

« (/read-267812/?page=24#booktxt)	20 (/read-267812/?page=20#booktxt)	21 (/read-267812/?page=21#booktxt)
22 (/read-267812/?page=22#booktxt)	23 (/read-267812/?page=23#booktxt)	24 (/read-267812/?page=24#booktxt)
25 (/read-267812/?page=25#booktxt)	26 (/read-267812/?page=26#booktxt)	27 (/read-267812/?page=27#booktxt)
28 (/read-267812/?page=28#booktxt)	29 (/read-267812/?page=29#booktxt)	30 (/read-267812/?page=30#booktxt)
... (/read-267812/?page=31#booktxt)	32 (/read-267812/?page=32#booktxt)	» (/read-267812/?page=26#booktxt)
26		Перейти!

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His anger comes from being “left out of society.” He has not rejected society, but it has rejected him, he says, cast him out because of his black skin. The black world on the surface has cast him out when he tried to fit into the white society. They both cast him out when he fought against both. He still suffers from the “conditioning” he received aboveground, conditioning that still causes him to doubt his self-worth and question his own “validity,” he says.

All of the members of his community feel the same, he claims, as do all members of all the communities of underground homeless—the “Federation,” as he calls it, which stretches along the East Side of Manhattan from Astor Place to 110th Street. All have been cast out and forced to find an alternative way of living.

The mayor left the surface five years ago, he says, but still feels insecure. “It’s not enough to leave, they won’t let you. Your past life above haunts you like a nightmare. That’s why you sense anger here. Because they won’t let us leave them completely. You always remember. You always hear those loud, ugly voices telling you you’re doing something wrong because you’re not doing it up there.”

Often he wakes from sleep in a panic. “I only see darkness and I wonder, ‘am I alive? What am I doing? How do I know that I exist?’ I can’t breathe, and I think that if I could take one breath into my lungs and fill my soul with air, I would be alive. If I could see some sort of light, I would be alive. If I was able to do something real, I’d be living.

“Yes, I’ve thought that if I go upstairs, I wouldn’t always wake up in darkness. And I’ve thought about breathing real air and getting back into things up there ...

“Maybe it is in the back of my mind that I’m not doing anything if it’s not part of your society up there,” he resumes. “But then I ask, ‘Who am I up there? No one.’ At least down here I can’t be passed by or ignored. Here I am here. My job is to take care of these people.”

He begins to rave. “Fuck the people on top! They want to exterminate us. We’ll do anything to survive. Sure, we’d sacrifice them sons of bitches!” He quiets down directly after the outburst.

“This is home,” he says more easily now. “This is where my conscious self meets reality. This is where my mind has been all my adult life. Underground.”

As a child, he recalls, he thought he was from another planet. As an adult, he believed it. “All black men are looking in from the outside up there topside. But me, I was looking in at the black community from the outside, too. I was outside of outside. I was way, way out.”

He grew up in a place like Harlem, which he wouldn’t identify for fear his family would recognize him. “They would think this is a crazy life when, in reality, it’s the only sane life for me and for everyone else down here.”

In fact, it is better than just sane. “We may not have the comforts of living aboveground. But we are a superior people. We’ve purified ourselves. We don’t allow just anyone to come and live with us. We allow only those who we can save, those who can believe in the human spirit above all else.”

His favorite book is Claude Brown’s *Manchild in the Promised Land*. “I read that book when it came out in the late sixties and I thought, ‘That’s me. How the hell did he know me? What is the message to me?’ I also got shot that year, when I was thirteen. I even liked a girl with buckteeth. That’s the first time I says to myself, ‘Man, something just ain’t right with you in this world.’”

He says he tried many routes to fit into society. He attended the City College of New York on a scholarship for a year. He joined a socialist group, then became part of the Revolutionary Communist Party, which was founded by one of the Black Panthers. He says he worked as a reporter, a youth counselor, a garbage collector, and even attempted to go to the police academy.

His passion throughout has been writing. “But I never want anyone on the outside to see my work, because they can’t understand.” He tries to explain, with metaphysical imagery. “When I tried to write before, no one cared what I went through, who I was. And writing, no matter what you’re writing about, you’re coming from the perspective of who you are. If you’re invisible, your work means nothing. It has no soul to those who can’t see you. It’s transparent. I write from my soul, which is deeper than any man’s out there. That’s why it’s invisible to them. It’s beyond their simple understanding, their simple ways.”

It was to explain all this, he says, that he invited me to visit his community despite the opposition of his advisers like J.C. He wanted someone “from the outside” to tell the world that he and his community are “better off” than those aboveground, those who are sick.

The mayor may see himself as Brown’s “Manchild,” but he is much more the “underground man” in Irving Howe’s “Celine.”

“A creature of the city, he has no fixed place among the social classes; he lives in holes and crevices, burrowing beneath the visible structure of society.... Even while tormenting himself with reflections upon his own insignificance, the underground man hates still more—hates more than his own hateful self—the world aboveground.”

## 21

### *“City Of Friends”*

IN BROAD DAYLIGHT I SLIP BEHIND A GRAFFITIED BILLBOARD AND onto a rubble-strewn lot that hides from hurrying pedestrians along 34th Street, a block from Penn Station. I walk across the lot and into a small alleyway to a wooden door with a brass-colored handle, just as I’ve been told. The door opens smoothly into a very small room, almost an entryway, of a deserted building. In one corner, amid dusty brooms and discarded clothes, opens a jagged-edged hole that has been chopped through the concrete floor, and projecting up through the hole are two rungs of a rusted metal ladder. Another invitation to visit the underground.

As the door to the outside world closes, I pause and allow my eyes to adjust to the stagnant blackness that I sense at the bottom of the ladder. I am expecting a guide, who last night on a warm grate reluctantly promised to lead me to what he called “the camp” of about forty people in a disused tunnel here. He was supposed to meet me half an hour ago. He has given me some directions and I follow them now, thinking of how foolish I am to be doing this alone.

Down in the tunnel, the air is oppressive and it’s even darker. I should be comforted by the absence of trains, but the dank emptiness increases my anxiety and sense of isolation. I wait motionless, hoping my mind will settle when my eyes adjust. Rhythmic water drops fall like deep drumbeats, and then the sound of tapping on pipes begins, slow and dull at first, but then more erratic. Warnings of a trespasser.

My ankles twist and I struggle to keep my footing on the gravel of the track bed. Sunlight occasionally filters down through grates on the surface two or three stories above me. The light never seems to reach the floor of the tunnel, yet suffuses the scene. My senses are sharp, but my body seems to move in slow motion, smoothly, almost automaton-like without conscious thought. It is as if I’ve passed into a new dimension, but inwardly, into myself rather than into the tunnel, and I am self-assured, impregnable. Rats will not make me jump, or taps on pipes, or even as now, the sudden blast of steam being released from a not-too-distant valve.

Eyes behind me, watching my back. I turn slowly, somehow not surprised to see a man, about six feet tall, in a flannel shirt and jeans, with long light-colored hair, beard, and mustache. He slowly raises his arms as if holding a rifle, and soundlessly, he aims at me. He squeezes the imaginary trigger once, then again, and again, his thin body rippling with each evenly timed recoil. He looks directly at me, coldly.

“It’s OK,” I hear myself saying soothingly. My heart seems to have stopped. “It’s OK,” I repeat, “I’m just passing through.”

The rifle follows me, firing again and again into my back, as I move farther into the tunnel in search of the camp.

Again eyes seem to watch me. “Hello?” I finally ask, with a shiver in my voice that sounds so foreign I think someone else is speaking.

A laugh answers. “I see you met Rambo,” it says. “His mind’s still stuck in ‘Nam. Likes the tunnels cuz they remind him of the jungle and he knows where he is,” explains George, my late-arriving guide, as he steps from the shadows. “He just can’t figure out who to fight.”

“Brave girl,” he says, trying to calm me. “I didn’t think you’d come.”

I feel like he is breathing life back into me, and I’m so thankful that I want to hug him.

George holds a lantern, an old kerosene lamp, and leads me to a side tunnel off the main tracks. Its shape is different from those I had visited before—smaller, with a low ceiling, more confining than subway tunnels and far more confining than spacious railroad tunnels. It is cool and damp, almost misty at parts, and lined with brick walls that are coated in soot.

I feel a sharp sting through my jeans at the knees, and fear rushes through my body as I begin to stumble.

“Watch your step!” George warns me too late. Someone catches me—a man but not George. He has been silently walking alongside me and keeps me from a bad fall over a sharp wire.

His name, he says, is Chud. It isn’t, really, but a nickname he chose for me to call him after he read one of my newspaper articles on the underground homeless that interviewed some transit workers, as well as some homeless who live on the surface, who call underground homeless CHUDs, short for Cannibalistic Human Underground Dweller. The label is partly humorous, but in part, too, CHUDs are feared as subhuman feral dwellers of the netherworld.

“We don’t eat people,” he tells me immediately, while George laughs. “Those stories are wrong. We don’t eat dogs neither. Sometimes, the ‘runners’ don’t make it down with food, we eat ‘track rabbits’ [rats], but I ain’t never ate no human. I ain’t never sinned like that.”

That’s good to know, I say uncomfortably.

Chud shows me the wire I had tripped over. It stretches directly across the tracks, from one wall to the other, at shin height, and just beyond it shards of broken glass twinkle yellow in the light of George’s lantern. He calls it a “Vietnam trap,” intended to both frighten and impede any strangers and, at the same time, warn the community of the intruders. Small strips of white cloth mark the wire where it is nailed to the walls, alerting regular inhabitants to the trap.

After Chud’s initial outburst, he becomes less talkative. Whenever I ask a question he does not like, he stays silent. So we don’t talk much. George, on the other hand, can’t stop talking, sometimes so fast that I lose the meaning of his words.

We enter a large, tile-walled chamber, with high ceiling, which could have been a waiting room at one time. Water drops sound different here, for some reason. The floor is firmer than in the tunnel, with less cushioning dirt and grime. I scrape an area with my shoe and the underlying surface, perhaps tile, reflects dully the lantern glow.

Against the far wall of the cavern leans a row of cardboard homes. Several dozen men and a few women sit sullenly around two fires in this underground shantytown, watching us enter.

“Hey, what’s she doing here?” a man finally asks. “Why’d you bring her here?” A general disgruntled murmur seconds his disapproval. “Yo, she found it on her own and came down alone,” George lies. “I just saw her at the hanger. I couldn’t let the CHUD people get her, now could I?” he asks, joking at my expense. After a second, a tinkling laughter breaks the tension.

“Hey, honey,” says a lean, handsome black man, “you didn’t let them scare you bad, did you?” He is called Fay and his wrist literally goes limp as he approaches. “Come have a seat by me and April,” he reaches for my hand. “You look white as a ghost,” he titters.

April looks up, the fire lighting her eyes. She looks as frightened and vulnerable as I feel.

“His name is Fay,” a man named Slim says, “and he’s a bit ... you know,” his voice trailing into a giggle.

“Now you better watch what you say, honey buns,” Fay warns Slim, drawing his hands to his hips in an exaggerated pose. To me he says, “I do the cooking around here.”

The community is well defined by duty, and the duties are allotted by the boss, Sam, whose title is mayor. I was introduced to each by name and by job.

Fay, as he said, is the community’s cook. April is the nurse. Chud is in charge of security. He is helped by Beeper, a weasel-like little man, who got his name because he was always first to detect a stranger in the tunnel and alert the community. George is a runner, along with Slim and Rex. They collect food and other necessities from the surface, often running scams in Penn Station that run the gamut from begging to pickpocketing to selling drugs, sometimes “drugs” that are just sugar or another inert substitute.

“Most of these people are too scared to go back up,” explains George. “Somebody’s got to take care of them.”

“And some people just need to be needed,” says Sam, the mayor.

He is a small, white man in his early forties, with round wire-rim John Lennon glasses and a tie-dyed shirt, who likes to talk about the sixties. He was trained as a sociologist. He is also a frightening man, one of the most frightening I have ever met in the tunnels.

The community elected him mayor, and there is no doubt they consider him their leader. He takes care of them as if they are family, even children, young children. Even men older than he are treated as five-year-olds at times.

Sam’s theory is that individuals remain stuck at the mental age at which they drop out of society: A thirty-five-year-old who got hooked on drugs at fifteen thinks that society only expects of him now what they did when he was fifteen. Those homeless people who live on the fringes of society, particularly those who live underground, have failed even to see—let alone experience—the development and socialization that is considered normal in people who live aboveground, he says. Sam also believes that most members of his community were pushed out of society at age five or six, as products of dysfunctional families, even though society may officially make them drop out at a much older age.

Sam’s management style is much like a parent, sometimes shaming members who fail to complete a task by berating them before the group, sometimes threatening to expel them from the underground family. He decides who should do which chores, and when the community is rousted from one tunnel, he decides where they will settle next. One day he sends April for water from a broken pipe in a distant tunnel; another time he has her mend clothes and sew old cloth pieces into blankets. He directs George to run a scam to get medicine. Whatever money is collected aboveground is put into a jar every night. Sam is its custodian. Only Sam dispenses from the collective funds. No one can leave “the camp” without his permission. He discourages members from trying to resume lives aboveground.

« (/read-267812/?page=24#booktxt)	20 (/read-267812/?page=20#booktxt)	21 (/read-267812/?page=21#booktxt)
22 (/read-267812/?page=22#booktxt)	23 (/read-267812/?page=23#booktxt)	24 (/read-267812/?page=24#booktxt)
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