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“I could handle eight pans and not burn an egg,” he says. “But it cost me \$100 a day to work, because I was paying \$50 for a gram of coke and \$50 for my amphetamines.”

Bob is Bernard’s best friend. He is also, according to underground artist Chris Pape, “the only one down here who has no illusions about himself. He knows he’s a drug fiend and doesn’t apologize or say he wants to change.”

Bob is a burly man with a mountain man’s gray beard and almost detached, cool blue eyes. He says matter-of-factly that he has chosen the life of an addict, wants no help to overcome it, and works only to support his habit. Bob is proud that he has never taken money from the government. He rises early to hunt for cans to redeem, and he picks up odd jobs on the street, such as helping unload produce from delivery trucks into grocery stores and fruit stands.

He is well known for his skill at working scams. He can con even his best friends, who are alert and wary. Once he scammed Pape, who he considers a friend, out of \$20 on a VCR deal, and disappeared for a week on a speed binge. Bernard made Bob apologize, but of course the money was gone. “Sorry,” Bob said with a shrug, “but, hey, that’s the way it is. I just had to do it.” Bernard offered the little money he had to Pape on Bob’s behalf, but Chris refused Bernard’s money.

Pape shrugs, too, about his loss. It’s impossible to stay angry with Bob, he says. He is childlike, totally passive most of the time. Raised in a middle-class Chicago neighborhood and trained as an engineer, his eyes are flat and unfocused, although they can be frightening because they are so expressionless and because, under the calm veneer, Bob has shown sudden anger and violence. He blames the chemicals in his system, or the lack of them. “It’s the drugs,” he says a day after exploding angrily because he had no place to sit. “Nothing I can do about it,” Bob says unapologetically. People avoid him on rainy days when he gets particularly depressed. Like most homeless, Bob’s moods are very much affected by the weather.

Bob is as unashamed of his scamming habits as well as his addiction. He talks freely about both. “Listen, kid,” he tells me out of earshot of the others, “don’t trust anyone down here. No one. Never!” His eyes are intense now as we walk out of the tunnel. I expect he is setting me up for a touch, but in the months I knew him, Bob never asked me for money. Instead, he always acted protectively—he’d scold me for even coming into the tunnels alone—and then offer advice on how to behave during my journeys underground.

Like Bernard, Bob earns what little money he needs by “busting,” or returning discarded cans and bottles to redemption centers. For 600 empties, they can receive \$30, or a nickel each. A major problem is finding groceries to redeem the trash, however. Despite the law requiring stores to take up to 250 empties from any one person, storekeepers often refuse in an effort to discourage the homeless from entering their premises. A few nonprofit redemption centers exist, notably “We Can” at 12th Avenue and 52nd Street, which was begun by Guy Polhemus when he overheard homeless at a soup kitchen complain about their difficulty. However, these centers tend to be inconvenient and very crowded, with long lines and long waits.

This has led to the rise of middlemen, also called two-for-oners although they should be one-for-twoers. They buy two empties for a nickel, half the price at regular redemption centers, but offer “no waiting, no sorting, no hassle,” as Bob says. Some middlemen have become full-blown entrepreneurs, like Chris Jeffers, a twenty-year-old who was sleeping in Riverside Park just two years earlier but now makes \$70,000 a year. He rents an empty theater at Eighth Avenue and 50th Street and keeps it open around the clock for the homeless to bring their cans and bottles; it pays half the price, but it’s convenient. Jeffers, who says he took some college courses in finance in Tampa, Florida, resells the empties to “We Can” for the full redemption price, earning thousands of dollars a day.

Most of the collectors go through the trash at night when they are less visible to the public. Many are addicts of one kind or another, Jeffers says, and often want to redeem their cans after hours to feed their night needs. “I know some people will say I’m exploiting those with alcohol and drug problems,” Jeffers admitted to a *New York Times* reporter. “But tell me, how is what I’m doing any different from what commodity traders do when they buy crops at low prices from farmers in distress?”

Scavenging, panhandling, and scams provide some income for the homeless, but surviving underground is a full-time job. “Living here takes a lot of planning,” Bob says as he contemplates the fire outside his bunker. “You have to prepare yourself in the summer for the winter, get your stuff washed and collect food.” His bunker is one of the most elaborate. Last year, he says, he spent \$200 to insulate his underground room, put in wall-to-wall carpeting, a queen-size mattress, a kerosene lamp, a table, and two chairs.

He takes his privacy seriously. “People like to inject chaos into their lives,” he says. “I don’t need that; that’s why I live here. In all the time I’ve been down here, I’ve never had company in my room. When I go into my room, don’t bother me,” he warns. “Don’t call me, and don’t come in,” he warns emphatically. “Bernard’s the only one allowed in my room.”

Bob has bad days when the weather is sour. He becomes irritable, edgy, and depressed because, he says, he can’t get out to gather cans or do volunteer work at soup kitchens. “I hate doing nothing; I always have to be doing something,” he explains, but ever since he left his wife and daughter—his wife always nagged him, he says, which is why he set off in his car one day for the grocery store and ended up in New York—he has never considered keeping a steady job.

“I like the way my life is now. I’m independent and do what I want. It’s not that I’m lazy or don’t want to work. I walk all the way around the city most days to collect cans. This is the life I want. I don’t take government handouts because I don’t pay taxes.” Sometimes Bob will be gone for weeks, but Bernard keeps his bunker safe from scavengers and Bob has always returned. He lives by what he calls the Homeless Credo: “Do what you have to do today. Tomorrow will come. And if it doesn’t, you won’t have to deal with it.”

Don

SOME OF THE HOMELESS IN BERNARD’S TUNNEL ARE LESS ATTACHED to the community, like Don, a large, clean-cut, smiling black man in his early thirties. He left his wife and children to go underground and straighten out his life, he says. He misses his family, but he promised his mother he would not return until he was free of drugs. He maintains ties with his mother, and even takes Bernard to Thanksgiving dinner at her house in Brooklyn. Although he has gone through detoxification centers several times, he is back on drugs.

He works regularly and hard. He wakes around 5:30 A.M. to get to a construction job at 7 A.M., and on weekends he usually has an odd job painting. He says he sends most of his money to his family. He is more frightened of underground life than most tunnel dwellers.

“The most dangerous animal on earth is man,” he says often. “I like to think about things when it doesn’t interfere with my safety, which isn’t often. Thinking too much is dangerous, because it gets in the way of the basic instinct of survival. You think too much, you find yourself caring too much about other people, or you feel sorry for yourself, and both are dangerous. When you live down here, you have always got to be on the edge. If you think too much, you are dead. No matter how well you think you know someone, you never do. And down here, you don’t want to.”

Reactions to danger can be unpredictable. Faced with a man with a knife, Don fell to his knees and begged not to be hurt, even though the knife-wielder was four inches shorter and much skinnier than Don. When confronted by a taller man who pulled a gun, Don just threw up his hands in exasperation and walked away. “It was the stupidest thing I’ve ever done,” he laughs now. “I just didn’t care. I was sick of that shit and decided to walk away and forget it and if I got shot, well, I would be walking and not just waiting for it.”

One morning at around 7:30, I arrive at Bernard’s camp to find him pacing angrily. Don is in the hospital with an overdose. Bernard found him the night before, sprawled across the tracks, unable to be roused. Trains are running through the tunnels again and Amtrak is looking for excuses to evict the homeless from the tunnels, Bernard says. He wasn’t going to let Don be that excuse, so he called the Amtrak police to take Don to a hospital.

“If you’re going to get bugged out, do it on top,” Bernard repeats to himself as he paces, convincing himself that he acted correctly. Bob stays strictly in his bunker when doing drugs underground. Don was irresponsible with drugs in general, Bernard says, working himself up. He often failed to bring wood for the fire despite repeated warnings. “He knows the rules: no drugging down here. They didn’t build this camp; they don’t deserve this. Fuck them. I built it. They think I own this tunnel. I do. I built it.”

Bernard pokes at the fire, quiet now. He will evict Don, with force if necessary. “He gets a week to get his shit out of here,” says Bernard. He leans back in his recliner and wonders if he can really force Don out because Don is also large and strong. “It’s been a long time since I had my ass kicked. Who knows, maybe I’ll like it,” he smiles broadly.

A week later, a homeless man passes me on the street. He tells me that Don says good-bye. Don’s name is seldom heard again in Bernard’s tunnel.

Tim

TIM IS THE ONLY OTHER MAN THAT HAS BEEN EJECTED FROM BERNARD’S camp. A wiry, meek white man, Tim often stops at Bernard’s fire, seeking an invitation to sit, which seldom comes. Occasionally he is offered a cigarette, but is always kept at a distance.

One afternoon I find Bernard shouting at Tim as they stand toe-to-toe on the tracks. Tim has been caught stealing from another one of the tunnel homeless. Bernard is furious and very close to thrashing him, but in the end just orders him to leave the community.

“He didn’t want to get violent because you’re here,” Pape tells me later with a smile. “Part of Bernard’s archaic thinking about women.”

Flip

LIKE TIM, FLIP IS NOT WELCOME AT BERNARD’S CAMPFIRE. FLIP doesn’t care for himself, Bernard explains; he lacks direction and wants to rely on people, trying to make them take care of him. Bernard once showed Flip an empty bunker and told him that if he cleaned it out, Bernard would help him set it up as a place to live. Flip hasn’t done a thing with the bunker, Bernard says dismissively. Lazy, he says.

Now Flip comes to the fire shyly once again. He stands hands buried in his trouser pockets, slouching on the tracks.

“It’s raining,” he says.

“So what?” Bernard answers.

Flip moves away, and later that afternoon, as Bernard walks me out of the tunnel, Flip’s figure stands silhouetted at the entrance, alone and forlorn against a cold, gray winter sky.

Tony

SOME OF THE HOMELESS WHO ARE PART OF BERNARD’S CAMP LIVE removed from his fire, like Tony, who has set up his home alone farther along the tunnel. One of the most gentle and popular men of the group, Tony is a fifty-five-year-old white man with a pepper-streaked beard and dark, arched eyebrows like Sean Connery, all topped by a red knit hat.

I meet Tony on the grate above Bernard’s fire one snowy day in January. Light smoke rises through the steel mesh, toying with powdery snow that the wind has swept up off the ice-covered Hudson. Red-faced New Yorkers walking their dogs in the park try to hurry them through the morning ritual, but a few pull their masters briefly toward the welcoming scent of burning wood mingling in the crisp air. Tony is standing on the grate stomping his boots to make sure the snow falls on the camp scene below.

Faint growls rise with the smoke and Tony, having gotten the response he wants, allows a boyish smile to break his face. He and I start carefully down the steep and icy path toward the tunnel’s entrance. In one hand he clasps a black garbage bag full of empty cans, and in the other, a dull green garbage bag full of plastic bottles. The superintendent of a nearby apartment house has saved them for him to redeem.

At the tunnel entrance, a young man named Joey emerges from between the iron rungs that once barred passage. He has a young, soft face but a skinny, nervous body that is unable to stay still. Tony pulls a wad of wrinkled and crushed dollar bills from the pocket of his corduroy pants and passes one to Joey. They exchange brief winks, and Tony permits himself a small smile that exposes two missing front teeth.

“Hey, man,” a beseeching voice comes through the grating as Flip emerges. “Gimme some, too,” he asks, almost shyly. For a large man, Flip looks as vulnerable as he sounds.

He offers Tony his plastic bag. Tony skims its contents quickly.

“Naw, man,” he says, “I don’t need any of that stuff.”

“C’mon, man, it’s cold,” Flip whines, almost whimpering.

“Naw, I don’t got that much,” Tony says firmly. He pulls out a crumpled pack of cigarettes and offers one to Flip. The younger man takes three and walks off without even nodding thanks.

Tony and I carefully descend the steps into the tunnel, wary of used syringes and fresh ice. We reach the bottom and Tony sighs heavily, as if he is home.

He is less afraid of falling, he says, than of getting struck by the nine-foot-long icicles that now hang from the tunnel’s ceiling. One killed a man two years ago, he claims, in case I should doubt the danger. Small precautions take on greater importance the longer you live in the tunnels, he explains.

I wonder aloud about Joey, to whom Tony has given the money unasked. Tony explains simply that he and Joey live together in an abandoned bunker. Joey is eighteen years old, and Tony refers to him at times as his son, other times as his lover.

As much as the tunnel regulars like Tony, they despise Joey as a useless parasite on the older man. “Joey’s young; he can do anything he wants,” says Bernard. “He doesn’t have to be down here, but Tony does. Tony does everything for that kid, even went to banks trying to borrow money to send him to college. Believe that! What money he did get, Joey spent on drugs, but he told Tony he was going to college.”

Tony prides himself on his two “mouses,” which are king-size rats that he trains to perform. Ralph and George, the “mouses,” can leap from the ground to a food bag hung five feet overhead. Tony claims they also guard his bunker from other rats, even that they have chased away stray cats, which from their size is credible. They are huge creatures, Ralph perching on Tony’s shoulder, George on the back of his wrinkled hand.

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