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The names they called him hurt more than their kicks and blows from a pipe across his back. “Nigger” and “worthless leech” and “sorry shit.” “They should round up all you homeless fuck-heads and shoot you dead, exterminate you like roaches, and then they should hang your mother for having you,” one kid yelled while kicking him. He remembers the sharp pain of each kick and the smash of the pipe until he had given up fighting, and each blow in turn passed to thuds against his body that he heard but did not feel. Only the terror of being set ablaze made him cry out.

He still cringes, not because of the pain, but because he had urinated in his pants and because he needed the woman’s scream to help him, and because she had seen his weakness.

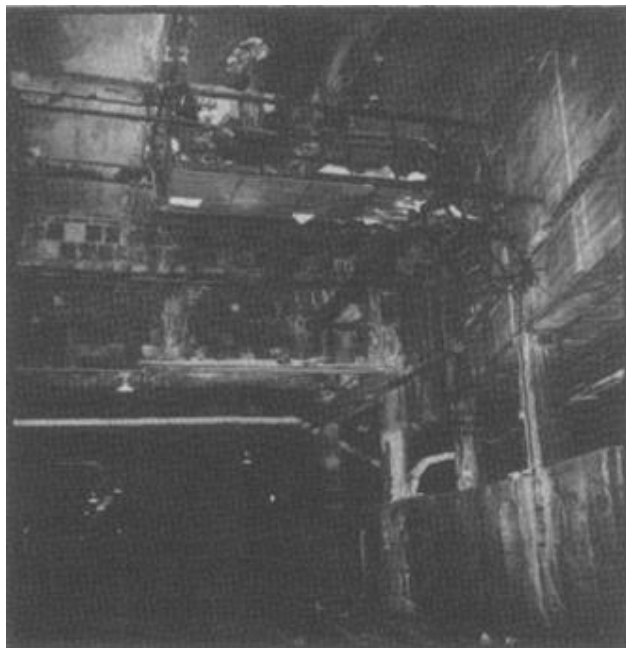
As bad as the streets are for a homeless man with a clean face, they are far more hostile for one with still-weeping scabs and eyes swollen into slits from the beating. People cleared a path for him, and their eyes, when not indifferent, showed anger that he would expose them to his misery. Worse still was that his slowed movements and visible wounds made him easy prey for other vicious youths looking for violent ways to express their frustration and hatred.

So how can this tunnel, even if it were that tunnel, be more dangerous for him than the streets this night?

He walks deeper, quietly, like a ghost, he thinks, and his heart gradually stops fluttering like a netted butterfly. It belongs to him again, his own. He stops and then he hears what he will remember as “echoing darkness.” It’s the only way to describe what he hears, a velvety blackness that rebounds from side to side, and then wraps around him gently as he sinks to the floor at the wall, a spot that now feels safe and his own. With his back comforted by the wall, he draws his knees up to his ribs and lingers with his thoughts as he drifts toward sleep. The quiet is broken only by the patient fall of dripping water in the distance, a soft and pleasant sound that he knows would be lost to the noise of New York’s busy streets. He is soothed despite the dampness that seeps through his frayed jacket and torn trousers. All the way down, he muses, are layers upon layers upon layers of tunnels, with no bottom. This layer is safer than the street above, the one below even safer, and the one below it is even safer, and so on, beyond thought, all the way down. A soothing numbness takes him. Nothing really matters. It could suddenly start snowing up above, or raining, or there could be warm sun. Nothing matters because all of that would change, it would pass. He feels his breath condensing, but he is content with simply being, and being without being seen, secretly in a new world, sensing he could see out to watch those who could not see him. He was living a life that others were afraid even to imagine.

In such a life, he thinks, there is a truth. You can be so cold that you can’t get colder, so wet you can’t become wetter. You can feel so deeply that you are saturated, numb but still intensely alert—beyond fear—as if living a memory. Beyond living, he thinks. Surviving.

The morning brings a splinter of light through a hole high in the wall opposite. He stirs and moves into the mote-filled beam. He persuades himself that it warms him. He feels he never slept so well since he became one of the homeless. So what if this is that tunnel, he thinks. He has found a home.



Home On A Catwalk. Photo By Margaret Morton

2 *Seville's Story*

SEVILLE WILLIAMS IS AS UNIQUE AS ALL TUNNEL AND TOPSIDE people, but his personal history mirrors those of many others in the tunnels. The path he took from the streets to the underground, and his struggles to climb back up are common to many tunnel dwellers.

At thirty-one years old, Seville's story is far from over. Although the life expectancy of a man on the streets isn't much beyond forty-five, he believes with his unending optimism that his life is just beginning. He refuses to let his past define him or limit his hopes for the future. He talks about getting a full-time job as a welder, a trade he learned during two years in prison for dealing drugs, with the same enthusiasm and conviction of a high school senior who talks about becoming a doctor after failing chemistry. At times an inward shadow dims his bright eyes, as if he recognizes that his past still influences his life like an old habit. Then, with the marvelous resilience that allows him to care for others, his smile is suddenly brilliant again. Every day is new to Seville, and anything can happen as he struggles to survive and climb out of the underground.

"I gotta believe there's a purpose for me still being here when I've come so close to death so many times you wouldn't believe," he says with his broad smile and light shake of his head. "You just wouldn't believe it. Most of my friends—Shorty, Teather, Flacko, Big D—they're all dead now. Some of them, it was their own doing. Some of them, it weren't, but they be dead anyway," he says and then sucks air through his teeth. "Don't know why I'm here, really don't. I done everything they done and worse. Times I tried to kill myself, I mean, not suicide or like that, but put myself in situations I was sure to be killed. It didn't work," he smiles happily, lifting his hands in mock disbelief. "I'm still here. Don't know why, but there's gotta be a reason."

Like many tunnel people, Seville comes from a dysfunctional family, torn by drugs and violence. He has emotional and physical scars from the years, but they have not callused his humor, which is open and without bitterness. He remains generous to others on the fringe, especially those in the tunnels. When he passes an underground homeless person in need, he usually stops to help.

"We got to take care of ourselves down there cuz ain't nobody else gonna do it," he shrugs again. "Know what I'm saying? You just got to accept it or reject it," he says of the homeless condition. "Take it the way you can. Know what I'm saying?"

I met Seville on the concourse in Grand Central. He was one of a group of homeless whom Sergeant Bryan Henry of the Metropolitan Transit Police approached with me in tow, but he stood apart from the group, a bit aloof, in an old Harris tweed coat with the middle button missing. He leaned with two crutches against a small constructional work truck, suspicious and defiant, with half-closed eyelids. He sucked his breath in slowly and evenly in a reverse hiss, but with barely a sound. His short beard is well kept, and if he could stand without crutches, he would look tall and healthy.

If being articulate is not Seville's strong suit, humor is. Finding the humor in underground situations is not only a gift but a necessity in order to remain sane in the tunnels, a survival technique, Seville says.

"You have to keep laughing. If you don't you fall apart. Sometimes you gotta smile when you don't want to, you laugh at terrible things that nobody should laugh at, but it's like your mind has to find something funny or you'll go crazy." Then, tired of speaking seriously, he smiles broadly again. "I know that too. I know it all; I been through it all." He stretches his arms wide and high with self-satisfaction and

pride at being alive.

Seville keeps the tunnels lively with his humor. Once while he was panhandling in Grand Central Station a commuter gave him a bag containing a loaf of bread and a pound of baloney. He thanked the man and then, after looking into the bag, shouted out after him, "Pardon me, sir, would you happen to have some Grey Poupon?"

Commuters cracked up with laughter, not least the donor. "He fell out," Seville remembers. "The man had a ball all the way out of the station. I loved doing it. That's what it's all about."

With the same sense of humor, Seville goes on to tell about doing drugs and living under Track 100 in Grand Central Station. He was once so exhausted from the drugs and his feet so swollen and sore from injecting into the veins in his feet, that he could barely get himself across the street for a free meal. One time he collapsed while running toward a Meals-on-Wheels van.

"I just lay there and yelled, 'I'm hungry, but I'm too tired to move.' And the lady she come up to me laughing and she say, 'We'll bring it to you. But just don't try to run; you look so funny when you run.'" He grins briefly at the image in his mind of himself as a disjointed, uncoordinated scarecrow. "Boy, I was really messed up bad then."

"I don't mind making people laugh, makes them more generous sometimes," he goes on. But some of his black friends dislike some of his enterprising, humorous acts and see them as demeaning to his race.

"We don't need no handouts from no white people looking to stay out of trouble," says Malcolm, who hangs around Port Authority Station. "They the ones who put us here. We don't need to be cleaning their shit pots."

Seville explains his enterprising scheme differently.

"We have this thing called Volunteers of the Bathroom where we clean up the toilets in Grand Central or Penn Station or Port Authority, and then we tell the people in a little speech." He begins, sweeping his hand gracefully after tipping an imaginary hat, "'Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. I'm a Volunteer of the Bathroom, keeping the bathroom safe, clean, and organized. As you know, most of the volunteers are homeless, like myself and this gentleman with me. Your donations help us eat and stay out of trouble. We do not get paid for our services, but we do it in the hopes that you good people can use the bathroom most effectively and appreciate it. Any donations, large or small—cuz I couldn't live with myself if I didn't ask—are appreciated.'"

"Some people get a kick out of it [the routine] and give us something with a smile, but my own kind rarely ever gives me anything. Once in a blue moon maybe. They won't even look into my face.... I'd rather they tell me they don't have it, or don't ask them than not look at me, you know?" He resumes earnestly, "Phoeey! People like that think I'm like them and they got no respect for themselves so they don't look at me—maybe that's it. I don't understand it. Seems to me that if you make people laugh, they treat you normal. They're not afraid to look at you. That's what it's all about, ain't it, a way to get some respect, to be treated like a regular person?"

Seville calls the eighties the "decade of the tunnels, because that's when we all found them. There were people in the late seventies who used the tunnels occasionally to get high or whatever, but it wasn't until the eighties that people started settling in, living down here.

"It's the decade of crack and homelessness. It's the decade of the tunnels," he repeated. "People've been down and out since the beginning of time, but we's the first to actually live in tunnels. There's been nowhere else to go," he laughs. "There was too many of us. We got no families that can help us or want to, whatever, and no place to go, so we come to the tunnels. Even people who don't like the tunnels come down here to be with their own. And I don't mean color. I mean people who grew up like me."

How Seville grew up came out piecemeal, over time and many conversations, amid laughter and jokes with which he conspired to ward off pity and "break up the blues."

"Well, just say it wasn't no 'Father Knows Best' situation or 'Leave It to Beaver,'" he says with a little laugh. "Man, I used to love those shows. It was like sci-fi to me; they were on a different planet from me."

Seville tried to run away from home several times before, but at the age of nine, he succeeded. By then he had been deserted by his mother, attempted to shoot his father, and seen more violence between parents than most children see on television. He also fathered his first child when he was barely a teenager.

When he was seven years old, his mother left him in West Hampton, Virginia. His parents separated and reconciled often, and were separated at this time when his mother decided to take a bus to New York. His father was apparently also in New York, Seville recalls, and maybe she went searching for him, but probably not. Whatever her reason, she left Seville in the house alone.

"I just stayed in the house," he remembers. "I knew how to cook; my grandmother had taught me. Then the guy next door—he was a priest—came over and asked where my parents were. We called my father and he came down immediately to get me and brought me to New York. He was mad, boy," Seville laughs. "He wanted to kill her for leaving me, and he probably would have if she'd been there."

His father, an Air Force enlisted man, was large and his mother was small, but when they argued, "she'd chase him around like a little bird pecking on him, her head bopping like a pigeon. It was funny, boy. She'd nag him to death. He'd try to run away, and he was big and she was tiny but he'd be the one running. But once in Brooklyn, he turned on her and I had to hold the door closed to keep him from getting at her while she got away.

"My mother threw acid on my father's head one day, and he almost strangled her. They almost killed each other so many times, it was pathetic. That's why I had to leave; too much fighting for me and I got caught up in it. I almost shot my father with a sawed-off shotgun my grandfather gave to me. It's called a loophole, an Italian gun. He was lucky, my father. I was too small to hold the gun, and he ducked. That's when I left. I couldn't take it no more."

Seville slept on rooftops, in doorways, halls, and basements throughout New York—in Queens, Brooklyn, and the Bronx. “I lived everywhere you could live. It wasn’t too bad. You got used to it. ... It’s bad when you get too used to it though, cuz then you don’t try to get out of it. That was my problem. After a while I couldn’t get used to sleeping in a room. I felt closed in with no escape.”

He stole to support himself. “Sometimes I stayed with an uncle of mine, Uncle Louis, but he kept trying to take me back to my mother’s house, and each time I’d leave again. I got so tired of family court.”

Seville claims he went to school regularly even when he lived on the streets because, he says, there was nothing else to do. His parents tried to catch him there. Once his father did corner him on the second floor of a school, but he jumped out a bathroom window and onto a car hood to escape. Somehow his father ran down the steps faster than Seville could get away. “I remember I couldn’t believe a fat dude like him could run so fast. When he caught me, he said, ‘I’m not gonna hit you, just come on home.’

“But I got out again. I got tired of being around them. They were just too busy fighting to pay attention to me. My father be there, my mother would move out. My mother be there, my father move out. It was like a revolving door.”

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