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Tunnel people always amaze outsiders at how well they hide. “We walked the tunnels along tracks, trains coming back and forth, 600 volts in the third rail, and we would walk right past people no more than four feet away and sometimes never see them ‘til they called out,” recalls Bethea. “We found people living above the tracks, on gratings, who we’d never see if we didn’t happen to look up.

“I remember climbing a ladder, going into a little crawl space, and my eyes caught the eyes of someone watching me. I could feel his eyes at first, then I could see his eyes, and I thought, ‘I’m outta here!’ And I kept going. I don’t know if I scared him, but he surely scared me. Then I said, ‘Oh, shit. I gotta go see this guy.’ And I did. We kept contact with him and eventually got him out of the tunnel, for a while.”

On the upper levels of the underground are mostly crack users who distrust everyone, Bethea says, and who essentially want to be alone. “Crack is a selfish type of drug, as opposed to heroin, which is a little more communal. Its users want to be with others.

“But there were lots of people who weren’t doing drugs, who weren’t crazy. We ran across working people, people who could not afford an apartment but were making too much money for social service supplements. So they chose to live in the tunnels and work rather than take public assistance,” he says.

ADAPT’s final report, never published but made available to me, states that “a significant proportion of the homeless (in the subway system) work for pay at least occasionally. Most homeless men have substantial work histories.”

Bethea and his group found that many of the homeless, rather than preferring to stay in the depths, want to get back to life aboveground.

“Despite the perceived notion that they are suicidal because they live along the tracks and do drugs,” he says, “those people don’t want to die. They still know they’re human beings. One woman refused to see a doctor for no obvious reason until we found out why: she was embarrassed because she hadn’t washed for several weeks. They know that they didn’t come from that environment originally, that problems brought them down. And you can get them to believe, because they already do, that they can get back to their ‘normal’ lives aboveground.

“They don’t want to die. You can see it in the way they live. They haven’t given up living. They may not have much self-esteem. We have to give them empowerment counseling, but like those guys under the Waldorf-Astoria, the homosexual community, we found condoms all around that place. They practice safe sex. They don’t want to die of AIDS.”

ADAPT was very successful in finding homeless in large part because of the diligence and dedication of the staff. At least two workers had to be ordered out of the tunnels when Bethea feared they were overworked. “They were down there everyday for four months,” he says. “I was afraid they would burn out, that they were going to get hurt. They were so involved they didn’t worry about their own safety and it’s very dangerous down there.”

One of those men is Harold Deamues, a smiling, good-humored, dark-skinned man in his mid-thirties. He wears a short, well-groomed beard and closely trimmed hair. He believes he can help because he once used drugs himself.

“I know what’s out there. I know what I’ve been through. I know what it’s like for people to give up on you, and you lose your spirit. I knew I could break out, with help,” Deamues says, and he wants to repay those who helped him by helping others. “You can’t help everyone; you got to accept that not everyone wants help. But there are some you can help.”

Deamues grew up in East Harlem and thought he knew just about every way a person could be down and out in New York, but he didn't know about tunnel people. "I thought talk about people living underground was just handing out a story; I couldn't believe it," he says. "Who would go down there? Why? What's down there? When I saw it with my own eyes, I was amazed, truly amazed.

"They call them the mole people, and you can catch them sleeping, having sex, eating. But strange. One older gentleman, fifty-something, with this ashen look, his feet were matted together at the toes like they were all one part. All you could see was the shape of the top of his toes. He was barefooted, and he lived way down there, three levels. Said he hasn't been up in three years. I asked him if he ate rats and stuff down there. He smiled. Didn't want to give me no definite answer. But he smiled like, you know, what else is there for me to eat sometimes.

"His eyes had that dullish gray, you know, like he might have drank a lot for years. But it's hard to say he was crazy. He was able to speak fluently, answer any questions without any problem. Sometimes when we saw him he was buck-naked and running around, quick. He was alone, but I imagine there were other people down there, that area called Burma's Road in the lowest tunnel levels under Grand Central.

"I found a gentleman on pipes one time, steam pipes. They got big steam pipes down there. I said, 'Peace, I'm coming up,' because the worst thing you can do is scare someone down there. That's when it's dangerous, when you surprise someone. But he was cool. He had his food heating up on the pipes and he lay on them, reading a newspaper."

Deamues says he's even found people singing in their shower underground, using water from fire extinguisher sprinklers. Some homeless use the bathrooms that the Metropolitan Transit Authority workers leave open for them.

A social network of sorts has been developed among the homeless, according to Tsemberis. Food, drugs, and medicine are often shared, as is gossip and stories of the underground.

Within this network, he says, "the mole people have taken on mythological proportions. They are supposed to be somehow different, unique. They've lived underground for years. They may even look different, like they are from a different planet. I run a men's group in the drop-in center on 44th Street and these guys talk about how scary the mole people are, about faces showing up and skinny heads, and since they smoke crack, I don't know if they are high or out of their minds." The stories, he says, demonize the mole people.

ADAPT headquarters is an old synagogue on 111th Street in Harlem, the only intact building in a drug-zoned block. Drive-by shootings are commonplace in the neighborhood. Riders at the nearest subway station are hard-pressed to explain the safest route to the building, ending by telling the visitor to be "very careful however you go." ADAPT staffers are unfazed by dangers near their office, but even they say the dangers underground are of a whole different proportion.

"You know that down there, besides the trains and the third rail, you have people who are afraid. Afraid of being attacked by others, scared crazy by coke. When we're scared and they're scared, it's really dangerous for everyone. But there is one area down there that is particularly scary for me: an abandoned tunnel that was once used to store or transport coal, for the old trains, I guess. Very, very scary, like if someone wants to do something to you there, you lost without knowing something started," Deamues says.

"There you can feel the eyes. That's the eeriest feeling, sensing eyes but seeing no body. I have confidence in myself that once I make contact with them, I'll be OK, able to do something for them, whatever. But, man, you feel their eyes and you start to wonder about the stories about cannibalism," he laughs self-consciously. "They seem to live in the asbestos insulation around steam pipes, and they got rats so big they look like they lift weights. You think they want your clothes because they are cold, or your boots, and there's all them glass vials and needles and shit on the floor. And you can't call for help, the police walkie-talkie radios don't carry upstairs. If something happens down there and you call upstairs, you get nothing.

"I used to tell the others, 'Don't get fat because, if you get hurt, I'm gonna have to carry your ass out of there.' You couldn't leave anyone alone in those tunnels."

On top of the various diseases, filth, mental illness, and addiction, homeless living underground also have gotten mauled by subway track workers, according to ADAPT. Sometimes a homeless person steals tools from the workers, and the workers take it out on the next homeless person they find. Hangman's nooses have been left dangling from overhead pipes to intimidate the homeless.

Subway workers have also reported being "piped"—struck over the head with a steel pipe—by homeless who want their clothes, shoes, and tools. "Workers get piped down here all the time," says Daniel Crump, a steward for the Transit Workers and Mechanics Union who was one of the first knowledgeable people to talk openly to me about the underground homeless and has been frustrated by the Metropolitan Transit Authority and city inaction. "I get calls all the time from workers afraid to go into the tunnels because they say, 'mole people are all around.'"

Most mole stories come up from the very bowels of Grand Central, seven levels down. "Down there," says Deamues, "there are no trains. It's quiet. There are old tracks, and electricity in some parts. Big areas. I'm waiting for someone to swing down like Tarzan. The deeper and deeper you go, the quieter it gets. But there's still those eyes. It's always like, 'Where are they?'"

The homeless feel safer the deeper down they go, ADAPT workers believe. "They get that sense of security down there," Deamues says. "To go further back in the tunnels, or deeper, says 'I don't want to bother nobody. I don't want nobody bothering me. I'm where nothing should go wrong. I don't want to deal with nobody. I won't cause problems; just let me stay here; I'll keep this place in order. Outside it's crazy, but at least down here I can close my eyes.'

"When I come up and I smell of those places, people think they need to take antibiotics just to come near me. In tunnels closer to the surface, the homeless mainly need a place to stay. The shelter system is too dangerous. They feel they can't close their eyes in the shelters, fearing rape or beating or getting killed. People yelling and stealing their clothes. And they're treated like they're subhuman there, like

dogs,” he says.

The irony is that, as Deamues sees it, “they feel much more human underground, safer, freer to move around. Tranquil, even serene to some of them, despite the trains running by.

“But worst, most heartbreaking, is when you find people who say, ‘Hey, I don’t want to be here, but I have no choice. I can’t take another shelter and I can’t go home.’”

One of the greatest difficulties that underground people have in trying to “go home”—back to the surface—is believing in themselves again. ADAPT found in its report that the tunnel dwellers “exhibit a paradoxical mix of self-sufficiency and dependency—they survive under the most difficult of circumstances, but they have lost faith in their ability to change their lives.”

Outreach workers claim that tunnel dwellers never lose the basic tools they need to succeed aboveground and they even develop greater incentives to succeed in general. “It’s like their instinct for caring and love is as basic as their instinct for survival,” Deamues says. “Like making a bad situation seem less bad. I see this guy down under Grand Central laughing, sitting there reading books. You put yourself down there and you’d probably drive yourself crazy, but they create an environment, build up a core inside and say, ‘This is happening, but this ain’t the worstest thing in life.’”

Aren’t some of them beyond repair? I ask.

He looks confused and angry, shaking his head. “No. That’s something a normal person might think, but once you know a little about them, you can’t give up on them. Some of us, like me, are living proof that no matter what you’ve been through, you can be someone again in the future. You can’t give up on them. That’s all they got. They’re still human. They can still have a life.”

Director Michael Bethea is just as persistent as Deamues but in a more objective, less personal way.

“If they can make it down there as well as they do, they can make it up here,” Bethea says earnestly. “You go down there and see how they take care of each other, and not just that, but how they rig things like water and electricity. Some of these are very bright individuals who could have been engineers or something. We just got to find the one thing, or things, that are stopping them. Like drug addiction—it’s just a problem that they *can* overcome. If they can deal with the underground, they can certainly make it up here. That’s what we’ve got to convince them. We know it. We’ve seen it. We just got to make them see it in themselves, and that comes with consistent outreach and trust.”

Whatever one might think about the optimism of Bethea, Deamues, and the other outreach workers in the tunnels, there is something heroic in their efforts. As Dr. Tsemberis put it, “They were touching and handling people that no one else would go near. You see really awful things down there: infected legs, faces half eaten away by cancer sores. There is a whole aura around the people who worked there ... like they were doing God’s work.”

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Dark Angel

“I CAN’T HURT YOU, LOST ANGEL.”

The words come out of the tunnel’s blackness without warning when I stumble into a cavelike recess.

“But I can hurt those you care about,” he says silkily. In the dusty tunnel light, I feel eyes to my left and turn to find him facing me, hands on his hips in a bold and graceful stance. He is barely four feet from me.

I stare, stunned.

“Some of me is within you,” he says, shielding his eyes with his left forearm as though there is a flood of light that I don’t see. “Not enough for me to hurt you. But enough for me to hurt others close to you. You have a fascination with the darkness of my tunnels. The evil within it. And it is evil,” he says with cool force, a fine layer from fury. “Everything down here is pure evil.”

Unwittingly I step back, shaking. He has appeared suddenly to me out of darkness, and his words chill my spine. He calls himself the Dark Angel. He has mastered the greatest weapon anyone has in the tunnels, the fear and discomfort that the environment inherently provides.

Tunnel homeless, welfare workers, and police officers have all met this devil-like figure. All of them come away scared, not of the supernatural powers he claims, but of the man himself.

He lives under Grand Central, like many other tunnel people, but he is entirely unlike any other. None have set up camps anywhere near his. He hisses, spits, and screams. He is unforgettable, in part, because of his words and his forceful delivery.
