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“It’s not all a joke,” one railroad engineer insists. “We know they are there. We can see their eyes. And when you aren’t looking, they’ll steal your tools, your food. I had a pair of pliers right next to me once, and a few seconds after I put them down, they were gone right from my side. I swear it happens all the time down here. The boss doesn’t even question when you put in a request for more tools because he knows they got stolen down here.

“And sometimes they’ll even pipe’ you,” he complains, indicating a club smashing into his head, “usually to steal from you but sometimes just cuz they’re wacked out or scared.

“I usually bring an extra sandwich or two when I work on the tracks here, and I leave them around so they can take them and not get nervous and bother me. When I leave, all the sandwiches are gone, but I never see them being taken.

“So I wouldn’t laugh at the CHUD thing,” he cautioned. “They eat dogs, I know, and I’d bet my life they’d eat people.”

Out in full daylight again, farther up the West Side along the Hudson River, Smith and I walk along tracks cut in the side of cliffs of layered rocks that are stepped back as they rise. On these terraced ledges are the homeless version of the sweet life—recliners, beach chairs, mattresses, and discarded housewares of all types on which the tunnel people sit. Some say hello as we pass, others turn their backs and walk toward the rock face where they disappear from our view.

“We have twelve cubbies in this rock here,” one woman explains helpfully as she looks down from her ledge. “You can come with me up into this one if you want,” she offers, “but don’t you go exploring on your own. People don’t take kindly to that. These are our homes you know.” Her cubby is a small cave in the rock, large enough for a mattress, a couple of framed pictures of her family, and a candle atop a plastic milk crate, but not high enough for her to stand erect.

We walk on along the tracks, going underground again. People sit on similar terraced ledges, but now in the dark.

“We could have light,” Seville had told me, “but sometimes we’re too lazy to screw in the light bulb. There is an emergency exit door from the tunnel there, and you can turn out the bulb in the sign if you want, or turn it on if you wanted light, and when people were too lazy to screw in the bulb, we sit there in the dark,” he laughed.

“Track workers would come past every day, say ‘how you doing?’ but they didn’t come over. I think they were scared. I know I’d be scared, looking into the dark and knowing people were there watching you. I remember one time a worker stopped and just stared at me from the tracks. He just kept staring until I said, ‘Damn it, you all right man?’ And he jumped a mile!

“‘I just wanted to make sure you was somebody,’ he said, ‘cuz all I could see was this pair of eyeballs. I was about to break and run because I didn’t know what it was.’ I got up and turned on the light so he could see me. He didn’t know what was growing down here. He thought I was some kind of animal or something,” Seville guffawed, slapping his knee.

Farther north along this road is Bernard’s tunnel—a world apart from this one—but I will enter it another way at another time.

“And I’ll grow up beautiful.”

—Julie, age eight

ON A FREEZING DECEMBER NIGHT, A WOMAN’S SHARP screams fill every recess in the abandoned train tunnel that more than a dozen people call home. The air is still, amplifying the shrieks as they echo through the dark cavern.

One by one and sometimes in twos, the nervous inhabitants come to its mouth, where the screams tumble out into the night air and are quickly lost.

“This ain’t right, this jus’ ain’t right,” says Shorty, a recent member of the tunnel community, a newcomer to its kind of suffering. His words create vapors that linger briefly before they disappear without effect. The half-dozen men with him study the rubble at their feet in silence.

Shorty is a soft-faced man with watery eyes so brown that their whites have yellowed. Now they are intense and demanding. “We should be gettin’ help. This ain’t right!” he insists.

His clenched fists chop the air in short strokes when a sharp beam of white light from a passing river barge catches him, suddenly illuminating the scene. He shrinks from the exposure and his fists seem to abandon their determination, opening into stubby fingers, cracked by the cold and ingrained with dirt. He shoves them into the pockets of his browned and oversized jeans whose frayed bottoms, cuffed several times, fold heavily over torn sneakers. Despite the cold, his clothes reek of the familiar smells of homelessness—spoiled and soured food from scavenged dumpsters, stale sweat, and the excrement and urine of the streets.

The beam sweeps past, and New Jersey’s flickering lights reappear across the river. The men are poorly protected from the Hudson’s cold winds. Butch, the beefiest among them and regarded as the leader of the community, shifts his weight to keep warm. His eyes are rimmed with tears from the cold as he hunches his shoulders against a new gust. He draws a switchblade from his jacket and fingers its edge gingerly. As everyone watches, he draws it several times across the face of a smooth rock, as if to sharpen it further, then closes and pockets it. His face resumes its vacant, distant look.

“Maybe we should pray,” says Juan tentatively. A slim Latino man whose eyes never leave the ground, he is the most clean and neatly dressed of the gathered tunnel dwellers. By day he works a minimum-wage job at McDonald’s. No one there suspects he lives underground.

Razor, a black man with face and neck scars, snickers at the mention of prayer. His midshoulder-length hair, matted reggae-style and knotted with dirt, looks especially wild in the darkness.

The rest of the men nod and grunt approval of Juan’s idea, and, in a low monotone, he begins to speak of the coming child:

“Dear Lord, please deliver us this baby safely. His parents are good people. He’s done nothin’ bad, Lord. He’s jus’ a baby. He don’t mean no disrespect being born underground. We’ll take care of him when he’s with us. Just deliver him and his mama safely, Lord, and we’ll take care of the rest. Amen.”

“Amen,” several of the men repeat in whispers that overlap each other like the small waves slapping the river edge.

Above New York, white stars pierce the sky. Everything appears too sharp and dramatic in the sparkling cold, including the quiet when the screams abruptly stop. A small animal, probably a rat, shuffles through the dried leaves at the corner of the tunnel’s mouth, but the world seems less hostile in the quiet.

Then the baby cries a strong, demanding bleat. The men look at the ground or at nothing, seemingly unmoved. They were familiar with death in the tunnels. Birth was something new.

“Should we go in?” asks Fred. His heavy-lidded eyes make him look dimly criminal and threatening, an effect he deliberately enhances on the street. Now, even while standing innocently outside a manger scene, he looks as guilty as a thief.

“Naw,” Butch says. “Wait for Ronda.”

A woman’s figure walks almost bouncing out of the tunnel’s mouth.

“It’s a boy!” Ronda announces, her eyes tired but lively. “Sally’s fine.”

The group moves from the December night toward the underground home of Sally and Tim, their blank expressions thawing into avuncular pride.

“Man, our first tunnel baby! Man!” exults Butch, shaking his head and smiling brightly. He leans over and smacks Shorty on the top of his head. “Shorty, man, you was a mess, brother,” he says, smiling more broadly.

“You weren’t no calm chicken neither,” says Fred, elbowing Butch as tension releases into exaggerated bonhomie.

The men gather wood as they walk deeper into the tunnel, adding it to the campfire they had left when Sally’s screams became too near and personal. The flames leap and warmth returns with swigs from a bottle of Thunderbird that is passed around, and the men spend the last of the night expressing wonder and even awe at the idea that a baby has joined their community.

Sally and Tim live in the tunnel for a week after the birth, but when I return a couple of weeks later, Ronda says that Sally, a white woman in her late twenties, and Tim, a black man in his early forties, have gone back to Brooklyn. Sally is living with her sister, Ronda says, while Tim looks for work.

The baby was fine, but the tunnel community is glad they have gone.

“We’ll miss them and all that,” says Shorty, “but this ain’t no place for a baby. A tunnel ain’t no place for a baby.”

Butch is most pleased that the couple left.

"It's too much responsibility having a baby," he says. "We always had to think about getting things for it, and making sure it was warm. I told Tim he had no business keeping his wife and baby underground. He was risking all of us. People up top were gonna start hearing the baby cry, and you know, if the cops came down and found it, they'd find a reason to arrest us all and shut down the tunnel."

Tim was reluctant to leave. "He liked it here," Butch says. "He didn't like to ask no one for help." Tim apparently wanted to raise the child in the tunnels, but the community threatened to alert the authorities.

"We would've told someone sooner or later," says Juan. "No baby could live down here with us."

Most of the homeless who attended the baby's birth have no intention of visiting Tim and Sally. Other underground communities are close-knit, but this one is more akin to being homeless on the streets, accepting the passing, fragile nature of relationships, willing to allow people to float in and out of their lives. Some also deliberately insulate themselves against disappointment in others by staying aloof.

Shorty, not yet callused in this way, hopes to keep in touch with the tunnel baby. "Sure, I'll see Little Shorty," he beams at the thought of his namesake. "They'll bring him down to visit his uncles." He entertains an idea fleetingly. "Maybe I'll pass him on the street one day."

"Naw," says Butch. "Little Butch is better off staying away. He wouldn't want to see your ugly face, anyway," he grins.

Everyone seems to name the baby after himself except for Ronda, who refers to the child as Joey—"because he looks like a little kangaroo," she explains. Eventually they accept that he is Little Tim.

A BIRTH UNDERGROUND IS A RARITY. PREGNANT WOMEN ARE USUALLY urged by the tunnel homeless to get proper care. If they refuse to go, authorities are usually informed where to find them, particularly if the women are addicts unable to care for themselves.

Nell, who is thirty-one years old, has been wandering in the tunnels for days, stoned and asking for money for food. Her body is emaciated, but she is hugely pregnant. She doesn't know it.

"I don't know why I'm hungry all the time," she says, looking vacantly to the side. "It ain't drugs. I don't do no drugs no more. I've gone straight," she says unconvincingly.

I ask if she is pregnant, and she looks at me, confused.

"You mean a baby?" she asks, muddled. "Naw, it ain't that. My belly's always been big. Maybe though," she adds as the thought sinks in. "Ain't bled for a while."

She turns out to be seven months pregnant. Her baby is born in a hospital, trembling, addicted to crack cocaine.

Some expectant mothers in the tunnels are ignorant of how to care for themselves. One refuses juice and even food at a soup kitchen several times before a worker suggests she needs it for the child.

"Really?" she asks, clearly delighted at the prospect of eating again. "I thought I shouldn't eat."

The kitchen stays quiet for several minutes. "She didn't know she could eat," a homeless man at another table explains to a friend in a whisper. Soon everyone nods their understanding. No one laughs.

LITTLE TIM WAS TAKEN FROM THE TUNNELS BUT MANY CHILDREN ARE brought into them. Their parents are not abusive or even negligent. They often want only to preserve their families, preferring the tunnels to losing their children. These parents refuse shelters because there, they say, the children are taken from them by the Health and Human Services Department. For this reason, many homeless parents are as wary of social workers as they would be of secret police. They remind me at times of dissidents in Moscow I knew when I was a child living there in the seventies, who would say nothing of substance when they might be overheard. Underground children usually have only one parent, the mother, who says she uses the tunnels only as temporary shelter until she can send the children to relatives or decide whether to put them in foster care or up for adoption.

Underground communities in which children live semipermanently, like J.C.'s community under Grand Central, are extremely secretive about their young ones.

J.C. told me initially that his community had no children, but when he allows me to visit it, I encounter several. "I didn't lie," he insists. "There are not children here. You can't be a child down here." After a moment, he adds, "We have adults as young as five."

J.C. and the mayor of his community refuse to say how many children live with them. On a visit, I counted at least four, but speaking to them is almost impossible. An adult is always present and intervenes by sending the children to play or standing directly between them and me.

OF ALL THE PEOPLE I MET IN THE TUNNEL, THE CHILDREN GAVE ME the most hope. Many of them seemed healthy and happy, undeterred and unaware of the implications of their environment.

Actually, it was their *absence* that made me upset, the evidence of their existence before I ever met them. I am still haunted by doll's eyes that I saw on my first trip into the tunnels with Sergeant Henry. I don't recall their color, but I will never forget their stare in a hastily abandoned recess above the train tracks that had served as home for a homeless family. She lay on the floor, her dirt-smudged face half-hidden behind well-stroked hair, lonely and deserted.

MY TEN-YEAR-OLD FRIEND KRISTEN GAYLE TOLD ME ABOUT JULIE, who lives with her parents and four-year-old brother in a shack in a tunnel. Julie is eight years old with a brilliant smile and tired eyes. She looks much like other girls her age, but perhaps she is a little slimmer. She boasts, with a mischievous little smile, that she has more secrets than any girl at Public School 125. No one at school

knows she lives in a tunnel, she whispers. They think she lives in Harlem’s Douglas Projects, but only her mail goes to that address where her mother’s friend keeps it for them.

The hardest part, she says, is not letting anyone close enough to want to play with her after school. But that’s not so difficult, she admits, because they already laugh at her clothes and sometimes at the way she smells. She says that it’s not that bad; she has her parents and her little brother to play with.

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