

|                                  |                                     |                                    |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| « (/read-267812/?page=3#booktxt) | 1 (/read-267812/?page=1#booktxt)    | 2 (/read-267812/?page=2#booktxt)   |
| 3 (/read-267812/?page=3#booktxt) | 4 (/read-267812/?page=4#booktxt)    | 5 (/read-267812/?page=5#booktxt)   |
| 6 (/read-267812/?page=6#booktxt) | 7 (/read-267812/?page=7#booktxt)    | 8 (/read-267812/?page=8#booktxt)   |
| 9 (/read-267812/?page=9#booktxt) | ... (/read-267812/?page=31#booktxt) | 32 (/read-267812/?page=32#booktxt) |
| » (/read-267812/?page=5#booktxt) | 5                                   | Перейти!                           |

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He hobbles through Grand Central, and we take the shuttle to Times Square, emerging into a bitterly cold January. Seville’s hands are cracked and bleeding. “It’s that Hudson wind,” he laughs as we walk along 48th Street toward 10th Avenue. Between 10th and 11th avenues is an almost unnoticed bridge over a gully through which run railroad tracks some thirty feet below street level, the spot where Seville fell. Access from either side of the bridge is barred by chain link fences, but these can be climbed or slid under, and the weeds—poison sumac, goldenrod—grow freely to the top of the sheer rock face of the crevasse before it drops to the gravel road bed of the tracks.

“Nothin’ in the world like that old Hudson wind blowing off the river. I should know; I’ve lived with it for four years now.”

At times the wind is so strong it almost knocks Seville over. We find none of his friends so we duck into a restaurant, Lee’s Chinese Food. The sign is short of one *e* and soon to lose the slipping *h*. It has two tables, a counter, and a loud kitchen.

“Chicken and fried rice, Mr. Lee, and don’t hold the grease!” Seville calls out on his way to the counter.

Lee laughs. “How’re you doing, man,” he asks. The black patois somehow doesn’t sound odd coming from this middle-aged Asian man; perhaps it is becoming the universal language, the Esperanto of urban slums.

A huge, white mechanic from a nearby auto repair shop joins Seville at the counter. When Seville asks for a cigarette, the man insists he take several. Seville seems to have friends wherever he goes.

“Wha’ happen to your foot, man?” asks Lee in a thick Chinese accent. “You fin’ trouble?”

“No, Mr. Lee,” replies Seville in his courtly manner, “it found me. I never look for it, but it finds me,” he says with a mischievous shake of his head.

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” says Lee, looking skeptically at Seville, “you din’ do nothin’.”

“Nothing but living my own life, Mr. Lee,” agrees Seville, and does not protest when a courtesy bowl of wonton soup is placed before him.

Seville contemplates his foot which, under a huge blue sock, appears encased in a large plaster cast. In fact, his foot has swollen to twice its normal size.

Two nights before, he explains, a man demanded money from him and his friend Cindy. “I said, ‘Look, man, I give you what I got, but I don’t got nothing.’ And it was the truth. Look at me. Do I look like I carry money? I just keep myself clean, that’s all,” he shakes his head at the senselessness of the incident that followed.

“But this guy is all strung out. ‘I’ll take the girl then,’ he says. Now Cindy, she knows her way on the streets. She lives in the tunnels, too, but she does the streets to make some money for drugs and stuff. But this guy got me mad.

“I used to know a little karate when I was young, so I thought, what the hell, I’ll try it,” Seville smiles like a mischievous child. As he raised his foot to kick, the would-be thief flicked open a knife and split Seville’s foot from ankle to toes. Seville thinks he passed out briefly, and when he came to, Cindy was screaming. The assailant had run away.

“That Cindy, man, she can scream. Had I known that, I wouldn’t have done nothing, just let her scream. That’s what made him run anyway.” He laughs, but not for long as he recalls the medical treatment.

Cabs refused to stop for them. When one did, it refused to take Seville. “Man said he didn’t want blood in his cab.” Cindy finally persuaded the driver to take them to the hospital where most homeless go for care.

“Saint Clemens, man, they are the worst!” Seville flares. “I seen people die in their waiting room.” In his case, he waited six hours for treatment, by which time the foot was too swollen for stitches so the wound was stapled closed. The doctor asked him to return when the swelling disappeared. Seville means to go back, he says, but he just doesn’t have the time to spend commuting and hanging out in the waiting room. “I got to spend all day getting food and ready for the night, and then I got to spend all night staying warm.”

Seville’s tunnel is one of the city’s more dangerous places because most of the community are heavy drug addicts. Seville once dealt drugs and still knows how to procure them, so he says people respect him, or at least don’t mess with him, against the day when they may want his services. Seville himself does drugs sometimes, but he’s very cautious about getting addicted, he says, having seen how they destroy lives. He refuses all alcohol because he remembers his father and mother were alcoholics.

“Last time I was dealing [drugs], a girl tried to give me her baby’s food stamps and diapers for a hit,” he remembers, shaking his head. “She was holding the baby, and the baby and her little boy standing next to her, both was crying, and they looked half starved. So I gave her the stuff and then turned around and called HRA [New York’s Human Resources Administration] because that just ain’t right. They needed help. After that I stopped dealing. Nothing’s worth that. I had enough of it.”

SEVILLE ALSO EXPRESSES DISTASTE AT TIMES TOWARD SERGEANT Henry and his Transit Police, which is surprising because as police go, Seville often says, Henry’s not as bad as others. So as we sit, I ask him directly why he doesn’t like Henry.

“Because I seen him do things he shouldn’t be doing,” Seville says flatly.

“He’s like the rest,” Seville continues, growing angry with some memory. “If he has a bad day, he’ll beat up on people who are too weak to stand up. I seen him do things to people that were not necessary, not necessary at all. That’s why I look at him the way I do sometimes. Cuz I seen things he done, seen them when he didn’t know I was there.

“Yeah, I know he done good stuff, too, for some people, got them jobs or into rehab or apartments and other stuff, but he isn’t a saint by any means. That article in *The New York Times* about Henry and Grand Central, you see that? Didn’t say anything about the tunnels, but Henry loved it cuz it had a big picture of him and made him out a hero. He sure as hell ain’t no hero.”

Could you do a better job than Sergeant Henry? I ask.

“Hell, I wouldn’t want that responsibility,” he leans back comfortably, stretching his hands in the air and laughing. “I do what I can [for others] everyday, which is more than most people. Even when I was smoking and doing it up, I brought people stuff to eat. One thing about being homeless in New York, you can’t starve. There is just too much food around.

“One time I had this deal with Flacko with a restaurant in Grand Central that has a hot salad bar. When they closed, they packed up all the leftover stuff for us, and it was good—squid, ravioli, meats, sushi, first-class stuff you wouldn’t believe—and we would pass it out in Grand Central to others who were also homeless tunnel people.”

He pauses, recalling my question. “If I was in charge,” he says, with a mischievous grin starting, “if I was in charge, I’d put up a big sign on the platforms saying, ‘C’mon down! Everyone welcome! Come live free—rent-free, tax-free, independent, free like Mandela!’”

When he stops smiling, he turns earnest and leans over our table in the Chinese restaurant, spilling his now cold wonton soup, “If you write this book,” he says, “you tell them the tunnels rob you of your life. No one should come down here. There’s lots of reasons they do. They think they can just get out after the police stop looking for them, or when they get off drugs, or when they feel better and can face things again. You can’t go back up. Man, I wish I knew that twelve years ago.

“I just want you to tell them that. The tunnels take your life. That freedom stuff is bullshit. Everyone down here knows it. They won’t say it, but they know it.”

But you have left the tunnels several times, I remind him.

“I never really left them,” he says. “I took vacations from the tunnels,” he smiles lightly, “but I never really left them. I guess they’re my home. Their people are my people. They are what I know best. They are who I know best.

“Think about it,” his eyes dim. “You gonna just stop living where you live with your friends and your job and your family, learn a whole new way of life with nothing waiting for you there? How you expect me to do it after twelve years of doing what I do?”

We look at each other for a moment. Then he broke the silence with a smile.

“Tomorrow will be different,” he rights his Styrofoam soup bowl. “Maybe I’ll win the lottery and turn the tunnels into an underground resort area: ‘Challenge your survival techniques!’ Maybe tomorrow will be different. Don’t you worry about me.”

### 3

## *Mac’s War*

IN THIS RECESS OF THE TUNNEL, MAC DOES NOT NEED A TRAP with stale food or a feces-soaked rag to catch “track rabbits,” as rats are known to the underground homeless. They come because the garbage is as dense as its stench. The light is very dim, but Mac is well accustomed to it all.

Many newcomers vomit here, he warns. No use wondering what the smell is, he says. It’ll just make you sick thinking of the possibilities. Ignore it, he advises.

I bury my nose and mouth deeper into the collar of my turtleneck. The cloth seems to filter the stench a bit. At least my eyes stop watering and my senses recover slowly from the shock.

A shuffling sound penetrates the quiet darkness, and Mac crouches low to the ground, like a wrestler preparing for a new round. This, he says, is how you hunt track rabbits.

A brown rat the size of a small adult raccoon sniffs its way out of the refuse and lumbers past Mac, undeterred by the stark beam of my flashlight pointed aimlessly at my feet. He is in no way frightened by humans and is prepared to ignore us.

“See,” Mac says proudly, “the biggest, healthiest, and boldest sons of bitches you’ve ever seen live down here.”

The rat turns at the sound of his voice and, teeth bared, darts toward Mac. In a sudden, graceful movement, Mac’s hand sweeps down as if throwing dice and seizes the base of the animal’s tail. The rat shrieks and claws the air as he lifts it high above the ground.

Mac lets out a short, powerful laugh. “He doesn’t look so almighty up there, does he?” he asks triumphantly. He flips his wrist with a snap and the rat’s body flies off into the dark and makes a dull thud as it strikes the wall.

“Shit,” he spits. “Where is that son of a bitch?” He allows that it’s harder than you expect to break those track rabbits’ necks.

“Sometimes I think they’re stronger than we are. They’re as mean, that’s for sure,” he says, walking toward the wall. Down here, the point is survival. “We’re both fresh meat. If I hadn’t grabbed him, he would have bit me.”

He spots the rat, which is still and bleeding from an ear. Dead.

“Dare’s da wabbit!” he mimics Elmer Fudd with a goofy grin.

When Mac picks it up, the rat hangs limp—as soft and unthreatening as a puppy. Its eyes are closed and its teeth, which were so sharp and menacing a few seconds ago, are clenched shut.

Mac drops the corpse into the blood- and dirt-stained white canvas bag he carries everywhere, and throws the bag over his right shoulder. He is a white man in his early fifties, small and wiry, filthy and bearded, with sandals that flop loosely against the bottom of his feet, which are blackened by tunnel soot.

He adds pieces of wood and metal to his sack as we walk back toward his camp. The wood will feed the fire, he explains, and the metal will serve as a leg for a table he is making, or maybe a club, or maybe part of a new trap. Everything has a purpose, he says, and if he can’t use it, he will give it away or just leave it for another tunnel dweller to discover.

“You may not be able to see what its purpose is,” Mac says, “but everything has a reason for being.”

We reach his camp, far beyond the operating subway tracks, and he walks behind a raised bunker, a ten-foot-high concrete wall that once served as a rest and tool shack for track maintenance workers. After a sharp, chopping sound, he returns with the headless body of the rat, its blood flowing freely over his hands. With a proud smile punctuated with crooked and rotten teeth, he strings the carcass by its hind paws in a corner of the tunnel beyond his space.

“Can’t leave them there too long or the other rats will eat them,” he explains. Quickly he builds a small fire and then skins the rat, shaving off the skin a strip at a time. Carefully and almost affectionately, like a small boy with a large fish he has caught, he skewers the rat from its neck through its anus and sets it over the fire.

“I took his head off for you,” he smiles. “You probably wouldn’t want to see it, but when you’re hungry, it’s very good. Juicy. Reminds me of pig’s feet. Tasty. But the fun is sucking out the gook. You can even eat some of the finer bones.”

As the rat cooks, he tells me about his favorite book, Thoreau’s *On Waiden Pond*. He carries a worn, paperback copy of it in the back pocket of his jeans and is able to quote long passages from it.

I ask, dizzy from the scent of burning flesh and cracking hair that haunts the campsite, if he is a Transcendentalist.

“I am, myself,” he says, then pauses to look from the rat to me. “But that’s a surprisingly dumb question from you,” he says aggressively. “I am simply being myself, living for myself, so I can have things down here established when others come down and need me. It’s my calling, you might say.

“The one thing I can’t stand is labels,” he adds, as if growing even more irritated by my question. “I am simply a person. I don’t conform to any caste or group of people who are too lazy to think for themselves. Everyone up there has a self, but how many of them know it? How many define themselves by what society says?”

The belly of the rat is smoldering. One of the feet catches fire and quickly turns into a blackened claw of carbon. Mac rotates the spit to cook the back, and returns his attention back to me with a gentle smile.

“Please excuse my impatience,” he says carefully, adding an almost courtly element to his urban mountain man persona. “Sometimes I forget that it took me a good year to forget what society up there taught me.”

I’m not sure I know what he means, but I remain silent. I’m frightened now.

He watches the meat as he turns the spit to avoid overcooking the animal. Flames periodically lick up to envelop and claim the fresh body, igniting a few remaining hairs. Mac lifts the rat off the fire, pulls out the hairs, and places it back.

“The world’s going to end soon,” he announces. “There’ll be another holocaust. Men up there are too evil and people will come down here and ask me for help. We’ll be the presidents and heads of state. We’ll be the ones to teach them how to survive. That’s why I’m here.”

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