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Jennifer Toth
THE MOLE PEOPLE
LIFE IN THE TUNNELS BENEATH NEW YORK CITY

*To my father who teaches by example and love
and*

To Kristen, Dericka, Richard, Julie, and all the children in the tunnels in hope that they will carry the lesson with them

“If you have built castles in the air, that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them.”

—David Thoreau



Author's Note

I THOUGHT A GREAT DEAL ABOUT THE TITLE OF THIS BOOK. Although there are several communities of tunnel dwellers who call themselves the mole people, there are many individuals living in the tunnels who take issue with the term. In homeless circles aboveground, the tunnel people are commonly referred to as “mole people.” Sometimes the term is used in such circles disparagingly, to establish higher status within the homeless community.

Graffiti artist Chris Pape and photographer Margaret Morton each raised concerns about “The Mole People” because it is regarded as a pejorative term among homeless advocates, and more important to us all, it is insulting to some tunnel dwellers. Bernard Isaacs and his community under Riverside Park were those we most wanted to protect from this title. For years, Bernard has objected to the term because he feels it is a label that portrays him as an animal, not as a person. Yet when I talked to Bernard about the title of this book, he agreed “The Mole People” was the right choice.

I chose the title for several reasons. The people of New York City who live underground are most commonly known as mole people. And it is no accident that the term conjures freakish images. I hope this book will reverse the horrible and striking image of “mole people” simply by showing what I saw and found. I hope the stories from the tunnels will bring a better understanding of the underground people. By writing their stories, I hope to dismiss the myth of animal-like underground dwellers, so that you, the reader, can come to know that mole people don’t exist beneath the surface of New York City, but people do.

Introduction

MY TEN-YEAR-OLD FRIEND KRISTEN WAS THE FIRST TO TELL me about the “mole people.” She was one of my students when I volunteered in the Harlem tutorial program during my year of graduate school at Columbia University. We met every week. She taught me about street life in New York, while I helped her with multiplication tables.

One Saturday morning we sat together on a thick red couch in the plush hall of the International House at a great bay window overlooking Riverside Park. Outside the weather was cold but bright, and the sun reaching into the room made us warm and happy. Kristen, bored by her school work and hungry for attention, searched for distractions in the high ceilings, the polished piano, and the wall paintings.

“I know this girl at school, Julie. She don’t live like this. She live underground in a tunnel,” Kristen announced. Her eyes grew wide and excited as they did when she began one of her tales. I laughed.

“Really, it’s true!” she insisted, straightening her slouched back. “She live in one of them tunnels.”

I asked if she were a friend of Julie’s.

“No, she nobody’s friend. She dirty all the time, and she be stinky too,” Kristen shivered. Her eyes lit with a familiar smile that was never far from her. Then she added with a giggle, “She be one of them *mole people*.” She wiggled her fingers near her mouth to indicate whiskers, squinching up her nose and eyes to look like an imagined mole. She looked more like my cat than a rodent, however, and I laughed again and she laughed with me.

While I was dubious about her story, I asked her for more details about Julie, including the name of the school, and then Kristen arranged for me to meet Julie and her father at the swing set in Morningside Park on a Saturday morning. They found me and told their story, one of many to come on the following pages, but they refused to take me to their underground home.

I WAS UNEASY TALKING TO HOMELESS PEOPLE. ALTHOUGH I HAD served in soup kitchens in high school and college, coming from St. Louis, I found New York City’s homeless wild and frightening. They seemed to multiply three-fold on each corner during my 1989-90 year at Columbia and their squabbling over the same turf seemed threatening as I passed by. Then, too, young girls were attacking pedestrians in the area with needles and everyone was terrified that the tips were AIDS-infected.

However, two experiences made me less reluctant to talk to the homeless. My friend Robert Meitus, also at Columbia that year, had an extremely open manner with those we met on the street, even embracing them at times. He and his band sometimes gathered near midnight on the long white steps of Columbia University’s administration building next to the school’s statue and played for the homeless who gathered in the sweeping white moonlight. He wrote some songs for and about homeless individuals in the area. He broke my fear of a population that seemed untamed and dangerous. The other experience was more pointed. One night I was feeling upset as I left my room, and I saw a homeless woman with a shopping cart of trash bags filled with empty cans and old clothes. She asked me for money. I said I had none. She thanked me and smiled. Then, seeing my tears, she began giving me advice with a gentle look and soft eyes until at the end, she reached into one of her garbage bags and handed me a limp and fading white carnation. I, in turn, spoke to her as more than a something on the street asking for money. She had lost her apartment a few days earlier, her children were with friends, and she was combing the streets “for cans and luck,” she said.

After our talk, I became less afraid of approaching the homeless on the street and talking to them. The homeless on the streets near the university, while they had heard seemingly fantastic stories about mole people, had never met any.

The following summer I interned at *The Los Angeles Times* bureau in New York and continued the search. Many of the homeless in Grand Central Station, not far from my office, claimed they had seen mole people or even visited their communities. Several promised to take me up the tunnel tracks to them, but, to my relief, none came through. One of them, however, directed me to St. Agnes’ Soup Kitchen nearby, where I spoke with the director.

"I've heard some stories," he said at first. "I haven't been down there." Then he began to hedge. "I'm not saying there are such people, but I'm not saying there aren't," he smiled when pressed. Finally, as we walked out, he quietly suggested that I visit Sergeant Bryan Henry, the Metropolitan Transit Police officer in charge of homeless outreach in Grand Central Station.

Finding Sergeant Henry's small office was not easy, and when I did, another officer stood by when I explained that I wanted to write a story about the underground homeless. "You mean the mole people," the two men laughed. "No one is living underground," Henry said flatly, "they're just stories."

When the other officer left and I continued recounting the various tales I had picked up, Henry listened more seriously. When I said that some homeless men had offered to take me into the tunnels, he asked for their names. While I was telling him about conditions at different locations in the tunnels, as they had been told to me, a woman officer walked in. She looked stunned.

"You told her about all that?" she accused Henry. "What is going on?"

Henry looked from her to me, covered his face with his hands, and took his feet off his desk. He rose, ushered her out, and shut the door.

"OK," he began. "I'm going to tell you about this. It's big. There's a city beneath the streets ..."

Henry was frustrated, like many others, at the inadequate city and state efforts to deal with the underground homeless population that increased year after year. He finally took some photographs of the conditions, which he showed to me, and brought those pictures to Albany in an effort to see the governor. He was advised to keep quiet and told help would come, but it did not.

Initially *The Los Angeles Times* was lukewarm toward the story, probably because I was fresh out of school. Perhaps they are pulling your leg, one reporter laughed; maybe they are luring you into the tunnels where you could be raped or killed, another warned. But several other reporters, particularly Karen Tumulty, encouraged me to pursue the story, especially after I brought J.C. to the office.

J.C. was the self-described spokesman for a two hundred-member underground community under Grand Central to whom Sergeant Henry had introduced me. Karen and editor Roger Smith gave me confidence to pursue the story. My drive was also fueled by denials that the underground homeless existed—even by those who clearly knew better. After months of research, I received, anonymously, a list of officials—mental health and substance abuse specialists who met with each other several times to discuss the underground homeless situation. The story unfolded easily. I became more fascinated by the homeless I met, their warmth and friendliness, as well as the way they interacted with one another through their quick communication network. I enjoyed being recognized on the street by those I had interviewed and even those who knew me by word of mouth. One night while waiting for the D train to take me home to Brooklyn, a homeless man came up to me and suggested that I pass up the waiting train for the next one. "There's going to be trouble" on that train, he warned me. I took his advice. Hours later while stuck on the stalled train, I learned that there had been a shooting on the previous train that I had passed up.

Immediately after my article appeared on the front page of the *Times*, I was deluged with calls from advocates of the homeless, some of whom were furious that I had quoted them. "It doesn't help the homeless to be portrayed as 'mole people' living underground," complained an official at New York's largest organization for homeless people. "It makes them look freakish." He intended to phone an editor and claim he had been misquoted by me. I asked if he intended to lie. "Sure I'd lie," he told me without equivocation. "I'd lie to help the homeless."

I wondered if I really had done harm. "Don't worry about them," Bernard Isaacs advised. A veteran tunnel dweller from the West Side, Isaacs is very critical of these groups for the homeless. "They're as bad as the city government," he said. "They have their agenda and we have ours. They need money to keep their jobs at their organizations. They make up the truth to support their platform so they get donations. We don't have a platform. We need the truth."

So I went back into the tunnels for more firsthand accounts and experiences of underground life for this book. With the help of Bernard, Sergeant Henry, and Blade, I had encounters that will last me a lifetime. If I had it to do again, I wouldn't. The sadness and the tragedies were overwhelming, and, in the end, the danger to myself was too great to want to relive. Too many friends I made in the tunnels have died or regressed almost beyond recognition. Too few have made it back aboveground. The excitement of dangerous tunnel adventures lasts only until you get to know the people of the tunnel and understand their plight.

In describing the dangerous world of the underground homeless, I've sought to bring up to the reader not only their personal histories but also the sparks of friendship and caring that help light their dark world. The stories tell not only of their present lives in the tunnels and the communities they form, but also of their communication networks, and of the encounters with government agencies, charitable programs, and nonprofit advocacy groups. All, I hope, make up the larger truth about the homeless underground that those who have never approached these people will find difficult to credit, let alone comprehend in its entirety.

Finally, few of the homeless in this book are identified by their real names. This was their choice.

"We leave our pasts and our failures with our names aboveground," explained the self-styled "mayor" of an underground Penn Station community. While they gave only their street names or invited me to invent one for them, virtually all of them wanted to talk about their lives, hoping that it would bring some understanding and perhaps help others. These people and their lives represent the worst of New York City and, I argue, the best. These are their stories.

HE'D HEARD ABOUT THE TUNNEL. SOME MONTHS EARLIER A corpse was found in it, not far beyond the tracks, its face half-eaten by rats, one eye scratched out and punctured with small teeth. The fleshless cheek swarmed with maggots and flies. They said a fat white worm, or perhaps only a maggot, crawled in the empty eye socket, while the other eye stared in unblinking horror. A veteran police officer threw up at the sight of the dead man who was just one of the homeless frequently seen but little known. He never fit into any place or plan. Even in death his body refused to be useful even to medical science. He had been dead only a few days, but his body was too decomposed to determine the cause of death. Or so they said. He might have been killed in a robbery or a drug-crazed beating or from natural causes—as natural as they come to a man of about fifty who had been living on the streets and sought a place to rest. It didn't matter much. There was no one to cry over him or claim his body. All that was left was a burial by prison inmates at Riker's Island in the Island cemetery, a government-issued number, and the folklorish memory of his hideous corpse circulated among the homeless.

That story about the tunnel was accepted as truth to him and the other homeless who lived in the area. Now as he enters a dark tunnel away from the tracks, he fears he is entering that corpse's tunnel. He considers working his way back out, past the mounds of broken cinder blocks and clumps of debris and refuge, back to the dark tunnel entrance he had stumbled into in his search for solitude. A moment ago he stood at the mouth of the tunnel silhouetted in the last of the day's red light, not yet committed to the underground. Now he finds himself enveloped in its darkness, his bravery receding with the light as he walks deeper into the tunnel. The dark is not much worse than the night in the city, he tells himself, and the danger can't be greater here than it is for men like him on the streets.

Three nights earlier he was stabbed while being robbed by a man he had considered his best friend, just after they had shared a Meals-on-Wheels sandwich and a park bench in East Side Manhattan's Alphabet City. Two nights ago a man tried to rape him at a city shelter where he hoped for sleep to heal his bandaged arm. Last night, as he lay curled in a doorway to stay warm, a group of young thugs kicked him in the head until blood filled his eyes. They tore the pint of cheap whiskey from his hands and poured it over him, then tried to ignite him with an iridescent yellow lighter until a woman began screaming. He could have gone to the cops, but what for? He couldn't identify them and he wouldn't risk fingering the wrong kids. That had happened to his brother once and it just wasn't right.

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