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Underground

I discovered subterranean New York in the late 1940's, well after the war, at the end of a hard winter. The city could be chilly in summer, but the whole place had been dead frozen from October to March. Buildings were mostly heated with coal in those days, and at any moment you might hear the thunder of a full load clattering down a metal coal chute into a basement bin in a nearby brownstone or apartment house. There was a permanent tang of oily smoke in the air from the bituminous, the cheap coal in tenements and low-rent buildings that couldn't or wouldn't pay for anthracite.

There was grit in the air, too, and it crunched underfoot when you walked on marble or linoleum, and that was what you were breathing. Your nostrils turned black from the soot and grime and you could always spot the street people—black nostrils and grey upper lips from living outside and never getting near a sink.

For the first few weeks, I hung out mostly in the subways, which were warmer than the street and protected from the wind. There were a lot of folks living in the tunnels in those days, but you didn't see them much. I didn't get very deep into the underground. Maybe those people are still there. There have always been a lot of New Yorkers underground, maybe even more now than back then. Anyway, it was getting on to the end of winter, still freezing most nights, but spring wasn't too far off. I didn't know anybody yet, or have money for a place to stay, but I was young so I made do riding the trains and dodging the transit cops.

Back in the '40's the Lexington line had a transit cop on every third or fourth train. They'd ride for a while and walk through all the cars, and

then get off and catch the next train. At the end of the line they'd start back. One cop could run the length of Manhattan eight or ten times in a single shift. So if it was night-time and I wasn't looking for someplace to sleep, I'd track the first cop I found, riding the train after his. When I saw him on the next platform, I'd get off and take the next train. That way I never got rushed more than a couple times, and more important, I didn't get famous.

It didn't do well around the subways, getting famous. Cops see a million people a day, but once they take notice of someone, they get fixed on that face and they'll spot it in a flash whenever the person turns up. Then you can't slip by, or fade into the crowd, or hurry on past with your head down. One glimpse and they'll roust you, no matter what you've been doing, or haven't been.

So I was tracking some transit cop, a few weeks after I got to New York, and he'd just changed trains, heading back uptown from the Bowery, and I was settling down on the platform to wait for the next train. It was a cold and windy night, with one of the first serious rainstorms of early spring, and I knew I wouldn't be seeing the light of day for a good long time, not until it stopped drizzling or warmed up a little.

Most stations have a couple of iron benches you can lie down on if there's nobody around, and I stretched out on one of them to rest my legs. You get tired standing in the cars, swaying around all day long, and your legs go even before your feet. I was mindful not to fall asleep, though, or one too many trains could go by and leave me back in sync with my transit cop.

So I'm lying there with one eye open, so to speak, trying to think about why I came to New York in the first place, which was mainly to be a poet, or maybe a painter if I could get enough scratch for supplies, but a poet was more realistic, given the overhead, when the station got really quiet, and the hum of the city overhead evened out, and the scrape of distant subway trains on other lines was just audible away down either end of my particular tunnel, and my mind wandered a little too far inside, and the next thing I knew I was waking up to a sharp poke in the ribs.

Transit cops aren't real cops, at least that's what the real cops would tell you, maybe because they don't carry guns, or didn't back in the 40's. But they did carry billy clubs, and my personal transit cop was using his on me without much restraint.

He poked me again, hard, and I sat up, trying to fend him off.

“No sleeping in the stations,” he growled. “Get yerself the hell out of here.”

“Yes sir,” I said, in my best subservient tone, keeping my head down to retain as much anonymity as possible.

“Don’t make me take you in,” he said.

“No sir,” I said. “I’m going.”

I got to my feet and started putting on my jacket, which I’d bunched up on the bench, under my head.

“I don’t want to have to book you, kid. It’s a fucking pain in the ass for both of us.” He was still prodding me with his club, but less energetically now that I was cooperating.

“OK,” I said, wincing and dancing away from his jabs. “I get it. I’m leaving.”

“Well, get a move on,” he said.

I started walking down the platform toward the turnstiles. He followed close behind, so close I could hear him breathing. I figured he’d be on my ass until I was upstairs on the street, but I still had some hope that he might lose interest and I could slip back under cover.

“Is it still sleeting outside?” I said.

“How should I know?” he replied. “I been down here all day.”

“You didn’t see snow up the stairs at Whitehall?” I asked. Some of the stations were small enough that there was a glimpse of sky if you were in the right car.

“Naah,” he said. “It’s too dark.”

“Passengers coming in with umbrellas?” I said.

“Yeah, some of them. Not many this time of night, though.” He was walking just a few steps behind me now, almost as if we were having a normal conversation.

As we reached the turnstiles, a loud clap of thunder echoed down the tiled stairway, and we both stopped. You could hear the sudden rush of rain up on the street and the echoes of thunder bouncing around the city.

I shivered and pulled my jacket collar up. It was a pretty decent leather jacket, with some quilted lining, but no damn good in the pouring rain.

“You got a place to go, kid?”

I hung my head and projected all the misery I could. “No sir. Just killing time until my uncle gets back from Long Island.”

He looked up the stairs and back at me, sizing me up. I was still trying to be invisible; just a habit, hard to break even when it's a lost cause.

"OK, look," he said. "It's a mess up there. You can hang out 'till the next train, but you gotta sit up or walk around."

I nodded like I never thought about that before.

"No lying down," he said. "Not on the benches, and not on the platform. When that train comes, you're on it."

I nodded again and mumbled appreciatively.

"My supervisor sees you, anybody reports you lying around down here, I get burned. You get it?"

I shuffled my feet, wanting to grin and say thanks, but not daring to break character. "I got it," I said.

"OK then." He pointed at a bench back by the wall on the other side of the token booth. "Go sit over there and keep warm."

I looked at him, and he waved his billy club impatiently. "Get on over there."

I went to the bench, and he followed, doing that New York cop billy club thing with the leather strap, spinning the club around and catching it, like it was second nature.

After I sat down, he stood for a minute, looking up and down the platform. It was late, and trains weren't running very often. We were in for a long wait. I wondered what I was going to do once I got on the next train. He'd be expecting me to get off somewhere.

"Where you headed, anyway?" he asked, like he was reading my mind.

"Well, 86th Street, eventually," I said. "But my uncle's not home yet, and I don't have a key, so I was just riding the IRT up and down to kill time."

It wasn't entirely untrue. I knew someone in a fifth-floor walk-up on 88th Street, and they were probably out of town, but I didn't know them well enough to crash their apartment at 2:00 AM anyway. So if I had to get off somewhere, that was as good as any other place. Besides, 86th Street had some dives and all-night bars where I might be able to sponge a little change and buy some coffee to stay awake till morning.

The cop scowled at me. "What's his address? Your uncle."

"268 East 88th Street," I said, proud to have something so factual and plausible to offer, and especially without having to think about it.

"That's what, between Lex and Third?" he asked, and I knew he was

testing me. Fortunately, I also knew damn well where George's place was because I'd been there a couple of times when I visited the city two years ago.

"No," I said, trying to keep the elation out of my voice. "It's between Second and Third. Just off Second, actually. Red brick building, corner restaurant called Sally's."

The cop relaxed, but he didn't say anything. He continued gazing up and down the platform, almost as if he was trying to look like a cop, but I knew he was just a transit cop, and if there was real trouble, there wasn't much he could do. I don't think he even had a radio. Even real cops on the beat didn't have radios in those days.

After a few minutes, he sat down on the bench, at the opposite end. I was afraid to look over at him because I didn't know what he was going to do.

"Don't tell anyone I'm sitting down," he said.

I shook my head.

"I'm not supposed to sit down on the job," he added, and he sounded almost sullen.

Then I looked over at him, and he didn't seem much like a cop at all. He was slumped, and his arms were just lying in his lap, the billy club dangling from the leather thong, and his feet were out straight, splayed apart.

"Long day," I said, cautiously.

"You have no idea," he said.

"Catch any criminals?" I asked.

He gave me a disapproving grunt, and I thought better than to get too familiar.

We sat in silence for a while, listening to the rain up above and the occasional sporadic squeal of subway trains braking in far-off stations, scraping around corners in other tunnels. I wasn't about to be the first one to speak.

"It's a hell of a job," he said.

"Yeah, I guess."

He was staring across the tracks at the empty downtown platform on the other side.

"Sometimes I can't believe I've spent another whole damn day underground, just riding up and down the island," he said.

“Been a cop for a long time?” I ventured.

“Ten years. You get promoted, little promotions, a tiny raise now and then, but the beat’s the same. I’ll never get out of here until I make sergeant, and there’s sixty, seventy guys ahead of me.”

“That’s rotten,” I said.

He sighed, and sat up straight for a while. After a few minutes, though, he slouched back down and stretched out his legs again, and let his head lie back against the tiled wall.

I wondered how long I could maintain my own sanity if all I did was ride the subway up and down Manhattan, year after year. Not long. Maybe it was time to crash at George’s for a few weeks, if he’d let me in, and get some actual writing done. Or at least find out what I could do for a little scratch.

The faint roar of the rain storm was still omnipresent in the station, but I could hear a train, far away down the track, shrieking to a stop at some platform downtown. It wouldn’t be long before it got here, and my slow-motion dance with the transit cop would have to stop, at least for tonight.

The cop didn’t seem to hear the train, and he was so still I wondered if now it was his turn to fall asleep. Should I wake him if he did? He probably wouldn’t like that, but he could get in trouble if somebody reported a sleeping cop sprawled on a bench next to a vagrant. I was mulling it over, imagining headlines in the *Daily News*, radio reports about city police mismanagement, trouble for Mayor O’Dwyer, who had just been elected, when I heard the uptown stopping again, this time just one station to the south, and I knew this was the next stop.

The cop heard it, too, and straightened up. He glanced at me with a blank expression, like I wasn’t there, and I got a shiver and looked away. He stood up, and gave his billy club a few loop-de-loops, like he was practicing, and then he looked up and down the platform again with that air of an official observer.

I didn’t say anything, but I sat up and shoved my hands into my pockets, ready to get on the train with him and get forced up to the street at 86th. You could feel the cold air in the tunnel moving now, pushed ahead by the advancing uptown local. There was a dim flash of light from the darkness to our left, and a faint roar was building.

The cop took a few steps forward and moved down the platform a ways,

in front of the token booth and the turnstiles. The wind and the roar were growing, and the squeal and clatter of steel drowned out the rain. And then the train appeared and filled the tunnel with noise and light and motion, and the brakes came on with more grating of steel on steel, and the smell of oil and ozone. The train ground to a stop, exactly filling the station, from one end of the platform to the other, yellow light bulbs in each car, almost nobody on board.

I got up, and the cop turned and pointed his billy club at me. “You stay here,” he shouted. “But get the hell onto the next train, or I’ll be after you.”

I stared at him. He looked fierce and almost military. “Yes sir!” I shouted back. He gestured at the bench with his club, and I backed up and sat down again.

I wondered if anyone was looking, if there was a supervisor evaluating his behavior, as he strode onto the train, checking up and down the car. He didn’t have a gun, but he swung that billy club like a pro. The doors slid closed behind him and he didn’t turn around as the train lurched into motion and roared on out of the station, up toward 86th Street. The lights on the train blinked out a couple times, but I just caught a glimpse of him, marching through the empty cars into the night.