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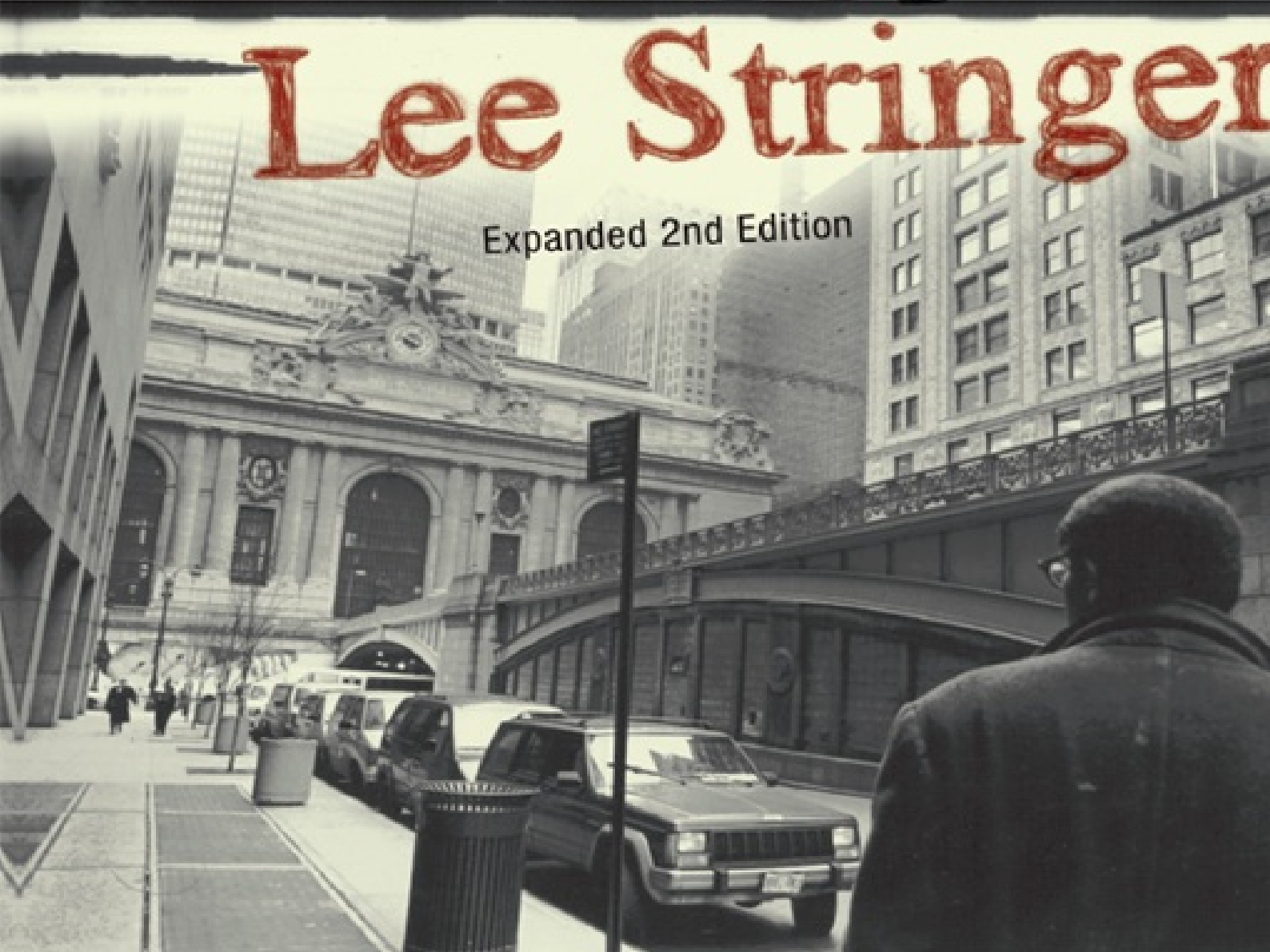
Stories from the Street

WINTER

Foreword by
Kurt Vonnegut

Lee Stringer

Expanded 2nd Edition



“Like Jack London, [Stringer] is a self-educated storyteller of the first rank ... this man can write!”

—Kurt Vonnegut

“[With *Grand Central Winter*] Stringer gives us ... the long view of New York’s underbelly, born of pain but delivered with style and heart.”

—John Jiler, *New York Times Book Review*

“*Grand Central Winter: Stories from the Street* is as much about the redemptive power of writing as it is about being down and out in New York. It succeeds because Stringer tells not just his story, but a larger story about finding room ‘amid the costume-jewel glitter ... for one more diamond in the rough.’ ”

—Bob Minzesheimer, *USA Today*

“Stringer ... weaves his gritty scenes with fluid commentary on how things work and what they mean, in language that combines the punch of the streets with the ideas of a careful thinker.”

—David L. Lewis, *New York Daily News*

“What raises [Stringer’s] punch prose to the level of art is his stubborn refusal to romanticize anything, least of all his own survival ... Stringer has no answers to the problems he lived with, just an understanding of the people who shared [the street], and the instincts of a storyteller.”

—Janice P. Nimura, *Newsday*

“Written with insight, humor and humanity, [*Grand Central Winter*] offers colorful and compassionate stories about life on the gray, grim streets of New York City, and the people he encountered there.”

—Mae W. Gentry, *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*

“At the heart of Lee Stringer the addict was a false Eden relieving him of the world’s and his own ills. At the heart of Lee Stringer the recovering addict at home in Mamaroneck, New York, is a writer, a real one, in *Grand Central Winter*, knowing, more than he lets on, exactly what he’s doing.”

—Leonard Gill, *Memphis Flyer*

“Stringer possesses a sharp eye for the street and the rich, sagacious talent of a storyteller.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“The book gives full humanity to its troubled characters and homes in on the motivations, strategies, and relationships of people surviving on the streets ... Highly recommended.”

—*Library Journal*

“Stringer’s crisp detail, straight-no-chaser wit, and uncompromising frankness are as bracing as his subject is significant.”

—Donna Seaman, *Booklist*

“Stringer knows full well that freedom begins between the ears. It is the discovery of this freedom that liberates the

heart.”

—Colum McCann, *San Francisco Chronicle*

“*Grand Central Winter* contains surprisingly entertaining vignettes, as the author is blessed with a light touch as well as empathy for his fellow down and out. You can imagine his characters—hookers and junkies and people who’ve fallen just off the edge—in a lyrical, neo-realist Disney film about New York.”

—Matthew Flamm, *Salon*

“*Grand Central Winter* is, in fact, a subversive work. Its characters and stories fly in the face of the most hallowed stereotypes that American society holds about homeless and near-homeless people.”

—Patrick T. Reardon, *Chicago Tribune*

“[Lee Stringer’s] writing is edgy and pointed and sometimes startlingly funny.”

—Barbara Stewart, *New York Times* Metro section

“While such vivid observations would be impressive for any writer, they seem nearly miraculous when you consider that they were drafted while the author was living on the street under the duress of drug addiction.”

—David Bahr, *Time Out New York*

GRAND CENTRAL WINTER

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Lee Stringer

foreword by Kurt Vonnegut

Seven Stories Press
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Foreword by Kurt Vonnegut

Preface

Acknowledgments

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About the Author

About Seven Stories Press

His name is Lee Stringer. Like Jack London, he is a self-educated storyteller of the first rank, and an unembittered, hopeful survivor of extreme poverty, long-term homelessness, and addiction.

Lee Stringer's tales are grimly entertaining. They are about how the most useless and rootless and endlessly harried of New York City's outcasts manage to stay alive day after day. They are reportage, not fiction. The author, himself a character in every story, was for years and years as bereft of dignity and self-respect as are his subjects.

Even when a crack addict, though, gathering cans redeemable for a nickel apiece, being chased off subways for hawking *Street News*, a weekly about and by pariahs like himself, Lee Stringer discovered a new high. It was writing for that paper. He wrote so interestingly and well that he became editor. He gained a purpose in life beyond getting the next crack fix. On the paper's office couch, he at least found a place to sleep where police could not improve the quality of life in the city by rousting him.

He kicked his drug habit. That makes him worthy of our attention, however fleeting, as a small-time hero. But this man can write! His stories are deliberately unsentimental. He might have made himself and his wretched characters from real life seem lovable or cute or raffish or at least pitiable, and thus established himself as a sort of Damon Runyon.

He chooses instead to be coolly technical, to teach his readers what homeless persons in New York City, many of them clinically insane or idiotic, do hour-after-hour, day-after-day simply to keep from dying.

Nowhere in all his first-rate writing has Lee Stringer concealed the hook of collective guilt should we dare to bite. But those who do bite will find resonant new dimensions, as have I.

What is to be done?

—Kurt Vonnegut
New York City
May 13, 1995

In some eras more than others it is harder for us all to be the kind of people we would wish ourselves to be. This was certainly true of Germany in the forties. And to an extent it was also true of America in the eighties, as the mighty and the lowly alike went to extraordinary lengths to flee a deepening sense of despair. The grand exploits of the high-and-mightiest—headlining the news as they had—were well documented and since have been amply dissected. But for the low and the lost, less is understood about their sprees of abandon.

I was among them.

This, in part, is our story.

I can hardly pick up a Seven Stories Press book without finding unbridled praise for publisher Dan Simon at the top of its acknowledgments. And much as I like to buck a trend, I find myself hastening to join that pack. There's no getting around the fact that Dan is indeed a gem. Were it not for his guidance I would have committed wholesale blunder to print.

He has my marker.

I owe a debt of gratitude as well to the erstwhile Nelson Algren, who told me, posthumously, that writers are at their best when they don't know what they are doing.

Thank you, Mr. Algren. For me there has been no greater manic-depressive lunacy than the process of trying to write this book. From prophet to fraud, from exhilaration to cold sweat, I had no idea of how I was going to get away with it. But Nelson, peering over my shoulder from the grave, kept coaxing me on.

"Fuck all that and write," he said.

Also Janet Wickenhaver-Allon, my former *Street News* editor, who told me, "Stick to telling stories and you'll be okay"; Peter Blauner, who took precious time out from writing best sellers to help me through a lot of angst; George McDonald, who, after working with street people for over fifteen years, still sees human beings when he looks at them; and Barbara Dunn, who not only forgave the time I betrayed her trust, but even corrected my many typos.

Among the must-mentions I include the earnest people of Project Renewal, who coaxed me back to sanity; the customer-friendly folks at the Little Computer Store, who treated me—and my oft-ailing Mac—as if I were a budding Hemingway; Jon Hart, Barbara Bales, Pat, and Indio at *Street News*; my very patient mother; and all the people, places, and things that lie at the heart of this book.

L.
Mamaroneck, N.Y.
March 1999

What happened was I was digging around in my hole—there's this long, narrow crawl space in Grand Central's lower regions, of which few people are aware and into which I moved some time ago. It is strung with lights and there is a water spigot just outside the cubbyhole through which I enter. It's on the chilly side in winter, and I baste down there in summer, because it is, as they say, home.

I have filled this place with blankets and books and have fortified it with enough cardboard baffles to hold any rats at bay (the secret being, of course, to never bring food down here. It's the food that attracts them). So, at the end of the day I come down here to polish off the last, lonely blast. Or just to sleep it off.

But as I said, I was digging around in this hole—lying flat on my back, reaching back and under the old blankets, newspapers, and clothes that I've amassed over time and that keep me insulated from the concrete floor, trying to find some small, dowel-like instrument with which to push the screens from one end of my stem to the other, so that I could smoke the remaining resin cake up in the thing.

For those of you who have not had the pleasure, I point out that when you are piping up the first thing to go is your patience. And I'm digging around under this mess, cursing and muttering under my breath like an old wino on a three-day drunk, when my fingers finally wrap around some sort of smooth, straight stick.

I pull it out and it's a pencil and it does the trick. I push my screens and take a hit and have a pleasurable half hour of sweaty, trembling panic that at any second someone or something is going to jump out of the darkness—I get much too paranoid to smoke with the lights on—and stomp the living shit out of me or something.

That's the great thing about being a veteran crackhead.

Always a lot of fun.

Anyway, the point is, I start carrying this pencil around with me because I really hate like hell to be caught without something to push with and then have to go searching or digging around like I was doing when I found the thing.

The good thing about carrying a pencil is that it's a pencil. And if I get stopped and searched for any reason, it's just a pencil. Of course I carry my stem around too. And there's no doubt about what that's for. But, hey, I'm not looking to strain my cerebral cortex on this subject. It's all I can do just to hustle up enough scratch every day and go cop something decent—without getting beat, arrested, or shot—so I can have a lovely time cowering in the dark for a couple of hours.

So I have this pencil with me all the time and then one day I'm sitting there in my hole with nothing to smoke and nothing to do and I pull the pencil out just to look at the film of residue stuck to the sides—you do that sort of thing when you don't have any shit—and it dawns on me that it's a pencil. I mean it's got a lead in it and all, and you can write with the thing.

So now I'm at it again. Digging around in my hole. Because I know there's an old composition book down there somewhere and I figure maybe I can distract myself for a little while by writing something.

The things a person will do when he's not smoking.

The funny thing is, I get into it.

I mean really get into it.

I start off just writing about a friend of mine. Just describing his cluttered apartment. How I kind of like the clutter. How it gives the place a lived-in look. How you can just about read his life by looking around.

So I'm writing away, and the more I write, the easier it gets. And the easier it gets, the better the writing gets, until it's like I'm just taking dictation.

Pretty soon I forget all about hustling and getting a hit. I'm scribbling like a maniac; heart pumping, adrenaline rushing, hands trembling. I'm so excited I almost crap on myself.

It's just like taking a hit.

Before I know it, I have a whole story.

I go to read the thing and it's a mess. The pages are all out of order. Parts are scratched out. Other parts are written sideways in the margins. But what I can read looks pretty good.

Even great in parts.

By the time I go back and carefully rewrite the thing, it's too late at night for me to both go out, which is a remarkable thing for me because I don't think there's been a day since I started that I have gone without at least one hit.

So I read the story over and over.

Fix a few things.

And what I end up with reads like Tennessee Williams (I have a paperback with all his short stories in it) in the way it kind of comes in through the side door. I mean, Williams would start off talking about, say, what it smells like to work in a shoe factory and before you know it, he's going on about wanting to kill his father or something like that.

That's how my story went.

It started with my friend's house and then I have a guy sitting there with him who wants to get some pills from him so he can take himself out before the AIDS virus gets him—you see, he is HIV positive—and when he gets the pills, he goes over to the park to just lie down and fade away on the grass.

Only he feels the need to apologize to the world because he has to die in public. And someone will have to come along and pick up his sorry, dead ass and all. But he's homeless, there's no place for him to go.

I guess they'll never make a musical out of it.

But the thing is—and this is what gets me—when I read the story, I can feel this guy's pain. I mean, I haven't been able to feel much of anything in years. And there I am, sitting down there under Grand Central, reading this thing scribbled in an old composition book, and I'm practically in tears.

The next day I take the story over to my friend's house and he reads it. All I'm expecting from him is a sarcastic remark because this guy is one of those snob alcoholics. He doesn't approve of anything.

Ever.

Least of all me.

But he just puts it down quietly when he finishes and gives me the slightest nod. Then he says,

“Do you love me?”

I know why he asks this.

Because in the story the two guys are friends but they would never admit it. They just hang around together putting each other down all the time—a lot like my friend and me—and in the end the one guy is sorry because he’ll never have the chance to tell his buddy that he loves him—in a normal sort of way, I mean—and that he’ll miss him.

He never realizes this until he’s dying.

The only real difference between the story and me and my friend, come to think of it, is that I’m not HIV-positive and I’m not dying.

But my friend is.

And when he asks me whether or not I love him, it gets to me because I would never have thought he gave a shit one way or the other. So I go over to him and hug him, and then the weepy shit starts kicking up again.

What can I tell you?

It was one of those moments.

All because I sat in my hole and wrote this little story.

Next thing you know, I’m up at the *Street News* office with it, asking if anybody’d be interested in putting it in the paper, and—sure enough—damned if I don’t open up the next issue and there’s my story!

That’s how I got my first thing published in *Street News*.

I think I called it “No Place to Call Home.”

A couple of months later I had a regular column in there. And—one thing after the other—I had the writing bug.

After that there were *four* things I did every day. Hustle up money, cop some stuff, beat up, and write. And in the end I wound up dropping the other three.

When I was out there, it occurred to a great many people to ask what a guy like me was doing on the street. After all, I had the full use of all my limbs, and I didn't appear to have any particular mental deficiencies. So, what, these people wanted to know, had happened?

I see it somewhat like a play, in three succinct acts.

Act I. East Side, Fall, 1984. *It is going on one o'clock on a Sunday afternoon when I exit the Lexington Avenue subway station at Thirty-third Street. The streets are awash with a bleak, gray light, which does nothing for my sour disposition. But at least the bracing September air keeps me from puking. My hangover has been at me ever since I reluctantly dragged myself out of bed.*

The phone tried to summon me three times.

Seven, eight rings each time.

But I knew what would happen if I let in the light of day. The room would begin to float, my head would begin to pound, my teeth would begin to itch...

I held on to sleep for as long as I could.

The phone be damned.

I am now on my way to Bellevue Hospital. I have a vague recollection of where it is. In one of its wings lies the city morgue. I know this because I have been there once before, in the dead of spring, to identify the corpse of my business partner, Barry. He stepped out the door one evening and his heart attacked him. The day after Easter two detectives came to the door.

"Do you know this man?" they wanted to know, and showed me the grim Polaroid. A death face. Eyes and mouth wide with surprise. Spooked by the reaper.

A wind has kicked up.

Swirls of litter dance at my feet as Bellevue's grimy brick facade looms up ahead of me. I am struck by how closely it resembles a prison. A short, gray-haired man walks solemnly toward me as he descend the entrance ramp. His head is swathed in bandages and his arm hangs in a sling. I imagine that I know what his Saturday night was about. I see rum, rancor, and rude contention. The scene plays vividly in my head.

I walk through the glass doors with this sudden prescience—almost an out-of-body experience. I can see not only the faces and bodies of the people milling through the veneered lobby but their lives as well. Each conveys to me some sense of where they live, what pictures are on their walls, who is beside them when they turn over in bed.

I find the starched, white efficiency of the nurse behind the reception desk intolerable for some reason. I survey her for a chink in her armor. A smudge, a wrinkle, a stray hair; something to connect her to humanity. But she seems seamless.

For a second I try imagining her in the throes of passion. Her hair splashed wildly against a pillow, her white, stockinged legs above her head. Moaning and growling in animal abandon with each blunt thrust. But the smile she puts on for me is all professional, conveying nothing more than—

"—Yes?"

"Visitor's pass for Wayne Stringer," I say, as curt and clipped as she.

Her thumb wanders through the index cards in front of her.

“One minute,” she chirps, still looking.

But I discover that I know what she is about to tell me; that in fact I knew it even before I woke up. The minute the phone had started ringing for the third time.

“Are you related to the patient?” she wants to know.

“I’m his brother,” I tell her.

“I’m sorry,” she says. “Haven’t you been notified? I’m afraid Mr. Stringer died late last night.”

There is no shock or surprise. Just a strange, rehearsed raggedness to the moment. I am director, and she has delivered her lines exactly right.

Cut!

How characteristic of Wayne to make himself larger in absence than he was when present. To express displeasure, he often put on his disappearing act. Cross a certain line with him and ZAP! You’d be left confronting an impenetrable void, with little to do but wonder what you’d done wrong. In a family like ours, which shared loneliness like hand-me-down clothing, my brother’s slow-burning pout was a particularly dangerous weapon.

And I was particularly vulnerable to it. I may have thought I had little use for Wayne most of the time, but when he’d cut me off like that, nothing in this world mattered as much as getting back on his good side. Usually I would resort to some verbal antics. For I was one of the very few people who could, when I put my mind to it, catch the abstract and slight macabre rhythm of Wayne’s sense of humor and make him laugh.

But Wayne could be one stubborn son of a bitch. When he didn’t want to laugh, nothing on this earth could make him so much as crack a grin. Lord knows I never had anything near his resolve. And Lord knows how desperately I mined for the nuggets of his laughter.

Mostly Wayne disappeared into his piano. He would sit for hours, oblivious to the world, languidly picking at the keys. It got so you could travel the landscape of his shifting temperament by listening to the impromptu dance his fingers performed on the keyboard. They would twitch discordantly on the sharps and flats when he was annoyed, making the whole room ring with his impatience. When he was bored, they would meander the scale aimless and atonal, off to nowhere in particular. And when they stalked the minor chords somber and funereal, you could measure the depth of his glumness.

“Wayne lacked confidence,” my mother would say, trying to make sense of the fact that he never made a profession of his music. My take on it was that what went on between Wayne and his piano was too personal for him to offer up for public consumption.

Although I was a year younger than Wayne, I was the first to leave home. A year or two after graduating high school I was gone, off in a rush. But Wayne was in no rush. He had taken a job at a hardware store down the street, and seemed perfectly content to remain where he was, buttoned down, bottled up, a shade too sober and conservative for his years.

When I returned home about two years later, having conquered considerably less of the world than I had imagined I would, I found that in the intervening time Wayne had started acting a lot more like me. At least as it concerned my less-than-wholesome facets.

He had gleefully interred his former icons—Messrs. Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Tchaikovsky, and company—beneath a deluge of freshly minted rock and pop recordings—some six hundred of them. Sitting with Wayne in his room the day of my return, amid the whirlybird din of a Pink Floyd opus, as he juggled a joint, a cigarette, and a beer all at the

same time, I should have seen the love in his overt bid for my approval. But what I felt was terrible sadness. For even though I may have written him off as a fuddy-duddy and a square, the truth was I had always loved, admired, and greatly respected Wayne as he was. And it unnerved me to bear witness to the rude influence I had had upon him.

Such was the persistent irony between us. Both of us routinely missing the obvious, always hovering just shy of real kinship, even while we each campaigned to win the other over. It was Wayne who finally openly took the initiative. And he did it just scant months before I would be faced once again, but this time irreversibly, with his absence.

I was still reeling from my partner's sudden demise, and the legal melee that resulted from it, when Wayne appeared at my door, thirty-four years old, penniless, pale, dangerously thin, a bewildered look on his face, black-and-blue blotches all over his legs. I told myself he had bruised himself somehow and I set him up on the living room couch, thinking, *This will soon blow over and then I will be free of this bother.*

But he could barely eat. And he tossed and turned the nights away. I dragged him to a high-rent doctor. He checked him over, but had nothing to offer but a grim, confounded shrug. When I could no longer bear seeing Wayne writhe in pain on the couch, I appealed to a doctor acquaintance of mine, who forged prescriptions. But neither painkillers nor sleeping pills had much effect. Wayne just lay there, day after day, taking his agony as he did most everything else, in frightened silence.

I seem to remember starting to feel like something was chasing me. I hid from it during the day in my work. And there was no shortage of that, or of problems to go with it. My business partner and I had been sharing our two-bedroom, rent-stabilized apartment, which doubled as our office. But his name was on the eighteen-year-old lease. And the landlord couldn't wait to dump me so that he could enjoy full Upper West Side market value for the space. Barry's son—and executor of what there was of his estate—came sniffing around to see if there was any money to be wrung out of our graphic design company. I was about ready to pull in my shingle altogether and had been offered a job with a small consumer products company. That took care of the days. Nights I went out and drank myself numb.

One night I came fumbling through the door, head swimming with booze, to find Wayne standing in the middle of the darkened living room, a near skeleton in dirty, drooping drawers. And it broke the spell of my denial. There was no more avoiding how very sick he was. And I realized that the thing that had been chasing me was a sense of guilt.

"I was waiting here to tell you," he said softly and sadly. "That I know you were always for me, I know you were always on my side."

I couldn't say anything. Just stood there blinking into the darkness as Wayne teetered over to me and kissed me, cracked, chalky lips and all.

I took him to Bellevue Hospital first thing the next day and stayed with him until someone would see him. Eight hours in the waiting room, Wayne squirming beside me all the while. But once they discovered he was unemployed and uninsured, they didn't want his bother any more than I had. And so long as it was apparent that Wayne could make it back out the door on his own two feet, they refused to admit him.

But I shamed them into it.

"I SUPPOSE YOU'LL BE HAPPY TO TAKE HIM WHEN HE'S DOA!" I roared at the top of my lungs. The whole floor came to a stop. They were left with no choice but to take him in.

It turned out Bellevue didn't have any solutions to offer either. They weren't even sure what the hell it was Wayne had. First they said vasculitis, then they said AIDS. One day arrived to visit him and it's all about gloves and masks and quarantine, and the next time come, all the precautions are off. He got a little better, then he got worse, and then he was dead.

Everybody has their share of bad news to swallow. But the thing with my brother caught me off guard. So long as he had been around, I was content to pretend I didn't give a rat's ass about him. But once he was gone, the jig was up on that game.

I was able to keep up my happy-camper act for almost two years after that. I immersed myself in my new job, and found myself an apartment.

Whatever money didn't go to rent I poured into diversion.

Then one night in my apartment, alone with a bottle of Georgi's, I found myself going through rounds with a rolled-up carpet I had leaning against the wall. I laid into the thing, roundhouse swings, all my weight behind each one. But all it got me was bleeding knuckles. For there was again after all, doing the thing I wanted to be done with, sitting on the floor, bawling into my sleeve.

Act II. Two Days Later. *I'm knocking back doubles in some overpriced East Side bar. Eight hours and still I can't shake the feeling that I want to smash something. But by two a. m. I'm too blitzed to start any real trouble. There's nothing left for me but to go home and sleep it off.*

Lucky for me my twenty-something bar buddy, Ed from New Jersey, has his Chevy and offers to drop me off. He deposits me at my apartment door and wheels back off into the night. I make a wobbly beeline for the bed, shedding clothing as I go.

I'm dead out when my door buzzer sounds. It's one of those annoying, tinny-voiced jobs that blare out a shrill, petulant squeal that can't be ignored. It doesn't summon me so much as piss me off. For some reason I'm compelled to gather my discarded clothes from the floor as I make for the door.

I'm clutching them as I let Ed in.

"How're you feeling?" he wants to know.

"Like shit," I tell him.

"I've got something that will definitely make it better." He grins.

"Come on with it," I tell him.

He halts a few paces inside the door and requests a saucer and razor. But I'm already back on the bed, my body just waiting to extract swirling, nauseating revenge if I push the up-and-about a another second.

"Saucer's in the cabinet over your head," I tell him. "Razor's in the bathroom."

A little bustle and clatter and he has them.

He removes a small wad of tin foil from his pocket and unwraps a lima-bean-size nugget the color of cream. It makes a surprisingly sharp click when he drops it on the dish. A substantial sound. One that will forever after divide two different points in time in my life.

From the bed I watch Ed at work, bent over the counter, a chef whipping up some special delicacy. I'm transfixed. He carefully and precisely halves the rock, produces a Pyrex pipe—on a pipe with a bowl, not unlike those I once smoked hash in—drops a chunk into it, and walks over to me with a pipe in one hand, lighter in the other.

"Age before beauty," he says.

I am no stranger to cocaine. It has fueled my after-hours wanderings on more than one occasion—and without morning-after agonies. A blessing, as far as I am concerned.

I have never smoked it before.

But what the hell.

“Pearls before swine,” I retort.

I draw on the stem, and the bowl fills with a thick, swirling cloud. I cannot feel the heat of the smoke as it goes down. But I can taste it. It is a taste I know I am going to love. The taste of success, love, orgasm, omnipotence, immortality, and winning the lottery all rolled into one.

And then some.

My hangover evaporates like steam off a griddle. The dark corners of the room brighten, the predawn quietude explodes with bustle. Suddenly the room cannot contain my spirit.

I want to burst out the doors.

Careen into the last of the night.

Do things.

Go places.

I look up just as Ed’s face reappears from behind the smoke, a hissing from his lips, his eyes glowing with exhilaration.

What a great feeling!

I love Ed!

I love the whole fucking free world!

“Where did you get this stuff?” I pant.

“There’s a place a few blocks from here,” he breathes back.

“You gotta go anywhere?” I ask.

“As a matter of fact,” he says, “I wanted to ask if I could crash here a few days.”

He tries to explain about an argument with his people in Jersey, about them asking him to leave. But I wave him off in mid-sentence, walk over to him, hug him chest to chest.

“Brother,” I coo, “me and you are going to par-TEE!”

A few minutes later the bottom starts to fall out of the high. Sadness and longing descend over me.

Utter desolation hovers moments away.

I am seized by a wave of panic.

I want that party feeling back.

“Listen, Ed,” I say, “those guys still out? Can we get more—now?”

“Sure,” he says.

I dig into my pocket and hand him the first fifty of the more than one hundred thousand dollars I will eventually smoke up before the party really ends.

Act III. Nine Months Later. *It is an early weekday morning. I lie sleeping on the platform bed at the back of my studio apartment. Except for a few essential furnishings, like the empty, half-size refrigerator by the stove, the room is uncommonly bare.*

No TV, no cable box, no radio. Not even a clock. They have all been either stolen or sold. On the floor, unlaundered clothing, carelessly strewn here and there, and the debris of hurried, impromptu meals are in good evidence.

It is a first-floor apartment in the rear of a renovated, five-story walk-up on East Ninety-sixth

Street. One block shy of the projects that demarcate the northern tip of Yorkville from the southern edge of Spanish Harlem. They get close to nine hundred dollars a month for this single room.

And I'm a good three and a half months delinquent.

Biggie, my sometime dealer, is sprawled on the couch across the room from me. He is big, as the name implies, in a short, stout, chesty sort of way. Late last night he rang my buzzer and told me "work" was coming (meaning a bundle of crack was on its way) and if I let him wait inside for an hour I'd get hit off with a free dime.

This has proved to be a ruse.

He needs a place to crash.

Pitchers (street-level dealers) don't clock the real paper.

After hours of anxious waiting, his subterfuge becomes obvious. But I'm too smoked out and defeated to challenge him on it. Ergo his prone, shirtless, Hershey-bar mass on my battered couch.

Out like a light.

When the doorbell rings, he is oblivious. But it brings me to a rude awakening. I drag myself over to the intercom.

"Yes?"

It's the marshal come to repossess the apartment.

I have been expecting him since the seventy-two-hour notice four days ago.

I say and do nothing.

My urge is to stave off the inevitable for as long as possible, and I take momentary refuge in the two doors standing between me and him. The front door is only plate glass, but my apartment door is the kind you find in the less tame regions of the city. Made of sheet steel and equipped with a police lock that bolts right into the frame.

I hear the front door squeak open and slam shut.

I hear the squeak of approaching feet in the hall.

In the peephole I can see the marshal looming up, his face distorted to hound-dog proportions.

He raps sharply on the door with some small, metallic object. This rouses Biggie. I can hear his stirring behind me.

"It's the marshal," I tell him. "He's come to take the apartment." Only the way I say it, it could just as well be the mailman.

"Shit!" Biggie squeaks. "You better open that door. Them guys don't play. They carry guns, too.

Ready firepower.

The quintessence of authority in Biggie's trade.

But there is one thing I absolutely do not want to do at this moment. I do not want to open the door.

The marshal pounds again, this time promising we can do it "the hard way" if I want. "It's all up to you."

Biggie, who has already muscled back into his T-shirt, starts going fidgety, staring anxiously at the door as if we had a couple of keys of uncut Colombian stashed in the mattress.

It's a wonder to see this reaction from a guy who routinely plies his wares right across the street from the Housing Police precinct. I feel detached amusement, a perverse flash of superiority even over this jittery "gangsta"-in-residence.

But then I figure maybe he knows something I don't.

I defer to his greater street knowledge.

Undo the police lock.

Open the door.

The marshal steps in bristling, eyes already embarking on a tour of appraisal. He flashes a paper bearing the seal of the City of New York, proclaims he has been empowered by the court to take possession of the premises, informs me I have fifteen minutes to grab what I can, and cautions me "do your talking walking."

Half an hour later I'm on the street, clutching a voucher for all that remains of my worldly possessions. Only instead of feeling put out, I feel strangely relieved. Elated even. I have just been released, I realize, from all earthly claims upon me.

There is nothing, anymore, that I am obliged to do.

No one, anymore, I am required to be.

Off to the freedom of the streets! I tell myself. Off to whatever happens next.

The Streets of New York City, 1985. As far as I was concerned, living on the streets was not an insurmountable inconvenience. There were some rough days, before I learned the ins and outs of soup kitchens and such. But once I hooked into picking up cans at a nickel a pop, I couldn't even be bothered with that cattle-call ordeal. And what a pleasure it was to sleep rent- and worry-free under the stars of Central Park.

Then one day the heels on my twenty-four-ninety-five-on-special Fayva shoes caved in. Soon after that the soles sprang open as well, and I couldn't imagine how I would get up the cash to replace them while going barefoot. So I asked around on the street where I might come by a pair of freebies, and was steered toward the Bowery.

"That's where they got all them missions," I was told.

Surprisingly no one on the subway seemed to notice my bare feet when I made the fifty-block trip from midtown to the Lower East Side. I stumbled around down there until I came upon a ragtag queue of Bowery bums in front of a white two-story stucco building. It turned out this was the well-known Bowery Mission. And their nine-to-five was helping down-on-their-luck types like me.

"You can get clothes in here?" I asked the weathered grapehead teetering on his feet at the end of the line, too-big clothes hanging off his bones. He must have been well into his third bottle of the day. I could barely decipher what he said. But I seemed to hear something of the affirmative in his din. So I joined him on line.

We were each issued a ticket at the door, assembled in the day room, then dispatched, ten at a time, to a modest dining room in the back. It was a makeshift meal, cadged together from many sources, but it was filling and satisfying.

After everyone was fed, they opened up the storeroom where they kept a supply of donated clothes. But I was out of luck. Size thirteen-and-a-half wide are not easy to come by. I spent the afternoon in their day room, slouched in a chair, drifting in and out of sleep. At one point I opened my eyes to see a pair of young slicksters straddling some old geezer who was off somewhere in dreamland. Curious, I watched them through the lashes of one half-opened eye.

Evidently whatever they were up to required much preliminary bickering. They stood there, one on either side of their quarry, scowling and hissing at each other, until whatever was their bother got itself resolved. Then the guy on the right reached out and, holding taut the fabric of their mark's trousers with one hand and wielding a single-edge razor like a surgeon with the other, neatly laid the pocket open.

I would have thought it a fruitless business; thievery in a place like this. But lo and behold they came up with a fistful of random coins and crumpled bills. They scurried out the door after that like they had just knocked over a Brink's truck.

A man across the room, long face, drooping mustache, cap drawn over his eyes, looked my way, shaking his head solemnly from side to side.

"That's the trouble with us black folk," he said. "Always victimizing our own. Why don't they steal from the white man? White man got all the money!"

Growing up, whenever I mentioned a new schoolmate, my mother would ask, "Wh

flavor? Chocolate or vanilla?" If I answered vanilla, she would raise her eyebrows. "I'll be you *they* have money," she'd exclaim. I never did like what that implied about my own prospects. And I liked it a lot less sitting barefoot in the day room of the Bowery Mission. I might have called Longface on it, but looking around me, I couldn't see anything that might contradict his assumptions.

Instead I asked him where I could get some shoes.

"Just down the street," he told me. "City-run shelter on East Third Street. Anything you need."

The Bowery Intake Center on East Third was typical of the Depressingly Utilitarian style of urban municipal architecture. And through its ugly, turd-colored doors trudged a noticeably more desolate and desperate breed, it seemed, than I had seen at any of the privately run places. Those who couldn't—or wouldn't—enter its hallowed halls had set up a cardboard squatters' shantytown between the Dumpsters parked along the outside walls; a tableau that had *discarded* written all over it.

Inside, a limp-lidded security guard pointed the way into a large dim, spiritless box of a room, distressed, fifties-vintage, vinyl-aluminum chairs scattered ad hoc, listless human forms slumped in them. Lethargy pervaded the room like a fog. People stood twenty deep, numb and impatient, before a bank of lead-glass windows at the front of the room, the workers behind them indifferently plodding through the rigors of state-sanctioned, pro-forma Samaritanism.

I walked over to the only vacant window—the one with a handwritten sign designating number one—tapped on the glass, and was greeted by a scowl that said, *Don't do that!* Then a form slid through a slot at the base of the window. I was told to fill it out—which I did promptly—and was just as promptly told to wait until I was called.

This turned out to be a matter of several long hours, during which I sat on the floor slumped against the wall, being jostled rudely awake by the guard and told "No sleeping" whenever I drifted off. When I finally heard my name blasted over the speakers, I resolved to keep things as simple as possible.

"All I need is a pair of shoes," I told the lady behind Window 2. "They don't even have shoes. I'll be fresh out of the box."

A bemused twinkle came to her eyes. "It don' work this way," she said, a hint of the island accent in her voice as she announced with some pride, "We have a system here. Intake. Meal tickets. Shelter voucher. You want us to help you, you do the whole ting."

By three o'clock I had been hooked up with the works and bussed up to Ward's Island—right across the East River from my former Ninety-sixth Street apartment ironically—accompanied by a hairy, spike-thin white guy who wasn't even on the same planet and a talky, blubberous, Jheri-curl'd brother of ambiguous sexuality. We were each subjected to a pat-down search, followed by a grave quickie lecture on the prohibitions of bringing contraband into the shelter, and were then told someone would be out to get us. The bus driver queen chirped away as we waited on a bench just inside the complex, taking a certain pride in his extensive knowledge of the workings of the shelter system. He was obviously a regular.

"You are about to enter the *Waldorf* of city shelters," he informed me. "This here's as good as it gets."

"And who are you?" I asked him, "the Zagat of the down-and-out?"

He found that one doggone funny. Slapped me on my thigh and yucked it up. When

worker came out to fetch the white kid, it was “Would you follow me, please, Mr. Williams?” But when he came back later to fetch one of us, it was “Yo cuz, wanna come this way?”

Both Zagat and I thought that was a scream.

I was the last one in; ushered into a large, prison-style shower room, issued soap, a towel, delousing agent, and told to strip and shower. I was immensely grateful for the shower. I stepped from it feeling human again.

I was then given a handwritten ticket and sent upstairs, where I was issued underwear, a shirt, slacks, socks, and, at last, a pair of shoes. Secondhand, Oxford-brown, penny loafers. To be exact—minus the pennies. I was also assigned a bed number and told to be in by nine o’clock or my bed would go to someone else.

“And remember,” they added. “If you go out, you can’t come back in for an hour. Same thing once you come in. Can’t go out for an hour. Got it?”

I got it.

Up in the dorm I was offered a bargain on a bologna and cheese on white by an enterprising Puerto Rican fellow, running what seemed to be a lucrative trade selling cut-rate sandwiches out of his locker. I was hungry, but I declined. Thoughts of jockstraps and old Nikes commingling with the food kept insinuating themselves.

A little later a purveyor’s truck rolled up to the back of the building and off-loaded an awesome shitload of food, huge bags of rice, sacks of potatoes, whole hams, turkeys, and roasts, industrial-size cans of fruit and vegetables, two-gallon jugs of milk. *That’s the end of Slick’s sandwich trade*, I thought to myself.

Only, in the four meals I had there, none of that stuff ever showed up on our plates. Breakfast was composed of a minibox of cereal, a half-pint of milk, and a piece of fruit. Lunch and dinner were the same—a large serving spoon’s worth of three-bean salad, three slices of fried salami, and two slices of bread.

“We won’t see none of that,” declared Zagat when I told him about the truck. (And let’s face it, if he was an authority on anything, it would be food.) “Most of that stuff is going out the other door.”

“No way,” I said. “The Volunteers of America run this place for the city. A nonprofit.”

“Nonprofit, huh?” Zagat said with a sigh. “Look. They make money on us. The city pays them for every swinging dick that comes through the door. Pays for all them goodies you saw coming in too. Probably selling the shit, for all I know.”

I nodded, but I was having a hard time buying it.

“Don’t believe me,” Zagat said. “Tell you what. Go into the kitchen and tell them you want you a pork chop. Go ahead. Boy, they’ll look at you like you’re out your mind. ‘A pork what? Nigger, you better *get* outta here and get your black ass a job!’ ”

The way he said it, I cracked up.

“It’s all a hustle, brother,” Zagat went on. “Without us all these people wouldn’t have the jobs. They *need* folks like us. Me, I hustle ’em right back. I *get* mines. Already got three digits going under different names”—*digits* being welfare benefits—“I were you, I’d get it now, brother. While you can. ’Cause I’ll tell you. Pretty soon? This shit?”—he said this, taking the universe in one expansive sweep of his arm—“Gonna be dead. These new people coming in? Uh-uh, honey. They’re fixin’ to *kill* all this welfare shit.”

Later that day I discovered my locker had been gone through. I didn’t have all that much

anything. All the same, I slept with my stuff tucked underneath the mattress that night. I didn't stay another night. I didn't like the karma of the place, for want of a better way to put it—the guards, the pat-downs, the food lines, the whole, watch-your-back, watch-your-mouth, watch-out-for-number-one, jailhouse mentality. I figured I'd just as well take my chances on the street. But my day and a half of sheltered life did confirm what had been hinted at in the pocket incident at the Bowery Mission. That even at the very bottom of existence it's still about money.

The next day I donned my original clothes, which they had laundered for me, and the secondhand, Oxford-brown penny loafers minus their eponymous coins, and left behind my voucher, my meal ticket, my clothing issue, and everything else they had given me.

Grand Central Terminal, Winter 1985, 12:30 a.m. Already the police have begun to round up people from Grand Central Terminal for closing. I've just come from Central Park. When I went to dig up my trunk from where I keep it stashed in the bushes, it was gone. I found it laid open and ransacked a few yards away. Perhaps some other soul will be warm tonight, snuggled under my three thick army blankets.

I have struck up a conversation with a young brother from Jamaica, the two of us strolling as casually as we can, circling the terminal, keeping a step ahead of the encroaching cops. He's a happy-go-lucky type with a simple story. A painter by trade, his "woo-man" has kicked him out of the house. It will be a few days before he can collect his pay, so, like me, he is out on his ass.

He's no novice, however. He has been here before.

There have been other women, it appears, in other apartments, on whose whims the fortunes of this girl-toy-of-the-islands have risen or fallen. He just takes it as it comes.

Neither of us relishes the prospect of being turned out into the brisk December night, and he has a plan. I follow along as he steals, with authority, down two levels, across several track beds, until we are in a deserted corridor that leads to a little-used machine shop, gated and locked for the night. When I plop down on the floor, the cement sucks the heat right out of my ass. But a few pieces of cardboard and several minutes later I'm out like I was laying up at the Plaza.

The next thing I know, something is hitting the bottom of my foot. I hear a voice say "hey something. When I open my eyes, I see only bright light and blackness beyond. Jamaica still a few feet away and the light swings over to him. I can now make out two men behind it, one pink-faced, short, dirty-gray on top, the other dumpy, baby-faced, blond bangs.

"Whaa ...?" Is all that comes out of my mouth.

But they flash a shield and I know what's up.

The fat one comes on smug and condescending.

" 'Sup guys?" he says, his grin triumphant. We do not know it yet, but he is already calculating the overtime it will be worth to arrest the two of us.

This yields a few moments' awkward silence.

He is not exactly a mental whiz.

The graytop is quiet and pouty.

He's a drinker.

I can tell this.

He could care less about the extra money. Right now he's thinking about when he can be cut loose to pursue some uninterrupted tippling.

They go through our pockets methodically, extract an item, hold it up to the flashlight, toss it on the floor. There is nothing of any real consequence in my pockets. But it is my property nonetheless. It irks me that they treat it with such unnecessary disdain. No sooner have I worked up a healthy resentment over this than they are clicking on the cuffs.

"You're under arrest for criminal trespass" is all they say. No "right to remain silent" business. Nothing about an attorney. The whole matter is too trivial for all that.

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