

## All Those Not Seen

There were three posh girls standing at the street's bend, gushing about the city marquee that would soon pop with caches of yellow lights. Black and red garments spilled from their shoulders, and I watched their golden bracelets flaunt daintily from their wrists as they pointed and giggled and gawked. They were vibrant breaths of life among the muck puddles and sullen gray facades of New York City, and they glowed in that way. Sprites that had strayed a few blocks too far north from their nests. If I didn't detest them so much, I might have pulled out my camera and taken a picture. I lit a cigarette and approached them.

At first, they didn't see me standing there. I melted into the blandness of the city all too well. I heard their talk of development and followed their painted nails to different dilapidated store fronts wrot with graffiti and disrepair. I pursed my lips and blew a waft of smoke into their circle. The blonde girl's nose crinkled up and only then did she look at me. The other two kept jabbing their jaws until a second stale cloud turned their heads. Their bright eyes were wide with fear. I took another drag.

"Can I help you?" The blonde said.

"We don't have any money." The brunette blurted in a panicked voice.

"How kind of you." I said. The third drag set their eyes squinting. They fluttered their hands to clear their delicate noses.

"Would you mind doing that somewhere else?" The blonde said in irritation.

The embers smoldered orange as I inhaled for all that I could. When I exhaled the three were already scuttling south back to where they belonged. Their heels clicked between their fading gasps. I laughed, coughed, set my cigarette in my lips, and continued up the street.

The sunlight was beginning to retreat between the sulking buildings. I passed by familiar old bars and strikingly unfamiliar “handcrafted” milkshake joints that stained the blocks with their clean blushing fronts. I remembered the gone relics that had been in those same spaces not one year prior. Though the streets still lingered with degeneracy, I knew the prostitutes that I could no longer see, and I knew the scourge that were being swept away and forgotten at the city’s frontier. I knew the real city, and I knew the plastic face that would soon be rewritten as the face that had always been.

I walked across Eighth Avenue, ignoring the chorus of taxi horns, and turned right to the glowing Terminal Bar sign on the corner. I stepped on my cigarette and pushed through the doors.

The Terminal Bar was one of the last good bars holding out in the neighborhood, but even its days were numbered. It was slim and long inside like most Manhattan bars. The bar stretched along a wall of rowed liquor and beer signs with stiff stools to match its patrons. The mirror behind the rows of bottles was so dirty it could hardly catch the light. Save for a couple of suspicious glances, no one acknowledged me. At the far end of the bar, Donnie raised a couple fingers to get my attention. I moved down the bar and sat down next to him.

“You’re late, *amigo*.” Donnie wasn’t hispanic and probably didn’t have any hispanic friends, but he butchered their language with his Brooklyn accent regardless.

“Late my ass. It’s seven like always.”

Donnie brandished his watch, holding a cigarette in his other hand. “Well, it’s 7:02.”

“I got distracted. This city is getting soft, man.”

“Oh, dear Lord, not the milkshakes!”

I looked at him.

He laughed and punched my shoulder. “Aw, c’mon. Don’t be square. I’m only kidding, man. I hate it, too.”

I ignored him and flagged down the bartender. “Give me a beer.”

“Light or dark?” His voice was so scruffy I almost missed the words.

“Light.”

Donnie took another draw as the bartender poured my glass. He blew the smoke out to the side and eyed me. “So what do you have for me?”

The bartender set down a frothy glass, and I placed a couple quarters down in return. He took them up without a word and left to tend to the other end of the bar.

“A few different shots. I got one of some Harlem guys playing dominoes, one of kids swinging around a fire hydrant in the Bronx, a few more of street graffiti.” I tried to list off my photos without expression to hide that I had exactly nothing, but the roses failed to hide the garbage I knew I had in my suitcase.

“So jack?”

I laughed. “Yeah. Jack.”

Donnie let out some air and took a long sip from his whiskey.

“How long have we known each other, Dick?”

“Twelve years since basic, right?”

He brought his fist down on the bar hard, rattling our glasses. The old black man on the stool next to us glared, but Donnie didn’t care.

“Twelve years! Of those that have occupied our professional relationship, you’ve always been my most consistent stringer. So why are you drying up now? You holding out? You sucking off some other editor behind my back?”

I dismissed him with my hand and took a drink. “You know you’re the only editor who’ll take me.”

“Bullshit! I’m just the only editor that *you’ll* take.”

“Well, you’re the only one who isn’t some puffy college elitist,” I said, rolling my glass. “I can’t stand being looked down on by those cunts.”

Donnie sighed and relaxed back onto his stool. “I know the feeling.”

“Ah,” I said. I pointed two fingers and squinted at him. “At least you can hide your service behind a degree. I’m sure they love seeing *New York University* all scribbled out on that resume.”

Donnie shrugged. “It helps. It can’t be all bad for you though. Combat photographer is still just a photographer, not a grunt.”

“They don’t see no difference.”

Donnie nodded slowly. “Well, at least you’re not cheating on me.” He paused. “You holding up okay?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ve said it before, and I’ll say it again. You need a girl in your life. It steadies you. Look.” He held his still hand over the table. “No shakes. Nothing since me and Mary got married.”

“Wow. Great party trick.”

“I’m serious. Ugly as you may be, every man needs a woman. There’s bound to be a blind girl poking around the subway somewhere just waiting for Dick Wilson.”

I cracked a smile. “Fuck off. I’m good, really.”

“Don’t you have family? Mother, brother?”

“Yeah, we talk.” It had been a couple years.

“Good. That’s healthy. A man shouldn’t be alone.”

I drank the fill of my glass and waved for another. “You know what day it is, right?”

Donnie looked off to nothing. “Don’t I know it.”

“Ten years to the day.” I said. I took the fresh amber glass from the bartender and drank that one too. “I still dream about it, you know.”

“I know. Me too.”

“You think it's fate me and you were the ones who made it out?”

“I don’t think much about fate at all,” he said. “Besides, there were more. Dave. Jack moved out to Ohio. Hernandez.”

“Hernandez shot himself a couple years back.”

“That so?”

“It is.”

Donne thumbed the bar, staring down into the wood. Finally, he said: “Look, man. Don’t take this the wrong way, but you gotta move on. Hernandez couldn’t either and look where that got him. No sense in being guilty. You just need to duck your head, forget, and start a new life. You get me?”

“I don’t know how anyone can go about their cushioned lives here with all the shit in the world.” I said. “It’s not just Vietnam. It’s everything, man. People have no concept of what’s real and what’s not anymore. So much pain in the world, and they just step on it like it was never there.” My voice rose before I knew it.

“Just watch yourself, alright?”

I turned to my glass. “Alright.”

We slouched over the bar for an hour longer and turned to lighter things. We talked about Reggie Jackson's home run against the A's, the Pope being shot that morning, and how good it had been since that "sonofabitch" Carter left the Oval office. After an hour or so Donnie looked at his watch. "Ah, it's about that time. Mary starts getting worried if I'm out too late." He grabbed his hat off the counter and stood up. "You get me something good for next week now, you hear?" He shifted a bit. "The *New York* magazine is trending more and more towards shopping and fashion and all the glitzy crap. You need to fight for your place by bringing me the good stuff. You need to bring me pictures this city can't ignore. Bring me the raw, unfiltered evidence of everything that goes ignored, or we're going to keep getting washed out by all this consumerism. You've got talent, but your pictures need more edge. We need more talent and less of these doe-eyed college kids. Understand?"

I nodded. I wasn't sure if he meant what he was saying or if he just pitied me.

"Good." He slapped my back and left through the doors, letting in the city behind him.

After most meetings, I paid my tab after the weekly wife excuse and left for my apartment to watch late night game shows, but tonight I stayed at the bar. I stayed at the bar drinking whiskey until the stools began to empty, their patrons staggering out the doors to God knows where. A thought occurred to me, and I ordered another whiskey to drink it down.

When I stood up my legs had lightened, and I had to catch the bar with my hand. I looked up. The bartender was counting the cash in the register, and the only other customer left looked like he was going to be blown off his perch if the AC kicked on. *No one knows anyone this time of night.* I shouldered my bag and walked out the door as soberly as I could.

The familiar smells hit me all at once. Secondhand smoke, sweat, ash from unseen fires. This was New York City. It was probably the only place in the world I belonged. Walking down

the empty sidewalks drunk and alone at night made me feel like I was floating. I found myself straying closer to the dark alleys, daring something to make a move. I found myself tracking down the few other midnight walkers with my eyes as they passed, drawing angry gazes and curses that floated by me. My shoulder caught one of these vagrant rambler as they passed. He shoved me, and my heels tipped over backwards with his “motherfuckers” until my back caught the wall.

“Watch *yourself*, motherfucker.” I slurred. He said something before his fist wrapped my jaw and left me in a gray puddle.

The world spun around him as he walked away.

The scum soiled my jeans as I finally felt that pain. My jaw throbbed, and a sudden wave of guilt flooded my mind and swam with those friends I knew a decade ago. A person walked by me without looking down. Two more passed without a glance before I stood up and continued on.

I trotted down the subway stairs, pushed through the turnstile, and got on the 3 train to Utica Avenue in Brooklyn. Somewhere between Chambers and Fulton Streets I thought of Donnie and the nothing in my briefcase and decided I was not going back to my apartment after all. I soon found myself on the 4 train to Woodlawn because that was the only train waiting at the station where I switched. Before long I was on the R train to Astoria then the 7 train to 42nd street then a few others after I stopped paying attention. I held my camera in hand the entire time, looking for a miracle shot. Although I usually worked during the early hours of the morning, I never worked this drunk. Photography was one of the few things left in life I approached with true discipline. Despite my drunkenness not, I was sobered with every new picture.

The world looked different through a camera lens. It was much easier to understand. A man sat on the opposite end of the car with his hands clasped as he looked forward. At a glimpse he was painfully regular. Very easy to miss. I raised my camera and clicked to take a picture. He probably knew he was painfully regular. The more I looked the more I could see the weariness at the edges of his eyes, the kind that doesn't wash away with a good night's rest. If he ever even had those these days. He looked over curiously at me then at the camera then back before staring forward once again.

I switched trains at the next station and left the man to continue on to Cortlandt street. Graffiti had almost completely overtaken the mustard paint on the walls, scribbled happily in its own language. I read what I could discern. "Stompy" here, "Satan" something there. I raised and lowered my camera. I slid down a few feet to the left and found this angle was better. Click.

The more trains and stations I visited, the better I felt. This was when the city felt most alive, when all the well-off were fast asleep, and the scourge could be free. They think they are saving the city by washing the streets and raising the prices. The true New Yorkers know they are just stealing our city one block at a time. I see our salvation in every photograph. No matter how many blocks they steal away, we will carry on. The homeless, the broken, the destitute. They are ignored their entire lives until I can capture their soul in a photograph. *It's the only hope I have left in this world. The only thing worth fighting for.*

As I bumped along with the next train, Vietnam started to swim back to my head. It nagged at me daily, but I always drank it down. I reached for my flask. Whether it was the cool touch of the metal or the mood I was in, I pulled back and let the memories come. I remembered the rain, that god awful rain, and trading socks twice a day to keep my feet dry. I only had two pairs on the patrols so I would keep the wet pair wrapped around my neck to dry it before



rotating. I remembered the infantry platoon I had been attached to well. Dave, Fitz, “Lee Harvey”, Smith, and the others. During one ambush I was pinned with them at a small cropping of trees. After several hours they had completely run through their ammo, and we could see the enemy circling around us. I yelled “Grenade!” and threw my Bell and Howell 16mm camera as far into the trees as I could as we hauled ass backwards away into the trees. The ploy must have worked because the gunfire stopped, and we escaped back to the rest of the platoon unscathed. I remember our uncontrollable grins, and how we talked so fast we couldn’t separate the words. Later when the Marines required that I pay back the money for the camera, none of the bastards would chip in. “That’s yo’ problem, Dick.” Smith had told him as he was scrubbing down the bolt on his M16. “I din’t go beggin’ you to save my ass.”

I was smiling, but the longer I thought the more it faded. Those men could only be thoughts now. What I would give to have those pictures on that camera. I took a drink from my flask.

As 4 o’clock came and went, I began to get tired. I knew I had some good pictures, but I couldn’t help but feel disappointed. It all felt so pointless. Best case scenario I get a picture on the front page, but then what? All those people, the ones who hated me so, would stop at the newsstand and see my picture. They would study the faces of the underground with some morbid curiosity, pretending to be shocked at the degradation to feel moral. Maybe they would feign interest to feel intellectual. All from a safe distance though, of course. All while sipping their cappuccino. My flask was empty. I needed to find a drink.

I stepped off the train somewhere in Brooklyn and looked around. The train pulled off and the station was quiet, except for a couple men huddled together across the tracks. I turned

towards the stairs and started thinking about how far the nearest open convenience store would be. If any were open this time of night at all.

A shout from behind nearly made me jump. Across the tracks the taller man was tugging hard at the other man's bag, but the second man refused to let go. I immediately pulled up my camera and knelt against a metal column to steady myself. The shot was perfect. The two men were pulling opposite one another, positioned perfectly between two columns. I snapped pictures as quickly as I could.

As they shifted around, locked in their criminal tug-of-war, the second man reached into his jacket. *Pop. Pop. Pop.* The bullets chimed throughout the station as they ricocheted around the metal and concrete. I felt a punch in my gut and crumpled forward. Without a thought I propped up on my elbows to keep snapping pictures. The taller man was on his back now, cradling his chest in an awkward position as he rolled. The second man got to his feet, having fallen backwards with the bag, and stood over the other. *Pop. Pop. Pop. Click.* Red mists puffed with every shot. Through the lens I saw him look up at me. "Shit." I lowered the camera and froze. He stared at me for an eternity. I froze like a deer caught in the sights of a hunter. Without a word he pulled his hood tighter against his head and ran down the platform, disappearing up the stairs.

My first thought was what I was going to do if he came back down the stairs on this side to kill the only witness. I tried to stand, but a pinching in my gut held me down. I rummaged through my pockets for my knife and pulled it out, but it only had a four inch blade. *I heard a click. He's out of ammo.* My second thought, which was far more concerning to me, was that he might destroy my camera and the pictures if he did come after me. "Come and try it." I grunted

as I rolled onto my back. I waited for the tapping of footsteps to start back down the stairs, but they never came. All was quiet.

Once I was sure he had left I untucked my shirt and wiped around my stomach. I held my breath when I felt the wetness near my belly button and released the air when I looked at my blood-coated palm. One of the ricocheting bullets had hit me, likely severing an intestine based on the burning pinch I felt. I took my knife and began cutting into my jeans. The blade nicked at my thigh, but I knew I had to be quick. I took the slab of denim and folded it over the oozing hole. Next I whipped off my belt and fastened it around my waist to hold the denim in place, poking a new hole in the leather to accommodate the tight fit. I could hardly breathe, but the denim stayed firmly over the wound. I rolled on to my stomach and pulled myself to my feet using the metal pillar. The adrenaline had left and the sting in my stomach began to burn hotter and hotter. I shouldered my bag, camera inside. *Get help. Move.*

As soon as my hand left the pillar I buckled back to my knees. I crawled to the stairs and then up them, holding onto the wound the whole way. Every move made me grimace. This was hell. I continued on under the turnstile and started up the last set of stairs when I really began to feel lightheaded. I collapsed to the stairs and used my one free hand to drag myself up each step. The pain was subsiding which terrified me. I began to feel delirious. At the top of the stairs the sweaty city air hit me. *Am I losing too much blood?* I looked back down the stairs and felt my soul sink back into the underground. A shimmering crimson trail had been left in my wake. I felt my denim patch, which was only moderately soaked through. It was holding up fine.

Then, my heart sank at my realization. I reached around to feel my back and found my jacket soaked. I had been shot clean through and didn't realize it. I had completely forgotten to check for an exit wound. The blood was pouring around my back and onto the ground.

I pulled myself to a wall outside and hauled myself to a sitting position. Whatever small morning hour it was, the street was empty. Three-storied apartment buildings surrounded me, with crude commercial awnings and signs at their feet. Across the street was a nail salon, pharmacy, some outreach church, and a liquor store, all with graffiti-clad garages clasped down. *Maybe I can get my drink after all.* I laughed. I would be dead long before those garages opened for the morning. As humid and miserable as the air was, I enjoyed it. My only regret was that my camera would be picked off by some junkie, and I would lose these pictures forever. Around here bodies were picked clean before the police could ever reach them. I would lose more people. This had really been my best work yet, too. Donnie would have been proud. I closed my eyes.

A babbling down the sidewalk let them open. I turned my head to see a scrawny man staggering about. It sounded like he was murmuring to himself. I realized this was my only shot. "Hey." I said and felt the pain in my stomach. "Hey!" I yelled and buckled forward at the burning sensation.

This the man heard. He stopped with great surprise and saw me laying a few steps in front of him. He walked up to me, muttering quietly, and stared with great bewildered eyes. I could see the veins in the whites of his eyes even in the dark.

"I need your help."

He kept looking at me.

"Can you please help me?" I closed my eyes, trying to not think about how futile this was. "There's money in it for you."

He nodded slowly. By God, I had a response. I pulled the camera out from my bag. "This is an Olympus 35 SP. You can sell it for maybe \$70, \$80. It's yours. You could sell it tomorrow if you want."

Somehow his eyes got bigger. My throat had gotten very dry, and I tried to clear it to no avail. My head kept getting lighter, and I was losing track of myself. I continued anyway. "It's worth \$70 or \$80. I don't know. But the pictures on it are worth even more than that. If you can take it to my friend tomorrow, you can get money for the pictures and the camera. You understand?"

Again I got a slow nod. This was going splendidly. "Perfect. I'll write down the address." I opened my notepad. I tried to think of something clever, but after a few moments I just scribbled into my notebook.

*220 East 42nd Street*

*Ask for Don Russo*

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*Caught a bullet on the subway. Nostrand Avenue.*

*One other dead. Shooter got away. Pictures in camera.*

*Give the money to the junkie.*

*Thanks for your support.*

*Signed,*

*D.W.*

“You can read, right?” I choked. He nodded. “Good.” I handed the note and camera to the junkie. It took all the strength left in me not to rip the camera back from his reach. I knew this deal was my only chance at saving my pictures. Saving more people. He stood there gawking at me. “You can go now, thanks. Remember, more money for the pictures.” With shaking hands, I lit my last cigarette and had an idea.

“Wait. Take a picture of me.”

He looked at me. “Picture?”

“Yes, picture. Just hold the camera up and click.”

As he fumbled with the camera, I opened up my jacket to show the belt and the blood, though there was blood everywhere at this point. I left the cigarette in my mouth and looked into the lens. I couldn’t remember the last time I had been on this end of a photo. *Click.*

“Thanks.” I whispered. He lingered for a few seconds. I wondered if he was considering whether to get help for me, but I could see in his eyes that even he knew I was done for. After a time he finally turned and ran down the street, camera swinging wildly. When he was a hundred yards off I heard the babbling start up again.

The street was lonely. I sat there watching a traffic light switch from red to green for no one. My cigarette burned until I couldn’t pick it up from my lips anymore, and I turned and let the butt fall to my side. I remembered when I first came to the city, straight after my deployment was over. My family kept asking me why I had to leave. Why I wanted to live in such a slum of a city. They kept asking the same questions until they gave up talking to me at all. The truth was I never knew the answer myself until now as I laid under these ghostly lights. I saw so many friends die in a void. They died ahead of a world that would never know them or even like them. It only felt right that I should be forgotten as well.

I started to breathe fast, but I couldn't find the air. The faces of my friends flashed through my mind, but when they ran out, I began to see other faces. Faces that a scarce soul would recognize, faces that the eyes glazed over in crowds without a second thought. Yet every one of these faces held rich lives and struggles and wants that were never acknowledged, and I saw them there all at once in the night. They were the faces I photographed, the single mothers, the men at the dead end of their lives, the alcoholics, the refugees, and all the others who were never seen. I smiled. I hoped the pictures would get to Donnie for me and every other person struggling in this city, but I felt right knowing I had fought the good fight regardless. *Maybe someday we'll learn to look after each other better.*

The sky turned a pale blue as sunrise neared. A deli shop owner came to open the shop and cursed the hobos when he found a man fallen over to his side face-down against the garage door to his shop. When he shook him to wake him up, he felt the blood and cursed again when he realized he was dead. He called the police and urged them to get rid of the body before customers began to show up. Someone had stolen the man's wallet and picked his pockets clean before his body could be reported. By eight o'clock, the sun washed the street with light, and the body was gone. He was booked as John Doe, aged mid-thirties, found on Nostrand Avenue. Time of death around 3:30 AM.