



William Tucker

## VISITS WITH THE HOMELESS

How some people live on \$50,000 a year.

"Help the Homeless," said a button pinned to the woman's beret. She was black, about 30, and standing in front of a table of trinkets being sold by a sidewalk vendor on 33rd Street in Manhattan.

"What do you think New York City ought to do for the homeless?" I asked her.

"Well, you know, they could give us a little more money. I've only got \$325 a month to live on. I've got my four kids to feed, and it's hard to do."

Her name was Carmen. She was not unattractive, intelligent, and spoke with a trace of an accent that she finally told me was Puerto Rican. Her home was the Martinique, a beautiful old tourist hotel facing Herald Square that used to have three luxurious restaurants, and now teems with 2,000 welfare tenants—500 women and 1,500 children.

"I was in Section 8 housing down on West Third Street," she told me. "We got burned out. I've been here about two months. We're waiting until something opens up in the projects."

For years, getting into the projects—city-sponsored housing—has been one of the most coveted goals of New York's poor. Waiting periods were once two years, but for the last decade the city has given immediate priority to people whose apartments burned down. As a result, tenants often burned down their buildings in order to move to the top of the list. Add this to a landlord's incentive to burn down his own building to rid himself of rent-controlled tenants, and you have the South Bronx.

Now, however, the waiting periods have swelled to ten years. Even arson can't get you into a city housing project. Consequently, there is a new category of "homeless."

I spent two weeks in early March floating among New York City's

population of 50,000 homeless people. I visited the Men's Shelter, where I ended up posing as just another homeless resident. I did volunteer duty in a synagogue that has been temporarily converted into a makeshift shelter. I visited the Coalition for the Homeless, headquarters of the legal attack for "homeless rights," and spent another afternoon talking with people in front of the Martinique, one of New York's largest "welfare hotels."

It is difficult to sum up except perhaps to say four things: 1) There is a hard core of homeless people, most of them refugees from mental hospitals, who are incapable of taking care of themselves; 2) there is a down-and-out population of homeless men who could probably take care of themselves; 3) the "homeless families" that are now surging into the system are really the familiar black-woman-and-her-illegitimate-children welfare families in a new guise; and 4) the people who are most emotionally involved in helping the homeless haven't the slightest idea what they're doing.

Lumping the first three categories together as "the homeless" seems useful only to the fourth category, i.e.,

those who patronize the homeless. First, it makes for a classification that is racially and ethnically neutral. Second, it obscures the fact that we are only dealing with problems that liberal programs have created. And third, it fends off public opinion that is probably getting tired of dealing with "welfare families."

What I encountered in several hours at the Martinique, for example, had little to do with "homelessness." It was simply the sociological debris from the catastrophic upheaval that has occurred in the black family over the last twenty years.

Thomasina was typical. A black woman, age 28, she had been living in two rooms at the Martinique for the last three months with her six children. She wore a red beret and sunglasses, and her two bottom front teeth were missing. She could have been 50.

"I had my own apartment and my own job six months ago," she said. "I was living in Columbus, Ohio. I came to visit my sister here, and while we were staying her apartment burned down. So they put me in here."

What happened to her job and apartment? "I don't know—they're gone now. That's the way it goes sometimes, you know." Thomasina didn't seem terribly concerned about getting in or out of the Martinique. "They put you on a bus every week and take you around to show you apartments, and tell you you have to take something. I didn't like anything they showed me yet, so I'm staying right here."

Carmen was the same way. She had four children. Had she ever had a husband? I asked.

"Are you kidding? Get beat up all the time? No sir, not me."

She actually seemed fairly responsible. She had worked as a store clerk, and was now tending one end of the trinket table for the elderly Oriental who was operating the sidewalk stand. He was paying her \$3.00 an hour.

"The only thing I don't like about it here at the hotel are the fights," she told me. "A lot of women beat their children. You know, they get mad at 'em and whip 'em or lock 'em outside. Or else they spend their welfare money on a nickel bag instead of feeding their kids. A six-year-old got raped in there a couple of weeks ago, too."

She said she wasn't particularly looking for another place to live. Her room at the Martinique wasn't all that bad. After we finished talking, she urged me to come up and visit her, and wanted to give me her phone number.

Where were the men in this world? A lot of them were standing right outside, their noses almost literally pressed against the glass.

Cloyd was a 29-year-old black who paced back and forth in front of the hotel like a caged fox. He was thin and wiry, with a strung-out look. A fresh two-inch scar ran down his left nostril, the stitch-marks still clearly visible.

"They won't let me in," he said. "These bastards won't let me past the



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door. I'm trying to get in to see my old lady."

It emerged that he had had "a little fight" with his old lady a week ago, and was now banned from the hotel. He lived in Queens with a relative and spent his days "doing nothing." I had the feeling his old lady wasn't terribly anxious to see him.

Cloyd was nervous and didn't want to talk, so I struck up another conversation with Carlton, an older, much more respectable-looking man with a Jamaican lilt in his voice.

"My baby-mother lives in here," he told me. "She has five other kids. The last one's mine. I'm 39, she's 38. We were living together in the Bronx, but the Spanish moved in. They're the ones that are ruining New York. They think us black people are nothing, so they stole everything from us. Then they wrecked the building. It was too crowded for me to live in here, so I'm staying at a hotel on East 23rd Street. The city is paying my rent."

I was curious about that term "baby-mother." What did it mean?

"It means the mother of your baby," he explained patiently. "You know, if she has your baby, that makes you the father, and she's the baby-mother."

But didn't that make her your girlfriend, or your common-law wife or something?

"No, mon, that's the baby-mother."

Cloyd had drifted back, and was listening intently to our conversation.

"I've never heard that term, 'baby-mother,' before," I said.

For the first time all afternoon, Cloyd's face dissolved in a smile. "You never heard of a 'baby-mother' before?" he said. "Shee-it, man, where you been?"

The day before, I had been down to the Men's Shelter on West Third Street. Originally a city-sponsored sleeping quarters for Bowery Bums, it has

recently become the central clearing house for New York City's homeless men.

I originally walked in looking for a supervisor to ask about some interviews. The place was so busy, though, and everyone seemed so indifferent to my presence, that I finally just fell into the routine of acting like another homeless individual.

About 300 men crowded into the Shelter's first-floor recreation and intake rooms, with perhaps another 300 scattered among the three upper floors.

## The people who are most emotionally involved in helping the homeless haven't the slightest idea what they're doing.

The crowd was mostly black and Spanish, probably a little older than younger. It was a boisterous group.

There were few places to sit. Card games occupied one whole side of the large recreation room. On the other, a group of black transvestites carried on an endless melodrama about someone's borrowed shoes. In the middle of the room, two men played a furious game of ping-pong. It took me a while to realize there was an old drunk asleep under the ping-pong table.

One thing obviously marked the few white men in the crowd. All of them seemed at least a little disturbed. One wild-haired Jewish-looking guy in his thirties, who looked like a shipwreck from the 1960s, marched up and down the room spouting loudly about Marx and revolution. When I asked him if he had grown up in New York, he said: "I'm from the USA, one nation under God—one, one, one, one." He jabbed his arms and legs out in a fair imitation of a swastika. Then he marched off again.

If I had to characterize the majority of men I talked to, I would say they were "down on their luck." One very kind black man in his forties, named Ken, said he had been running a small video parlor in the Bronx only a few months before. "I had to go to North Carolina to take care of my mother. She got sick, and didn't have any insurance. I used all my money to pay her hospital bills. She finally died.

"Then when I came back, some kids had broken into the game parlor and wrecked everything. We didn't have any insurance. My partner and I went bankrupt. I couldn't pay my rent, so I ended up here. I'm trying to scrape a little money together so I can get started again."

One kid was sitting on a bench selling individual cigarettes for ten cents

apiece. He was 23 years old. "I've been in here about four months," he said. "I make about \$10 a day. I do it because I'm not the kind of person who'll rob or steal from people. I wasn't raised like that." Did he have any plans for the future? "Just get out of here and try to get a job, I guess."

It was an institutional setting, not unlike a jail or mental hospital. (In fact, many of these people undoubtedly would have been in mental hospitals twenty years ago.) In an upstairs pool room, two older guys spent fifteen

minutes doing a clumsy Harlem Globetrotters imitation. In another room where garbage details were being handed out for \$12 a week, one man fell down and had an epileptic seizure right in front of me.

I went through intake, told a social worker I had left my wife and children, and was issued a 30-day meal card. When I told him I had spent a year in college, he didn't blink an eye. The guy just ahead of me, a jazz musician, had claimed to have a Ph.D. "It's the economy," Ken told me earlier. "The guy I slept next to last night said he was a surgeon."

Finally, as we lined up for a meal, I ended up next to an Irish-looking guy, graying, with pointy shoes, pegged pants, and a funny, cross-eyed look. Even to my untutored eye, he had "jail" written all over him.

"What've they got you in here for?" I asked.

He laughed, and told me all about his days in prison. "You've got a much tougher bunch of guys in there," he said. "In jail, you've got to protect yourself all the time. I saw a guy get stabbed 39 times once just like that. When it was over, nobody seen nothing. Here everybody just minds their own business. But don't get drunk. They'll roll you in a minute.

"You've got to make plans," he advised me. "You've got to think of something to do on the outside. A lot of these guys in here have given up. They're just living day to day. They'll stay here as long as the city lets them."

The requirement for staying at the Men's Shelter is that you take a shower. After you're through, the shelter gives you a clean T-shirt. The shirts are color-coded to make sure everyone washes every day. Some residents of the men's shelter are opposed to bathing on principle.

The cleanest, brightest, and most acceptable of the homeless are farmed out to the dozens and dozens of armories, churches, synagogues, and former mental hospitals that have been mobilized to deal with the state court settlement that created the "right to a place to sleep" for everyone in New York City.

A few nights later, I spent an evening at the Congregation Rodef Shalom on West 86th Street. The temple was putting up twelve homeless men, but eight of them had already retired to their cots when I arrived at nine o'clock. (No shelter can take more than nineteen people. Otherwise, it must secure a city license, which requires an impossible amount of refurbishing and paperwork.)

Gary, Rodney, and Vinnie, three homeless men, were sitting at a card table playing a wicked game of pinochle. The two other volunteers—a middle-aged man and woman from the neighborhood—were watching television. There was supposed to be some "counseling" going on, but the card players were having such a good time and the volunteers seemed so intimidated that the whole idea of "rehabilitation" seemed inappropriate.

I sat down at the table for a while and tried to learn the game. Then gradually, I started asking the players about themselves, telling them I was doing a newspaper story. They were cautious at first, but eventually opened up.

Gary was 35, although I would have guessed 28. He was black, had a small mustache, and a well-educated manner. An accountant by trade, he had just come back from six months in London.

"I sublet my apartment and was living over there," he said. (In New York City, subletting a rent-controlled apartment at double or triple the rent allowable to the landlord is a major source of income for tens of thousands of people.) "But my sub-tenant moved out and didn't even tell me. The





landlord took it over again, and when I got back I didn't have anyplace to live. So I had to come here. I haven't been able to land a job in six weeks, but I just got something with Bank of New York. I start Monday. It's almost impossible to look for an apartment and a job at the same time in New York."

Rodney was 38, black, and extremely pleasant. He owns a liquor store in Los Angeles, where he lives with his common-law wife and five children. His eldest daughter is attending the University of Southern California.

"I came back here to settle the estate with my mother and stepfather," he said. They had died under mysterious circumstances that he didn't want to elaborate. "We don't think they were murdered, but we're not sure. I was staying with my sisters and brothers while the house is in probate, but things got too crowded, so I moved here. I sent my kids back to L.A. My wife and I aren't legally married, but we've been together for 18 years."

He was extraordinarily sensitive to the nuances of the situation. "My mother was the first black woman CPA in this country," he said. "We've always been accountants in our family. My mother and father were the only liquor store owners in our neighborhood to survive the New York liquor strike in the 1970s. It's much easier to run a liquor store in Los Angeles, though. You don't have so many regulations out there."

Vinnie was the youngest of the three, 24, Italian, and probably the least savvy of the group (he was also losing the card game). He was willing to talk about things that left the other two a little embarrassed.

"I'm married with two kids," he said. "I'm a construction worker. My wife and I live with her brother in Queens. He's a real bastard. He's a cop, about 38 years old. We don't get along. He's retiring and moving to Florida in

the spring, though, so we'll have the whole house to ourselves."

What was he doing among the homeless? "I got hurt on the job a month ago," he said. "I got some glass in my feet, and then it got all diseased." He showed me the soles of his feet, which were damp and peeling, and indeed looked painfully infected. "I'm collecting disability and unemployment for a while. I came down here because we're telling the disability people we're separated. We collect a bigger check that way." He told me all this without a trace of embarrassment.

Was he sure he wasn't having a little fight with his wife, and just telling this story as an excuse? "Oh, no," he said, "I go out there every day. I'm just sleeping down here at night so we can get more money."

After an hour-and-a-half of this, I finally had to admit I felt a little strange. "I feel like I'm sitting with a group of impostors here," I said. "I came down here looking for an interview with the unfortunate homeless, and here I find three intelligent, grown men, all with jobs and families." (Gary had a teenage daughter, but was separated from his wife.)

They ignored my comment for a bit. Then Gary finally pursed his lips and formulated a response. "I think you have to differentiate us from those people down at the Men's Shelter," he said. "All those people are really institutionalized. Even a lot of the staff started out as homeless. All they think about is getting you on some kind of social-services program. They're always trying to send you to Camp LaGuardia." (Indeed, during my interview, the social worker had immediately suggested I go to this large state-run compound in the Catskills.)

"I think they run the whole program all wrong down there," he concluded. "They ought to be telling people to find jobs and take care of themselves. In-

stead, they're just trying to put everybody on welfare."

New York City now has an estimated 50,000 "homeless" people. The numbers have grown in the past few years, although the phenomenon is not new. In 1978, Kim Hopper and Ellen Baxter, of the Community Service Society, published a paper estimating there were 35,000 homeless in New York. (They now claim 60,000.) The real change seems to have been that the issue has become politicized.

In 1979, Robert Hayes, a young Wall Street attorney, brought a class-action suit that eventually determined every person in New York City had a "legal right" to shelter at city expense. At the time there were 2,000 men in the Men's Shelter and 50 women in the Women's Shelter. The City was spending \$14 million per year on the program.

This past January 9, 20,000 slept in city shelters. New York City now spends an incredible \$200 million annually on the homeless. If there are 40,000 homeless altogether, that's \$50,000 a year per individual. ("There's a little bit of overhead," admitted Fred Griesbach, director of the Coalition for the Homeless.) Even then, Carol Bellamy, President of the City Council and Mayor Koch's rival in this year's election, is berating Koch for not spending an additional "spare" \$40 million on the homeless.

After talking to people in the street, I can believe these numbers. Carmen said the city pays \$1,800 monthly in rent for her two-room suite in the Martinique. My wife and I are buying a five-room co-op in Brooklyn, and the total mortgage and maintenance payments come to less than \$1,000 a month.

The inevitable accusation, of course, is that some mysterious "slumlords" are making millions off these welfare payments. But when I talked with Sal Tuccelli, the owner of the Martinique, sitting in his mezzanine offices overlooking the lobby, he didn't seem like a man getting rich.

"If you'd told me I'd end up like this ten years ago, I'd have thought you were crazy," he said. "This used to be a beautiful place. We had an off-Broadway theater in here. I was the first hotel owner in New York to win the Silver Award for Fine Restaurants. That's a hand-painted ceiling out there."

Tuccelli said he leased out the Martinique for ten years, and his leaseholder converted to welfare without telling him. "Even then he couldn't make it, so we had to take it back," he said. "I've got 1,500 kids in here. Can you imagine the vandalism? Four months ago we spent half-a-million

dollars on five new elevators. Now all of them have been destroyed. I'd sell this place in a minute, but there isn't a person on earth who would buy it."

New York City's complicated tenant-protection laws forbid any welfare hotel owner from evicting a tenant who has lived with him for more than 29 days. In New York, once you've accepted a tenant, you're stuck with him for life. This is another reason no one builds rental housing anymore.

The only way Tuccelli could empty his building now is if the hotel burned down.

Fred Griesbach is director of the Coalition for the Homeless. He doesn't think New York City is spending nearly enough. "Each year's peak of homelessness is next year's average," he said, sitting in his cramped office. (The Coalition for the Homeless receives no city funds.) "The numbers just keep going up. There's no end in sight."

"Studies have shown that about 25-30 percent of the homeless are mentally ill," he said. "That figure is probably about right. There's a hard core out there who just can't take care of themselves."

Most of these people were dumped out of mental hospitals in the 1960s and '70s when another "civil rights" crusade decided they should be "free" to refuse treatment. Nationwide, the population of state mental hospitals has fallen from 559,000 to 132,000 over that period. Thousands of these "bag ladies" and "vent people" now live in railway and bus stations, in bank lobbies, on sidewalks, under bridges, and in makeshift "tent cities."

Many of these people are obviously irrational. When New York City officials began forcing them to go to shelters on sub-freezing nights, however, the ACLU objected loudly that their "civil rights" were being violated. In very cold weather, the pick-up van from the Department of Human Resources now carries two psychiatrists who make on-the-spot diagnoses designed to stand up in court.

This winter, Grand Central Station began staying open all night to accommodate the homeless. Within days there were rumors that Human Resources vans were dumping people off at Grand Central, rather than putting them into the city's overcrowded shelters. Soon, Grand Central travelers were stepping over indigents to get to their trains. One supposedly "harmless" vagrant attacked a Connecticut commuter and bit his finger off. Grand Central officials started closing the station at one a.m. again once the cold weather eased.

But this hard core of shamefully abandoned drunks and incompetents



has only served as a wedge, to drag thousands of other people into the social services network. A survey of the men's shelters in 1983 found that a significant number of shelter residents were younger men who had come in for economic reasons, and 60 percent of the homeless had lived with close relatives or friends in their last three sleeping arrangements. That was long before the city started processing welfare mothers and their children into the system as well.

"How many of these families are intact?" I asked Fred Griesbach, after he told me that homeless families represented "the biggest growth area."

"What do you mean, 'intact'?"

"I mean a father, mother, and children."

"Very few," he said. "They are almost all minorities. You know what

it's like for black people in this society, especially black women. They can't find jobs, they don't get adequate day care, there are no training programs available. It makes very little difference whether a family is quote-unquote intact."

Griesbach was bearded and young, a nice-looking guy. I thought he looked 27, but he was 34. He was a school-teacher before becoming involved in the homeless. His office was decorated with political posters ("Help Angola Win Independence—Boycott Gulf").

What is the city supposed to do about the homeless? I asked.

"Housing. We've got to have more public housing. There's just no place for anyone to live. We're a rich society, we can afford it."

Can New York City afford it?

"Well, probably not. We've got to

have the federal government come in here and build housing for us."

Wouldn't getting rid of rent control help, since New York City's housing regulations have driven every single private developer of rental housing out of business?

"No," he replied. "The private developers only build housing for the rich."

Well look, I said. I admit it's hard to find a place to live in New York. (John F. Kennedy, Jr. recently spent two months trying to find an apartment.) But didn't he think that people had to provide something for themselves? Almost every homeless person I had encountered so far was a black who had split up his or her family—or never bothered forming one—making it necessary to find two apartments instead of one. By going to

court and trying to force the city to spend hundreds of millions or more dollars in building shelters, wasn't he just making the whole system more attractive?

Griesbach stared at me in disbelief. "Almost anything is attractive to a person who doesn't have a place to live," he said. "All we're talking about here is shelter. We're talking about having a bed to lie on and a roof over your head to protect you from the rain. The people in these shelters don't even have a place to cook. Some of them don't have a private bathroom. We're talking about things every human being is entitled to."

As I jotted in my notes, I could feel his voice rising with emotion. When I finally looked up, his face was glowing with righteous indignation. He looked like a candidate for sainthood. □

Roger Starr

## THE UNMAKING OF MANUFACTURING

The rise and fall of industrial New York City.

One of New York's best-kept secrets in 1946 was its status as the nation's largest manufacturing town. Bemusing other cities with its symbolic office skyscrapers and the penthouses serenaded by songwriters, New York did not let the rest of the nation know that in fact a very large fraction of its population worked at factory jobs. And rather grubby factory jobs at that. Until the end of the Second World War, the city's mayors and business and political leaders did whatever they could to encourage manufacturing and to reduce the factory workers' cost of living by maintaining the low subway fare and providing subsidies to housing. After the end of the war, however, growing interest in the "quality of life" and in the sociological problems of race relations, advanced health care, juvenile delinquency, and substandard housing overshadowed the attention

that leadership had given to the cultivation of manufacturing.

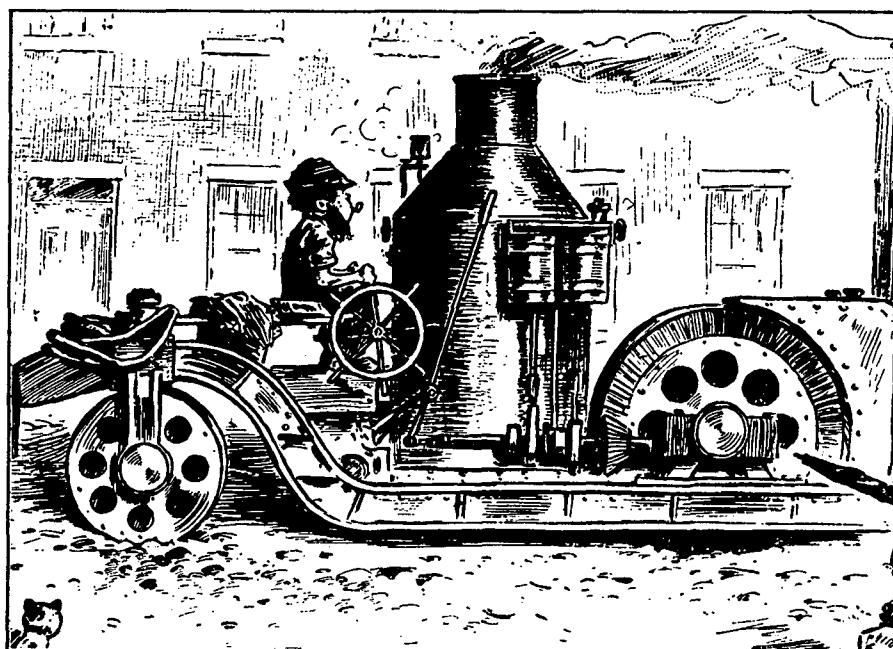
It was not until thirty years after the end of the war, when the Federal Bureau of Labor Statistics announced that the city had lost 600,000 manufacturing jobs in ten years, that New Yorkers who had never set foot in a factory learned that they had been living

in a factory town. The rest of the country never had known. New York, in fact, was the only factory town in the nation that could lose 600,000 factory jobs and still retain 600,000 people working in factories.

Of course, New York's factories did not always look like factories, at least not like modern factories—one-story

boxes floating in a parking-lot sea. New York had some multi-story reinforced concrete buildings, designed to carry heavy machinery on their extra-large floors and clearly labeled by design as buildings within which objects were produced. But the busiest factory district in the city was incongruously located in central Manhattan, just south of 42nd Street and the theater district. Here, sometimes in new brick-faced elevator buildings that looked like extraordinarily solid office buildings and sometimes in older structures on the choking side streets, the women's garment industry made its headquarters. Adjacent were the furriers.

In the early postwar years, imaginative real estate people were chagrined that dress factories kept such valuable real estate from attaining its "highest and best use"—meaning office buildings, whose tenants could pay much higher rents per square foot. Samuel J. Lefrak suggested moving the whole garment industry to a site over the vast Sunnyside rail freight yards in Queens and offered to build new, modern factories if the city would on-



Roger Starr is a member of the New York Times Editorial Board. This article is adapted from his new book, *The Rise and Fall of New York City*, to be published later this year by Basic Books.