

(On Christmas Eve the author is in his bunker in the tunnel that runs for 50 blocks under Riverside Park. His eloquent and crack smoking neighbor Bernard, one of the most televised underground homeless in New York, has withdrawn himself in his bunker. On his bike, the author rides 20 blocks towards the southern entrance of the tunnel, planning to visit Franky and Ment, two white runaway kids in their early twenties and Joe, a Vietnam veteran who has been living for twenty years in the tunnel, the last five years joined by his wife Kathy.)

11. Suicide on Christmas Night

It is the day before Christmas. Not a White Christmas. It is dreary, windy, gray weather in the city. Santa Clauses roam around on Broadway. They wave big bells and try to sell the last Christmas trees for special prices. Bernard and I are sitting at the fireplace, listening to the radio. Instead of good rock and Bob Grant's right wing talk show, his favorite station W1010 is now broadcasting non-stop Christmas carols. "Fuck this Frosty the Fucking Snowman," Bernard grumbles. It's a silly American song about a merry snowman who, in fact, dies a horrible thawing death. Frosty accepts his fate courageously, actually quite cheerfully, but in a completely naïve way. We hear the song at least three times every hour. It drives us crazy. Bernard decides to go back to bed, I go to the South End to deliver my Christmas wishes.

It is not that cold, but a chilling wind blows through the wood pillars at the South End. Icicles are dripping from the ceiling. Last winter it was worse, Bernard told me. At that time there was a curtain of icicles, some up to fifteen feet long. One nearly killed him when it broke off. At Clarence's shack, a fire is burning in an empty oil drum, but there is no one in sight. Little Havana is deserted. I don't even see any rats. Even they must have decided to stay in today. Deeper in the tunnel, a group of kids are coming towards me. Hoodlums that don't belong in the tunnel. As they come closer, I see Ment among them. We chat a bit, but Ment is aloof. The boys look uneasily at me.

One of the guys, a Latino with a wild expression in his eyes, scratches his back and as he pushes his sweater up, I see a shiny gun next to his beeper. I don't know if the kid showed it accidentally or as a veiled threat. I politely say goodbye and stop at Joe's; he is sorting out cans outside. We watch the group of kids. "Friends of Ment," Joe and shrugs his shoulders. "Sometimes he hangs out with strange people." I wish him a happy Christmas. "Fuck Christmas," he says bitterly. "And you're also some kinda asshole to leave your wife alone back home at the holidays and hang around here in the tunnel."

Joe fakes indignation, and has a grin on his face for a moment. But soon he returns to his usual sad expression, the look he normally has. Joe told me last time about his five daughters. Two were born dead. Two died as toddlers. It had to do with Agent Orange, according to Joe. The devastating effects of the defoliation agent on human genetic material were not yet known during the Vietnam era. His oldest daughter died when she was sixteen. Joe heard it too late to go to her funeral; he had already been on the streets for a few years.

Christmas Night. I am having a cup of wine at Bob's bunker and feeling sad. Every year I curse the holidays and family obligations, but Christmas underground is no fun either. Doing something with

Bernard is not an option, as he remains incommunicado in his bunker, probably enjoying himself smoking crack.

Why not go over to Joe and Kathy and offer them the bottle of champagne a New York friend gave to me a few days ago? The bitter way Joe said ‘Fuck Christmas’ still rings in my ears. He could sure use a little present for the holidays. On top of that, it is proper thing to show the tunnel elder respect. While I pack up my backpack, I hear a long train whistle, louder and longer than normal. Maybe the train conductor is blowing his whistle as a Christmas greeting to the tunnel people. I jump on my bike and ride with my flashlight on the narrow path next to the tracks to the South End.

After five blocks, it becomes clear something is wrong. In the slow bend of the tunnel, I can see the bright headlight of the train. It has stopped and blue police lights flash along the walls. As I get closer to the 83rd Street exit, I see people walking around with powerful flashlights. I am blinded by one of their lights and stop my bike right in front of a police officer. “Excuse me, officer,” I ask as politely as possible. “Could you please tell me what happened?” The cop is flabbergasted. “Who the fuck are you and what the fuck are you doing in this fucking tunnel?” I show my NYPD press card and explain I am working on a story about the tunnel. The press card is like a red flag to a bull. “Git yer fuckin’ ass outta here,” he barks. “But officer,” I try again. ‘TO CROSS ALL POLICE AND FIRE LINES’ is printed in big bold capitals on the press card. “Now don’t get fuckin’ smart with me...” he screams.



© Teun Voeten – Police outside a tunnel emergency exit in Riverside Park

When cops start to talk like that, you know it’s time to go. Quietly, I slip through the emergency exit. Outside is an ambulance and a few police cars. I try again with another cop. He threatens to beat me up with his huge Maglite, handcuff me and throw me in jail. The message is clear. I leave the scene. Through the dark park I bike to the entrance of the parking garage. There, I

find Frankie and Ment nervously smoking cigarettes. “What’s up, Ant,” Frankie greets me. “Did you hear what happened?”

They have also been kicked out of the tunnel, but Frankie saw everything. “Lady Bug started to bark so I took a look to see what was happening. Outside some idiot is stumbling on the tracks. I yelled at him not to walk on the goddamn tracks and went inside. That must have been the last words someone told him.” Frankie leaves a significant silence. “Those words obviously brought him little luck,” Ment tries a joke. “Shut up, asshole,” Frankie says angrily. He is shocked by the accident and is smoking one cigarette after the other. “A few minutes later I hear horns, whistles, hooting, screeching brakes. I knew immediately what time it was. I tell you: it was not an accident. It was goddamn suicide.”

Frankie has seen the body. Mangled beyond recognition. PO— police officer—Anderson from the 20th precinct was there first, Frankie says. They know each other from the hood. “PO Anderson shone her flashlight on the man and asked if I knew him. I could only see he was black. Otherwise, he was ground meat. When I saw his brains dripping out of his head, I had to throw up.” Frankie puts his hands over his eyes. “PO Anderson told me to go home and get a drink. The other cops that came after her after kicked us out.”

We wait in the park for half an hour. Frankie tells us more about Anderson. “She’s a cool cop. She often talks with us and sometimes we get a beer. Unlike most cops who are just out to fuck you.” Ment now and then glances through the gate in the tunnel to check if the coast is clear. Frankie and Ment have known Anderson for a few years. At one point, it started to smell terribly in the tunnel. Everybody thought it was a dead cat or rotting garbage. But Joe as a war veteran knew that it was the smell of a dead body. Ment called the police and they went on an inspection. Together they found a dead man somewhere hidden deep in a crevice. The body was partially eaten by animals. A rat came out of his eye socket.

“We couldn’t find any traces of violence,” Anderson said later, when I interviewed her at the police office. “His hands were under his belly as if he were asleep. Probably he had crept into the cave to die in peace.” About Frankie and Ment, she said motherly: “They are not bad guys.” Once she was harassed by a drunk guy from the neighborhood. Frankie and Ment had offered to ‘take care’ of the guy. Anderson refused. “I fight my own battles. But it was a nice gesture. It was their way of saying ‘PO, we think you are cool and we like you.’”

Ment calls when the police have gone. “It’s no good,” Frankie says once we are back in their place. “This kinda bullshit only brings trouble in the tunnel. Why this stupid nigger had to kill himself of all places in front of my home? Soon, we all will be kicked out for good.” Ment is not interested, and plays with his beeper. That’s how he stays in touch with the outside world: if someone beeps him, the nearest pay phone is two minutes away in the parking garage. I ask about his friends who I met in the

morning. “Oh, nothing,” Ment says, “just my crew.”

Frankie wants to turn on the radio when we hear a loud bang, followed by a dog barking and whining. “Something goes wrong,” Ment says dryly. He gets up, grabs the baseball bat and jumps outside. Frankie follows him, his shoes not even tied. As I am about to follow them, they have already returned with Lady Bug in their arms.

“Oh my God,” sighs Frankie. The dog groans and cries. The poor animal fell off the roof and was slashed by a protruding nail. Across her lower abdomen stretches a nasty cut, blood dripping from it. We put Lady Bug on the couch and use a flashlight to inspect the wound. It is nearly four inches long. “Fuck this tunnel,” curses Frankie and he grabs his head. “And fuck this Christmas.”

We discuss what to do. Going to a vet is out of the question. Most of them are not working on Christmas Eve, and it would take an hour of walking to get to the nearest one. And there’s no way a cab would take us with the bleeding Lady Bug. On top of everything, a vet would cost a few hundred dollars. Without a cash advance, they wouldn’t do anything. The only thing remaining is to perform the operation ourselves. In my backpack I carry a sewing set, and my father was a vet. I used to look over his shoulder when he set broken sheep legs or delivered calves. I also remembered seeing in a Rambo movie how he pulled a bullet out of his shoulder with a knife, and afterwards sewed up the wound himself. Frankie and Ment have seen the movie, too, and are comforted. It can’t be that difficult.



© Teun Voeten – Joe and Franky bandage up up Lady Bug with a T-shirt and duct tape

We need hot water and soap to shave the skin and wash the wound. Frankie heats the water in the coffeemaker and goes looking for soap. The only thing he can find is toilet disinfectant and detergent. The latter should do. While Ment and Frankie hold on to the dog, I clean the wound. Now we can see how deep it actually is. Frankie puts his hands in front of his eyes. “I can’t see blood,” he moans. There is no razor, and so we try to cut away the hairs around the wound with blunt scissors. It

is not easy. Surgery is much more difficult than we had imagined. The other dogs start to bark. The neighbors are coming home. “Let’s get Joe,” Ment suggests. “He got experience sewing up people in Vietnam.” Ment returns with a bottle of aspirin drips. “Kathy told me first give this to the dog to sedate her.”

We open Lady Bug’s mouth and administer drops of the pain killer. The poor dog looks at us with frightened eyes. Now I notice how skinny and dirty she is. She smells awful, and leaves smudges and smears on my coat. A moment later, Joe enters with his sleeves rolled up. “What a night,” Frankie says. “First a guy that had to throw himself under a train in front of my house and now this with Lady Bug.” Joe remains calm, lights up a cigarette and looks at the wound. “It’s gonna be a difficult job,” he mumbles.

Meanwhile, Kathy has also come up, and she strokes the moaning dog’s head. “I told you so Frankie, you need to make a fence,” she says sternly. “This is already the third time a dog has fallen off.” “I know, I know,” Frankie says impatiently. Joe goes to work. But the sewing set is clearly meant to fix buttons, not to sew dogs. It takes all our force to restrain the writhing Lady Bug while Joe grumbles and curses the needle and thread that keep slipping out of his thick fingers. The wound is big, and the skin as tough as the sole of a shoe. After half an hour, we give up. According to Joe, the only thing we can do is put a bandage around the dog and hope for a miraculous healing. With duct tape and an old T-shirt, we bandage the dog. She now looks like a walking sausage and Kathy bursts out laughing. Lady Bug starts to feel better and wags her tail. Frankie’s mood also improves when the dog licks his face. It’s late. I say goodbye and bike back to Bob’s bunker. On my way home, I realize the champagne is still in my backpack.



© Teun Voeten – Bernard enjoys wine and cheese on Christmas day

Next morning at the grill, I tell Bernard about the suicide. He has already heard the news on the radio. “A train takes no prisoners,” he comments simply. Actually, the news is now dominated by a new

tragedy: A cop shot himself through the head just before midnight in Times Square. Bernard pours a glass of white wine and steals nibbles from a piece of Emmentaler cheese. The delicacies are from a Christmas package that Sabine, the reporter from the French TV, gave him. Satisfied, he leans back at the warm fireplace and takes a sip of wine.

“What the fuck are they whining about” he says. “If someone wants to leave from this earth, goddammit, he has the fullest right to do so.” Bernard stares at the glowing embers. “Fuck it. We are still down here with our daily troubles. At least these two guys managed to escape.”

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