

# In Search of a Real New York

Fed up with the transparent hipsters on the downtown bar scene, in spring of 2001 I set out to collect the life stories of the people sleeping on the streets around Tompkins Square. I passed by the park a few times a week, mostly in the evening, and chatted with the diverse tribe of people who frequented the benches. If the conversation proved interesting, I'd ask for permission to tape record. There were a few who rejected my offer, but most were eager to proclaim their story to the world.

These volunteers represent only a microscopic sliver of the homeless people living in New York City. Many of these untold thousands\* successfully hide the outward signs of their dilemma while struggling to remedy their situation from inside the system. I did not find many of these people in Tompkins Square Park.

This anthology focuses mainly (but not exclusively) on people who are “visually homeless”—those who can be seen sleeping on public benches, sorting through dumpsters, or begging for money. Most have been living on the street for an extended period of time, and even if willing, few possess the identification required to receive services from programs. Some have completely given up hope of ever conforming to an acceptable role

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\*In winter of 2003 city homeless shelters served up to 38,000 people per night, a 24% increase over the previous year. It is impossible to accurately determine the number of people on the streets who do not seek services.

in our money driven culture. Environmental factors and internal struggles have forced these fellow citizens to pursue their lives on a separate playing field. Although both worlds intertwine at the edges, they remain Strangers to the System.

While editing these interviews into narrative form, I found it necessary to alter much of the syntax and chronological sequence of the original recordings. Some names have been changed to protect personal privacy, but none of the content that I have rendered is fictitious. All but two of the subjects had the opportunity to listen to the first draft of their story and help me alter it according to their wishes.

*“We are all individuals. The only one you can correct is yourself.”* —Rino Thunder

This book is not a statistical compendium, nor is it a soapbox for ideological propaganda. These are merely some words that were exchanged between friends on park benches. Rather than dwell on the details of my own experiences, I leave you to reap the insights and emotions of your own harvest.

*“Cause we love it—when there’s plenty of it.”*  
—The Reverend Doctor Daddy Max

# History of Tompkins Square Park

*"If all the ghosts came back to Tompkins, the place would be so packed you couldn't even walk."*

— James Carter

Tompkins Square is a ten-and-a-half-acre public park squeezed between Manhattan's Lower East Side and East Village. Its bench-lined pathways and grassy fields have served as a refreshing refuge for generations of immigrants seeking a foothold on the American Dream. Many of the events that would define their struggle took place inside these fences, and the park's history is a rich chronicle of class tensions in New York City. In its 166 years the park has seen six full-scale riots, with the last two occurring in 1988 and 1991. Between these two uprisings the park was covered with the makeshift shelters of hundreds of homeless people.

Although recent years have witnessed tremendous economic growth in the area, the community of homeless people who continue to spend their days in the park serve as a lingering reminder of the neighborhood's turbulent past and a visible testament to the dilemmas that continue to plague our city.

*To read Jim Flynn's full length History of Tompkins Square Park please visit [www.curbsidepress.com](http://www.curbsidepress.com).*

## The Living Room

If Tompkins Square is the living room of the Lower East Side, then the bench-lined path across from Avenue A is the Living Room of Tompkins Square. This heavily trafficked stretch is a center of interaction for a variety of neighborhood dwellers. Stiffly garbed briefcase wielders tap at two-thousand-dollar laptop computers, while the next bench over a grizzled senior citizen diligently attempts to dislodge a copy of yesterday's *Post* from a gizmo-laden baby stroller. Babushka-clad Polish women knit with steady hand against the echo of congas, and gray-haired strategists stare at the chessboard with fierce contemplation. The Living Room is the crossroads of urban America, and an eager soul seeking conversation is not to be denied.

At the height of the summer, I would say that there are probably a total of fifty "regulars" at the Living Room who do not return home to an apartment once the park closes. Although there is a diverse spectrum within this population, it is not unreasonable to say that most of them are alcoholics. Many of my interviews are conducted while the subject slowly numbs the senses.

The issue of open container creates a constant cat-and-mouse game with patrolling squad cars from the 9th Precinct. Although tempers occasionally flare during these encounters, most of the regulars accept them with grumbling resignation. My own interactions with the police are also strained. Officers often ask me to open the lid on my coffee cup only to find coffee. One night three officers surround me and search my pockets for drugs. Despite my anger at

these events, I must also commend the 9th Precinct for its alert response to medical emergencies. Whenever I call 911 for people who are having seizures, the officers arrive within a few minutes.

The most fascinating aspect of the Living Room is watching the interactions between people sleeping on the streets and those with an apartment in the area. Not all of the regulars are homeless. A man named Joe often invites people to sleep on his roof on Avenue A. There is also a Jewish lady named Carla who chats vigorously as weathered hands caress her poodle. Another neighbor, Diane, brings bags of food. From time to time former homeless people return to the park and offer encouragement to their friends on the street.

As autumn fades into winter, the regulars at the Living Room gradually begin to disperse. Some disappear, while others take up residence in the Second Avenue subway station. When springtime arrives, old and new faces return to these benches to lay the foundation for a new community.



## Phillip

Queens, New York 1950

*Phillip's soft smiling face is a constant presence in the Living Room. The only time he leaves the park is when it closes, and even then he rarely ventures more than a few blocks away. Immersed in a torrential thunder of non-stop talkers, Phillip is content to sit back with a beer and let the world roll by. His mellow nature is respected by all, and his easy laughter has gained him many friends. Although I've heard people jokingly refer to Phillip as "Uncle Remus," they mostly just call him Pops.*

*Phillip sleeps on the sidewalk in front of the 7A Restaurant with a fairly consistent group of old-timers. His stationary nature makes him a favorite when people need someone to watch their bags. Phillip takes pride in this role, and whenever I run across the street to the bodega, he insists that I leave my briefcase with him for safekeeping.*

I grew up in an apartment on 75th Street in Far Rockaway. It was a small family—just my mother and father, my four brothers, and my sister. I guess my childhood was pretty regular. Me and my brothers was always running around playing cowboys and Indians with the other kids in the neighborhood. I had a cowboy hat and a Fanning six-shooter cap gun. Bap. Bap. Bap. We played crack top, scully and some other games. You don't know scully? It's like lowlies, where you get down and try to spin the top into different boxes. Kids don't do that today. Now the kids be sitting inside with the video games. It was different then. People were very close back in the day. Everybody on the block knew everybody's child. You disrespect Miss So and So, you come home and the

message is already there. "Take your pants off son."

My father hustled different jobs doing construction and cleaning. He didn't have much formal education, but he was sharp about business. The good thing was that he always paid the rent. The bad thing was that he was more or less an alcoholic. Things got ugly whenever he drank. If he had a hard day at work, he'd contain it all day, but then he'd just come home and get messed up on Benzedrine and alcohol. Sometimes he'd hit my mother. When I first started realizing what was going on, I was just a six-year-old kid, and there was nothing I could do but sit there and cry for my mother. That's why I never did that with my own families. I never beat a woman in my life.

There was two parts of the Rockaways, the all-black part and the mixed part. I actually lived just inside the mixed part. It was a nice neighborhood, and I got along with the white kids. They liked having me around. First time I ever got drunk was with white boys. We were sitting down in the park, and this white boy said it was time I started drinking Schlitz. At first I couldn't get the taste down, but after a few I started liking it. I ended up getting pretty ripped, and they had to carry me home. You should have seen my father's face when he opened the door and saw two white boys holding me up. I was so drunk he had to wait for the next day to blast me out.

I wasn't a troubled kid. It was just that I had a lot of friends who were troubled kids. First time I stole something was in 1962. Me and my friend Eddie was needing to be getting wood to make a scooter, so we jumped over a fence into the neighbor's yard. I was getting up the wood, but all the sudden Eddie started killing the chickens in the pen. I don't know what this

boy was thinking. He was making so much noise that the police showed up. The only thing I got was a JD (*juvenile delinquent*) card, but when my mother and father was through with me, my behind was so sore that I couldn't come out for three days. THREE DAYS.

Getting my ass whipped didn't really make me wanna stop stealing, it just made me wanna make sure I didn't get caught. When I was fourteen I started hanging out with a bunch of cats called the Robin Hood Gang, because we was always robbin the hood. There was about fifteen of us, and we'd just go out stealing at night. One weekend one of my friends decided to try and snatch a pocketbook. He got caught, but I got taken in too. When they took me to the station, I wouldn't tell the police who really snatched the pocketbook. They had a lawyer talk to me and everything, but I still wouldn't tell. That was against the code.

The judge ended up sending me to Warwick State Training Facility. My father really tore me up before I left. I thought it was gonna be like jail, but it really wasn't that bad. You weren't behind bars. It was actually a lot of open fields. You'd spend three months in the dorm, and then if you got gold stars, they'd give you passes to go home for the weekend. I liked it so much more back in Queens. Back there I had an exciting life with partying. There wasn't that much excitement in the boys' home, because you couldn't drink there, and remember, it was all boys. (*laughs*) After nine months I went back home for good.

That summer was when I really started to become a young man. I started dressing more slick—Kangos, bellbottoms, leather shoes. Instead of hanging out in

my own part of town, I started going over to the other side. That's where the girls was at. We used to have big parties when somebody's parents would go away for the weekend. We had blue-light parties, red-light parties, and green-light parties. Blue-light is like when you dance real slow with the girl and hold her. Green-light is like when you have fast action on the dance floor and a lot of conversation. A red-light party was basically anything goes—raid the building, run through the house.

When I went back to regular school that September, they put me in the slow class. I didn't like that. It was like kindergarten. I told my mother about it, and she went into the school and said that she wanted me in a regular class. They wouldn't do that. I knew I didn't have no place being in the CR and D class, so I went to the office and asked for my working papers and inoculations. The principal asked me if I was sure I wanted to do it, and I said yes. I didn't see why they had to put me in that class.

I found a job in the Neighborhood Youth Core cleaning up the parks after the dances. I made \$32.92 a week, but I had to give my mother five bucks a week to help out with the rent. I also had to save money so that when I went to a party, I'd have a few dollars in my pocket. That was a good time for me. I was a single young man, and I could enjoy myself. That's the year that I met Jessica.

It started when I was hanging around outside of the liquor store, talking to this older guy in a wheelchair. He kind of took a liking to me and told me that he wanted me to meet his daughter. I wasn't doing nothing, so I said OK. We went back to his place, and there she was, Jessica. She was big boned, but she had

a baby face. Right away I liked her a lot. She didn't like to be hit on, so it took me a while to get to her. I used to stop by once in a while, and then I asked her to be my girlfriend. We'd go to Coney Island and I'd buy her little trinkets, watches and rings. My favorite was when we used to go pick up some wood and relax in front of the wood stove. We were close.

Everything was going pretty good in my life. Then, one day in July, Jessica comes to me and says she gotta tell me something. From the look in her eye I knew it wasn't good. She was pregnant. Oh Lord! I didn't know what to do. I took Jessica and her father home to meet my family. Her father and my father talked. Then my father called me into the room. He looked at me and asked if I had twenty-five dollars. I said yeah. Then he told me to give it to Jessica. He said that I had to give her twenty-five dollars each week. I had to get a night job in a paper factory from five till twelve every weekday. That was the end of me just being a kid out to enjoy myself.

I kept visiting Jessica at her parents' house when I could. See, back in those days you couldn't live together. At 8 o'clock in the evening, her parents would tell her that it was time for her company to leave. One night, just before I had to leave, I asked her if she wanted to marry me. She said, "You don't love me, Phillip. You only asking because we have a baby." I kept trying to tell her that I loved her, but Jessica wouldn't pay it no mind. After that we broke up—but my father said I still had to pay her that twenty-five dollars a week.

After Jessica left me, I started talking to this other young lady named Janet. She had a big house, and I used to go visit her on the porch. She was tall, a little

bit on the skinny side, but she had a mind like a computer. She could talk to me about anything. We went for walks, and I used to spend time helping her around the house. After a few weeks, we became close. Now, you think I woulda learnt my lesson the first time, but I guess you could say I was a young man, and I liked pushing the old rod. (*laughs*) You know what I'm saying? Guess what? I found out that August that Janet was pregnant too. When I took her to meet my dad, he said, "I don't know what you're doing son, but you're wearing yourself thin." He made me take another twenty-five dollars out of my paycheck each week and give it to Janet.

It was kind of rough when the two girls found out about each other, because they lived right across the street. I was worried that they was gonna fight, but all they did was come together and hug. You know why? Because I was taking care of both of 'em. I wasn't leaving neither one of them stressed out. At the time the hospital charged a little under a thousand dollars for babies. Neither one of these women would take any welfare money, so I paid the whole thing. They were both in the same hospital, one on the fifth floor and the other was on the third floor. Jessica gave me a daughter, Roxanne, and Janet gave me a son, Howard.

Right after that, I asked Janet to marry me, but she said no. She was a free spirit and didn't want nobody to own her. What I liked about my women was their inner strength. I saw that. They didn't wanna get married just because of the fact that we had children. That would have made a bad marriage.

I kept working at the factory at night and for the park service in the day. I had to pay for the fact that these are my kids. After I bought food, diapers, and

formula, it only left me with about twenty dollars a week for myself. It was a rough time, but all and all I enjoyed it. I had goals to work for, and it kept me pretty busy. I stayed in both Janet and Jessica's lives. Sometimes we'd all get together, and Howard and Roxanne would play. We had birthday parties with all the families. I enjoyed it even though I didn't have a lot of time for myself. I didn't hardly drink at all back then.

In 1973 my grandfather in South Carolina died. My father wanted to keep the house in the family, so I signed it over to Jessica. It was a nice two-family house with a yard. She moved down there and started working as a nurse. We stayed in touch for a while, and I sent her some money to help her pay the mortgage.

That same year, Janet and I got some money together and applied for public housing. Then me, her, and Howard moved into the Edgemere project in the Rockaways. Janet and me lived together like husband and wife. I loved her. I never hit her. I never beat her. I got frustrated at times, but my kid never went to school with black eyes or saw their mother with a busted lip.

We used to have to pay one hundred and forty dollars a month for rent. Then, the more money you made, the more money it would cost for rent. When I first went in there, it was mostly working people, as the years went on, you had more welfare recipients. At the time, welfare was only giving sixty-eight fifty a month, so you had people who made up the rent with selling food stamps. Janet never believed in public assistance, so we had to work. If we was gonna buy a TV or something, we'd never pay credit.

Coming into the seventies, I had another son with Janet named Steven. We also had another boy named

Randolph. He really wasn't my son. This lady who was a cocaine addict left him with Janet. He always used to wake us up in his sleep, because cocaine babies have a lung condition. When he got to be five or six, he started calling me Dad.

It wasn't always easy, but looking back I see that it felt good to have people need me. I did whatever I could. When my kids were young, I put money into bank accounts for each of them, so when they got of age, they had money of their own. An old Jewish woman told me to do that. My kids' lives were pretty stable. They never got into fights or drugs. They had smart mothers.

In 1979 a friend hooked me up with a custodial job at Nassau Coliseum. The money was pretty good, and I liked working just one job, but that only lasted until I got laid off in '82. After that I had to get some odds-and-ends jobs to maintain the household. I didn't want to accept welfare, so I did a lot of painting and cleaning. The money wasn't anywhere near as good, and that kind of stressed me out.

In 1983 Howard comes to me and says, Dad I got a girl pregnant. I was like oh, not again. I'm tired of that. I told him that he was gonna have to start working, so he dropped out of school completely and started driving an ambulance. He married the mother of his kids later on and went on to pass the GED. He owns his own landscaping company now, and he's doing all right. A couple years after that, Steven comes to me and says the same thing. Then he had to move out and get a job. Howard and Steven always wondered why they never had enough money to buy things for themselves, but when you have a woman and a child you have to be more giving.

I was glad to see that my kids were starting to grow up and take care of themselves. I had spent the last twenty years of my life working everyday just to put food on the table, and that was a long time for a man to give up his life. I wanted to take some time for myself, but then in 1988, Janet had a daughter named Nadine.

I stayed with Janet for another year to help her out, but she knew that I wasn't going to stick around. It was nothing that Janet did, and it was nothing that I did. I just knew that I needed to get out of New York and start seeing things for myself. We didn't have no argument. We just agreed that it would be better. Doesn't mean I didn't love her. I told her she could keep the apartment and all my stuff, and when I got myself straight, I'd come back.

Leaving that apartment was like a release, like Ahhh. I went down to the bank and took out all the money I'd been saving. I had eight thousand dollars in my pocket, and I went and bought myself a train ticket to Las Vegas. I had nothing, just the clothes on my back. If I wanted a clean shirt, I'd just buy one. I was partying and just living it up. That was like the first time in twenty years that I got to do my own thing. It felt good to have nothing to worry about.

From Las Vegas I went to South Dakota. I wanted to see the Badlands, like in all the cowboy movies. I stayed there a few months in a hotel room. There weren't too many people for me to talk to, so I started drinking. I was upset, because for all these years I had been imagining what I could do on my own, and it wasn't working out the way I planned it. After a few months I took a train to Louisiana, where I stayed with some of my cousins in the swamps.

From there I called up my mother, and she said

that Roxanne had called me from South Carolina, and she wanted to see her daddy. I hadn't seen Roxanne in years, so I got on the train and went down there. I was amazed. Roxanne was all grown up and going to school to be a nurse like her mom. The house looked brand new. They fixed it up outside and inside. They had things of their own, their own cars and whatnot. I stayed there for two weeks, but I really didn't fit in. Jessica never got remarried, but there was nothing left in our relationship. She wished me well, and I headed back to New York.

My trip lasted for seven months. I spent all my money on drinking and hotel rooms. When I got back to New York, I still wasn't ready to go back to Janet. Instead I stayed at my sister's house for about a year. She's an Evangelical Minister, and my brother-in-law is a deacon. They was always talking to me about God and life. I used to come home drunk, and they had issues with that. I couldn't have her being my mother, so I walked out of there. They got their lives. I got mine.

When I left there, I moved in with a friend in Far Rockaway for a while, then I stayed with my cousin in Brooklyn. I stayed with a couple different friends, but I got tired of being up in everybody's business. In 1990 I rented a room in a flophouse and started working odds-and-ends. That same year some guy tried to rob me, and I cut him with my knife.

They took me to trial and found me guilty. I got two years of parole. I walked away from that because my PO (*parole officer*) was an A hole. He said you gotta do this, do that. Now, me being a man, I don't appreciate that. My father'd died ten years before that, and I don't need no other man to tell me what I gotta do. When I skipped out on parole, I didn't have nowhere

to go, so I just walked the streets in Brooklyn and Queens. I stayed out on the street for five years eating at shelters and panhandling—drinking liquor all the time. In '95 the police picked me up for open container, and they sentenced me to five years upstate for parole violation. I don't like to talk about that so much.

I ended up doing two and a half years upstairs, and then they released me to a halfway house called McCauley Mission. They were really big on religion. I stayed there for about three months. For the first month, you couldn't leave the building. It was pretty rough. Eventually, I became a security guard there. If I stayed for a few more months, they were going to put me in a program where I would have my own apartment, but I got fed up with that, and I went back out on the street.

That was when I first started living around Tompkins Square Park. Being on the streets over here is much better than being out in Brooklyn. I love the people here. You meet all types of people in this park and learn what they're about. I talk to doctors and lawyers. You meet people who have insight. I just soak it all up. It's like an education.

*Phillip is the first subject that I speak with after 9/11. He greets me with a hug and tells me that during the emergency the park had turned into a free for all. People were smoking pot and shooting up right out in the open, just like the old days. Tears were shed and several of the more unstable regulars had nervous breakdowns.*

*As I sit down on the bench, Phillip spies a police cruiser slowly edging toward the Living Room. He quickly swallows the rest of his beer and pushes the can behind the bench. A short stocky Hispanic officer steps out of the car and scans*

*over the people passed out on the benches. He clicks on a flashlight and calls out in a shrill voice, "All right, first we gotta get Sleeping Beauty up. Sleeping Beauty, get up!" The officer pulls the blankets off the man's head. Startled, he jerks himself upright. The officer then turns and faces Phillip. "Now I divert my attention to the very slick one. What you got under that jacket. A bomb? A bomb of alcohol? We're looking for bombs. Come on, let me see. Tick tick tick tick tick. Hurry. Hurry. What do you think I'm stupid?" Phillip lifts up his jacket. There's nothing underneath. "You're good. What about that bag? What you got in there?"*

I'm just watching it for a friend, but I think it's mostly clothes.

*The officer sorts through the contents of the bag. "Just want to make sure that there's nothing in here that could harm a passing child should he happen to find it." After emptying half of the contents, he finds a full a can of Budweiser, which he opens and pours on the ground. "I'll leave the can in case he wants the nickel." The officer proceeds to check the next bench where a man named Stack is passed out in the upright position. The officer routinely opens up the inside of his jacket and pats down his chest. As he leaves, "Sleeping Beauty" shouts, "Why don't you go down to the World Trade Center, bother somebody down there! Harassing me. I ain't doing shit! Yeah, the name on your badge is [Hispanic name]. But you ain't no Puerto Rican. You're white! That's what you are, a white Puerto Rican!"*

That makes me angry. Much more going on in the world today than me drinking a beer in the park. He's always trying to catch me with a beer. But to hell with you, you not gonna catch me with no beer! *Phillip*

*pulls another beer out of his jacket with a coy smile.*

I don't worry about too much. Whenever I get sick, I get an antihistamine and a cup of tea. If that doesn't work, I go to the hospital. They're my friends. They know me. I go to Bellevue, because they're the best in the world. I don't even have to show ID, because my name is registered there. But even if I didn't have that, they would still take me. Doctors, real doctors, are lifesavers. Remember they took a Hippocratic oath. They stand by that.

I try to take it slow. When I wake up, I get me a cup of coffee and a butter roll across the street. They know me there. When I finish that, I go into the park and lay back to sleep for a few hours so I feel it digest. When I wake up, I go and get me a beer. When I finish that, I go over to Trinity Church and get me an afternoon meal. If you homeless in New York, you shouldn't be hungry. There's a whole lot of places you can go to eat, even on the weekends they got kitchens all over the place. Trinity you can get a plate on Sunday at twelve o'clock. They let you eat at eleven if you went to church, but me, I wait to twelve. See, I can't go to services at Trinity, 'cause they Baptist. I'm Pentecostal, FIRM believer in Pentecostal churches. I know we all serve one God, but I believe in dancing of the spirit—talking in tongues. Baptists don't do that.

When I'm done eating lunch, I go on the avenue and make a little change. I used to get a Social Services check when I first got out here, but now I have to make all my money panhandling. I don't mind it so much. It's important to be polite and say hello to the people. I like putting smiles on people's faces, so I make a lot of little jokes. Like if they have a

little dog, I might say, “Fifi is that you?” People crack up. Depending on how busy the street is, it might take a few hours to get enough money for some beer. I never lose my patience, and I understand when people can’t give. After I get my money for two or three forties, I chill out in the park for the rest of the day.

At night, I’ve got a crew of brothers that I sleep with. We look out for each other. What one has, everybody has. It’s not just you have, everybody has. When you go to bed, one stays up until he gets tired, and then he wakes up the next guy, and he goes to sleep. You watch over the rest. All together there’s probably about twenty people that I can trust. That over there—that’s Vinny the Chimp, Bear, and Radio Rahim. That’s Cool. We sleep right on 7 and A. It only tends to get a little rough on the weekends. Why? You got young folk that drink and don’t know how to act.

You’ve gotta understand, I’m not out here because I HAVE to be. I’m out here because I WANT to be. It’s not so much me being an alcoholic. I just like to drink. Things wasn’t happening like I wanted, so I started drinking. Alcohol is not bad as long as you don’t abuse it. If you abuse alcohol, that’s where you start messing up. If you drink constantly and stop eating, your body starts deteriorating. You start to get sick. That’s why I drink a lot of beer and very little alcohol. To me, certain beers are refreshing. I started off on beer, I guess I’ll end up with beer.

I know that I’ve gotta do a better job taking care of myself. I’m thinking of going into Bellevue Men’s Shelter when it get cold, but for right now, I’m just gonna be staying out here. Overall, I’m pretty happy. God has blessed me with a great life. I don’t worry about what’s gonna happen when I’m gone. They’re

just gonna take my ashes down to Coney Island and throw them in the ocean. I think the good Lord will take me.

*As Phillip finishes the rest of his beer, he reaches up to wipe the stream of tears from his face.*

*Phillip disappears for a week in mid September. When he returns, he tells me that his brother had brought word that his mother had passed away, and he returned to the Rockaways to visit family. During his visit Janet bought him a Greyhound Bus ticket to stay with relatives in Louisiana for the winter.*

*I last spoke to Phillip on October 19th. He told me that he planed to return to New York in the spring of 2002. I have not seen him since.*



## Sweet Leif

Brooklyn, New York 1966

How are you gonna tell me that I didn't bring you your fucking booze? You gave me the money, I went to the fucking liquor store, and five minutes ago I put it right next to you right on the fucking bench. You're so fucking drunk you probably put it in your pocket and don't remember. Oh, I'm fulla shit? I'm fulla shit? Don't fuck with me Phillip! I'LL BASH YOU OVER THE HEAD WITH THIS FUCKING GARBAGE CAN!!!

*Sweet Leif is an emotionally intense individual. Her small stature stands in stark contrast to her immense persona. She describes herself as a "no bullshit" person and never hesitates to share her viewpoints regardless of how they might be received. This headstrong attitude gains her respect but also creates many conflicts. I have seen her engage in several*

*physical confrontations.*

*Witnessing Sweet Leif's vicious wrath makes me very apprehensive about asking for an interview. I finally approach her early one morning in July, and she is perfectly cordial. We walk to a secluded area of the park and embark on a marathon three-hour session. Although it is a humid eighty degrees, Sweet Leif is shivering. She rambles her responses in raspy spurts of epic proportion.*

Our first apartment was in Bushwick, Brooklyn. I lived with my two younger brothers, my parents, and my grandparents. My dad used to work for the American Stock Exchange, and my mom was a housewife. After my grandfather died, we moved into an apartment house on Pitt Street in the Lower East Side. Now they're projects, but back then they were tenements.

On the outside we looked like a typical family, but behind closed doors it was a different story. My father was a drinker. He DRANK. My mom didn't have the guts to stand up to him, and she just got the shit kicked out of her. She would never tell my dad when we got in trouble, because he'd knock the shit out of us. I'm the oldest, so when he'd hit my younger brother, I'd wind up jumping in and taking the beating. I'd do the same for my mom. I didn't mind the fights that much, but what really hurt me was having to listen to my father tell me how worthless I was all the time.

My parents sent me to this bullshit Catholic school down the street for kindergarten. The only thing I remember is that stupid play we did, the fucking *Chicken Littles*. You know, where the sky is falling? I played a flower. I didn't wanna do it, because I had stage fright. They made me get up there in this stupid fucking cardboard costume, and I hated it.

That school drove me nuts. Whenever I came home my knuckles were always bright red from getting smacked with a ruler. In fourth grade I got caught smoking cigarettes outside, and I told Sister Agatha to go to hell. Poor nun almost had a heart attack. Finally I got kicked out of Catholic school. My father was pissed. I don't know why. He's an atheist.

I went to a public middle school, but it really didn't make a difference. I didn't want to be in school, period. I was a little bit unsure of myself, and the kids picked on me a lot.

I used to have a big crush on one of the guys in my class. He was always disruptive all the time. I guess I liked him, because I thought he was a badass. One day he asked me to meet him at the pizza shop, so I got all dressed up in a nice dress, and I waited for him for like an hour. He showed up with a bunch of other girls, and he started making fun of me, telling me I was ugly and shit. I didn't want to go back to school after that, but my mother made me.

I remember in seventh grade there was this other girl who they used to pick on, Luan. She really was ugly—nerdy glasses, afro red hair and freckles all over her face. She liked this guy named Mark. He thought he was god's gift to women, a real player. He took Luan out for pizza one night and told her he wanted to have sex. Luan went and told all the popular girls, and they said she should do it. But really, they were just setting her up. See, all the popular girls were talking about how they had sex, but they were actually virgins.

That night, Mark brought Luan to a keg party in Forest Park. I saw them walking away up into the woods, and Mark turned around and gave one of his

friends the thumbs-up sign. After a few minutes, this group of guys started following. Mark was up there fucking away with Luan, and his friends came up and shined this huge flashlight on them. Luan started crying and told Mark to stop, but he just started laughing and kept fucking her. Pretty much, at that point, it turned into rape. That fucked up Luan pretty bad. We didn't see her in school after that.

My father lost his job when I was eleven, and we wound up losing a lot of stuff and going into debt. Eventually, he declared bankruptcy and became a building contractor. He went from making seventy-five thousand a year to thirty thousand. Kids in school would call me a welfare kid, because I was always wearing secondhand clothes. I was very self-conscious. Kids used to beat me up every day for no fucking reason, just for GP, general purpose.

I was a real terror to all of my teachers, always yelling or throwing stuff around the classroom. I figured that if I started causing trouble, the teachers would at least start having to listen to me. They tried to ignore me, but that only made me get more frustrated.

By the time I got to high school things at home were really out of control with my father. When I was thirteen, we had a big argument. He was smacking me around, and he told me, "If you don't like it, you can get the fuck out." I wasn't going to back down, so I ran away from home.

I didn't really have anywhere to go, so I went to Tompkins Square. I was just sitting on the street, and this old guy asked me what I was doing. I told him my story, and he said that I could sleep inside his tent in the park for the night.

At first I was a little bit scared to be sleeping in the park, but everybody was really friendly. They saw that I was just a little girl, and they looked out for me, because they didn't want to see me get raped. It was like a family. Eventually the cops took me home, but I always ended up back here in the park for days at a time.

I used to sleep in a tent right over by that tree over there. That was where I made the transition from being the little girl that everybody picked on to somebody who didn't take any shit. It was also the place where I became an addict. About the third time that I slept here, I was in a tent with a junkie, he's dead now God rest his soul, and I asked him to explain what he was doing. I was curious about what it was like, and I told him that I wanted to try it one time. He said, "You never try this stuff just one time. I've been doing it every day for thirty-five years."

I kept on asking him, and eventually he gave in. He mainlined me a little bit, and bam. It was like the best orgasm that you've ever had in your life. Everything just melted. It lasted for like four hours. I fell in love. For the next seventeen years, I kept trying to get that first time rush. It never happened.

That year was pretty rough. In the fall my boyfriend of two years got killed in a car crash. My grandmother died right after.\* I couldn't deal with it, so I ended up coming down to Tompkins Square to shoot up a lot. Within a month or so I had to shoot up about four times a day. The cost wasn't anything like what it is today, they used to sell huge bags right on 2nd Street for three dollars. I used to go to school and snort during lunch. Then I'd do a bag at night, but I'd

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\*Sweet Leif's name came from the "tender healing herbs" in her grandmother's garden.

always make sure that I had some left for the morning. It was pretty easy to hide what I was doing, and it actually made me a lot calmer.

When I was sixteen, I dated this guy Roger who I later found out was a pimp. We both needed money for our habits, so he conned me into going out on the stroll. I'd get twenty bucks for giving head. I was so emotionally messed up that it didn't really faze me. It was mechanical. It didn't matter. I made decent money, but Roger would take most of it.

One thing about being a prostitute was that I totally lost my attraction for men. Looking back on all the fucked up shit that men had done to me, it's no wonder that I became a lesbian. Today I'm totally gay and I love it.

After a few months of working the streets, I fell in love with this girl named June who was a dominatrix. She brought me over to Hellfire and got me a job there. Instead of doing sex, I was doing dominance. I was making more money, and I didn't even have to fuck.

I stayed with June for a while, but eventually we went our separate ways, and I ended up sleeping in the park. Tompkins was different back then, everybody knew everybody, and people looked out for each other. Sometimes the meat market on 14th Street would give us free steaks, and we'd barbecue right on top of the garbage cans. One time they came home with a whole side of beef. Even the cops used to say hello. A lot of the old time cops were really cool. Captain Kelly and Captain Dunn used to stop by and give us money or a doggie bag.

There never used to be many cops in Tompkins. It was mostly park rangers. It wasn't a police state like

it is now. As long as you weren't mugging anybody, you could drink, smoke a joint, shoot up, or whatever. There were a lot of hippies and black people, but mostly old-time junkies—guys who were shooting dope for forty years.

I was still doing a lot of dope, and I had to start selling to support my habit. My dealer used to pay me in dope. For every six bags I sold, I got four bags for myself. I used to move eight bundles of ten bags each every day. It wasn't too hard, because I knew everybody. I would hit the front gate and I'd have twenty people running up to me.

The park was wild. The men's room used to be the heroin cop spot, and the ladies' room was the brothel. This lady had a mattress in the back stall, and johns would pay her at the door. She's dead now. Somebody gave her a hot shot of battery acid, because she was ripping people off and ratting people out.

For the most part the people in the park were pretty peaceful. Whenever there was fights, it was always caused by somebody who didn't live here. One time this guy from New Jersey tried to take over my tent. I went and got a few of the boys, and they grabbed him and threw him over the fence. "If you come back into this park, we'll kill you." The people in the park today don't have that sense of unity. Today, they'll slit your throat for a dollar.

I was away from Tompkins Square for the first riot, but I was there for the second one in 1991. It was a sunny day, and there was going to be a punk show in the bandshell called *Resist to Exist*. Before the show could get started, the bands had to wait for the representative of the Parks Department to get there. He was stuck in traffic, and he was a half hour late. When

he finally got there, he told the bands that they could play for an extra half hour. So the concert went on, and everyone was having a good time. Apparently, the police hadn't spoken with the Parks Commissioner, so they expected the concert to be over a half hour earlier. When the time on the permit ran out, the cops went up on stage and pulled the plug. The commissioner went over to talk to the cops, but they pushed him off the stage. Then total chaos broke out.

Cops were pushing everybody off the stage and throwing instruments. Then the crowd started throwing stuff at the cops. They went berserk and started knocking everybody with riot clubs—even the people who were trying to get away. I got hit with a nightstick behind my ear.

I ran out to Avenue A where a bunch of my friends started dragging boxes and chairs into the middle of the street. There was like thirty horses coming down St. Marks, and people were just getting squashed. Somebody tossed me a can of lighter fluid and I squirted it on the pile. The cops saw what we were doing, and they took me down and handcuffed me. They beat the fuck out of me and cracked my ribs. Just as I was riding away in the car, I saw the flames shoot up.

After the riots, they put up a twenty-foot fence around the park, and nobody could get in. When it reopened, they closed the park at midnight, and that was the end of Tent City. Some of the people from those days are still around. A few of them got their act together. A lot of them died.

*As the summer sun climbs higher, Sweet Leif's trembling increases. When we finish our second tape, I give her the*

*agreed upon sum of twenty dollars even though I know what she's going to do with it.*

*I speak to Sweet Leif several times in the next few months. In August she is arrested for drunk and disorderly conduct and is sentenced to three days community service cleaning up the park. Some of the regulars taunt her by intentionally leaving garbage in areas she has just finished cleaning. The ensuing outbursts are a source of much amusement for the bench dwellers. I finally get the chance to speak to Sweet Leif again towards the end of September.*

After Tent City died, the heroin started getting more expensive. A lot of the old time dealers got arrested, and it was hard to find somebody you could trust. In '95 they had some kids up on St. Marks selling rat poison saying, "Ha Ha fuck these junkies." They'd take a bundle and have eight bags of dope and two bags of strychnine. It was like Russian roulette. Twenty-eight people died and nineteen were put in the hospital. Those kids are in jail for murder now. My younger brother died from that. That hit me pretty hard. The night I found out, some guy was bad-mouthing my brother, and I just exploded. We got into a fistfight, and he sliced my face. That's how I got this scar.

In '96 one of the store owners on Avenue A thought I was stealing his newspapers, and he called the cops. I didn't steal nothing, but the police searched me and found a gun.

I quit heroin cold turkey in the holding cells. For five days before my court date, I just sweat it out. It's the hardest thing I've ever had to do. You're shitting and puking at the same time. Anything you eat comes right up. Every joint and bone in your body aches.

You can't sleep. You're sweating one moment, and you're freezing the next. It could be ninety degrees, and you'd be shivering. It's just like if you don't get food, you get hungry. If your body's used to having dope, it expects to be fed.

I was in jail for eight months, and then I went to a treatment center for nine months. It was full of shit. They weren't allowing me to advance. The worst thing about it was the encounter groups. You sat in a chair called the hot seat, and everybody nit picked what they didn't like about you. Then, they'd tell you all the things that were going to make you get high. They didn't even know who I was. Fuck them. I used to hide in the landscaping room when it was time for group. Rehab is worse than jail. They don't get on your case in jail.

Once I got back on the street, I didn't have anywhere to go, so I moved in with my mother in Long Island. I started working some different jobs, and I stayed clean. The last time I had a job was October of 2000. I was working as a bar back in the East Village. They fired me because they thought I robbed the register.

After that I started camping out around Tompkins Square again. My mother still has a lot of my stuff in Long Island, and she feeds my cat. Last winter I moved into the women's shelter on 25th and Lexington. One night, I wasn't going to make it back by ten o'clock, so I called and told the receptionist. The next morning, my shit was packed and they already gave my bed away. I guess the receptionist never put it on the books. I couldn't find another spot. Since February, I've been sleeping out here.

A couple months ago, I started doing dope again.

At first it was just a little bit, and then I wouldn't touch it for a month. Now I'm doing it everyday. The heroin culture has changed a lot since the old days. The people now are more selfish. The attitude of the seller has changed. It's all about a quick buck, and I don't care if you're sick. Half the time, it's not even dope. They're putting baking soda in there. The dealers are ripping people off, because most of them are kids who don't even get high.

The people who hang out in the park annoy me to no end. I walked in the other day, and Phillip says, "Kinda late Sweet Lips. I might have to spank your little behind." I think Phillip has a crush on me. I told him straight up that I'm not giving him no play. You know I'm gay, but on top of that if I'm going to go back to a man, I'm definitely not going to sleep with a fifty something homeless man who stinks. He's not a bad guy, but he pisses me off. He tells me that I'm cute when I'm mad, but I ain't going to be so fucking cute when I hit you over the head with a fucking garbage can. *(laughs)*

When I get my check, all the guys say buy me a beer. Give me a cigarette. Excuse me, when I applied for welfare, I do believe I was by myself, and I don't believe I claimed any dependents. You're too damn lazy to drag your ass to the welfare office to get a little pocket change for yourself. That's what pisses me off. They want to sit in this park all fucking day long, won't even go panhandle. They want to drink up everybody's beer and have their food brought to them on a silver platter. They won't even get off their lazy ass to go to the goddamned bathroom.

The whole World Trade Center thing is fucking me up. My younger brother got blown up. My mom's

not taking that too easy. I was sitting there on 7th Street, and I heard this big boom. We thought it was Con Ed releasing pressure from the boilers. I went up to my friend Joe's roof, and we saw the second plane hit. I just started walking downtown with my friend Froggy. We were about three blocks away when it went down. There was this big fucking fireball that shot out, and we just ran under this ramp in this construction site. We saw people jumping off the buildings. I'm still kind of fucked up about that.

*Sweet Leif disappears from the park in October. I finally spot her walking down Avenue A in early December, and we step into Odessa's Restaurant to go over her rough draft. She tells me that she has kicked heroin and is living with friends in Long Island. With great pride she shows me a roll of pictures that she had shot while working as a volunteer at Ground Zero.*



## The Chess Monster

New York, New York 1951

Most people come into this park, and they want to play the same old game of chess with the pieces set up the same old way. They want to bang on the clock and memorize what they need to do to win. In Chess Monster Chess, each game has it's own individual character. You can't use somebody else's strategy, because you have to be thinking in the moment. Some people don't want to play Chess Monster Chess, but that's OK, because someday it's going to revolutionize the way people play the game.

*Between interviews in the Living Room, I spend many hours relaxing at the chess tables. Chess Monster and I play several times during the summer and fall. He is well kept and always sober. I don't begin to suspect that he's homeless until I find him in the Second Avenue subway station during the*

winter. We have our first real conversation in January when I invite Chess to keep me company on the ride back to my apartment in Bensonhurst.

Once we grab a seat on the F train, he pulls a scrapbook from his bag and removes an old clipping from the New York Post that shows him in his Chess Monster costume. He then removes a small packet of papers titled "Chess Monster Chess." With great pride he pages through and explains the rules for his creation. Basically, Chess Monster Chess is the same as regular chess, except the players can arrange the back row of pieces anyway they want. Chess explains the particulars of castling and *en passant* with great relish, but when I try to steer the conversation away from chess, his words slow to a trickle. When I begin to ask him personal questions, he replies that it's "classified information."

As I become more familiar with Chess, he reveals that his real name is Lewis. In spring of 2002 he agrees to talk about his life.

I grew up in Whitechester—I mean Westchester. The racial thing was very subtle, because I didn't fit in with the so-called typical blacks. I always kind of resented it when white people told me, "Oh you're one of the good Negroes. You're not like the others." It was kind of hard having to associate with two groups, because a lot of the black people would say, "Look at him he's trying to be white."

My father died in January of 1968, and then that April Martin Luther King was assassinated. The first thing that came out of my mother's mouth was that they had to do something for the natural leaders in the black community like myself. They needed to give us something to hold on to, or we would be the ones leading the riots. That June I was one of two hundred black kids to get a full ride to NYU.

After I graduated, I worked as a history teacher for a year, but back then there was a teacher surplus, so I had to go to work for All State Insurance. I hated it. When the company relocated, I quit.

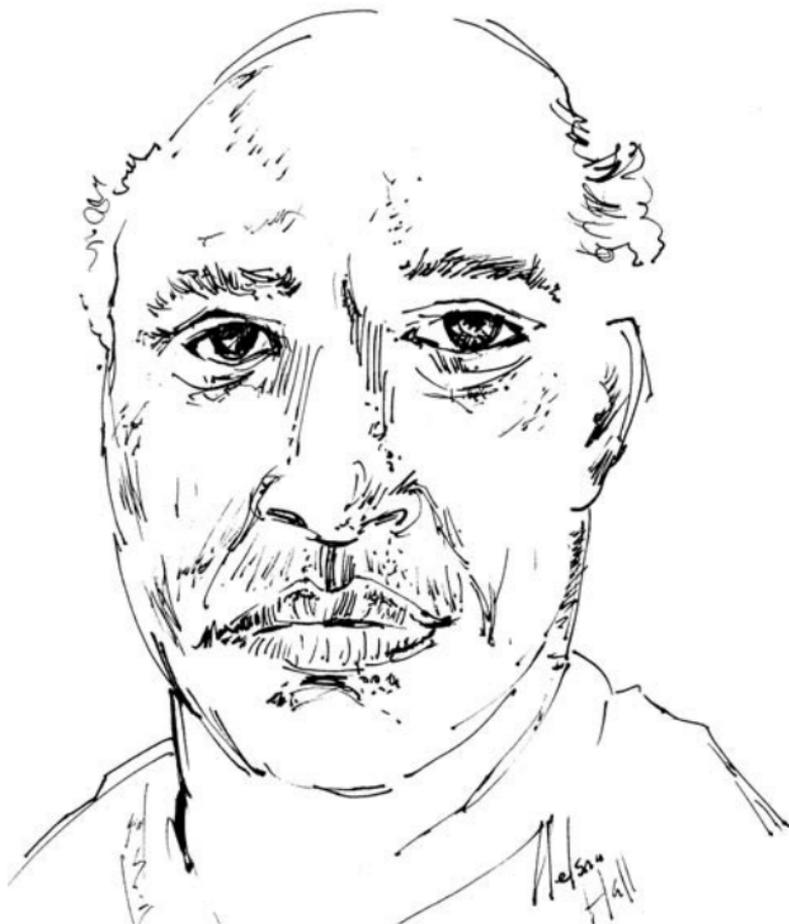
In 1976 Jimmy Carter had something called the CETA (*Comprehensive Employment Training Act*). It was basically a make work program that was supposed to keep everybody happy. They gave you jobs as janitors and security guards. Now I had a college degree, so that was way beneath me, but the pay was like a thousand dollars a month, about the same as I would have been making teaching.

I went down to the unemployment office, and the guy down there talked me into it. Being a college graduate, I didn't really fit the profile for the program, but they had to have all the jobs filled, or they'd lose their funding. It was all right. For the first few months I helped guys repair buildings in New Rochelle. Then I got a job as a janitor in a nursing home. I didn't really work too hard.

There I was with a college degree, and in theory they were getting me ready for future employment. I knew there wasn't any future in it, but the benefits were great, and I had a lot of free time. That's when I started coming down to the city to play chess.

The thing that always appealed to me about chess was that there were almost an infinite number of games that could be played. It blew my mind just to ponder the complexity. I said why not take the potential for different possibilities and expand on that. I discovered that instead of setting up the pieces the same way every time, if you changed the order in the back row, the game had so many more strategic possibilities.

That was the birth of Chess Monster Chess. In



order to promote my new game, I put together this costume made out of giant chess pieces and a motorcycle helmet. I used to wear it down to the park.

While I was down here, I met this guy, Jerry, who had a costume place in the Bronx. He said that he wanted me to be a guest monster at a monster convention that they were having at Madison Hotel. There were seven hundred people in the auditorium and all sorts of different monsters. *Chess's voice begins to tremble.* Jim, I went into that auditorium and complete strangers were taking my picture. People were asking

for my autograph. I was kissing babies. It was like a rush, a high. Right after that, a reporter came down to the park and gave me a one-page write up in the *New York Post*. It was like I found my calling. I quit my job, and from that moment I knew that I wanted to be the Chess Monster for the rest of my life.

My family thought I was crazy when I started turning into the Chess Monster. There was a thread of anger through it. "Boy you better use that college degree. Go work for the system." I guess I could have bought myself a three-piece suit and gone for some interviews, but I just didn't see the point. My experience working for All State was completely empty. I knew that any other job I got would be the same thing. After a while, I stopped going back home to my mom's house in Westchester.

Remember the singer Barbara Streisand? Her parents told her that she should be an airline stewardess. Bill Cosby's dad told him he'd never make it as a comedian. That keeps me inspired to be the Chess Monster.

I've got cousins around here that I stay with most of the time. Other times I stay outside, but I don't worry about it, because as long as I've got my chessboard, I don't need to worry about anything else. I know that I'm a little bit of a sociopath, but I don't think I'm any crazier than most people in this city. A lot of these people are running around working nine-to-five, and they don't even know what they want from life. I know what I want from life. I want to be the Chess Monster.

*I continue to play with Chess Monster in the park. He tells me that he's currently seeking a patent for his creation.*