

HAPPINESS IN NEW YORK CITY

My name is John. I have lived in Manhattan all my life. Everything had been good for a long while. Then suddenly, it all went sour. And man, it sure came up fast on me. It started when I caught chicken pox from one of my kids. I had never had it before, and it can really hit you strong when you are older. I was out a good three weeks, and I lost my job.

My estranged wife came by the apartment to check on me only once. I never did understand her. She always wanted to fight about something, it seemed. Half the time, she would go stay with her mom. She had taken our kids to live there, even though they had all already had chicken pox. I have no answers why. I don't care about her anymore.

Huge sores covered me from head to toe. I mean, I was blanketed from my eyelids to underneath every single one of my toenails: everything. It just seemed like the most incredible bad luck thing to happen. Toward the end, I could barely move. All I did was get up to use the bathroom or get some food from the refrigerator. Then one day, I suddenly discovered that I was about to breathe my last breath. So I drew every ounce of energy I had left, put on a NY Mets hat, a pair of sunglasses, my coat and a scarf, and went to the corner store. It was hard to just walk.

I bought four big bags of food with my remaining cash. After I was done shopping, I had twenty bucks left, so I stuffed the bill in my sock. I wheeled the shopping cart home with the food, and packed it up in the apartment. That was the last thing I did for a long while.

The landlord knocked loud on the door one day. I did not get up from bed. He came back after about an hour and opened the door with the key. I could tell that he paused in the living room for a minute. Then he said, "Hey! Is anyone in here? Who the hell is in here?"

I groaned and then he came into the bedroom. I was lying naked on the bed because it helped ease the pain to not having any covers. All three fans were blowing on full blast, so the place was loud.

"Jesus H. Christ!" The landlord said, as he walked into the bedroom, quickly putting his shirt over his nose. He had to shout above the fans. He was a short, fat man and had just about no hair left on his head, which always made me wonder why he would not simply just shave the last two long strands, circumnavigating his skull, off. But I always paid my rent on time, and he left me alone.

"What the fuck is wrong with you? You look like you belong in hell," He asked, seriously wondering.

I answered in a low, slow voice, "Very funny, ha ha, oh, my sides. I have chicken pox...did you ever have it before? If not, get the fuck out, quick. Matter fact, get out anyway, asshole."

"Look here, you're two weeks past due on your rent [actually, I was only ten days late by that time]. Since you're laid up, I'll give you to Friday. But I'm calling the cops after that," he said and then he turned and hustled out fast, still holding his

shirt over his nose. I heard the door slam behind him. It was Wednesday and I really did not know how I would be able to make it out of there by Friday. But I also did not want him to call the cops on me. I already had a warrant out on me from a while back when I hit my stupid wife one time. She had freaked out and called the cops but I didn't show up for the court date.

I was in a bad way. My folks couldn't help. My dad was probably drunk right now and my mom, who the hell knew? I have one brother, but he has his own problems to deal with.

So somehow, I got out of bed and took a long bath. I mean, I did not get out of the water until late the next morning. All I did was smoke cigarettes and throw them in the toilet, and drank water from the bathtub tap. When I finally crawled slowly out of the tub, my body felt and looked like one giant ocean sponge with herpes. The sores got a little less red and the pain eased slightly, though, so I could just about walk. Then I rested down on the bed, until I was dried off from the fans and I felt a whole lot better. I managed to get my clothes on. I threw on my army field jacket and my NY Mets hat, and some sunglasses, and I walked slowly out of my apartment to the street.

I have never been a homeless person before, and I don't consider myself to be homeless, but I don't have a home to go to anymore. The park is the best place to go to. No one is really there and the people who are there are not rushing around. They usually look at you like they expect to see homeless at the park. As if they are walking through a zoo or something. They pause, stare, and then move on again. I can rest in the grass and the police do not really come over, because there is a lot of open space. It's wintertime and it gets very cold at night.

My sores eventually went away, but left red scars all over my body. My face is pock-marked. I drink when I can with some buddies of mine. They are always by the rocks behind the back entrance to the subway; my three buddies. I go over there at night, when it gets really, really cold.

"Merry Christmas, ye fine gentlemen," Ralph said, even though I was the only one strolling up to them, coming out of the trees and across the field toward the rock face where the back entrance of the subway was. Ralph was kneeling in the grass, at the edge of the field by the rocky hill, working on a small fire that he had made with some tree wood and matches. Where we were, behind the big rocks, there was no one else, and the police would never make their way over to us. So it was just us three, all alone in great big New York City. We could make the fire just about as big as we wanted to.

For now, Ralph was only getting it started. He was ex-army, a vet like me, but he had been in Vietnam so soon that fire would be blazing something fierce and we would all be warm. I mean, Ralph did not mess around. And maybe one of them had found something to drink. Then it would be a Merry Christmas.

Bill and Ephraim were there too, sitting next to the fire. Bill smiled as I walked up. He is a black man. He was in Vietnam too. I won't lie to you; sometimes Bill gets to my nerves. Ephraim is a Philippino man, but he is very religious. Those were my buddies, all I have now. It is Christmas day.

"How is it a Merry Christmas?" I asked.

"Because we're all here, celebrating Christmas together," Ralph said.

"I don't think there is anything merry about it, to hell with the day I was born," I replied scornfully.

Ephraim said, "You know, John, you always complaining. Here's what I say: live by the sword, die by the sword, man. Whose fault is it that we are here? I know you know."

I sat down next to the fire, closed my eyes, and silently meditated for a few moments. The surrounding sounds eased their way into my mind, and then reached down into my soul. Soon, I felt relaxed. I opened up my eyes again and smiled inwardly.

Ephraim continued talking. I closed my eyes again while he talked, "Last night I saw a ghost, I swear to God. I was just dozing and the hair on the back on my neck stood up. And the ghost said, 'do not judge God!' My friends, the ghost of my dreams said to not judge God. And then it said, 'those that do, they will be smashed like worms.'

"Man is born into trouble and the sparks fly upward, see what I am saying? We should all be happy to simply be here. God is fixing our problems for us. And when we walk out of this, we'll be better off for it."

I opened my eyes and said, "Ephraim, for once shut up with your holy-rolling bullshit."

Ephraim did not answer, so I continued, "You know what, Ephraim? I'll play along, like I got anything better to do. I am poisoned. My soul is poisoned. Everything I touch is cold. Every person I meet I want to run away from. I can't continue on like this. How can I do anything? My flesh is scarred. My marriage is over and I lost my kids. I would just assume die right now. That would make it easier, Ephraim. Why can't God just finish off with me?"

The fire was blazing but Ralph kept working on it. He added more wood to the fire and then adjusted the wood to burn properly. We were all warm now and we stared at the slithering flames and listened to the wood crackle. It was relaxing to watch the fire burn.

Finally, from the heavy silence, Bill said, "You know, John, every time we come here to talk, it always seems like we wind up talking about your problems. But you never seem to listen to our advice. Don't you think you had just a little bit to do with the fact that you ended up here? You know how someone who has been divorced four times still does not think maybe they are the real problem? Well, maybe it's the same thing with you, man. Maybe you, and you alone, are the problem."

Like I mentioned, I never did like Bill.

I answered back, "All day long, Bill, I look at everything: the skyscrapers, the trees in this park, and nothing ever changes. Everything just stays the same. I just want some answers, man. That is all I want. I know my problems are at least partly my own fault but I can't find any answers."

Ralph finally put down his big tree limb that he had been using to stir the red embers. He turned to me and spoke solemnly, "I agree with Bill, too, John. But I

have one more thing to add. If you're searching for answers you need to ask yourself first. That is all we are saying. Stop asking the sky and the skyscrapers and everything else that is around you. Ask yourself, man."

I answered Ralph, "Your right, but if what Ephraim says is true, then I need to find my peace with God first before I can look within. And I still think that I can only find my peace with God by looking around me first. Something has to tell me first."

Ralph said, "We're just trying to get through to that thick head of yours, to help you, man. I think first you need to realize that you are not always right. At least, you should accept that you need some advice. But you keep refusing us."

At last, I said to them all, "Listen, you guys are my good buddies but I don't think you see it my way. I am saying I need to be at peace first and then I can do anything I want. But I am not at peace, don't you see?"

Ralph said, "Let's take a vote. How many here think John is not, and will not, maybe never, accept that he must first look to God in order to then look within?"

Ralph, Bill, and Ephraim all raised their hands. I stared at them for a moment in silence. Then I said, "I am right here, no matter what you say."

Ralph looked a little startled and then he said, "Well then, John, maybe you need to leave our fire."

I was shocked. These were my buddies. I did not understand why they were kicking me out of our sanctuary, the only thing I had left. But I did not think twice. I sat up, turned, and walked away, into the dark night. I never did look back. To this day, I have not looked back.

Once I had crossed the field and was into the trees a ways, and I was sure they could not see me anymore, I took off my shoe and got my twenty-dollar bill out from my sock that I kept there for emergencies. I put my shoe back on and walked down Riverside Drive until I found a liquor store and bought a fifth of whiskey. I drank the whole bottle as I walked back to the park. Then I walked through the dark forest, stumbling, quite drunk.

I am sure I would not have remembered anything the next day, but something happened. At one point in the night, I was walking over a long subway exhaust grate. About halfway across, a subway train suddenly raced by underneath, and the wind blew up over me like a whirlwind, throwing my hair and everything around. It was just like Marilyn Monroe, except the homeless version.

Then I heard the voice of God speak to me. I swear to God, it was the voice of God. It sounded exactly as if it were God. This is what the voice of God said:

"Are you the one that takes counsel from wise men and then makes that counsel dark, all the while knowing nothing?"

"Aaaahhhh..." was all I could muster. I dropped the bagged bottle and it shattered in the metal grate but stayed there, the glass shards encased in the brown paper. It was almost all gone, anyway.

God continued on, unrelenting:

"Were you there when I laid the foundations of the Earth? Do you have any idea what measurements I drew up? What exactly do you suppose the foundations of the Earth are connected to? Do you know where I put the cornerstone to it all? Well?"

"Who do you suppose closed the sea after I was finished with the land, as if it were a womb? When I made the clouds as a garment over the sea, thick darkness its only cover, telling it to stop only at my own decreed place, were you there? Have you commanded the mornings since you existed? Did you turn the clay of the Earth into a seal, as a covenant, eternal before God? Can you open the doors of hell? Have you seen the shadow of death on those same doors?"

"Go ahead, answer at any time! Where does the light go? Where does the dark come from? Do you know why I hold back war against thee? Do you understand why light parts into pieces? Do you understand why after there is nothing I allow a single flower to grow? Do you know why the Pleiades huddle together as stars? Can you take off Orion's belt? Can you make the clouds rain? Who provides the raven his food?"

Then there was a pause and God finally finished with a question:

"Who are you?"

"I am John."

Then no more voice came. No more subway trains rolled by. So I stood there for a moment in awe but then I thought I should answer God in my vision, so I raised my arms above me and said to the dark sky, "I see now I am just a speck of existence before you, God. But I never doubted you. I only doubted myself."

Then the sky opened up and a myriad of colors swirled around like a kaleidoscope. The patterns looked like those chaos math problems that make pretty designs. I was in awe. I was truly in awe. I could not speak and my feet seemed riveted to the ground, unable to obey my brain's commandments.

A few minutes passed. I did not hear anything. I did not see any more visions. So I walked a few steps over to the wall of the building next to the subway grate and put my hand against the wall. I braced myself there for a few moments, hung my head, and tried to catch my breath. I could feel the rough, gritty brick scraping my sweaty palm. Then I lowered myself to the ground and sat with my back against the wall. I stared straight ahead in a semi-trance. I felt I had lost everything, despite having talked with God. I had no more family now. I had nothing. I was nothing anymore. There was nothing left. It was all gone. I was not sure what to do. I was not sure where to go. This was the end of the road.

I did not understand why I felt the way I did. So I hung my head in my hands and cried.

I heard the low roar of the airplane's engine before I saw it, through the trees, not too far above the Hudson, heading downtown.