

In D.C., Raw and Threatening Things

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First the wino collapsed like a dead man, smacking head first onto the cold pavement. Then Norton, the nightstick-toting security guard, viciously beat two old geezers across their backs and ribs and sent them howling into I Street NE. Then came Tony, clutching a fifth of Thunderbird and threatening to fire his .32 pistol before the night was through.

This was one cold night in a line of 80 homeless men in a playground outside Blair School, a Northeast public shelter. It was my introduction to the down and out of Washington.

After sojourns in Baltimore and the Maryland suburbs, I finally arrived in the District of Columbia — my last stop on this assignment as a homeless derelict — and soon discovered a number of contrasts between the two cities.

Washington, like Baltimore, maintains a few scattered soup kitchens, missions and shelters for the homeless. Washington, in fact, has more of these retreats because the District government runs several overnight

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shelters, while Baltimore City operates nothing for derelicts at the public's expense. And during my stay here, I encountered even sharper contrasts in the ways the two cities treat their homeless and in the ways the homeless treat one another.

This city's corps of street men and women is a veritable army compared to Baltimore's benign battalion. It is a city where scams, such as bus

station luggage thefts and the \$20 bill trick, and the art of panhandling are practiced and refined to perfection. It is a city where bums live in constant dread of the \$10 fine for drinking in public and the \$15 fine for urinating in public.

And it is a city where a bum new in town had to learn quickly — above all else—to beware of "popcorn." To understand how different Washington really is from Baltimore, one had to understand what this word popcorn means.

Boots and I were sharing a bag of cracklings with several others outside Blair School that night when Tony stumbled through an opening in the cyclone fence and made his way past shards of broken bottle and the monkey bars to us, the men in line.

Tony was a tall man in his 60s wearing a scraggly white goatee and a scruffy hard hat and when we first saw him he was drunk. It was not one of those blissful drunks so common outside St. Vincent de Paul on North Capitol Street, where the bums guzzled Wild Irish Rose all day and

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POPCORN From A1

sang "Jim Dandy" while waiting for the Jesuits to dole out bread and coins. Tony's drunk that night was the kind that alternated between sobbing melancholia and guffaw like the kind everyone stepped around and hoped went away.

When he came to us the men groaned under their breath, because they knew Tony liked to talk popcorn and, as it was, they had already seen and heard enough popcorn to last them.

Moments before Tony arrived three incidents occurred in rapid succession to upset the always tenuous equilibrium that exists among groups of Washington derelicts: First the wind fell, sending ghostly shudders through the pavement beneath our feet.

Then Norton, Blair's security guard, came outside with his nightstick to look for fun. Norton, a chubby man with thick sideburns, knew that nothing panicked Washington bums more than losing their places in line — be it outside the soup kitchens on O and L Streets NW, St. Vincent de Paul, the Chinatown missions or the Northeast shelters.

Their days and nights, their sustenance and shelter, are ever defined by the line — first served, first served. Whenever a snuffe broke out among the bums of Washington, if it wasn't over that last bit of booze, it was usually over a place in line.

Norton seemed to understand this very well. When he swaggered outside and declared, "All right, single up, single up! Whoever ain't in line don't sleep here tonight!" He stood back with a delighted grin on his face. Most of the men scrambled back against the base of the four-story brick school house, but several — to Norton's irritation — stayed where they were, preferring instead to share smokes and rap.

"Didn't I tell you to move, man?" Norton hollered at one scate-eyed old drunk who appeared too wasted to budge. "When I say jump, you jump!"

That was when everyone fell silent, waiting for the inevitable clank. For whenever a bum was singled out by an authority figure in front of a crowd of others, he tried first to save face before he obeyed the directive. The drunker he was, the harder he tried. And the harder he tried, the harder the nightstick felt.

The old man stood his ground, peering at Norton with perplexed eyes, then said, "Git back in there next to the radiator where you come from, nigger."

When Norton grabbed him by the collar and prepared to rap him with the stick, another bum zigzagged his

way down the line to get a closer look. Norton, still hiding the camera man, said, "You bum. 'Did I invite you, nigger?' Get back in your own damn category."

So this onlooker was drawn into the ring, and began talking his own brand of dignity. Norton grabbed him first and leveled his nightstick twice — rap, rap — against the man's ribs. He cried out once — a sustained, pained, pathetic howl — before Norton dragged him by the back of the collar out in the middle of I Street and told him to find somewhere else to sleep that night. Then Norton came back and told the other old drunk to leave unless he, too, wanted the stick. The drunk mumbled and turned his back and slowly walked toward the street, but Norton hit him twice more for good measure across the top of his hunched back and the bum fell into the street cursing and shaking his fists.

This was all popcorn — a word I heard frequently in the streets among the derelicts of Washington. It is a recurring theme of the experience here, just as bojo — clowning, flirting, fable telling and myriad other peculiar activities — is a theme of Baltimore.

Popcorn means being bothered. It means having to suffer constant reminders of one's lowly plight. And it means tough talk, provocation and confrontation. It means raw and threatening things.

At a fire drum at 71 O Street NW, in an alley behind a soup kitchen called SOME House, bands of derelicts recalled the race riots of 1968 while rubbing their hands and knees against the smoldering metal can and tossing empty bottles at parked cars — to show how it was done in those days when it was almost legal to vent your rage. That was popcorn.

On a steaming grate near Judiciary Square, a dirt-caked wino rolled over and looked bewildered into the street after a passing truck driver screamed disgust and obscenity at him. That was popcorn.

In a smoky Gospel Mission daytime hall in Chinatown, dozens of bums — some clutching their worldly belongings in torn plastic bags — heatedly discussed happenings the previous day when several policemen waded in searching for Bruce Wanzel Griffith, in connection with the killing of an undercover narcotics cop. Two men argued for 10 minutes over whether Griffith had, in fact, been in the hall the previous day. Then they traded curses for several minutes until, finally, they wrestled each other to the floor in rage. That was popcorn.

The problem with popcorn is that one can never quite tell whose is made in jest, whose is made in seriousness, and whose — when it counts — is real. Everyone has the tongue, but who has the talent or the stupidity or the potent mix of both to act?

When Tony staggered over to the line after Norton's mighty bout, all the men groaned because they knew Tony liked to talk popcorn. He came up and began talking about his old lady, how she stole his food stamps and locked him out of the house and probably was in there making love to another man.

The woman was no good, he moaned, and needed to be taught a lesson. It was vintage popcorn.

Most of the men knew Tony because he hung out at a laundromat at Seventh and H NE, two blocks down the street from his old lady. At the laundromat, while several of the men swigged rum and joked about the knives they carried in their hip pockets, Tony would boast that none of their weapons would do any good against the 32 he wore.

So the men in line knew what would follow next that night outside the school house shelter, after Tony began raging over his woman. "I got it righteh heah," he whispered, patting the right front pocket of his checked coat. "Don't believe me, does ya? I'm gonna use this. Bltch been asking fo' it."

Tony carried on like that for about 15 minutes in a drunken stammer, while some of the men mumbled knowing comments like "Know what you mean, bro" without adding fuel to his anger. We were rescued from this scene by a tired little man who opened the door of the shelter and we entered, leaving Tony and his troubles behind us — not knowing then what we would find the next morning at Fifth and H NE outside the house to which Tony would return.

For now, we registered our names with an agathetic young woman who yawned behind a desk in the lobby, which once smelled of chalk erasers and school books but now smelled of whiskey and sweat. We then trooped downstairs to the school's dank basement, where the tensions of the line returned once again. Nowhere in down-and-out Washington are places in line protected with more ferocity than in the basement of Blair.

For here, we all had to strip naked and place our clothes in green garbage bags and stand in line to shower. The quicker we stripped the sooner we got out of there. There were 80 of us struggling to disrobe in a cool smelly room only twice the size of a Dupont Circle efficiency. Afterward, we stood in file, body crammed against body amid odors of liquor, fungus and rot, to wait to shower.

Wobble, an old man with elephantiasis of the scrotum, walked bowleggedly to ease the pain between his legs. Several men had open sores festering on their backs and legs. And the scars! One only had to look long enough at a body to find an old knife wound or two, reminders of popcorn's past. One old man had a pop-gash that had healed to a purplish brown color along the side of his neck, near his jugular.

This wait in line could last as long as 90 minutes, so the men pushed and shoved for space. The shower room contained only four faucets, each of which released a single rivulet of water to be shared by four or five men. At the head of the line a worker directed traffic and offered foot powder and Cuprex deodorant, which was supposed to be washed off in the shower. Most of the men declined to use it. To them it was again a matter of pride.

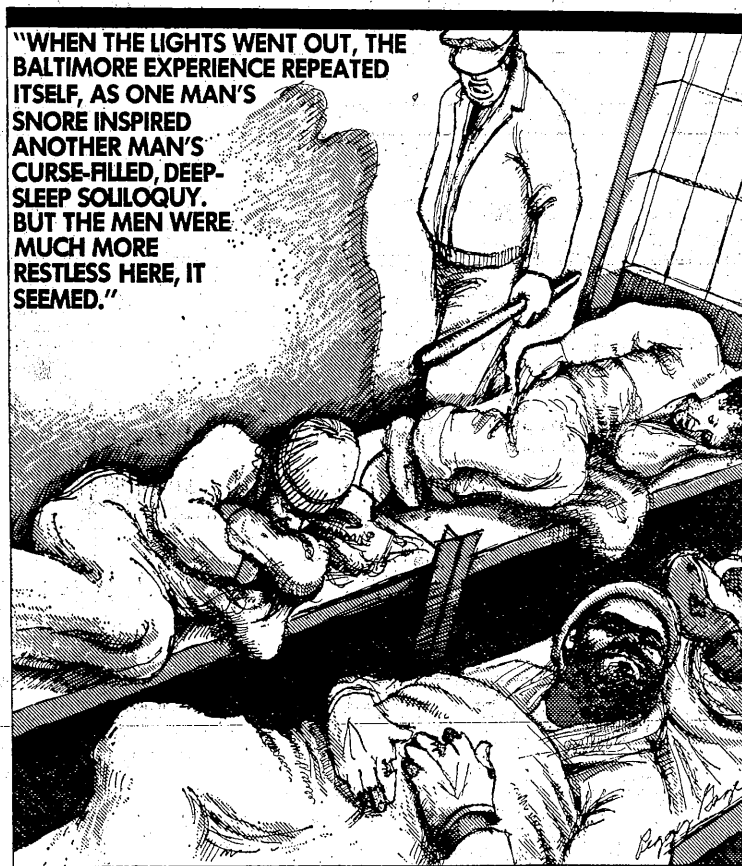
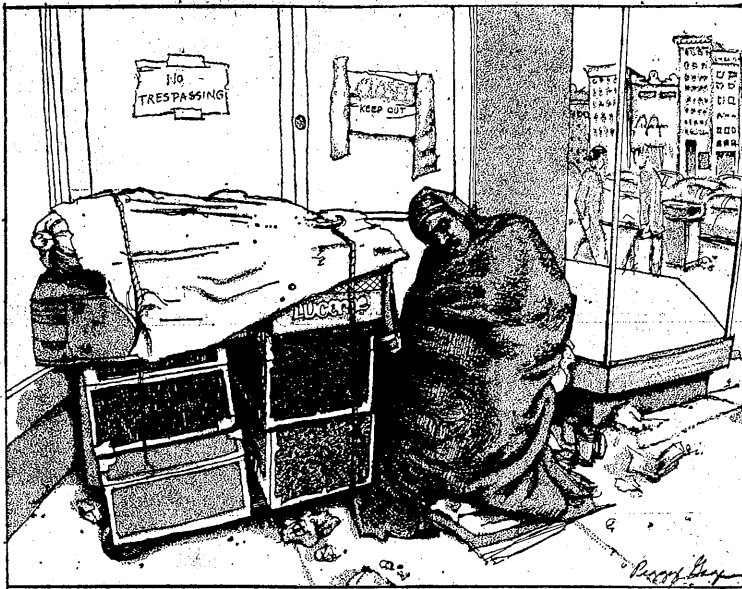
After showering, we entered another small tiled room where a man threw out towels and pajamas. When the towels ran out — the shelter offered only about 20 each night — he handed out old cotton rags that didn't absorb the water so much as spread it around. Our pajamas were cutoffs and torn cotton shirts that we returned the next morning along with the rubber-disposable slippers we received.

From there we headed upstairs to another line outside the cafeteria, where we ate string beans, rice, Bologna sandwiches and fruit juice. Boots, a manual laborer whose nickname dates back from his early days in Mount Airy, N.C., where he drove in bootleg liquor, passed out crackblasts to "put some grease in the stomach."

After dinner we were shepherded upstairs to one of the school's classrooms where 40 army cots were laid out in three rows. Grammar lessons were still chalked to the blackboard here, along with black pride posters and wall hangings — all reminders that this flophouse was once a school filled with children.

When the lights went out, the Baltimore experience repeated itself, as one man's snore inspired another man's curse-filled, deep-sleep soliloquy. But the men were much more restless here, it seemed. Slippy, a tall man with a bushy, unkempt Afro, stood in the middle of the room beside his cot, moaning and shaking his head back and forth for a full half-hour, before falling straight back onto the mattress and sleeping fitfully throughout the night.

At 5 o'clock the next morning, we were herded downstairs to retrieve our clothing. We were supposed to



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See POPCORN, A3, Col. 1

Some Derelicts Spurn the Popcorn Found in D.C. Shelters

POPCORN, From A2

get breakfast then, but, amid complaints that the workers hoarded food and drink, we were sent out into the cold without so much as a cup of hot water. Getting booted out of shelters at such an early hour seemed to be universal.

At Baltimore's Helping-Up Mission, this rigid schedule was tied very closely to the Protestant Ethic — early to bed, early to rise — in hopes of instilling a bit of discipline in otherwise totally undisciplined lives. At Washington's Blair shelter, however, the motive appeared to be different. The fewer hours the shelter operates, the more money the District government could save.

(Today, in fact, lawyers representing the National Housing Law Pro-

ject and the Community for Creative Non-Violence are going to emergency court to try to prevent the District government from saving even more money. Mayor Marion Barry's austerity budget would close Pierce School, another Northeast public shelter, and transfer management of Blair School to the National Council of Churches, at a savings of \$400,000. This would take effect tonight.)

The city still slept as we filtered outside in twos and threes and wandered toward the laundromat on H Street NE, or an abandoned building or two, or Union Station, or waited for a government van to shuttle us to the bus stations downtown.

That first morning Boots and I ventured down H Street and noticed the white ambulance and the morgue wagon parked in an abandoned lot

at Fifth and H NE. We and several old men waited there an hour or so, then, after daybreak, a stretcher containing a body in a green plastic bag was carried out by four men.

The old men shook their heads as the detectives cussed and lifted the heavy stretcher down the steps leading from a dilapidated three-story row house. Then Tony came out in handcuffs, with his head down, and was led away to an unmarked car.

"Crazy nigger," Boots said, watching as the body was lifted into the wagon. "Crazy fool nigger."

"Always talking that popcorn," added another man. "Always talking 'bout that gun. He ain't gonna see no light of day no more."

In the following weeks I discovered that the culture of Washington's

homeless is larger and more diffuse throughout the city than Baltimore's, stretching from the shelters in Northeast to downtown and Chinatown and as far west as Georgetown.

One reason for this diffusion is the bum's inclination to go where he is most comfortable and stay there to a point where he becomes a fixture in that neighborhood. There were bums, for instance, who lived in and around Georgetown and Dupont Circle for so long they became a part of the landscape in those communities.

But I found a more important reason for this diffusion is the popcorn — such as Norton's and Tony's — and the degradation one suffers at the public shelters and missions here. The Reverend Archbishop Pope St. Charles Tyler Cavanaugh, a man

who forsook the public shelters and lived for many winter months in a storefront at 14th and K NW, put it this way. "Yeah, yeah, I could stay in a shelter, yeah, yeah. But I wouldn't live long to tell of it, now would I?"

Such comments were common among the derelicts who preferred to go it alone, to carve out their own little ports in the city storm. An inherent risk in this independence, however, is one's vulnerability to nature. In March three homeless men died of exposure while sleeping in 20-degree weather in abandoned cars and buildings very near sixth and C streets NW, the site of the Central Union Mission.

In a short newspaper article concerning these deaths a D.C. homicide detective was quoted as saying, these men didn't have to sleep out

in the cold, that shelters such as the mission and Blair School were available.

Well, the point was — and it was a point I came to understand fully after several weeks in this city — some men prefer sleeping in peace, alone and in the cold to contending with the popcorn and the constant humiliation that the shelters provide.

Some of these men, considering nature the lesser of two evils, slept in abandoned buildings. Others, like the Reverend Archbishop, retired to storefronts. But there were a few — like George, Willie, and Ross — who sought peace on the heating grates of Foggy Bottom.

Next: *The Philosopher Kings — A Night on the Grate.*