

A Washington Winter's Tale: Fear, Hunger, Loathing, Abuse

By Neil Henry

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When the sun went down the rats came out—furry, long-tailed, hunch-backed rats. They scampered out of their nests in the bowels of the Daughters of the American Revolution building, tiptoeing along hedges and bushes, ducking in and out of drainage gutters, sniffing for food.

Ross warned me about them. He said the rats liked the night. He said not to worry, though, because they were sort of like people. They never bothered you as long as you didn't bother them. It was a full house on the heating grates of Foggy Bottom that night, so Ross sent me here to this noisy grate on C Street NW across from the DAR colonnades.

The metal grate was warm and vacant, but the DAR building rats liked it too much, sometimes sneaking up to catch spurts of hot air and nibble on crumbs left behind by bums who slept here previously. The rats were loathsome creatures that — no matter how much I yelled or waved sticks or threw stones their way — refused to take no for an answer.

Fear kept me awake the entire night. Still, the rats were a mite more pleasant than the group of Constitution Hall concertgoers who had swept by the grate in furs and fancy suits earlier in the evening, dropping revulsion and disgust my way.

Ross warned me about that as well.

Much of the inspiration for this assignment, in which I traveled from Baltimore to Washington as a home-

PART 9

DOWN & OUT

*A night on the heating grates
with Ross, George, the rats
and the jitterbugs.*

less derelict, was provided by George Orwell, who wrote "Down and Out in Paris and London" and "1984." The themes of these two books—urban poverty and technocratic oppression

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DOWN & OUT

GRATE, From A1

— remarkably coincided on the District's heating grates. Here, among the grate dwellers — the philosopher kings of down-and-out Washington — life and art were one.

After a day and night with George, Willie and Ross in Foggy Bottom on grates separating the State Department and the American Foreign Service Club — I wondered whether I had endured a 24-hour Socratic lecture, or taken a trip through hell, or both.

By the end of that stay I just about accepted Ross' reasoning as ultimate truth — which said something about Ross, surely, but also about the effect of simultaneous heat and cold on a man's mind and body.

To introduce Ross, George must be introduced first. He was a wiry man who when I met him was celebrating his 68th birthday with a bologna sandwich, courtesy of several workers from the Community for Creative Non-Violence. Only two weeks earlier, George said, he'd been released from St. Elizabeth's Hospital. Now he was huddled under a beaten leather jacket and was sitting in a tiny pool of feces and urine with two legs caught in one leg of his purple pants.

George was naked from the waist down and after finishing the sandwich, he struggled to move 10 yards to a heating grate on the corner. He was quite tipsy and it took a good half-hour to negotiate those 10 yards. Ross, meanwhile, owned the grate in front of the main entrance to State. He said he had lived in and around there the last 15 years. He was in his 60s and owned several boxes of canned foods and clothes, which he pushed around on a dolly.

Ross' trademark was a dark gray cloche, from which he removed the side brims to make it resemble a Sherlock Holmes cap. To passersby George, the wiry man up the block in the middle of waste, appeared a pathetic figure. Not to Ross, though. He knew better.

According to Ross, George was a pro who had the jitterbugs in Georgetown working for him ever since a night last winter when the cops came by and found him sprawled on the green cement corner in front of no man's land between two grates.

"This one's froze to death," one cop said to the other, and the morgue wagon was called. Ross that night was feeling a shame because earlier in the day he had asked to share the grate, but Ross had sent him away, as Willie had done from his grate on the corner.

The morgue wagon finally came and took George's body away. But the next day, who should show up with a bottle of Rippie but George? He was never dead in the first place. Or was he?

"George," Ross recalled, watching the little man crawl to the grate, "George got the jitterbugs on his side. They took him up there to that operating room and put one of those passive-resistance Telstar listening devices in the right lobe of his brain.

"Then they injected gas in his veins and George came around. He don't need nobody's help. He's a pro."

To this day, Ross said, the jitterbugs in Georgetown keep tabs on George by listening to the radio waves emanating from his right brain lobe. Whenever he's feeling a little out of whack they send up some invisible life gas through the heating grate to rejuvenate him.

To these men in Foggy Bottom "jitterbugs" was a private password that described the human establishment that flourished about them. These jitterbugs were responsible for internal combustion engines, hypodermic needles and millions of other ubiquitous technological marvels that seemed to define and rule human life. Technology, from the vantage of a heating grate, was an "amazing and very awesome thing.

"They clones babies, they puts one man's heart into 'toter, they sends out these electronic microwave boxes on booster rocket ships to look for Jesus out in space. Hell, they got this

warehouse on M Street where they make bodies. Every 43 days a new body walks 'outta that warehouse. That's where they fixed George."

Every now and then one of those manufactured bodies came, by and dropped a nickel or two on the sidewalk, then picked up and analyzed stool specimens off the heating grates. That was Ross' reality, a world filled with such scientific terms as Telstar, microwave, cruise bomber, homing device, transistor, computer and electroshock.

"Hell, boy, I seen it! Twenty years I been round here'n looking at this buildin! Peoples comes from all over the world—hell, Asia, India, Paris, Honolulu—they comes right through this here'n door to see the jitterbugs, then they come outta that door carryin' them black cases."

Willie, the third member of this Foggy Bottom trio, was white, though you couldn't tell by looking at him. His hair hung all the way down his back in thick matted strands of grayish, blackish brown that resembled unraveled lengths of old rope. His red face and hands were blanketed by a film of oily soil. His clothes were jeans, a ripped hunting jacket and Adidas tennis shoes.

Willie, like Ross, was a philosopher, but he seemed to meditate much more than his counterpart. "My brother," he said to me, reclining on his grate and sipping water from a plastic jug. "My brother."

"What about your brother, Willie?"

"Blood brother."

He left this reference dangling in the musty, foul air for five minutes or so before he sat up abruptly and stammered, "He works up there you know."

"The State Department?"

"Yeah, all around, you know how that is, right? I mean, Jesus cared, you know?"

"Right."

"You know Vance?"

"Yeah."

"He's my brother, the head cheese, So's Carter. Both of 'em just jitterbugs, that's all they are. Look," he said, nodding toward a man entering a

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black limousine outside the State Department. "Look, there he is."

"Vance?"

"No. My brother. He works there, you know. Here, turn this way. All right?" Willie asked. "The bus is coming. Turn around or it'll take the heat away."

Gradually, as darkness approached, the heating grates filled. The men called them holes, these grates. The city was sprinkled with them. There were holes outside the Justice and Commerce departments and other federal buildings, museums such as the Corcoran Gallery of Art and around Judiciary Square, outside the D.C. Police Department and the Court of Military Appeals. The holes, for these men, were oases from the cold, which that night registered 21 degrees.

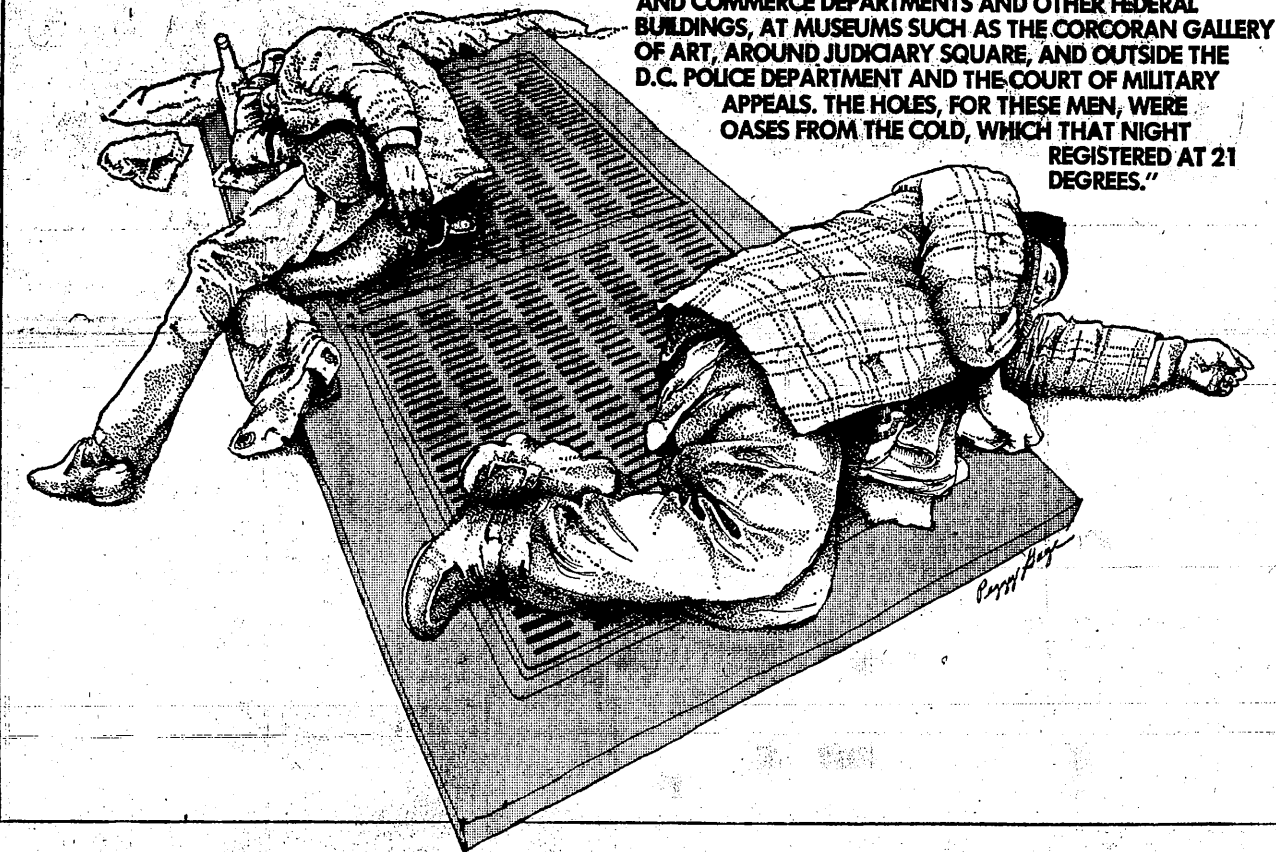
Ross asked me to leave. Other men didn't mind their sharing holes, but Ross was a loner. He wanted the extra room on his grate for his dolly to keep warm.

"Go down to the Daughters," he said. "The Daughters got one, probably empty, too. There's more rats 'round there, but they don't bother you. Only thing you got to worry 'bout is the jitterbugs. They goes to hear music at night."

Ross walked me down to the DAR building, checking garbage cans along the sidewalk, then tipped his Sherlock Holmes cap. "You can't hear the sputniks," he said, continuing on his way. "If the radio's turned off."

Ross and Willie's reality made sense

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bands or boyfriends who became angry after my presence startled and alarmed their companions.

"Get up off that thing, nigger. Who you think you are, you worthless son of a bitch?" barked one black man in a beret and three-piece suit.

"Goddamn," muttered another, stepping directly over me on the sidewalk. "He ain't gonna do nothin'. Janey, come on, we're late! He's a bum, Janey. He ain't dead."

One woman, however, stopped in the middle of the street after passing me, then turned around and asked, "Hey mister? You all right?" as her companion tugged her arm and mumbled, "Let's go. Leave the man alone."

Later, after the theater emptied and the crowd drove off into the night, a police car thundered up to the curb beside me. "You gonna make it, man?" the cop asked. "Well, all right. Man up the street worried about ya, that's all. Thought you were dead or something."

The rats, which intelligently scampered "for cover when the concert crowds approached, came out of their hideouts to feed. One of them next to a tree behind me came across a half-eaten apple and dashed off with the treasure back to DAR. Another rat, which traveled along the curb as far as two blocks away, always returned empty-mouthed to my grate. Several times that night he tried to sneak up to the grate. I would yell and slap a tree limb into the pavement to scare him away. But each time, this unfazed, misbegotten creature, his vermilion hide expanding and contracting with heavy breathing, turned around and tiptoed slowly away.

All night I wondered how Ross, George and Willie did it.

As the street lamps went out and the sun came up the next morning, I rolled off my grate and discovered that my senses were mostly paralyzed. I couldn't feel coldness or warmth and was extremely thirsty. It dawned on me then that Willie always kept a plastic jug of water handy, knowing that grate heat robbed one of body fluids.

I felt weak from hunger and yet

Neil Henry, a 26-year-old Washington Post staff writer, spent seven weeks this winter as a homeless bum in Baltimore, Washington and points in between. He began the assignment on Jan. 7, arriving in Baltimore that afternoon without a penny in his pocket. His journey ended two months later on the night of March 7. For a six-day period during the middle of the assignment, Henry came in from the cold to recuperate and transcribe his notes. His "cover" during his days down and out was that he was a struggling writer. But in his travels, only once was Henry asked about his background. This happened one night at the Helping-Up Mission in Baltimore when a bum noticed Henry scribbling in a notebook. "Trying to write a book, eh?" said the man, smiling, after Henry gave his story. "Well, don't try selling it to me. I done read it already."

almost superhuman. The cold wind blew but I couldn't feel it. Fortunately my eyes still worked, as I discovered a small brown wooden jewelry box open face down on the curb near me. Inside were all kinds of sparkling baubles: pendants, bracelets and necklaces. A concertgoer last night must have accidentally knocked the box outside the car as she was stepping out.

The jewelry sparkled a bit too brightly to be real. In fact, most of it was fake. I did find a gold bracelet, though, in whose shiny clasp the figures "14K" were etched.

I ventured to 14th Street, ducked inside a pawn shop, and stood in line behind two D.C. police detectives who switched off their walkie-talkies and amiably told a quinting bald man behind the counter that their "government checks finally come" and that they were in the market for watches and televisions. We were all doing what we could to get by.

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