

New York City Rain

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WEDNESDAY—ALL MY LUGGAGE IS SOAKED and I tore the sleeve of my brand new overcoat in the subway station. Elder Sessions told me not to look away if I noticed someone staring. "Just stare them down or ask them what they're looking at," he instructed. It's all such a blur. Three weeks ago I was running around po-dunk Colorado and now I'm drying off in a run-down dump of an apartment in the slums of East New York, Brooklyn. Sessions says we're going to make a difference here.

What is it about the rain that brings it all back so vividly? The blue sparks from the third rail that lit up the windows in popping strobes on the long train ride through Queens. I tried to appear as calm and unaffected as my companion, who was nodding off while reading a book. I dug out my scriptures and attempted to read. I skimmed over verses, but my mind never left the man who had been riding in our car for the past several stops.

He had limped on and brought a foul smell with him just as our dog did back home when he got into the house out of a storm. He stretched out across some vacant seats and immediately fell asleep in layers of filthy drenched clothes, his heavy head resting hard on the cross bar, bumping with the shifts of the track. We retreated to the other end of the car to escape the stench. At each stop two or three other passengers would change cars or move toward our end until he was alone.

The train emerged out of the tunnels in Brooklyn and crawled upward over the elevated tracks. The rain fell heavy on the roof of the train as I gazed through streaked windows at the broken down, burned out miles of brick. It all felt so dark; brown buildings, asphalt, and concrete under the grey skies of a thunderstorm. With a jolt of the subway car, the sleeping man sat up suddenly and gazed out the window as if trying to get his bearings, then he collapsed again on the hard bench.

Monday—"Please don't take my mother again," the little girl cried. I won't forget her face as she stood in the doorway, cheeks smudged with dirt, braids

wrapped at the ends with colored rubber bands. She must have recognized men in long coats and ties. Her mother appeared in the doorway, her face hard, eyes glazed by addiction. She slammed the door, and through thin walls we heard the pains of a beating. The girl had been told not to open the door to strangers.

Sometimes I would physically shake my head in an attempt to discard a bitter image. I despised the constant feeling of helplessness. I guess I was always aware that there were problems in our country, but I seemed so separated from them that to me they never really were problems, just distant news stories. Now I was bombarded constantly.

When it got to be too much, we climbed the fire escape to the roof of our building. We marveled at the endless rooftops of Brooklyn and watched kids play stickball in the alley below. We commented to each other about how difficult it would be to grow up with no baseball diamonds, no grass, no vacant fields to build forts and hide. A foul ball shattered a window in the alley and the kids scattered. A lady came to her doorstep shaking her broom.

"Do you think those kids are aware that there is a better way of living?" I asked my companion. "Do you think they wish for a better life?"

"When I was a kid, I thought everyone lived lives exactly like mine," he said. We shook helpless feelings and talked about distant mountains, distant girls, open green spaces.

Thursday—We saw him in Grand Central Station, on a trip to Manhattan. People call him "The Kid." Some of the other missionaries told me about him; they said that he's even appeared in television commercials and briefly in a couple of movies. We heard his music as we stepped off the shuttle train from Times Square, the fast-paced clatter of his sticks on the bottom of an overturned five-gallon bucket. We listened in amazement with the group who had paused to watch him. Eyes closed, shirt removed, sweat glistening on broad shoulders, his muscles twitched to beat out the rhythm of the city in the summer heat of the subway station. "He plays like that all day long," one man said; others shook heads in amazement and dropped money at his feet.

It became so common that I didn't think about it anymore. People sitting on street corners with outreached paper cups. We were asked for money or food so many times a day that I didn't even consider my response. A quick "sorry" and a shrug to communicate that I had no spare change. Sometimes I would drop a quarter in an extended hand and consider whether it was out of pity or a method of brushing it aside, a way to get an uncomfortable feeling to pass quickly.

We missionaries discussed it on occasion.

"What good does it do them anyway?" my companion asked. "They

probably just use it to buy drugs. Why can't they get off their butts and get a job instead of feeling sorry for themselves?"

I remember how I lashed into him even though I myself shared his feelings at times. I told him that he had no place judging them when everything he had was handed to him on a silver platter.

"It's not our place to say how they should use what we give," I said, speaking more to myself than to him. "It is our place to serve others without restraint."

"Maybe giving them change is how we ease our own consciences of the fact that we do not serve them," he breathed quietly. "Maybe feeling the pain of deep concern for them as a person is the only true service we can give."

"Maybe," I said.

Saturday—We had a long discussion with Donte and gave all the textbook answers that never seem to resolve the dreaded questions about why God allows so many bad things to happen to certain people while others have it easy. He asked us how we got so lucky. "I don't think I'll ever escape," he said.

I remember thinking that if I could only make a difference in Donte's life, I could go the rest of my mission with no baptisms and still consider it successful. We became close friends. He told us practically everything that went on in his life. He especially took pleasure in telling us the details of his dates to the movies and laughing at how young guys like us could neither date nor see any movies.

It was raining the night he told us about the fear that he felt in his own surroundings. He explained the heavy temptation he felt to get involved deeper in dealing drugs. He told us that he didn't have options like we did. It would be too difficult for him to go back and get a high school diploma and somehow make it to college. He told us that he needed time to sort things out and couldn't meet with us for a while. Though he said he would stay in touch, we parted knowing that we would never hear from him again. We rode our bikes home in the rain and I cursed under my breath about another ruined tie.

"We've been working so hard lately," shouted my companion, "you'd think we'd earn a little sunshine."

Sunday—Brother Franklin and I chased a lady down the street who had been seen stealing coats from the racks in the foyer. The two large, heavy bags of coats made it easy for us to catch her. I asked her how she could steal from a church and told her that we would feed her if she was really hungry. She dropped the bags and left cursing us and the church and the name of God.

I walked back to the church with Brother Franklin that Sunday, each of us carrying a heavy bag of coats over his shoulder. "It's a bad sign," I said, "when you have to keep an eye on coats in the foyer of a chapel. How could someone steal from the church?"

He chuckled slightly. He was a former minister of the Baptist church and his voice took on the rhythms of a preacher. "Some people get to the point where they are no longer willing to sit back and wait for God to impart blessings. Some don't wait for the sunshine; they just look out for more rain and try to survive in the darkness of its accompanying clouds." John shifted the heavy bag to the other shoulder. "Believe me, lessons about a future paradise do little to soothe the pains of present torture. Maybe the woman who stole the coats is so tired of waiting for God's blessings that she decided to take some of God's blessings for herself." We got back to the church and heard a scripture read over the pulpit, "... God maketh his sun to shine on the evil and on the good, he sendeth rain to the just and to the unjust."

Tuesday—Our early afternoon appointment in Harlem was with a man who invited us to sit on the only two broken chairs in the apartment while he sat on a milk crate. He told us he only had two pairs of pants, a shirt, and a pair of shoes to his name. He said he thanked God every day that he still had a roof over his head. When we left and reminded him to read the book we gave him, he joked about it being the only book he owned.

"What else could I read?" He chuckled.

Directly after leaving him, we had to hurry down to the Upper East Side and meet with a lady living in a penthouse apartment overlooking Central Park. The carpet was white.

Whenever we walked up Central Park West and approached streets numbering in the upper nineties, I would watch the transformation take place. Within the distance of two blocks, the buildings became run down. Harassment grew more common, we expected bottles to be thrown and vulgar names, warnings to get out of the neighborhood.

One missionary got slashed in the face while I was in New York. He refused to give his bike willingly to a group of kids and ended up losing it anyway. Another got a blade stuck in his ribs even though he willingly surrendered his possessions. Serious confrontations were rare though, and it seemed that we got more harassment from beat cops than from anyone else.

They would always ask us if we were lost and if we knew what part of town we were in. When we assured them that we knew where we were and that we, in fact, lived and worked all day in those areas, they in turn assured us that we were insane.

"Why you even bother?" one officer asked. "These people are animals. They just as soon kill guys like you as look at you. You'd do better preaching religion to other people some place safe."

"Can we come to your house and teach you," I retorted, not missing a beat.

"I got no need for God," he said. "I carry a gun."

We left him holding his belly and laughing hysterically.

Friday—On the Staten Island ferry, with a group of missionaries, we saw an old man who must have been carrying all he owned in the world in a big black garbage bag. One elder said it was a fitting piece of luggage; most of us chuckled. We watched him struggle to pull his boot over an infected foot that was swollen to deformity and attempt to lace it up with a short piece of wire. I turned away with a familiar helpless, uncomfortable feeling. One missionary crossed over to the old man and silently knelt down beside him. He removed the wire and replaced it with his own shoelace, lacing it carefully with regard to the man's injured foot.

When it rains, I think about New York. I remember the faces and voices of people I met there. I remember the hospitality of those who became my friends, the taste and smell of unfamiliar spices, the generosity of countless suppers served by people we visited. I remember the smiles of children and the harsh eyes of a mother. Rain's randomness reminds me of the injustices of poverty. I think about filthy floors and white carpet, I remember swollen feet and borrowed shoe laces. When heavy rain taps the window, I hear the rhythm of the city beat out on an overturned plastic bucket and, through streaked glass from an elevated train track, I again feel the helpless remorse and I let it run deep. I will not brush it aside.