

mission, because I had become a Christian there, not just in word; I had become a believer. Although I understood the need for reprimanding me, the extremes they went to eliminated my desire to work with them, to be part of them. I realized that being a Bowery Mission-brand Christian had nothing to do with being Casanova.

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In my experience, all institutions tend to want you to remain dependent on them. That's the welfare system, that's the AFDC, that's Christianity. It is great to go out and feed people, but it is more important to help people learn to feed themselves. It's like that old saying that if you *give* a man a fish, he will have food to eat that day and that day only; *teach* him to fish and he'll be able to get food for himself and have something to eat for the rest of his life. Moreover, he can teach somebody else how to fish.

I cannot stress this enough. I won't ever stop emphasizing it, because this country has built a population of dependents, people who depend on someone else for their lives. As long as you depend on someone else, you are in their control. You are not your own person if you are on Aid to Families with Dependent Children all the time, or on the dole from the church. If we have a system of AFDC that sets us up to be dependent on AFDC for the rest of our lives, then we are not our own masters. We cannot make decisions based on our own beliefs; we have to make our decisions by the guidelines dictated by AFDC, by the government, by the churches, by the people who then control our lives.

If a person is on AFDC on a temporary basis and is being trained to become self-sufficient, then that's another story. That is the way the system should ideally work. If somebody has a car with an engine that guzzles gas, they don't take a sledgehammer to the engine. The answer is not to destroy these programs, but to tune them up.

## CHAPTER 14 Tent City

There are many things I haven't touched yet in my story, and many people that need to be in it. I have forgotten some of the events, some of the names and some of the dates. But I do know that on August 6, 1988, at two in the morning, I was standing in Tompkins Square Park near the entrance on Avenue B, across the street from a bar and a liquor store, holding a Bible in my hands, watching a riot between police and people in the park.

I always seemed to come back to Tompkins Square Park. That night I stood watching it all, watching over some of the homeless people who wanted no part of the clash and who were trying to sleep on benches behind the band shell. Right then I didn't even care if I was part of the world. At that time I was experiencing inner turmoil. I don't remember exactly, but I believe I was either contemplating leaving the Bowery Mission or had just left it.

A writer named Sarah Ferguson, who lived in the neighborhood, asked me that night why this group of homeless was outside the circle of violence.

"We just want to be left alone," I told her.

The police had told us to stay where we were in the park, and we did, so we weren't caught in the beatings. It felt like we were in a bubble that the raging violence couldn't touch. Later I painted a picture of that night which I titled "Shadow of Protection."

In the end, a lot of people got beat up in that action. One hundred and twenty-one complaints of police brutality got filed, although not one of the officers was ever convicted or punished, mainly because the court system would not find police brutality had occurred unless fellow officers said it had. And they were not talking.

Rather than put myself through the Bowery Mission program any longer, I withdrew. Hurting, disappointed in my life and the

world, I went out of control, I returned to my old ways of drinking and wildness, living in abandoned buildings and in Tompkins Square Park again. Once again alcohol was in control of me, not the other way around, like I sometimes believed. *Though I did not commit any crimes or do needle drugs during that period, I was wild, reacting against the strictness and the unfairness of the Mission toward me.*

After I left the Bowery Mission, I went back to Shanty Town for a little while, but by that time it was ruled by a homeless gentleman who was controlling people in the camp through alcohol, through drugs. With him it was all about power, but power just for him. That was not my cup of tea, so I went back to living in Tompkins Square Park.

I'll give credit to a Christian crew out of Jersey. I forget the name of the organization, but they used to come down there to Tompkins Square Park and try to talk religion to us, and they always brought us food. The Christians from Jersey would come down every Saturday to sing their Gospel songs, pass out their tracts and feed hundreds of people. They served the best food, so a lot of homeless from Queens and the Bronx came down on Saturdays to eat. Though the feeding was good, it brought all kinds of people, and not all the homeless were very friendly. Sometimes they were very angry, sometimes they would steal, sometimes there would be a fight.

Because of my recent experience at the Bowery Mission, I myself was feeling anger toward Christians at that time. In the beginning when the Christians from Jersey would come, I used to tell them "Please, leave me alone. I'm sick," or "I need a drink," or "I want to get high."

They were smart, however. They learned not to keep shoving their religion down our throats. They did not stop coming and showing their concern for us just because we refused to be listening to their Christianity. What convinced me of their sincerity is that they came back *despite* our refusal, because of their humanistic ideals, still feeding and clothing and listening to us.

For a time I moved in with some squatters at a building on 9th Street between B and C. While I was there, somebody from

the Bowery Mission tracked me down because they had something for me which came as a surprise: a good-sized wooden cross. All the time I was at the Bowery Mission I had been after the Mennonites to build me some wagons for hauling food around the streets to help feed people, and here instead they sent a cross. But I guess I must have smiled when I saw that cross because it had been put together for me by the Mennonite kids as a class project, and I had a fondness for those kids. As it happened, one of the squatters in the building was a black-haired Mennonite minister named Frank, who had a blonde wife and baby, so I donated the cross for the room in our building we had set up half as a kitchen, half as a meditation room.

That winter it got very cold, even for New York City. One night about the middle of December, 1988, my Polish brother Ed Rutter went to sleep on a park bench in Tompkins Square Park. Even in the winter, Eddie wouldn't go in a city-run shelter because he was afraid of getting hurt or robbed there. That night he had an overcoat, two blankets and a bottle to keep him warm. Another homeless man, Eliot Lopez, helped Eddie over to a bench next to where Lopez had built a fire in one of the park's metal trash cans. During the night, a police officer kicked the trash can over.

"No fires allowed in the park," the policeman said.

And the mercury just kept falling. It got down to five degrees that night.

By morning, Eddie had frozen to death. Lopez said Eddie's hand was reaching out to the scattered, cold ashes where the fire had been. Later when I heard what had happened, it made me angry, but scared, too. I thought of my own plight. I was almost 44 years old and without a secure place to live. I could end up like Eddie. But for the time being, all I did was drink until I forgot to be scared.

Unfortunately, at the squatters' building we had problems sometimes with the Puerto Rican brothers and sisters in the neighborhood because they considered squatters to be hippies, and they did not like the idea of all these hippies moving into their block. So most of the neighbors there did not like us. They

were the Latino rich; they were only into their cars and didn't think about the problems of people with no place to live. Partly because of that animosity, I quit living there and returned to the park.

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It seems to me that it was around my birthday in 1989 when I ran across my old friend Red Wolf. I was sitting on a bench in Tompkins Square Park and he came by. We had not seen each other in ages.

"Hey, man, what's up?" he asked.

"Ain't nothin' to it," I said. "I left the Bowery Mission a while back, and right now I need a place to stay."

Red Wolf was on his way out of the city, but he pulled a tent out of his knapsack and gave it to me. I pitched the tent in Tompkins Square Park close to 9th Street and Avenue A.

Next day, Red Wolf was back. He ended up not leaving town, so we shared his tent. We were there about a day and a half when a friend of ours, a fellow named Spider, pitched a tent next to us. Next thing I knew, my good friend Gypsy showed up and set his tent up as well. Within that week we must have had anywhere from five to ten different tents in this one area of the park, and a number of the people in them had been part of the Casanovas. I felt a sense of security being with people I knew, a comradeship.

All kinds of people came to the park whether they lived there or not: African Americans, old Polish people and Ukrainians, Cubans, long-haired hippies and spike-haired punk rockers, Puerto Ricans playing *jibaro* music, skin-heads in steel-toed army boots, Jamaican rastas with dreadlocks. People walked their dogs while skate-boarders shot past concentrating chess players and heavy metal bands, and Reeboks were squeaking as pick-up teams played basketball while mothers walked their infants in strollers. But something different was happening this time. People who were coming to sleep in the park began to act aware

of themselves as a community. I felt happy because it reminded me of the Village in the old days.

People just kept coming. The police themselves, all over New York, began telling homeless people in the subways and doorways of the Bronx, Brooklyn and Queens to go down to Tompkins Square Park. We had an influx of people coming in, pitching tents and building shacks. The park became a sanctuary. I guess the cops and the neighborhood liked it that way because while we were in the park we were not sleeping in their doorways. We were not blocking any businesses. At the time we did not realize that we would soon have to fight to live in the park. We did not know that we would have to fight to survive. And the police had helped to set up the scenario.

But June 1989 was fantastic. We were a festive combination of squatters, anarchists, activists and mostly just homeless people. Some people slept in the band shell, some people slept beneath the flat roof of the brick pavilion that was between the rest-rooms. We had a lot of homemade lean-to type tents made out of clear plastic stretched over wooden frames. They were about the size of pup tents. Refrigerator-box cardboard walls for some, store-bought tents for others. Tents pitched side by side on the hard-packed dirt underneath the park trees near park benches. People slept covered by blanket and sheets, or some had sleeping bags. We were getting a lot of clothes donations, which we hung up on fences for anybody who needed them and could use them. Beside each one of the tents we had campfires, and there was one communal campfire where we fed any people who were hungry. People in the neighborhood would go out and buy or collect food and bring it for our kitchen. People began to get the word that we were feeding the homeless and anybody was welcome.

I had experienced people living in the streets since I was young, a youth living in hallways. The general plight of the homeless did not really affect me back then; I only worried about myself. But by that summer of 1989, things had changed very drastically from the way they had been. I had never seen so many homeless people.

We had a veteran living in the park with us, another drinker, who we called Old Man John. Old Man John was disabled mentally; he couldn't live with his family, and his sisters couldn't take him—he couldn't live with anybody. In fact, he was a thorn in my side because he was a very aggravating person.

Old Man John was a coffee fanatic. He made sure we had coffee. If there wasn't coffee at the crack of dawn, I was the first person he would come to.

"Cas! Where's the coffee? Where's the coffee? Where's the coffee?"

I guess I had the patience of Job in those days to keep from kicking his ass. But he did not want to live in an institution, and I understood that. So I would get up and take the coffee pot somebody had donated and start boiling the water on the fire. We strained our coffee the best we could.

Old Man John also wrote poetry of a sort. He would jot down sentences, fragments of thought. A woman from the neighborhood used to put out a paper printed in Jersey called *Voices From the Street*. She somehow got John to write out one of his poems and she edited it down and printed it in her paper. Unfortunately, I lost my copy in one of the police raids that were to come.

Soon we had a lot of churches supporting us. One day some people we knew from Long Island brought a van full of food from a gourmet store. We had something like 18 boxes of groceries. We bagged them individually and passed the bags out to people who came by and needed the food.

Everybody and anybody could eat with us. At first we would be cooking on fires outside the tents. We did not have a stove. Then the Parks Department warned us no fires were allowed in the park, so when we finished cooking a meal, we put out the fire. So for a while the authorities left us alone. Eventually, however, they started messing with that, again saying no fires in the park. They brought in the Police Department and the Fire Department, trying to get our camp fires in the park extinguished. But that plan backfired. As it turned out, the police and firefighters went all over the park checking these fires. The

Police Department said there was nothing wrong with them. They were safe fires. The Fire Department also said they were safe fires.

Not happy at all with this result, the Parks Department went to court about it. This time it didn't go our way.

"Put them out," the court ruled. So we moved our cooking inside of a tent where we made ourselves a big stove out of bricks. Pretty soon we lucked out and got us a cook, a black dude by the name of Artie Wilson. He first came to the park because some of his friends had come to Tompkins Square from different institutional shelters. When we saw that Artie could cook, we got to know Artie very well. He became our official cook. Artie liked cooking for the people who came.

"People are here for various reasons," I remember Artie saying. "How you wind up in the park, you don't want to remember, but you *are* here, so we have to deal with it from there."

On that brick stove, Artie prepared food three to four times a day and fed several hundred people at each meal, and did a very good job of it. Our regular meal times were morning, afternoon and maybe about five o'clock in the evening. The neighborhood anarchists helped with the food. They worked out of a bookstore called Sabotage, which closed at four in the afternoon. Afterwards, they would come to the park and drop off chickens and vegetables. The anarchists liked to wear dark clothes, a lot of black, and they smoked cigarettes continuously. Frank, a Latino anarchist, dressed all in black and wore a beret. He had a narrow face and whiskers on his chin. Frank was very intense.

"We're facing a fascist police order in this city," Frank said one time, "that is out to attack and kill blacks and Latinos especially, but really is indiscriminate in terms of poor people in general."

In a big pot Artie would cook the chicken and vegetables the anarchists brought. Later at night the squatters would come by with more food and so we would eat again. The late crowd. We would pretty much be feeding people throughout the night because people would come at various times.

Neighborhood people would come down with their instruments and play music. One night a guy brought his portable xylophone and played while we sat smoking reefer and drinking beer and talking. On every bench you could see people sitting conversing, politicizing. They were all comfortable here. It was a beautiful atmosphere.

I noticed a tall, slim woman talking with some people. I went over and introduced myself. She said her name was Karen Margolis, and she was an activist. Back in the 1950s, when she was only eight years old, she had gone on a CORE (Congress of Racial Equality) Freedom Ride. Later she worked against U.S. involvement in Vietnam, and in the '80s she opposed U.S. intervention in Central America. Until recently Karen had taught school in New York.

I expressed my interest in getting to know her. Well, that night she still left with the married couple she had come with, but in the days to come she became one of the neighborhood people who would come around bringing food.

Early in the morning Karen would be one of the first supporters to come to the park. She would come wake me, always bringing me something to eat. She was a lot of fun to wake up to. In the freshness of the morning Karen and I would sit and drink coffee and talk, and as the summer days passed, I learned about her. Karen had lived for a year on the Upper West Side of Manhattan with a dude she said "turned into the fiancé from hell." Karen told me that after she had gotten pregnant, her fiancé had gotten physically and mentally abusive. So Karen left him and spent a few months with a friend. Eventually she took the shelter route, moving into a shelter and going on welfare. She was 39 at the time.

In those days, Mayor Koch had a program for pregnant women whereby Karen was able to get into a low-income tenant co-op in the East Village. While Karen was living there, she had her son, and she named him Ethan.

"The name means 'strong'," she told me. "It's such a beautiful name."

I looked at Karen, this tall, willowy woman and thought that *she* was strong, *she* was beautiful.

"I'd like to meet Ethan," I said.

She then told me Ethan was in Kansas City, Missouri, with her parents, and that she was going to get him soon. I questioned Karen some more and learned that New York Hospital had told her that Ethan, two years old then, might be autistic. She tried to get him help through Medicaid, but the help didn't come. Her parents were well-to-do, and they had promised the best in help for Ethan, but only if Ethan stayed with them for a short while. So Karen took Ethan to stay with her folks. She had stayed in constant contact with her parents and had been assured by them that Ethan was progressing very well and that he was probably not autistic. But they told Karen that as yet Ethan was not quite ready to return home to her.

Our community grew, and we soon gave it the name of "Tent City." Things were happening fast. Tent City did not happen as a planned organization. There was no revolution, no movement there. It started as a place where people came because they needed a place to stay. We had no place to stay, so we went to the park and pitched a tent. It was people of like mind, comfortable with each other, sharing their space in the park. Tent City was open to anyone and everyone who rejected the city's so-called solutions to homelessness. We had a slogan: "No Housing, No Peace." Now that did not mean that we wanted a violent confrontation with the authorities. That meant we were not going to allow ourselves to be quietly put out of sight and mind in jails or dangerous shelters. That is no solution, that is burial.

Some of the squatters and anarchists and other activists from the neighborhood who were already in the antipoverty movement started talking to us about how to deal with the authorities. There were several groups and they all had plans and ideas. I would just pick out which one sounded the best to me and make suggestions along those lines to the Tent City residents. Usually they agreed.

Something was happening in Tompkins Square Park. All our lives we had accepted poverty as a way of life, whatever the reason. People had accepted welfare as a way of life. Now we

were doing things for ourselves. Outside the entrance to the park we set up a table with information about Tent City, poverty, homelessness, and about social services people could get and how they could go about getting those services. We began educating people about the politics of poverty. During the day, while most people from our park community would go looking for work or do their hustle to bring some money in, I would sit there in the camp and paint. That was *my* hustle. I would keep an eye on peoples' clothes and property while doing my art.

I would stretch a t-shirt over a section of cardboard and slant it off my knees as I sat up against a tree painting. Then we would sell them at the table we had set up. That summer I painted and sold a lot of t-shirts showing scenes from Tent City and Tompkins Square Park.

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Since I had been living in the area off and on since the mid-'60s, I had a lot of friends in the street, a lot of people who knew me. Sometimes they and the more curious people from the neighborhood would come by the park to find out what Tent City was about.

"Why are you living in the park?" they would ask me.

First of all, I would explain, most of us in the park were single people, and we could not afford to rent. If you were to rent a room in Manhattan, you would be paying something like \$200 a week. First of all, if you could even find a room in that low a price range, the place would be roach-infested and filthy. You were lucky if you got a window. You were lucky if nobody broke into your room.

Let's say you are working and getting paid the minimum wage of 1996. You cannot even afford that rent. Do the math. For the sake of discussion, let's say you're getting paid one and a half times the minimum wage; hell, round it off to \$6.50 an hour. You might be able to make rent, if taxes don't take too much. But then where do you get the money to eat? What happens if you get sick? If you have kids, what about child care? How do you get

your laundry taken care of? What about transportation? Utilities? And on and on and on and on. The minimum wage needs to be tripled.

"Why don't you homeless go into the shelters?" some people would come by and ask me.

"Have you ever been to a shelter?" I would answer. "Have you ever been to the shelter on Wards Island? Go to Wards Island," I would tell such people. "Then take a walk through Tompkins Square Park to see the difference."

People in Tompkins Square had their problems, but they also kept their own kind of dignity, which you will not find among the fearful inmates of a shelter. The homeless of Tompkins Square remained individuals, refusing to become the beaten-down penitents that too many of the shelters want, demand, and make.

Kids did not live with us much at the park, although kids would come down there to visit a parent who was living in the park. Some of these kids came with their grandparents or some other relative.

Despite the fact that a lot of the shelters are terrible, there are reasons some people go there, even though they may not want to. Being homeless is hard on couples. If you really love a person, you don't want them sleeping on the ground and worrying about where they are going to eat. A homeless family living on the streets has an added problem: the welfare system or the courts will take away the kids if they catch up with that family. So if there is a homeless family that does not want to go into a shelter, they have to dodge the law so they can keep their kids with them. Some of the family people I have met in the streets are responsible parents. For example, they try to stay in one area so the kids can go to school, and if the kids get sick they take them to a clinic or hospital. But it is much more difficult to stay out of the shelter system if you have children or a loved one with you. Some families who do go into the shelter system don't want to, but they do it for the sake of their kids.

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One of the biggest problems we experienced at Tent City was that the Parks Department would lock the public rest-rooms every day at 4 p.m. That made things difficult. At that time, counting Tent City and the other folks who were not part of our camp, you had anywhere from 300 to 325 people living in the park, including some women and children, and no bathroom after four o'clock. Of course that meant that you would get a bad smell in some areas. We preferred the rest-room to using the trees and the grass. We did not want to go to the bathroom outside, but we were left with no choice.

Late that month, the police told us to move to the other side of the park. We told them we did not want to move. Finally, Deputy Inspector Michael Julian, of the 9th Precinct, came in person. Julian was tall, slim, and fairly good looking. He had come into power under the banner of Bush's "kinder, gentler" phrase. But he was very condescending. He came over to us and told us we had to move to the Avenue B side of Tompkins Square Park.

"We'll leave you guys alone in this park if you go down to Avenue B and pitch your tents," he told us.

I said, "Hey, you gotta be crazy."

I told him we refused to go because that side of the park was drug-infested. That was where the people hung out who did the drugs, and we did not want to be bothered with that. We did not want anything to do with hard drugs. Imagine a situation with over 300 people living in the park at one time, and a little bit more than half were doing needle drugs. There were also people from the neighborhood who came to the park to buy needle drugs. In every section of the park except ours, they were dealing heroin and cocaine. We had created our own security force in Tent City, and we would kick out people who were doing heroin or coke.

Besides the hard drug situation, we had strategic reasons for not wanting to be bunched together into one crowd with everybody who was living in the park. Not all the people living in the park got along with each other. We had an ongoing feud with the punk rockers who lived in another part of the park. More

importantly, though, we were aware that a park curfew law was going into effect starting July 5th. We were aware that the parks department police were going to come and get us.

"There is no way you are going to put us in one bundle, one crowd of people and make it easy for you to come and get us out of this park," we told Julian. "We don't intend to make it easy for you, and we have no intention of leaving."

So we stayed where we were and Julian and the city officials stayed where they were—for the time being. Their stated reason for wanting us out of the park was bogus. They said they were concerned about the drug problems in the park. Drugs had been rampant in the park for years and the police ignored it. Now suddenly they were concerned.

One part of the problem was that since the police were sending any and all homeless people to the park, drugs in the park naturally increased. But the truth of the matter is, if it weren't for the fact that Tent City existed in Tompkins Square Park, they would not have done anything about the drugs. Once we started making noise about poverty and homelessness, the cops started putting it in the paper and in the neighborhood that the homeless people in the park were all drug addicts. They also said later for the *New York Times* that we had been living there for only a week, as if that lie could justify what they eventually did.

On Wednesday, the fifth of July, 1989, we waited.

Police were gathering, but nothing overt was happening yet. Over at Washington Square Park, a lot of skinheads had been burning American flags, demonstrating against anybody living in Tompkins Square Park. Then they left Washington Square Park, marching to Tompkins Square Park. They came into the park raising hell, trying to scare all of us out.

I was sitting in front of my tent with Red Wolf. We were just sitting there on one side of the benches, the skinheads and their crowd on the other side of the benches. As long as the skinheads stayed on their side of the benches and their side of the fences and didn't come to our tents, we were going to leave it alone. But Red Wolf and I sat ready with our pieces of pipe. Instead of

trying to calm down these skinheads, or walk them out, the cops just watched.

We passed the word around that the skinheads were coming. If there was not a unity among all the homeless people in the park, there were a lot of people who were scared, but not ready to lose their tents to the skinheads. It was bad enough we were going to get taken by the cops, but we were not going to let anybody else do it. Everybody started coming out from their tents, and even the punk rockers came over carrying sticks and pipes. They were with us.

We were ready to do business.

The skinheads were being surrounded, then. They were not only confronted by the homeless residents of the park, but also confronted by the activists and people from the neighborhood who were coming to our aid. That's when the cops started dispersing the crowd. As it turned out, most of the skinheads, seeing the crowd of homeless people with clubs and bats, realized they were not going to be able to do what they wanted so they backed off. So we had a rest that day.

At nine that evening the police force came.

More than 250 police in riot gear with long billy clubs advanced on the park, with about a dozen Parks Department police. Helmeted police on horses. Helicopters loudly chopping overhead. The police told all non-homeless people to leave the park. But by that time we had almost 200 supporters from the area.

At 9:30 three green Parks Department garbage trucks rumbled into the park. The line of police pushed us back, while the Parks Department workers came in tearing and ransacking, knocking down our handmade shelters with sledgehammers and axes and throwing food, clothes, and IDs into the garbage trucks.

The cops were already hip to the idea that Tent City contained the noise makers and the ones that were going to give them the problem, so they cleared out all the other shacks and tents in the park before they came to the Tent City area. This was Inspector Julian's "kinder, gentler" way—the same as all the rest: dragging off homeless people.

"Out of the park and into the street!" people were chanting. "No police state!"

This was my first time being involved in anything this heavy. As I watched, I was scared, but I was angry too. I had no intention of leaving because my blood was in that neighborhood. One of my daughters had been born on Ludlow Street nearby. My Polish friend had died on a bench there, frozen to death. All my life I had tried to escape New York and make a life. I had worked in New Jersey, Wisconsin and Florida. But by the night the cops came in, I was at the point where I didn't want to go anywhere else anymore. I no longer wanted to escape New York. This time I would not stand apart from what was happening.

When the cops were coming to tear down all the tents, Red Wolf and I stayed, as did some of the punk rockers and some concerned citizens from Jersey who were willing to stay there and maybe get their heads beat in. I decided I was going to sit there by my tent, and they would have to pick me up and take me away. An inspector or captain kept coming up to me.

"Take your stuff and leave," he would say.

"I'm not going to leave," I kept telling him.

At last he said, "If pretty soon you don't do it, we're going to have to come in and people are going to get hurt."

That was good psychology because I did not want any blood on my hands, especially of people we were trying to help. I did not want anybody to get hurt. So I told the guys to come on and we split.

One of our Tent City residents, a black man named Keith Thompson, was sitting on the ground crying, with one arm over his suitcase and his other clutching a garbage bag of his belongings. Armed police stood guard with their arms crossed or hands on their guns, making sure that no one stopped the Parks Department workers from trashing the belongings of the homeless. I watched as real litter got left in the park while the Parks Department workers threw everything some of us had—including ID, medication, and clothing—into the mouths of those big green trash trucks.

That is the moment I became an activist, when I saw the destruction. I realized that the government or powers-that-be could do that at any given time. Now it became personal.

As it turned out, we ended up going out onto Avenue A and 7th Street that night. That's where the real demonstration started taking place.

## CHAPTER 15

## Up from the Wounded Streets

That night, after the cops kicked us out of Tompkins Square Park, we gravitated toward 7th Street and Avenue A, the site of the bloody confrontation that people in the neighborhood were having with the police. The cops barricaded all park entrances and made sure their forces were numerous enough that nobody could get back into the park.

In response, over 400 neighborhood supporters, housing activists, squatters, and homeless proceeded to block the streets so that no cars were getting through all night long. The intersection at A and 7th was filled with people. More than 30 plainclothes officers were helping to arrest people. We ended up starting a bonfire in the middle of the block between 7th and 8th Street on Avenue A. Somebody set an American flag on fire. Firecrackers were set off under cars. Some people threw bottles and eggs at the police. Thirty-one people were arrested and others got beat up by the police or the skinheads. It seemed as if the cops did not care who they hit. They were indiscriminate. People came out of buildings, who knows, maybe just to try to get to the store, and they were attacked by police. It was a very bloody incident.

A fire truck pulled up. The firemen came with the intention of using the fire hose on us, but at first they didn't do anything. They just stood there and watched. By that time we had been there almost eight hours. Eventually Inspector Julian decided it was time to stop the fire and get the people out of the street. So they put out our bonfire, and we started another one.

Finally the authorities decided they had had enough of us being in the streets, so they let us back into the park. Everybody who still had any of their stuff brought it back in. But the police had destroyed most of the tents.

When they tore down our tents that night, I realized for the first time just how much they really didn't give a damn about me.