

AFTERWARD

I write this from a small apartment in Albany, New York. It is 1993 and I am 42 years old.

I began these stories in 1974. I had been living in Manhattan for about a year, on the corner of W. 98th Street and Broadway, an area that was literally falling apart around me. I worked odd jobs, collected unemployment insurance, and sometimes wrote articles for local newspapers. On the streets, I saw and occasionally talked to people unlike any I had ever known before. I grew interested in writing a book about the neighborhood street walkers.

I talked the idea over with my roommate, a photographer. He and I decided to do a series of portraits of these woman: he would take photographs and I would write short profiles. We would create a coffee-table style book, with photos and text on facing pages; we imagined that somehow this would be our ticket to success.

One night, we went out together in search of a prostitute.

We found one half a block from our building, walking just ahead. From the rear, she looked like any other West Side prostitute: blond wig, tight miniskirt, torn stockings, red platform shoes. A suggestion of beard beneath her face powder, however, gave her away. She was Margie, the transvestite who is the subject of the first story in this book.

After Margie, our interests began to diverge. My roommate wanted to do a photo essay of the transvestites in the neighborhood (there was a hotel a block away which was

almost entirely populated by transvestites), while I wanted to describe more generally the New York City street scene. We collaborated on two more interviews, then parted ways.

For the next two years, I drifted. I wandered the streets of Manhattan and Brooklyn, carrying with me a note pad, camera, and tape recorder.

I was drawn, consistently, to people further out on the edge than I was.

I wrote down and photographed what I saw.

Coming to know these people and to write these stories has shaped me.

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In the spring of 1976, I pulled together enough material for a book proposal.

Through a series of chance encounters, I acquired an agent, and he circulated an outline and sample chapters to some twenty-two New York publishers.

Most of the editors who read my material returned it with a note saying that while they found the material interesting, the subject was too "downbeat" to be salable. An editor at one publishing house liked my ideas, but felt I was not sufficiently qualified to write the book; she suggested I team up with a sociologist, then try her again. Another wanted a book strictly about bag ladies. Yet another was prepared to offer a considerable advance, but only if I would write, as he put it, "about the more bizarre and eccentric inhabitants of our streets... who perform their wonderful brand of street theater, which, for a lot of us, makes a city a more interesting place to be."

The closest I came to a book contract was at Scribners, an old, well-respected New York publishing house. There, the editorial board approved the book, subject only to a final O.K. from the publisher himself, who was then in London. According to my agent, the

publisher, on his return, declared that "such a book should never be published." The editor in charge of the project returned my manuscript with her regrets; she left there some months later. Charles Scribner II never returned my calls.

Shortly after that, I put the street people book aside, persuaded by my agent to accept a contract for a book about American folk music. In 1977, I moved to Brooklyn, where I finished the folk music book. In 1979, I left New York. I drifted again for a year, then eventually moved to Boston, Massachusetts, and finally to Albany.

I attempted, again, to get my stories published, this time with a French publisher, who offered me a contract and an advance (and the check cleared). But the book was never published.

For the past eight years, I have been writing about computers. I tried to abandon this project and this kind of writing; it seemed pointless to continue working on something no one would ever read. Carrying this material with me, however, has been like keeping a burdensome secret that can neither be told nor forgotten. Writing of this sort, I've also discovered, is the only way I know to make sense of being human. Without it, I am blind.

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I met the people in these stories largely by chance -- they are everywhere in a city the size of New York, if your eyes are open to seeing them. I have changed details here and there, and I have changed most of the names, because the people I wrote about asked me to make them less recognizable. I believe they felt about their lives much as I did: that they were somehow better than that. I hope they were right.

When I approached these people, I said I was writing a book about New York, and that I thought they had points of view different from the points of view one usually reads

about in books and magazines. Sometimes, I added that I thought the rest of the world had the wrong ideas about them and that I hoped writing their side of the story would help put things straight; they usually agreed it might. They confided in me, I think, because I was genuinely interested in what they had to say, and because I seemed sincere and harmless. Perhaps they were also flattered, or simply amused. Sometimes, we talked where I found them. At other times, they came to my apartment to talk.

In the years since then, I have wondered how sincere and harmless I really was. Certainly, my motivations now seem less than pure. Even then, I often felt that I was taking something from the people I interviewed, burrowing into their lives under false pretenses, and I sometimes worried that, by intruding into an area in which I did not belong, I might do more harm than good, both to myself and to the people I intruded upon.

If it is true that I was sometimes less than honest with the people I met, it is also true that these tales are riddled with self-contradiction, their narrators often untrustworthy. (Were these stories straight transcriptions of the conversations I had, they would still be largely fiction.) I suppose that at times my subjects deliberately lied -- they had no reason, after all, to trust me with the truth. However, I also believe that they were often, themselves, unable to completely discern fact from fiction.

Friends who read early drafts of these stories have asked me what I was doing there and why I wrote what I did. I have asked myself what I have learned in the years since then.

At the time, I saw the people I wrote about as strong and adaptable in ways I could never be, connected to life with an intensity I would probably never achieve, and I was taken with the apparent romance of their lives. Now, despite the genuine strength of

character these stories often reveal, I see that those lives were hell. A friend of mine has suggested that the people in these stories tried to escape from the hell they lived in by reinventing their lives. He has also suggested that I was motivated by a similar impulse: that I wrote not so much for the humanitarian or journalistic reasons I expressed at the time, nor for the exploitative ones I feared were beneath the surface, but because through articulating these tales, I hoped to articulate myself. Perhaps so.

I was a good deal more naïve and vulnerable, then, than I am today.

Then, I believed that a writer could change the world for the better and I was trying to become one, to do that. I thought that you wrote to expose obvious but overlooked truths and that revealing those truths somehow helped things along. Now, I do not believe writing often "changes the world" in any permanent way, though I do think it can let you see life from another's point of view, and that that is no small thing.

Then, I was drifting, and I often wondered what, if anything, separated me from the people I wrote about. Now, I know that I am, and probably always will be, on this side of the edge, though I see that what put me here owes as much to the luck of the draw as to any conscious effort.

Then, I saw myself as a kind of anthropologist, reaching into another world and bringing back something of value.

Now, I see that we are all equally human, and that we all deserve -- though seldom get -- an equal chance to survive. And I have learned to survive.

David J. Bookbinder, 1993