

Postcards from the Edge

Allison Stateman

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It's one of those bone-numbing rainy days, the kind that gets under your fleece and rain gear, rendering all attempts at warmth futile. Julie, 26, is in a mood as foul as the weekend weather.

"This is ridiculous," she said, her words punctuated with four-letter invectives. "You would think that people would be more willing to help out, but it's not like that."

"Actually," she added, gesturing toward her plastic cup, clearly disappointed with its thin layer of coins, "on nicer days I make more money."

Strangers are both intrigued and repelled by this slight, black-clad figure, a pilled skullcap low on her forehead, who is slumped against a wall adorned with graffiti. Black dirt is caked under her fingernails and nestled in the crevices of her open palms.

A patch of sidewalk near the corner of 14th Street and University Place is Julie's regular spot to beg for spare change, to "spange," as she and her friends put it. This is where Julie spends most of her days, along with Whiskey, her tawny shepherd-pit bull mix, and Samantha, a pretty, 20-year-old brunette. Samantha, who goes by Sam and is from upstate New York, is dressed in baggy combat pants ripped at the crotch, and, like her companion, refuses to give her last name.

Along with "Dumpster diving"—scrounging for garbage outside restaurants—Julie and Sam meet their needs for food and shelter by using signs that advertise their plight. Sometimes Sam carries a sign that reads, "Trying to Get Home to My Mother's House." Julie's current sign, which is illustrated with paw prints, reads: "Homeless, Hungry and Broke. We are trying to get off the street tonight. Need @ \$30 for a place to sleep. Please help. Thank you!!" The amount requested is her share of the approximately \$65 that she and Sam will need to rent a cheap room for the night.

If they come up short, they will sleep on a side street, under scaffolding or an awning. Julie used to stay in squats on the Lower East Side, but more often than not, it's a cold, concrete bed for her.

FYI

Allison Stateman is an award-winning writer whose work has appeared in the *New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. As a former resident of NYC's East Village, she observed urban nomads' migration patterns firsthand, as they'd come and settle in each summer, sometimes right outside her front door. She wanted to explore their lives of perpetual motion and the often-angry responses their mere presence provoked among some of the neighborhood's residents.

For the last decade Julie has been part of a little-known segment of homeless youth often called urban nomads. Year in and year out they travel to a few select North American cities, living on little or no money on the fringes of a society they have grown disillusioned with or, like Julie, actively despise.

Like birds, they migrate according to the weather, spending the winter in the warmer parts of the South and West—San Francisco, New Orleans and Austin are favorites—before returning north as the weather grows milder. Manhattan is a prime destination, even though the life, never easy, is likely to get harder, given impending budget cuts that would affect the city's social services.

According to statistics provided by the Partnership for the Homeless, an advocacy group, an estimated 19,000 homeless and runaway youths live in New York's shelters or on its streets.

"New York is a place where people come for all reasons," said City Councilman Alan J. Gerson, who sponsored a conference at Pace University two weeks ago to explore the growing problem of homeless youth in the city. "That's the history of New York. So if a person is homeless on our streets, they are our problem and our imperative."

BASIC BLACK, AND TATTOOS

Urban nomads like Julie are a population that social scientists have only recently begun to study. Chief among those who focus on this group is Don C. Des Jarlais, research director at the Baron Edmond de Rothschild

Chemical Dependency Institute at Beth Israel Medical Center. The center has just issued preliminary findings from its Urban Nomad Study, now in its third year.

For the purposes of the study, urban nomads are defined as youths who have traveled to at least five different cities or towns in the past three years and at least three within the past year. After interviewing several hundred people who fit these criteria, the researchers are getting a feel for who they are, though hard statistics are elusive.

"We haven't really attempted to get a good estimate of the numbers, but I'd say it's probably in the thousands," said Dr. Des Jarlais. He estimates that nationally there may be 5,000 to 10,000 urban nomads, 1,000 of whom pass through New York each year.

Dr. Des Jarlais discovered urban nomads during an earlier study of drug users on the Lower East Side. "I was curious how they managed, how they survive," he said. "And the subtext was, 'Could I do that?'"

"This is a challenging lifestyle," he added. "But it's not as if they have totally given up on their lives."

Dr. Des Jarlais says that while urban nomads sometimes exaggerate or dramatize their pasts, they tend not to make up stories. Their parents are often ambivalent about their children leaving. "Some parents were probably very upset that they left, and some were probably very happy to see them go." Seventy to 80 percent of urban nomads said they stayed in touch with their parents, usually their mothers, but, he said, "when we asked, 'Could you go back home?' only 50 percent said they could."

While urban nomads and the city's traditional homeless youth often share a history of physical or sexual abuse, the two groups differ in many respects. Typically, New York's population of runaways and homeless youths is heavily minority and includes both girls and boys. By contrast, urban nomads tend to be white and largely male, with backgrounds that are typically working-class and occasionally middle-class. Many are children from homes where a parent's remarriage has produced family conflicts. Others are simply bored.

"In general, their home situations are not good, but it is not like they are in dire danger or anything like that," Dr. Des Jarlais said. "They are sort of not getting along well at home and they want to do something different, so they leave."

Unlike most of New York's runaways, who often pursue the dual street-survival occupations of drug-dealing and

prostitution and hang out in places like Times Square, urban nomads tend to shun prostitution and heavy drug use and are drawn to the East Village and the Lower East Side.

The East Village holds a particular attraction because of its history of social and political unrest, its squatter tradition and its punk roots, typified by landmarks like CBGB's on the Bowery. The usual attire of combat or work clothes or basic black, set off by multiple piercings and tattoos, also mirrors the punk and working-man sympathies of the typical urban nomad.

But looking different can backfire. "From the moment they get into town, they're targeted by police because of the way they look," said John Welch, program director of Safe Horizon's Streetwork Project on the Lower East Side, a group that serves several hundred urban nomads each year. "They're more visible." As a result, they are often ticketed for minor offenses, like panhandling.

DRUG-FREE, BURNED OUT

Passers-by will tell Julie she doesn't need money if she has enough cash to pay for her tattoos and all that silver. In fact, she often wears long-sleeve shirts to hide her extensive network of tattoos, and she readily explains that she got them for free from friends who were budding tattoo artists and practiced on her.

It may, however, be the choice of artwork that makes people pause. A pentagram and a black skull with twisted horns are imprinted on her neck, and her hands and left upper arm are decorated with the phrases "Godless" and "What Life?"

"It's a scare tactic," she said. "I'm not in any way a holy person, but I'm also not satanic. It kind of reflects how I feel inside about people and life and the world and stuff. I'm not a happy, colorful, optimistic person, so a lot of my tattoos interpret the way I feel about everything."

Julie's physical condition also startles. Her front teeth, which arch out slightly, are yellowed, and she is rail-thin even for her petite frame. Julie hasn't been to a doctor or dentist in more than 10 years. However, she can recite the dates on which Whiskey was vaccinated and spayed and carries the paperwork to prove it in her army-green pack.

In fact, Whiskey seems to be the only being she doesn't seem to dislike, herself included. At one point, she grasped Whiskey's face and wept. "I love this dog, man," she said as Whiskey licked her tears before she could wipe them away.

Dogs play a big part in the urban nomad culture, providing their street-bound owners with companion-

ship and protection. "A lot of people say, 'Oh, why don't you stay in a shelter?'" Julie said, mimicking their concerned tone. "Well, obviously it's because I have a dog. 'Well, why don't you give the dog away?' I love my dog. I'm not going to give my dog away so I can stay in a shelter. I'd rather sleep in the street."

Almost everyone who passes her stares. Some people grimace in disgust; a few cross the street. When a woman starts to take a picture of Julie, the action pushes her over the edge. "Can you not do that, please?" Julie asks.

"People think of us as some kind of New York landmark," she said later, her pale blue eyes glowering. "It's amusing to them. I am amusing to them. 'Oh, look at that, honey,'" she said in the mocking tone she adopts when impersonating strangers. "That little creep with the dog begging for money."

Indeed, many passers-by are drawn less by her than by her pet, who this day rests a weary head upon Julie's thigh and shivers despite the red sweater wrapped tightly around her. Several people who drop change in Julie's cup announce, "This is for the dog."

This angers Julie. "They think I'm going to use it for drugs," she explained. She admits that she used heroin for four years, but said she has been drug-free since 2001.

Although Julie says she has been coming to the city every year since she was 17, making cross-country excursions to San Francisco and Portland when she can prevail on Sam to watch Whiskey, she is hard pressed to explain exactly why she is here.

"First of all, I'm kind of preoccupied with my financial situation," she said, "and No. 2, five or six years ago I might be able to speak really clearly about how I feel about things, but now I'm just so exhausted with having to explain myself all the time. Maybe it's just because I've had so much time to think, because I'm just sitting around thinking, that it's just like my brain is just burned out."

"I've become this kind of totally miserable, hateful person because I have to look at all these people every single day," she added. "But I put myself here, so I can't really blame anybody else. I guess I could have done things a little differently when I was younger, but I don't know."

Julie says she ran away from her home in New Hampshire at the age of 15. Asked why she left, she responds with an obscenity about her parents. According to her account of her early years, she spent time in a children's home and a year at Keene State

College in New Hampshire before flunking out and hitting the road with like-minded friends.

She says she misses her father, who just turned 60 and used to work in computers. But the few times she has reached out to her parents, she said, by phone or through visits, she has been rejected. According to Julie, they are still angry at her for running away.

After so many years on the street, Julie doesn't seem to know what to make of generosity or choice. When a sailor in town for Fleet Week approached and peeled off a \$5 bill, she asked awkwardly if he were really a sailor. Later on, when asked what she'd like for dinner, she had to think for several minutes, not wanting to blow a rare opportunity to choose her food. She opted for Taco Bell.

Despite evidence to the contrary, Julie doesn't think of herself as homeless.

"Homeless people to me are people who push around shopping carts and push strollers and they just sit around," she said. "Lazy and crazy is what I say."

The next day she's not so sure. "Once you do this for a while," she said, "it gets kind of exhausting and it's hard not to give in to those things that will make your life a little bit easier, such as getting a job and settling down and having security blankets and a nice place to live."

Could she ever lead that kind of life? "I hope so," she replied morosely, "because I don't want to be pushing a shopping cart around when I'm 50. If I make it to 50."

Dr. Des Jarlais has found that urban nomads seldom reach that age. "We've found almost nobody over 30," he said. "Some of them tend to move into conventional society and some of them, of course, develop health problems and die." Few find their way into organized programs, in part because programs that meet their needs are scarce.

THE "GRAPES OF WRATH" ROUTE

Urban nomad culture is built upon a patchwork of traditions that reflect its anti-establishment bent. Hopping freight trains, a practice that harkens back to the hobo of the Depression, is a favored mode of transportation. Many urban nomads find work sporadically as house painters or migrant laborers in the tradition chronicled in John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*.

Shane, 26, a soft-spoken friend of Julie's who travels to Maine each August to harvest the state's famed blueberries, matches the template perfectly.

Unlike Julie, who is all explosive energy, Shane is mellowness personified. Though coated in grime from the top of his once-beige Dewar's baseball cap to the tips of his work boots, though his backpacks emit the musky odor of too many nights spent sleeping in the rain and soot, he manages to maintain an air of dignity.

Even his choice of tattoos belies a gentler nature, from the character from his favorite comic book, *The Realm of Chaos*, etched on his forearm to the heart and scroll adorned with the names of his two former dogs, Sasha and Blue, on his bicep. Perhaps because of the shave he just finagled in a rest-room at Kmart on Astor Place, his angular face, punctuated by a strawberry-blond goatee, looks surprisingly youthful.

Shane, who is stationed across the street from Julie, is biding his time in the city before moving on to his next odd job.

"I follow the harvest," he said. "I do blueberries in Maine, then I do beets. I go down to Virginia and do apples. I go up to Alaska and work in the canneries. I don't like to stay in one place for too long. I love traveling. I don't like the whole 9-to-5 thing. I like to go to work for a couple of weeks, a couple of months at a time, and save up for whatever gear I need and go on to the next place."

Shane said he has a regular winter gig painting houses in Townsend, Wash., a job that provides a steady income and a trailer for shelter. Like the majority of older urban nomads, he eventually tired of the city circuit and began opting for odd jobs that took him to smaller towns; by contrast, younger nomads are usually drawn to the glitz that bigger urban environments offer.

Shane says he likes his life. But even if he wanted to get a conventional job, doing so without a permanent address would be nearly impossible.

"Some people tell you to get a job," he said. "They don't understand that I'd love to have a job, but it's kind of hard when you're homeless to walk into a place when you don't have an address or anything. To get a place to live, you have to have a job, but then again to get a job, you have to have a place to live where you can wake up

every day to go to work. That's why I do the harvests. You can camp right there and go to work."

Shane, who said he was born and raised in Washington State, was not always the self-described laid-back person he presents himself as today. A decade ago, he was a rebellious, hard-partying teenager, with a tough Navy man as a stepfather. At one point, his mother gave him an ultimatum: Follow the house rules or get out.

"I was doing a lot of drinking, so I wasn't listening to my mother, so I ended up getting kicked out when I was 16, so I've been on my own since then," he said. "She told me if I couldn't follow her rules and my stepfather's rules, then I wasn't welcome to live there. And being the know-it-all that I was as a teenager, I just left."

He first came to New York at 17, drawn by a sense that this was his true place. His real father, who had left his mother around the time Shane was born, was originally from the city, and though Shane has never met his father, the city has not disappointed.

"When I was young, I used to picture New York a lot and see movies about it," he said from his curbside vantage point, surrounded by skeletons of umbrellas, abandoned cigarettes and clouds of bus exhaust. "I guess I just always wanted to see it.

"It was just like I thought it would be," he added. "It's just beautiful. The old brownstones and old buildings. It's such an old city and has such history. I like it here."

Shane recently earned his high school equivalency diploma and spends time in the main reading room of the New York Public Library, writing in his journal and reading books like *Last Exit to Brooklyn*.

His mother, a former teacher, is retired and lives with his stepfather in Spain. He calls and writes her regularly, and he gets her mail sent care of Streetwork's Lower East Side center. "Me and mom are really close," he said. "I talk to her a lot."

Reaching into a torn Duane Reade bag, he pulled out photographs of his mother's Chihuahua, dressed in a sweater, and a postcard she had sent him from Portugal. Does his mother worry about him? "I think she used to because I used to be into a lot of drugs," he said. "But she knows I've grown out of that."

CONSIDER

- 1 How do urban nomads compare to your preconceptions of homeless teens? Is it fair to say they choose to be homeless? Why or why not?
- 2 What are your thoughts about the lifestyle of urban nomads? Are there elements that appeal to you? What does their lifestyle say about more conventional ways of living?