CAN'T GET THERE FROM HERE

TODD STRASSER

AUTHOR OF GIVE A BOX AGWA
"Here is where you are.  
There is where you want to be.  
But you can't get there from here."

—Harrison Blanchard aka OG
Maggot said we should go up to Times Square to watch the ball drop and pick some pockets, but we never got around to it. Instead we hung out in front of the Good Life Deli like we always did. Maggot, Rainbow, 2Moro, and me. A cold mist drifted out of the dark, the little droplets sparkling in the streetlights. Maggot and me sat under the awning of the newspaper stand on the corner. The damp matted down our hair. Black puddles dotted the street and steam rose like ghosts from the manhole covers. Rainbow sat cross-legged against the wall, loose strands of blond hair falling out of a blue wool cap, her head nodding almost down to her lap. 2Moro leaned against the streetlight with her arms crossed, not saying anything to anyone, just waiting for someone to say something to her.

It was one of those nights when there wasn’t much traffic on the streets of New York. Most of the New Year’s parties were done with their stupid celebrations and back in the four-walled cells they called apartments. Prisoners of the system, Maggot said. Now, only the newspaper delivery trucks and taxis passed, their tires making squishy sounds on the wet, black pavement. Out
here in the cold where we weren’t walled in, we were free to go where we pleased.

"Guess the cops have the night off," Maggot said, his brown dreadlocks stringy from the mist; his breath a small cloud of fog.

"The rest of the world, too," muttered 2Moro. She was wearing a red-and-orange patchwork jacket, a tight black skirt, and high black boots. Her short dyed red hair was matted down on her forehead like a cap. The piercings in her ears and eyebrow and nose glinted in the streetlight. Tattooed around her neck was a circle of black barbed wire.

I sipped cold coffee from a paper cup. At night we drank coffee to stay awake. It was safer to sleep during the day.

A man and a woman came around the corner wearing raincoats and sharing a red umbrella. They slowed down when they saw us. The woman slid her arm through the man’s and said something in his ear. Probably wanted him to turn around and go another way. But the man shook his head. Taking stiff strides, they walked toward us.

When they got near, the woman wrinkled her nose like something smelled bad.

"Have fun tonight?" Maggot asked, kind of menacing.

The couple broke stride. "Yes, we did," the man answered.

"No work tomorrow, huh?" Maggot said. "Get to sleep in."

"That’s right."

"Day after that it’s back to the old nine-to-five grind," Maggot said.

"You could say that," answered the man.

"Happy New Year," said 2Moro, not in a friendly way.

"Same to you," said the man. He and the woman hurried past. She kept glancing over her shoulder at us until they reached the next corner.

"Robots," Maggot said. "Just following the rules. Work till they die. Then new robots replace them."

"Check this." 2Moro tilted her head down the sidewalk. A man came toward us, unsteady, dragging the toes of his shoes. The shoulders of his suit were dark with water and his white shirt collar was open, a blue-and-red tie hanging like an upside down noose. His face was clean-shaven, and even though his wet hair fell flat on his forehead, you could see that it had been recently trimmed.

We watched as he stumbled along, not yet aware of us. When he passed under a streetlight, something gold glinted on his wrist and light reflected off his wet polished leather shoes.

"Come to daddy," Maggot whispered, cracking his knuckles.

From her seat against the wall Rainbow raised her head. "Oh, Maggot, you’re so full of it. You never rolled a drunk in your life."

"People do it all the time. How hard could it be?"
“He’s big,” I said.

“The bigger they are, the harder they fall,” Maggot rose to his feet. “He’ll never know what hit him.”

“Let’s do it,” said 2Moro. She crossed the sidewalk and joined Maggot in the shadow of the newsstand awning.

Rainbow pressed her hands against the ground and tried to push herself up. “Come on, Maybe. Time to get outta here.” But she lost her grip and slid back down.

“Try again.” I put my hands under the arms of her black leather jacket and helped her up. Out of the corner of my eye I saw the drunk guy a dozen yards away down the dark, wet sidewalk. He looked up, saw us, and stopped. I got Rainbow to her feet, turned her by the shoulders, and started to lead her away.

We were halfway down the block when the scuffle began. Maggot and 2Moro trying to wrestle the drunk down. Maggot pulling at the guy’s jacket from the front. 2Moro hitting him from behind. Only the drunk didn’t seem to get the idea. 2Moro and Maggot barely came up to his shoulders. He swung his arms and Maggot went down. Then he grabbed 2Moro and threw her so hard she disappeared between two parked cars. The drunk took a step, tripped over Maggot, and fell to his hands and knees. Maggot got up and jumped on his back. 2Moro came out from between the parked cars and started to kick the guy in the sides.

The guy yanked Maggot down to the sidewalk and straddled him. 2Moro was still kicking and hitting him, but the guy hardly seemed to notice. Pinned on his back under the drunk, Maggot flailed with open hands. The drunk slammed his fist into Maggot’s face. Down the block Rainbow and me heard the crunching sound and saw Maggot go limp on the sidewalk. The drunk grabbed 2Moro by the wrist. She tried to shake free, but he wouldn’t let go. He staggered to his feet and pulled his fist back like he was going to hit her next.

“Hey, don’t!” I yelled and ran back toward them. I hated it when kids got hit. Got hit too many times myself. Not just with fists, neither.

Still holding 2Moro by the wrist, the drunk turned to look at me. I stopped a dozen feet away. “Please don’t hurt her, Mister. Please?”

“They jumped me,” the guy said.

“They’re just kids. They didn’t mean it.”

“Didn’t mean it? You crazy? They were kickin’ and hittin’ me. They wanted to rob me.”

Maggot sat up on the sidewalk, hands covering his mouth and nose, dark red blood seeping out between his fingers. The drunk still had 2Moro by the wrist. She kept swinging, trying to hit him.

“Let me go!” she screeched.

“Let her go,” I said. “She’s just a girl. Please?”

“You kiddin’ me? She’s twice as bad as him.” The drunk pointed at Maggot.

“Just let her go,” I said. “I promise she won’t hurt you.”

“I’m gonna kill this pig!” 2Moro screamed, still
clawing and scraping like a wild animal. The drunk twisted her arm tighter.

"Ow!" 2Moro yelped.

"You better stop," I told her, "or he's gonna hurt you bad."

2Moro stopped.

"If I let go, you gonna go quietly?" the drunk asked.

"Drop dead." 2Moro spit.

He yanked her arm up behind her back. 2Moro let out a squeal and went limp. "Okay, okay," she whimpered. The guy let go and 2Moro stumbled away, cradling her arm. The whole thing must have sobered the guy up, because he stood straighter and tightened the blue-and-red tie around his collar. He looked down at his suit. The knee was torn. "Look what you kids did."

"Sorry," I said.

"Sorry?" he repeated. "Your friends jump me and you're sorry?"

"They just wanted some money."

"Then they should've asked." He looked around. 2Moro was rubbing her sore arm. Maggot was sitting on the sidewalk, staring at the blood on his hands. Down the block Rainbow was leaning against another wall, her head and shoulders again dipping toward her waist.

"Just a bunch of punks out to roll some drunks on New Year's Eve," the guy grumbled in disgust.

"No kidding," Maggot muttered.

"Well, you picked the wrong drunk." The guy started to walk away through the mist. He reached into his pocket and tossed out a handful of loose change. As the coins clattered onto the sidewalk, he said, "Happy New Year."
Country Club was lying in Piss Alley next to a Christmas tree someone had thrown out a window of the apartment building next door. The Christmas tree was on its side; Country Club lay on his back. His eyes were open. Glassy and dull. Like he was staring straight up at heaven. Sometimes on sunny days Country Club's eyes looked green. But on this cold gloomy day his eyes were as gray as the clouds overhead.

Under a film of dirt Country Club's skin was pasty and almost green. He had a wispy light brown beard, thin so you could see through it to his jaw and chin. On his left cheekbone was a long, crusty brown scab. On his right cheek was a small black tattoo of a spider's web. His long, tangled brown hair was spread out on the ground, mixed in with the torn papers and candy wrappers and bent straws that littered the alley. Bits of paper and dirt and a single strand of silver Christmas tinsel clung to his beard. His arms were spread out. One hand turned up, the other turned down. His hips were twisted sideways, his legs bent at the knees like he was running.

But he wasn't going nowhere.

Piss Alley smelled like pee because the restaurants and stores wouldn't let us use their bathrooms. OG was on his knees beside Country Club, sobbing. The tears left light trails down his filthy cheeks. When street people cried, their tears were filmy with grime.

OG's hair was long and dirty blond, dreadlocked, and he had a bushy blond beard. One of his earlobes was stretched to the size of a quarter and had a clear round
plastic plug in it. He wore bars and rings in his eyebrows, nose, and lips. OG and Country Club were partners. They traveled all over together.

OG let out a gurgly, liquid cough. Put his hands on the ground to brace himself, then coughed and coughed while his thin body shook. Then spit out a mouthful of greenish phlegm.

Maggot, Tears, and me stood nearby, watching. My stomach growled and hurt from hunger.

“He must’ve died during the night,” Maggot said. His nose and the left side of his mouth were swollen purple and blue where the drunk guy had punched him. His sweatshirt had a big reddish brown dried bloodstain on the front.

“How?” Tears asked. The newest and youngest member of our “family,” she had showed up a couple of weeks before.

“Don’t know,” Maggot said. “Doesn’t look like he was killed. I don’t see any blood or bruises.”

Maggot talked different from most street kids. They would have said, “don’t see no bruises.” Maggot said “any.”

Tears looked at me with big round brown eyes almost hidden by the straight black bangs that hung down her forehead. “Ever seen a dead person before?”

I didn’t know. Sometimes it was hard to remember.

“Yeah,” I said, even though I wasn’t sure.

“Ever touch a dead person before?” Maggot asked. I knew a dare when I heard one.

“Have you?” I asked back.

Maggot stepped closer to the body. Squatted down and placed his hand on Country Club’s dirty forehead. Kept it there for a moment, then stood up and came back to us.

“What was it like?” Tears practically gasped. When you first saw her, she looked like she was around my age. She had a shape—more of a shape than I did. But she acted young, and if you looked close it seemed like she was still growing. Like her eyes were too big for her round face. It gave her this always startled look. Like everything was a surprise.

“It was weird,” Maggot answered. “I mean, his skin’s cold to the touch. But that’s not the only thing. You have to see for yourself.”

Tears looked at me with those big dark little kid eyes. Like she wanted to know if she should do it. Or if I would.

I went over and squatted next to the body. By now I was pretty sure I’d never seen a dead person before. Never even been to a funeral. People said when you died you either went to Heaven or Hell. Maybe there really was a Hell because there was a show on TV about volcanoes, and it said that deep down inside the earth there was red-hot melted rock. But where was Heaven? People said it was up in the clouds. But what about the days when there were no clouds? Where was Heaven then?

Squatting close to Country Club’s body in Piss
Alley, I looked up at the sky. All you could see were gray clouds where the tops of the buildings ended. Then I looked down at Country Club. Those blank, glassy eyes were staring straight up. "You lookin' for it, Country Club?" I whispered. "Let me know if you find it, okay?"

I reached down and put two fingers on his forehead. Maggot was right. It felt weird. The skin was cold and almost rubbery. I moved it a little with my finger. It didn't go back when I let go. On TV once I saw a man put his hand over the eyes of a dead person and close them. I put a finger on one of Country Club's eyelids and moved it down.

"Hey! What are you doing?" OG's shout caught me by surprise. OG didn't yell much, but when he did you saw the gaps where he was missing teeth and it made him look scary, like a witch or something. He picked up a beer can and threw it at me. It glanced off my forehead, but didn't hurt much because it was empty.

"Leave him alone!" OG screamed. I jumped back to where Maggot and Tears were.

"Gee, Maybe, don't you have any respect for the dead?" Maggot laughed.

OG picked up another beer can and threw it over our heads, yelling, "Get out of here! Leave us alone!"

Tears, Maggot, and me backed down the alley toward the street. We passed the shopping cart Country Club used to push around. It was full of rags and empty bottles. On top was a small black TV set with a dark green screen. It was broken, but in the reflection I could see back down the alley where OG was sitting next to Country Club. It was the last episode of the OG and Country Club Show. But maybe there would be a spin-off. The Return of OG and Country Club. Or maybe Country Club in Heaven.

"What'd it feel like?" Tears asked.

"What?" I was still watching the end of the OG and Country Club Show.

"Touching him."

"I don't know. Like a dead person."

"Was he OG's best friend?" Tears asked.

"Yeah," Maggot said. "I think they'd been together for a long time."

Anyone else would have said, "they been together," but Maggot said, "they'd."

We stepped out of the alley and onto the sidewalk. People walked past wearing coats and hats, carrying briefcases and talking on cell phones, like it was any old day and there wasn't a dead guy a dozen yards away. Tears shoved her hands into the pockets of her gray sweatshirt. Except for the bangs that fell almost into her eyes, her black hair was short.

"Does it happen a lot?" she asked.

"OG throwing beer cans?" Maggot said.

"No, someone dying like that."

"All the time," Maggot said, even though it was the first time I could remember. And I'd been around there since the summer. Longer than Maggot, who showed up when
the leaves on the trees were starting to change colors.

"Don’t it scare you?” Tears asked.

"Naw, Country Club was old,” said Maggot.

"How old?”

"I don’t know. Just old. Like in his twenties,” Maggot said. "You know he was lucky? A thousand years ago, like in the Dark Ages, you were lucky if you lived even that long. Now everybody thinks they’re supposed to live forever."

A woman in blue tights and a red down vest jogged toward us. Maggot held out a dirty hand. His fingernails were painted black. "Spare a little change, ma’am?”

"Sorry, don’t have my wallet,” the jogger answered.

"It’s hard to think about living past eighteen,” I said. "Who’d want to?” added Maggot.

A police car came around the corner. Tears took off down the sidewalk and disappeared. The car stopped at the curb, and the cop in the passenger seat rolled down her window. She had streaked blond hair pulled back into a ponytail. I’d never seen her before, but I’d seen her partner, the one who was driving. His name was Officer Johnson and he was mean. He leaned toward the passenger-side window. "Hey, Maggot, what you dealin’ today, oregano or baby powder?”

"Neither, Officer Johnson. I’m just out here spang- ing,” Maggot answered. Spanging was street talk for spare-changing. "Hardly worth arresting me for. With the way our legal system works, I’ll be back on the street before you can say misdemeanor.”

"You got it all figured out, don’t you, Maggot?” Officer Johnson said with a smirk. The policewoman with the streaked blond hair just looked at us. The black nametag over her badge said Ryan.

"We got report of a dead body around here,” Johnson said. "You kids know anything about that?”

Maggot gave me a look, then glanced over at the entrance to Piss Alley. That was all it took. Officer Ryan got out of the patrol car and put on her dark blue police hat so the ponytail stuck out of the back. The hat looked too big for her head. She was about my height and not fat, but the thick black gun belt with the radio and gun and nightstick made her hips look wider than they really were. She looked down Piss Alley, then pulled the black radio off her belt and spoke into it. She hurried back to the patrol car and said something to Johnson, who was still inside. Then she rushed around to the trunk and got out an orange first aid kit and dashed back to the alley. You could kind of tell she was a new cop. Maybe Country Club was the first dead person she’d ever seen, too. Or maybe she wasn’t sure he was really dead.

Meanwhile, Officer Johnson turned on the flashing lights and backed the car up so that it blocked the alley.

They’d just finished putting up the yellow crime scene tape when the orange-and-white EMS truck arrived, siren bluring and lights flashing. From down in Piss Alley came OG’s raspy, liquid cough. Two EMS
people with white shirts and dark pants got out of the truck and ducked under the crime scene tape. In the alley they talked to Officer Ryan. No one touched Country Club.

A crowd gathered on the sidewalk behind the crime scene tape. A green sedan pulled up. It had a flashing red light on the dashboard. Two men in dark suits got out and ducked under the tape.

“Detectives,” Maggot said.

One of the detectives talked to Officer Ryan. The other told OG to get out of the alley. OG got up slowly and trudged away, the frayed bottoms of his jeans dragging along the ground. He was so skinny, his pants were always sliding off his hips. Went past us and down the street. One of the detectives pulled on white latex gloves and began to feel around Country Club’s body. The other one walked around the alley, looking at the ground and moving pieces of garbage with the tip of his shoe.

The two EMS people went back to the ambulance and got a stretcher with wheels and a long black bag with a zipper.

“Think I could talk to you for a second?” Officer Ryan asked Maggot and me, flipping open a notepad.

“It’s a free country for those who can afford it,” Maggot replied. “First week on the job?”

Officer Ryan looked up and blinked. “How’d you know?”

“Lucky guess,” Maggot said.

“Either of you know his real name?” Officer Ryan pointed her pen at Country Club. We shook our heads. “Where he came from?” she asked. We shook our heads again. Officer Johnson came over. He was a tall cop with a long face and a black mustache. “What are you doing?” he asked Officer Ryan.

“Trying to get some information,” she answered. “From them?” Johnson shrugged. “Don’t waste your time.”

Officer Ryan flipped her notepad closed and followed Johnson back to the patrol car. “Hey,” Maggot called behind them. “What’d he die of?”

“Exposure,” Officer Johnson said over his shoulder without stopping. “To what?” I asked.

“To the cold,” Officer Johnson said as he pulled open the car door. “To drugs, drink, disease, and hunger. Basically to life on the street. If you kids had any sense, you’d go home.”

“What if you don’t have a home to go to?” Maggot asked.

“You’ve got no parents, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, relatives?” asked Officer Ryan.

“You think I’d be living like this if I did?” Maggot said.

“You could go into a shelter.”
"No, thanks," said Maggot. "Last time I spent a night in a shelter they robbed me of everything I had. I'd rather take my chances out here."

"As long as you're out here," Officer Johnson said, "you don't have a chance."

It was the middle of the night and the Good Life Deli was the only place open. Not that we could go in since we didn't have any money. My stomach hurt and some food would have helped, but it was the deli's light we really needed. In the light we weren't gonna get rolled or cut or killed. The really bad ones, the junkies and weirdos who'd slit your throat as soon as look at you, they didn't like the light.

2Moro leaned against the wall, wearing black fishnet stockings and a short red skirt and her orange-and-red patchwork jacket. She was smoking a cigarette. When she first showed up, her skin was a delicate olive tone, but it was more yellow now. Sometimes she forgot to go to the clinic to refill her HIV medications. Most days she spent more money on cigarettes than on food.

Rainbow sat against the wall with her eyes closed, wearing her black leather jacket with the collar turned up. She was nodding over, bending at the waist, her tangled blond hair falling into her lap.

"Why doesn't she just go to sleep?" Tears asked. Her breath was cloudy. We were wearing coats we found on the fence outside the church, but we had no hats or gloves.