

BEFORE***SHIT I got drafted******Chapter 6***

Our flight Vietnam to Seattle had about 5 hours left, I had plenty of time, and started to reflect on how little time it took after my arrival, adjusting to everyday life in the “Big Apple”

My first couple of days in New York City were a bit of culture shock, and I was trying to get to know the area (mostly Manhattan). I spent most of my time around the Times Square and 42nd St. area. I found it to be hectic, but also an exciting part of the city, it was “truly the city that never sleeps”.

To me, the food seemed to be cheap. I could get a burger for \$0.75 with fries and have breakfast for under \$1.00. So, hopefully my money will last until I could find a job.

I spent the days looking for work, any kind of work. It was not easy realizing my limited English was a bit of a handicap, but I kept on trying with a seemingly endless supply of stores and businesses around for me to check out. I would just walk into any store or business and ask them if they could use help telling them I was willing to do pretty much anything they needed.

I found most people to be sympathetic and helpful, asking me where I was from, it gave me hope and confidence that I would find something sooner rather than later. I felt my best chance was to land a job in one of the countless restaurants, most of which would operate 24/7.

There had to be at least 10 movies one after the other on each side of 42nd St. between Times Square and 8th Ave. At first, I would sleep on a subway train, and after a while the noise and rocking motion would put me to sleep but many times I would wake up having no idea where I was, and trying to find my way back to midtown became a challenge at times. The subway system also had an odor with hot and heavy air hanging around.

While standing at the platform it was like the oncoming train pushed the air in front of it gushing the odor and heat into the station. Washing myself in those subway bathrooms was the worst of all but I was not the only one. I found out most people in the subway know where “they” are going and coming from but do not have an overall knowledge of the system. So, I got lost quite a few times.

I would stick my head out above ground and after realizing I was in places like Queens, Brooklyn or anywhere else you

can think of and it was back down and try again. I had no idea and was amazed at how large this subway system was in New York. Soon I learned and found a new place to sleep, the movies.

The movies on 42nd street played all day and night the same movie over and over again seven days a week and just like so many others I would pay my 45 cents and sleep there at least I woke up in the same place.

I remember one movie because I watched it and slept through it a hundred times or more it was called “Zulu”, a movie where the British slaughtered Native Africans by the hundreds if not thousands.

After basically trying every store and office in the neighborhood, to see if I could land a job, it started to frustrate me at times because of my English shortcomings and limited skills but I was determined. Frankly I had no choice but to keep going my money was running low.

Finally, I was able to land a job during my second week as a cleanup and dishwasher guy at a diner. It was the corner of 33rd St. and Broadway the owner Alex Gross seemed to be a likable person, for me this was a big step in the right direction. It worked out well.

My job was to come in around midnight, and I would stay after they closed at around 1 AM, cleaning up the place, it surely could use it, and it took me nearly a week to get the kitchen to look respectable. Alex was very pleased, admitting it had not been this clean for a very long time. I could help myself with some food.

The sinks were large enough for me to wash myself and I got paid for it. I usually finished around 3 or 4 in the morning. I would lock up, and it was back to “Zulu” trying to go to sleep.

Besides the loudness of the movie there were also people coming and going all night long. Getting a good night's rest was not easy but it was the best I could do right now. I felt I had made progress; I was working within two weeks of my arrival. After all this was “the land of opportunity” as I was told. A

few nights after I landed my first job, it was back to the movies, and I was just about to doze off.

Half asleep someone tapped me on my leg, a small Latino guy, woke me up.

He said to me; “*Would you like a blowjob*”?

Again, not speaking much English I could not figure out what kind of job he was offering. But I was tired and decided I really liked the job I already had. So, I told him “*No thanks I just got one.*”

It took me a while before I realized what he had said and luckily, how I answered his offer. Live and learn!

I kept working at the diner for now because it worked out well. I had most days off and worked every night over time I got

to know a few people who like me basically hung out around the Times Square area, but it was not easy because it was never a relationship you could call a true friendship, as they would come and go or disappear altogether at times.

One of my favorite places to eat became a place called “Tats Steakhouse.” They had several locations throughout the city. After giving you a tray and a plate you moved along a line to get a steak, a baked potato, some veggies and a piece of pie. All for \$1.69 this was heaven!

Meantime the owner of the diner Alex who lived in Glen Rock, New Jersey, took a liking to me we would talk sometimes about Holland and Switzerland were he and his family came from. I had gone through Switzerland a few times on the way to Italy on family vacations with my aunt and uncle.

A beautiful peaceful country and quite remarkable when you realize how well they get along with each other not having their own language but instead depending on where in Switzerland, it could be German, French or Italian which never seemed to be a problem. They had newspapers and TV in 3 languages totally acceptable to them! He invited me to his home for a weekend. It was my first time outside of New York City. I remember going over this big bridge the “George Washington Bridge” into New Jersey. The area where he lived had all these beautiful homes and to me it looked like an exclusive area. It was a split-level house very nicely decorated. I figured they had to be millionaires living in such a neighborhood. He drove me around the area, and I got my first look at life in the suburbs. His wife Eleanor worked in the city as well for Macy's. She created all their advertising and was very artistic herself. It turned out to be a great weekend; they took me to a big mall we had a nice meal in a great restaurant and of course sleeping in a real bed gave me a feeling of things to come if I just kept working at it. I remember his car, a red Lincoln Convertible, the size of a boat. They also let me call my mom and it was the first time I talked to her after I left. It was emotional but she was happy to hear I was well and making progress. In the spring of 1965 Alex and Eleanor offered to become my sponsors, which is someone you needed to get your official immigration papers. “The green card”.

A sponsor is someone who commits to being responsible for you, should you get sick or do something illegal. I was very appreciative of their commitment to help me out. But Alex having been an immigrant himself was happy to help and understood my predicament of being here illegally.

I was able to use their address to receive and send mail. And most importantly I used it to obtain my immigration papers. I received my green card in July 1965. YES, *I was in the US legally!* I felt great.

I had noticed a place on 57th St. With two huge doors and it read “The Art Students League”

I walked in and it reminded me a lot of the art school I attended back home. It was a place put together by professional artists. They would hold classes for students who had some sort of talent. The tuition was steep, I do not remember exactly how much certainly more than I had. The secretary did give me an application for a scholarship, and with help from Alex, I filled it out and dropped it off at the “league.”

I was awarded a full scholarship 3 weeks later it felt great! I attended classes for a few hours every day and it made me think how far I had come in the last three or four months since jumping ship.

I made friends again pretty much like the ones I had in Holland who liked Art Jazz and yes parties! I became familiar with and enjoyed the Village downtown with all the jazz clubs and its art galleries. One of my favorite artists/instructors was the painter, “Will Burnett,” I did a lot of wood and linoleum cuts in his class and things looked just fine!

I felt I started to belong. Things were going in the right direction. One of my friends at the Art Students League a girl named “Joan” told me I could share her apartment; she had an extra room it was on E 82nd St. 4th floor no elevator. But I was happy to move in and share some of the cost with her she became a really great friend but just that, we never got romantically involved. I remember on one afternoon finding this little Italian restaurant and decided to have dinner there after looking at the menu I ordered “stuffed shells.”

As the server returned to my table with my plate it looked like nothing I had ordered, these were large pasta type pieces filled with some sort of creamy cheese.

I argued telling her to please get me what I ordered. She came back with a menu and the manager showed me what I ordered. Indeed, it was my order, the problem was my expectation. I thought I would get shells like clamshells or oyster shells with a nice filling. *Seafood!* In the end the manager, the server and I had a good laugh about it. It was just one of those linguistic misunderstandings I had from time to time. I once ordered a Root Beer and spit it out expecting it to be dark Beer. Shit happens! But again, things were about to change, Alex came to the diner one morning and handed me a letter delivered to his house by the government with my name. When I opened it the first line read. “*Greetings*”

And yes, it was a draft notice,

This was only about four months after I became an official immigrant.

I really couldn't believe it, and it took me a while to compose myself and try to figure out my next move. I had no idea exactly what just happened. I went to the draft board in Hackensack, NJ. Thinking it had to be some kind of mistake since I was not a citizen, and I was aware of the conflict going on in Việt Nam as the draft was going full throttle. I was told it's

not a mistake, and that since I became an immigrant, I was eligible for the draft. I was given two options go back to Holland and probably never be allowed to return to the US again, it would make me a draft dodger! Or report February 2nd, 1966, for the draft.

A hell of an option it was a difficult decision to make at age 20. I called my family back home and they wanted me to come back Immediately! But in the end, I decided to comply since I wanted to live in the United States not completely realizing the consequences of joining the army and the possibility of winding up going to a war.

February 2nd, 1966, Banta Place, Hackensack NJ

Peter Mathews reporting for duty. I spent about a week at Fort Dix, New Jersey to be processed into the army it was a bitter frigid winter. From there we were taken on a flight to Colorado.

The winter was even colder over at “Fort Carson” in Colorado Springs. It would be where I took basic training, and the Drill Sergeant made me the acting Sergeant for my platoon. Go figure.

AFTER:

Chapter 6

Shit! I Got Drafted!

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My first couple of days in New York City were a bit of culture shock as I tried to get to know the area (mostly Manhattan). I spent most of my time around the Times Square and 42nd St. area. I found it to be hectic, but also an exciting part of the city, truly “the city that never sleeps.”

To me, the food seemed cheap: I could get a burger with fries for seventy-five cents and have breakfast for under a dollar. I hoped my money would last until I found a job.

Finding places to sleep was a challenge. At first, I bunked down inside subway cars, where the noise and rocking would finally put me to sleep. It was convenient but disorienting; I had no idea of the size of New York’s subway system.

Many times, I would wake up and realize I was in Queens, Brooklyn, or anywhere else you can think of, and finding my way back to midtown became taxing.

Living in the subway was no easy feat. As trains approached, they'd gush heat, assailing me and others on the platform with heavy air and the astringent odor of urine. Washing in those subway bathrooms, alongside other indigent squatters, was perhaps the worst part of all.

Seeking a suitable alternative, I focused on movie theaters. There had to be at least ten lining each side of 42nd Street between Times Square and 8th Avenue. They played the same movie continuously throughout the week, and like many others, I'd pay my forty-five cents and secure a safe, dry place to spend the night. At least when I woke up in the morning, I knew where I was, though often my sleep was troubled, thanks to the loudness of the audio and the comings and goings of other viewers, all night long. Plus, I'd get nightmares from numerous showings of movies like *Zulu*, where the British slaughtered Native Africans by the hundreds if not thousands.

I spent the days looking for any kind of work, frantic because my money was running low. It was not easy realizing my limited English was a bit of a handicap, but I kept on trying. I would walk into an apparently endless stream of stores and businesses, asking if they needed help and telling them I was willing to do pretty much anything they needed.

I found most people to be sympathetic and helpful, mostly curious about where I was from. Their interest gave me confidence I would find something sooner rather than later. I felt my best chance to land a job was with one of the countless restaurants, most of which were open 24/7.

After two weeks of searching, I was able to land a job as a cleanup guy and dishwasher at a diner on the corner of 33rd St. and Broadway. The owner, Alex Gross, seemed to be a likable person. For me, this was a big step in the right direction.

My job started around midnight. The diner closed around 1:00 am, but I'd stay until 3 or 4 in the morning, cleaning the place. It took me nearly a week to get the kitchen looking respectable. Alex was quite pleased, admitting it had not been that clean for a very long time.

Best of all, I could help myself to some food, the sinks were large enough for me to wash myself, and I got paid for it. I would lock up, and then it was back to *Zulu*, trying to get to sleep.

A few nights after I landed my first job, I was back at the movies, and just about to doze off when a small Latino guy tapped me on my leg and asked, “Would you like a blowjob”?

Not speaking much English, I couldn’t figure out what kind of job he was offering. In any case, I was tired and decided I really liked the job I already had. So, I told him “No thanks, I just got one.”

It took me a while before I realized what he had said and was thankful to have answered how I did. Live and learn!

I kept working at the diner every night because it worked out well. I had most days off, and over time, I got to know a few people who, like me, basically hung out around the Times Square area. These were hardly relationships you could call true friendships because they would come and go or disappear altogether at times.

One of my favorite places to eat was Tad’s Steakhouse. They had several locations throughout the city. After being given a tray and a plate, you moved along a line to get a steak, a baked potato, some veggies, and a piece of pie. All for \$1.69! This was heaven.

Alex, the owner of the diner, took a liking to me. We would talk sometimes about Holland and Switzerland, where he and his family came from. I had gone through Switzerland a few times on the way to Italy on family vacations with my aunt and uncle.

I’d found Switzerland to be a beautiful, peaceful country and quite remarkable when you realize how well they got along with each other without having a common language. Depending on where you were in Switzerland, they could be speaking German, French, or Italian, but that never seemed to be a problem. They had newspapers and television shows in three languages, totally acceptable to them!

Alex invited me to his home in Glen Rock, New Jersey for a weekend. It was my first time outside of New York City. I remember going over the George Washington Bridge and into his neighborhood, filled with beautiful homes. It struck me as an exclusive area.

Alex lived in a split-level, very nicely decorated house. I figured they had to be millionaires to be living in such a neighborhood. He drove me around the area, and I got my first look at life in the suburbs.

His wife Eleanor worked in the city for Macy’s. She created all their advertising and was very artistic herself. It turned out to be a great weekend; they took me to a big mall. we had a nice meal in an excellent restaurant, and of course, sleeping in a real bed gave me a feeling of things to come if I just kept working at it. I remember his car, a red Lincoln

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Differences in language remained an issue at times. I remember one afternoon finding this little Italian restaurant and decided to have dinner there after looking at the menu. I ordered "stuffed shells." As the server returned to my table, the dish looked like nothing I had ordered—instead, he served me large pieces of pasta filled with some sort of creamy cheese.

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