

The Street or Me: A New York Story

Copyright © 2014 Judith Glynn

All Rights Reserved

CHAPTER ONE

WHY BOTHER

IT WAS RUSH HOUR AND A DISMAL February night in Midtown Manhattan. I was on my way home from a temp secretarial job and climbed the subway stairs at the Columbus Circle station. As I neared the top, I heard raised voices and a commotion. The exit was part of the Hearst Building, home to *Cosmopolitan* magazine. Beautiful people were leaving for the day but no one stopped as the confrontation escalated. Instead, they snapped open umbrellas and braced against the pelting winter rain about to envelope them on the sidewalk.

I lingered to watch two burly security guards shove a belligerent, drunk, homeless woman away from the building's revolving doors. As she struggled against their force, she lost her footing on the wet terrazzo and fell into the guards. Instinctively, their arms reached out to stop the fall before they quickly dropped to their sides. To touch this wretched woman appeared intolerable.

She wobbled for secure footing, only to fall backward and land on the ground with a thud. Her filthy, beige woolen coat and layered clothing underneath softened the fall since she didn't yell in pain. Instead, she spun around and kicked at the men as she lay on her back. Her arms flailed over her head to remind me of a child making a snow angel.

"You motherfuckin' cocksuckers," she screamed, as the guards jumped back.

"Get the fuck out of here, scumbag. And don't come back," one guard yelled as he placed his heavy boot on her ankle to stop her kicks. But she continued to bang his other leg with her free foot. He then looked at his fellow guard and motioned for them to return to the building's entrance.

I was captivated by this woman as the scene unfolded. She was white, approximately five-feet, three-inches tall and thin under her layered clothing. Her long, unkempt, light-brown hair had blond highlights and a natural wave. I guessed her to be mid-thirties, possibly younger. It was hard to tell. Something about her was different from the countless homeless people who littered the city. Her filth obscured a sense of style. She was pretty with a husky voice that carried a foreign accent, one I couldn't differentiate. But it was her translucent blue eyes that transfixed me despite being bloodshot and enlarged with anger. In addition to a large dose of curiosity about her, my feelings mixed disgust with fear of the homeless.

When the guards left, two black men who appeared homeless came out of the shadows. A pungent stench from the trio filled the area, powerful enough for some passersby to gag and cover their nose and mouth. The men bent over to pick up the sobbing woman in the fetal position, one side of her swollen face pressed against the cold pavement. She stopped crying when she recognized them. She swayed when

righted and screamed another obscenity into the air. She then hurled the small paper bag she held in her hand. It hit the building's plate-glass doors, bounced off and hit the ground. The bottle inside shattered, releasing a peppermint scent.

"What you do that for, Michelle?" asked one man. "We gotta get out of here and you're causing trouble again. Damn. We need that schnapps for tonight."

Not answering, she broke into a wide grin that revealed broken teeth. She then linked her arms into the offered elbows of the two men. They guided her away from the confrontation into the dark and wet night. I continued to watch, fascinated by the event, and until the trio hobbled up crowded Eighth Avenue resembling the *Wizard of Oz* characters on the Yellow Brick Road. A refreshing peppermint aroma overtook their absence, as the guards returned to the area with large, stringy mops. With a few whisks and their moans of disgust, the ugly episode and its aftermath vanished.

I'd been riveted by the outburst and had pressed myself against the building to watch, far enough away to feel safe. When it ended as quickly as it began, I opened my umbrella and walked into the rainy night headed toward my nearby apartment building, which was a block away in the sketchy Hell's Kitchen neighborhood. My teenage son, Derek Albanese, was waiting for me to cook dinner. But my thoughts were with Michelle. How did she get like that?