

Netherland

Homeless in New York, a young gay woman learns to survive.



Samantha was sitting on a lawn chair in her parents' garage, smoking a joint, when she decided to run away. She had just graduated from high school, where she had few friends, and felt invisible. She went to class stoned and wrote suicidal poems about the shame of being molested by a family friend: "why try when there is no hope / for my dirty soul there is no soap." The thought of remaining in her home town, in central Florida, made her feel ill. Reclining in her chair in the brightly lit garage, she closed her eyes and thought, Is this going to be my life?

Samantha had got A's in high school and had planned to escape to college, until she realized she couldn't afford it. The only other option, she decided, was to flee. She wanted to go to Manhattan, which she'd never visited, because it seemed like a good place to meet other lesbians. Samantha enjoyed reading about botany and had long assumed that, like some plants, she was asexual, a self-sustaining organism. She found it trivial and unbecoming when girls at school pined over their crushes. Then, at fifteen, she watched "Lara Croft: Tomb Raider" and was uncomfortably captivated by Angelina Jolie. Her English teacher at the time had the students spend five minutes every day on an exercise called Vomit, in which they wrote down every phrase that occurred to them. Their pens could not stop moving. "In my fifty-millionth Vomit, I spaced out and wrote, 'I'm a lesbian and no one knows,'" she told me. "It was this crazy voice that knew."

Throughout the summer of 2009, Samantha researched the logistics of being homeless in New York, reading all the articles she could find online, no matter how outdated. She learned that if she went to a homeless shelter before she was eighteen social workers would be required to contact her family. She wanted nothing to do with her parents, who, she believed, hadn't taken

her complaints of sexual abuse seriously; her mother suggested it was a hallucination. Samantha planned to live on the streets for several weeks, until her eighteenth birthday. Then she would begin the rest of her life: getting a job, finding an apartment, and saving for college.

In a purple spiral-bound notebook, she created a guide for life on the streets. She listed the locations of soup kitchens, public libraries, bottle-return vending machines, thrift stores, and public sports clubs, where she could slip in for free showers. Under the heading “known homeless encampments,” she wrote down all the parks, boardwalks, and tunnels where she could sleep and the subway line she’d take to get there. Her most detailed entry was a description of an abandoned train tunnel in Harlem and the name of a photographer who had taken pictures of the homeless people who lived in it. She hoped that if she mentioned the photographer’s name she would be “accepted by the underground society.”

On September 5, 2009, she bought a Greyhound bus ticket using the name Samantha Green. (She has asked me not to use her legal name.) Her parents were away for the day, visiting friends, and she told her thirteen-year-old brother that she was leaving for New York. He expressed concern about her being homeless, but she reassured him. “It’s kind of like camping,” she said. Her brother, who had always treated her with reverence, agreed not to tell her parents where she was going. He helped her break into her father’s safe so that she could take her birth certificate. Then he drove her to Walmart, where she bought a durable backpack, a roll of duct tape, protein bars, multivitamins, a box of garbage bags, a canteen, and a jar of peanut butter.

Samantha’s parents came home six hours after she left and found a note on her bed: “I’m not coming back for a long time. . . . I am safe where I am.”

Samantha spent her first few nights in Central Park, sleeping under a pine tree. She wore the cargo pants, steel-toed Brahma work boots, and blue hoodie that she had left home in. She kept an open book by her side so that anyone passing by would assume she was a student who had drifted off. Using her backpack as a pillow, she slept lightly, alert to the sound of footsteps. More than any noise, she feared the buzz of police radios. She avoided thoughts of danger by embellishing them, imagining that her absence was of central concern to the police. She survived her first days in New York, she said, by “acting like I was in some sort of spy novel.”

For hours every day, she wandered around the city, memorizing street names and bus routes, observing how the neighborhoods changed depending on the time of day. Her favorite time was just before dawn, when the bars let out. She watched drunken tourists shout foolish things as they searched for cabs, and enjoyed knowing that, comparatively, she had her bearings. Rarely sleeping more than four hours a night, she was constantly looking for opportunities to close her eyes. One of her first discoveries was the Museum of Natural History, where the bathroom stalls were conveniently narrow. She could sit on the toilet, her head against the stall, until she was woken at the end of the day by the sound of the janitor’s mop.

By sharing cigarettes, she befriended other homeless kids, many of whom hung out at the Apple Store on Fifth Avenue. Their poverty wasn’t apparent—most of them had stolen at least one trendy outfit—but Samantha could spot them easily, because of their backpacks and the way they lingered near the least impressive computers. (The pictures in their Facebook profiles had shiny

new laptops in the background.) On rainy nights, Samantha occasionally slept with them on the A, C, E subway line, which has the city's longest route. They called it "Uncle Ace's house." One person would stay awake, on guard against cops or thieves; the rest napped until the end of the line.

Many of the kids knew each other from the youth shelters, a decentralized and temporary system that turns away far more people than it houses. The city has roughly two hundred and fifty shelter beds for some four thousand youth between the ages of thirteen and twenty-five who are homeless on any given night. This substratum of the homeless population has historically been overlooked. Until 1974, running away was a crime. The federal youth shelter system wasn't established until the seventies, following an era in which homeless kids were seen as middle-class dropouts who would shortly return home. The media portrayed them as rebellious flower children in search of a countercultural utopia. According to a 1967 article in the *Times*, the crisis involved "thousands of young runaways, particularly girls, who are flooding the Village area to live as hippies."

During the recent recession, the rate of unemployment for people between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four reached nearly twenty per cent, a record high. Samantha dropped off her résumé (which she printed at libraries) at dozens of fast-food restaurants, but having no job experience, and given her appearance—she had packed no change of clothes—she seldom got called for interviews. She tried to make money by recycling bottles, but older homeless people had cornered the market. Instead, she shoplifted. It was easy, because of her wholesome looks. Half Cherokee on her mother's side, she had sharp cheekbones, high-arched eyebrows, and long, shiny hair. She targeted chain stores like 7-Eleven and Whole Foods: she'd steal a package of oatmeal from one and then use the microwave at the other.

In a journal stolen from Barnes & Noble, she kept a log of all the items she'd pocketed: Advil PM, beef jerky, "Practical Guide to Cherokee Sacred Ceremonies and Traditions," four lesbian romances by Gerri Hill, Emergen-C, an exercise shirt, an onion bagel. "I started this log with the intention of paying all these stores back when I got back on my feet again," she wrote on the second page. "I now know that's impossible."

On Samantha's eighteenth birthday, October 9th, she woke up in Central Park, the bottom half of her body in a garbage bag to block the wind. She was wearing the same cargo pants she'd had on when she arrived in New York, now belted with a shoelace, because she'd lost weight, and a Burberry coat she'd stolen from Macy's without realizing that Burberry was a designer brand. Most of the kids she'd met had been arrested for trespassing, shoplifting, or hopping subway turnstiles, but she had managed to avoid the police for more than a month. On her first day as an adult, she allowed herself something resembling pride.

By late morning, Samantha had checked into a shelter called Turning Point, in Sunset Park, Brooklyn, which struck her as the kind of neighborhood where she could sleep behind a dumpster without being bothered. At the shelter, which accommodated twenty people between the ages of sixteen and twenty-one, she was placed in a room with four other girls. Samantha was surprised and encouraged to discover that all of them were lesbians.

Her roommates, who referred to each other as sisters, simplified their reasons for being homeless: “I got kicked out because I was gay” was a frequent refrain, and Samantha eventually adopted it. Inevitably, though, their stories were more complicated, involving an intersection of sexual identity with abuse, neglect, or family poverty. According to some surveys, up to forty per cent of the nation’s homeless youth are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender. Many have run away from foster care, where they were abused or felt ostracized. Others were rejected by their families, often for religious reasons.

Once homeless, they embarked on the kind of self-experimentation that they felt incapable of at home. Samantha was impressed by the way the other girls at the shelter, most of whom were from New York, had refined their sexual identities. The day she arrived at the shelter, she was asked if she was a femme, A.G. (short for aggressive), or fem-agress—terms Samantha had never heard. At dinner, one of Samantha’s roommates pointed out the key signifiers of different girls at the table: an oversized T-shirt, hiding breasts bound by athletic tape, was one sign of an A.G., while a femme, easily mistaken for straight, was identified by the company she kept. Samantha’s own style was plain and inscrutable. Her father had always wanted her in dresses, and simply wearing pants felt like a rebellion. She associated style with “cheerleaders looking at dumb-ass magazines” and didn’t realize that lesbians dressed up, too. “I just hoped someone else would categorize me,” she said. “I didn’t know what the hell I was.” (On the opening page of her notebook, she copied a quotation from George Bernard Shaw: “Life isn’t about finding yourself. Life is about creating yourself.”)

Samantha found her roommates tough and moody but supportive. They shared clothes and cigarettes, taught her how to use a MetroCard—she’d become so good at hopping turnstiles that she hadn’t learned how to take a train legally—and included her in their far-fetched plans for the future: they intended to rent a place in Connecticut, where they’d heard the cost of living was low, by cashing in all their food stamps.

One night, after she had been there three weeks, Samantha was in the back yard of the shelter when a male resident, a pot dealer, offered her a cigarette. A rumor spread that Samantha had kissed him, a transgression made more egregious because she’d rejected the romantic overtures of one of her roommates. The next day, the girls accused her of “fronting,” of not being a “real lesbian.” “They told me I had to leave,” Samantha said. “They said their sister was on the street and needed my bed. I said, ‘Oh, hell no, guys, I’m not leaving.’”

The adult shelter system is legally obligated to provide shelter to anyone who seeks it, but Samantha was afraid of going there, after hearing stories about young people, especially gay ones, who had been exploited and sexually harassed. She stayed at Turning Point, even though she felt increasingly uncomfortable among the other girls, who continued to call her a “poser.” “They were bored,” Samantha said. “There was a lot of groupthink, like ‘Here’s someone we can hate.’” On November 3rd, her twenty-sixth night at the shelter, Samantha had just taken a shower and was getting ready for bed when a girl called Chocolate Cake demanded that she apologize for lying to them. Samantha refused. Three more girls entered the room and began yelling at her and pressed her against the wall. Samantha said that when she fought back, punching and kicking, one of the girls took a knife out of her pocket and cut her throat. Bleeding

into a towel, she ran outside to the street and called 911 from a pay phone. She was taken by ambulance to Lutheran Medical Center, in Brooklyn.

It didn't take Samantha long to recover from the wound. But in the hospital she developed a constellation of new ailments: she had vertigo, an ear infection, and a fever, and was coughing up blood. After three weeks, Samantha signed out of the hospital against medical advice. She left with her hospital roommate, Christina, a pale, thin eighteen-year-old who told Samantha she had run away from her abusive mother, in Brooklyn, several times; as a minor, she'd always been sent home. She was emboldened by Samantha's "motherly vibe." "She was my escort," Christina said. "She knew all about the shelter system, and I was like, 'You know what? Let's do this. We're going to do this. This is my door out.'"

Christina called herself "pansexual": she was attracted to A.G.s, femmes, transsexuals, and men. She initially had a crush on Samantha, but Samantha was too shy to make a move, so they settled into a familial relationship, realizing, "We were meant to be sisters." A veteran shoplifter, Christina gave Samantha advice on technique, urging her not to pause or glance at security guards or cameras. "You're in, you're out—easy-squeezy," she said. Together, they stole batteries and deodorant from large chain stores and then sold them to bodegas in Harlem at half price. On inventory lists in her journal, Samantha tracked how many items they'd moved in a day, and the profit margins.

They used the lists of resources Samantha had compiled in Florida to navigate the youth shelter system, which comprises some twenty drop-in centers and emergency shelters, five of which cater specifically to gay and transgender teens. The agencies' services are often in flux, depending on the year's allotment of government grant money. After leaving the hospital, Samantha and Christina began going to the Door, a youth agency in SoHo, where they got free meals, met with career counsellors, and kept warm. Samantha felt like an outsider there until she befriended a transgender boy named Ryan, who was popular among all segments of the homeless population—the ravers, the stoners, and the gay kids. Ryan was glad to meet someone else with Native American roots—he had spent his early childhood as a girl in an Inuit village in Nunavut—and he began calling Samantha his older sister (even though she was younger than him) and Christina his younger one. He admired their shoplifting skills—his specialty was stealing fruit—and called their money-making operation "pulling a Duane Reade."

Ryan, who had already been homeless for two years, had been kicked out by his mother when she cleaned his closet and discovered his stand-to-pee device in a box labelled "Children's Books." When he confessed that he wanted to take hormones so that he could live as a man, she demanded that he do it elsewhere. He spent his first few months in New York sleeping at the Metropolitan Community Church, near the Lincoln Tunnel, which opens its doors to homeless gay and transgender youth. At the church, Ryan acquired what he described as his "gay family." The fictional bloodlines were forged rapidly, often after someone shared a survival tip, like how to apply for food stamps or Medicaid or avoid the street corners that were frequented by pimps. Two people referred to Ryan as their gay mother. "I have this real butch-queen way about me sometimes," he explained. Three others called him Father. "At some point, people just started calling me Dad, and I was like, O.K.? All right. I guess that's who I am."

The family roles were based not on age but on the knowledge people had about living on the streets. There was a new generation within the gay family every four or five months; Ryan's children mentored other kids, and soon he was a grandfather. He lost track of how he was related to people, but the connections still gave him social cachet. "The beauty of the gay family is that you can walk into Union Square and you have an in—you're not alone," he said. "I can go up to a stranger and ask who his gay mother is. And it's like, Oh my God, I'm your uncle!" He added, "A lot of us lost our biological families, so the gay family fills the void."

Some members of his gay family were immersed in the city's ballroom scene, which relies on a similar family structure, organized by "houses" that function like fraternities. At night clubs and performance spaces, the houses compete against each other in balls—a contemporary incarnation of the drag pageants that were a staple of the gay subculture in Harlem in the thirties. House mothers (typically transgender women or drag queens) assume a nurturing role, while the fathers (often female butches) tend to take on stereotypically masculine tasks, enforcing the rules. The children, mostly black or Latino, vie for prizes by modelling and voguing, which combines moves from ballet, break dance, and walking the runway. Luna Ortiz, father of the House of Khan, told me that the nuclear-family structure of houses "happened automatically, because there were all these young people who didn't have anyone gay to admire and model themselves after."

Ryan's gay aunt Sasha, whom he met at the Metropolitan Community Church, had spent hours trying to teach Ryan to vogue so that he could participate in the balls, but she eventually gave up. "I love him," Sasha told me. "But he's an old man—no rhythm." A black transgender twenty-five-year-old, who is six feet one and wears long, matronly dresses, Sasha prided herself on her ability to give her gay family "backbone, structure, that mother image." She had become homeless after aging out of foster care and had lost her first apartment when her landlord, upon discovering that she was transgender, called her a "batty boy," Jamaican slang for "faggot," and attacked her with a mop. When she finally got another apartment (which she has since lost, because the government housing program, called Advantage, was terminated), she let her gay family sleep at her place for weeks at a time. "I took them out of the street and I raised them," she said. "Just like any other family, they came together. They all wanted to live with Mommy."

Samantha never felt "fabulous" enough to be part of a gay family—the music she had mistaken for cool, like AC/DC and Led Zeppelin, had put her at a permanent disadvantage. The gay families reminded her of high school. They were "closed worlds" and had their own lingo, adopted from the ballroom scene: terms like "throwing shade" (disrespecting), "trying it" (being cheeky), and "reading" (insulting). Samantha felt more comfortable socializing with people in street families, which were smaller, whiter, and included both straight and gay kids. There were no parent figures, only brothers and sisters. " 'Mom' was a sore, taboo word," Samantha told me. "Despite everything that happened, a lot of us still missed our moms."

The core of Samantha's street family was Christina, Ryan (who remained close with his gay family), and three boys they met through Streetwork, a youth program with a shelter in Harlem where twenty-three people can stay for thirty days in a row. The hope is that residents will find work and a place to live, and then move on, but it was never enough time. Throughout 2010, Samantha cycled in and out of Streetwork so many times she lost count. Each time she was discharged, she walked a few blocks to St. Nicholas Park, hopped a fence near the basketball

courts, and descended a slope through fifty yards of overgrown shrubs and fallen branches, accumulation from years of storms. She slept on a flat limestone rock, surrounded by trees. She and her street family spent their nights on the rock, which they covered with a stolen rug, until they reached the top of Streetwork's waiting list again, a process that typically took several weeks.

Samantha handled domestic matters, like cutting the poison ivy around the rock and purifying rainwater with iodine. She was alternately called paranoid and prescient, the one who was constantly wary of arrest: for loitering, smoking pot, and hopping turnstiles—the pillars of their daily routines. A former Cutco salesman named Paul, who kept kitchen knives on the rock for protection and used the knife case as a pillow, was proud that he had persuaded Samantha to date him for a week. During that time, she considered the possibility that she was bisexual. “Finally, I was just like, ‘I can’t do it, I’m sorry. You’ve helped affirm my identity as a lesbian, if that helps.’”

When Samantha was readmitted to Streetwork, she made sure everyone on the rock got into the shelter, too. She found herself employing the same tactic as the girls at Turning Point. If she decided that a girl didn’t need her bed, because her circumstances weren’t desperate, Samantha would urge her to leave. “Seriously, my sister is on the street because you’re taking up a bed. Go back to Grandma,” she thought. “She’s not beating you, she’s not raping you.” When that failed, she got people kicked out by planting drug paraphernalia on their beds.

Samantha preferred sleeping on the rock to staying at the largest youth shelter in the city, Covenant House, a fortresslike eight-story building with a hundred and eighty beds—seventy per cent of the city’s beds for homeless youth. The institution, situated two blocks from the Port Authority bus station, was founded by Franciscans in 1972, and its Catholic underpinnings have complicated the shelter’s response to increasing numbers of gay residents. Samantha thought the staff members were “weird and shunning to the gay girls,” and she felt pressured to go to church. (The shelter said that it does not make anyone attend religious services.) “I told the staff lady I really don’t have good feelings about church—like, how is that going to help me?” she said. “Then they sent the pastor to talk to me.”

Ryan left Covenant House because staff members insisted on using his legal, female name, and he felt humiliated by the process of sitting for attendance. Several times, when he checked in at the guard’s station, he was told that the only resident with his last name was female. He preferred to be on the streets, where he felt recognized as a man. His gay father, Pablo, a thick-shouldered, twenty-one-year-old Latino, took care to use the correct pronouns for his transgender children, whether or not they looked as masculine or feminine as they wished. “They’re still figuring out how to feel real,” Pablo told me. “Ryan was a beautiful young lady. But I was just like, ‘Dang, that’s not you. You are a dude.’ He had the personality down pat.”

More so than Samantha, Ryan found himself drawn to Christopher Street, in the West Village, which on warm weekend nights is populated by cliques of gay and transgender teens. Biological boys who wear wigs or eyeshadow or glitter on their faces walk up and down Christopher Street, checking who's out for the night, before settling on the Christopher Street Pier, which juts out into the Hudson River. On the lawns of the pier, they take turns voguing. Ryan's gay grandmother, Donna, told me that "as soon as you come out of the closet, all you hear is 'You need to go down to the Village. You need to get your face out there.'"

For fifty years, the pier has offered a rite of passage for young people, often impoverished ones, who are trying on new sexual personas. In the sixties, the street kids who hung out on the pier were central to the Stonewall riots, which took place about five blocks away. In an article written shortly after the riots, Dick Leitsch, the director of one of the first gay-rights organizations, attributed the success of the 1969 uprising to the bar's youngest customers, who had to panhandle for the price of admission. They had been "thrown out of their homes with only the clothes on their backs by ignorant, intolerant parents," Leitsch wrote. They stood up to the police because they "had nothing to lose."

The West Village now projects a homogeneous image of gay identity: wealthy, professional, and white. The streets are lined with upscale shops that sell smoothies, gourmet cupcakes, and purebred puppies. The Stonewall Inn now draws mostly tourists. Carl Siciliano, the director of a shelter for L.G.B.T. youth, told me he finds it pathetic that in the birthplace of the gay movement there are so many gay kids who have been "utterly dispossessed." He said the gay movement has focussed on "issues of privilege," specifically gay marriage. "Our movement has left its youngest, poorest members behind."

After dark, the Village attracts a far less streamlined demographic. At the pier, older transgender women teach younger ones how to apply foundation and eyeshadow, to tuck and bind their penises so that they can wear fitted dresses, and to create fake breasts by inflating and shaping condoms in their bras. Ryan's gay aunt Sasha told me that she started coming to the pier when she was a "different soul," a ten-year-old boy. Older teen-agers helped her "find the right wardrobe, the right setting, the right approach." "I observe, I study," she said. "I see a lady crossing her legs calmly, mellow, and, two days later, I'm doing it, too."

Sasha's studies extended to sexual interactions. Other transgender women on the pier made money by giving oral sex to strangers—they called it strolling—and so did she. For a time, she could entertain the idea that she was "practicing" to be a woman. That sentiment faded quickly, but it took her less than an hour to make enough money to pay her cell-phone bill, so she continued.

Ryan began strolling, too, during a time when he was sleeping in Columbus Circle and subsisting on only a few meals a week. "I went up to one of my sisters and I told her, 'I'm really desperate. I need you to show me the ropes,'" he said. She led him to Weehawken Street, a narrow residential lane in the West Village, and taught him how to make eye contact with men who were cruising.

On his first night, Ryan took several pills of Triple C (sold in pharmacies as Coricidin Cough & Cold), which made him feel as if he were hovering a few feet above the ground, watching the world and himself from a comfortable distance. When a potential client drove by, he had been instructed to get in the car and say, “Fifty for oral, no touching.” He didn’t bother explaining that he was biologically female. Although he didn’t take hormones, he had a deep, raspy voice and passed easily. He was confident he would be seen as “just another gay boy.” He completed the job while sitting in the passenger seat and was out of the car within minutes. “I didn’t think of him as human,” Ryan told me. “He was just a dollar sign.”

Ryan began spending at least one night a week with a group of half a dozen homeless youth who serviced men in cars, in the rest rooms of nearby diners or bars, and in hotels or apartments. “Then we’d all take a break and fall back down to the pier,” Sasha told me. “That was our battery-charger rest spot.” If someone had been with a client who was violent or stingy, the news was shared widely. One of Ryan’s friends took a cell-phone picture of a man who had attacked her. “By the next morning, all of us knew never to get in that man’s car,” he said.

Ryan discovered that most of his clients didn’t care that he was biologically female—some had a fetish for it. He acquired seven regulars, who came to him on a weekly basis, and nine “frequenters,” who visited him once or twice a month. If the person appeared sane and gentle, he would trade sex for a chance to sleep in a bed. “Sometimes I could pretend—I would convince myself—that I was having sex with someone I had chosen,” he said. In the morning, he would slip out of the apartment before the stranger woke up.

Ryan avoided streets that were monitored by cops, though it was never clear to him whether he was the victim or the perpetrator of a crime; technically he and his friends were pimps to one another, occasionally sharing both clients and money—a dynamic that is rarely part of public conversations about youth prostitution. According to a recent investigation led by anthropologists at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, ninety per cent of underage teens in New York City who engage in “survival sex”—selling their bodies for money, drugs, food, or shelter—meet their clients on their own, through friends, or through “fictional families.” There are as many male youth prostitutes as female ones. The researchers asked eighty youth what they would need to leave the sex trade, and most of them said stable housing or employment. “These young people exchange sex for money not because they are being held and trafficked as sex slaves,” the authors wrote, but because they “exist at the lowest stratum of a socio-economic and cultural system that is failing them.”

Some of Ryan’s friends on the pier joked about prostitution as if it were a profession, asking each other what time they got off work. They could make two hundred dollars if they agreed to “go raw” (without a condom). “It can be very enticing when you know that money can feed you and your family for a few weeks,” Ryan said. “You’re just like, ‘Fine, O.K., whatever.’”

There were hierarchies among those who made money this way, with those who could be easily “spooked” (identified as transgender) at the bottom. Ryan’s gay grandmother, Donna, who began working as a prostitute when she was thirteen, told me that other transgender women called her “knotty,” meaning ugly, because she was scared to use illegal hormones or get silicone injections to make her breasts, cheeks, and butt look feminine. “It’s all about how much money you invest

in yourself,” she said. In rough neighborhoods in Brooklyn, men would throw things at people who seemed stuck between genders. When Donna wanted to insult someone on the pier, she would say, “At least *I* can go to Brooklyn.”

In February, 2010, Ryan discovered that he was H.I.V. positive, which did not completely surprise him. Many nights had been spent consoling friends who had gotten their test results; they comforted each other with the mantra “It’s not a death sentence anymore.” The rate of H.I.V. infection among the homeless is three times higher than it is among the rest of the population, and the risk of transmission is disproportionately elevated among youth. Kate Barnhart, the director of New Alternatives, a drop-in center on Christopher Street for L.G.B.T. youth, told me that one in five of her clients is H.I.V. positive. Discussions about who is “D. and D. free”—clean of diseases and drugs—are part of the homeless scene. Samantha once made out with a girl who, unprompted, pulled her negative blood results out of her backpack. When she learned of Ryan’s diagnosis, she assured him he’d live a long life, and then urged him, “Dude, wear a condom.” Ryan began laughing and reminded her, “I can’t wear a condom!”

Samantha hoped eventually to find a wife, have children, and move to the country, a plan that began to recede farther into the distance. She had a tepid, on-and-off relationship with another homeless girl, which consisted mostly of making out in public bathrooms. Samantha didn’t mind that her partner occasionally smelled, but she knew the relationship would collapse under other circumstances. She could get into lesbian bars if she wore her job-interview outfit, which made her look older—she wore shoplifted loafers, slacks, and a black button-up shirt that didn’t show the dirt—but small talk rarely went well. Inevitably, Samantha was asked where she lived. When she responded truthfully, some women acted as if she were out to swindle them. Samantha decided that she didn’t want to date anyone who wasn’t homeless. “There would be no balance of power,” she said.

Samantha and Ryan talked about the “housed world” as if it were an exotic culture, intrinsically superior to their own. They spoke in academic tones, trading theories about the patterns of “housed thinking.” They treated the subway, where they occasionally panhandled, as a human laboratory: people’s impulses toward charity had far less to do with them, they concluded, than with the other passengers riding the train. Few people looked at their faces until the first dollar changed hands, which then created some sort of force field—other passengers would suddenly feel compelled to be generous, too. They rode the trains deep into Brooklyn, because they found that poorer passengers were more likely to hand over their change.

Samantha considered herself romantic for having believed that “if you worked hard enough it would all come easily—the job, the apartment.” But she never doubted her decision to run away—her only regret was not skimming more money from her father’s business—and she encouraged her brother to join her as soon as he finished high school. Samantha called him at least once a week from pay phones and, eventually, a cell phone that she paid for by cashing in her food stamps. They both excelled at “stuffing the feelings down” and rarely mentioned their parents, who didn’t know they were in regular contact. They discussed new dishes that her brother was cooking—Samantha had taught him to cook—and her brother urged her to be more vigilant. He considered her current means of self-defense—an empty SoBe-tea bottle, which she planned to crush over someone’s head, if the need arose—an inadequate form of protection.

After applying for jobs for a year and a half, the only offer Samantha got was an unpaid, part-time internship at Streetwork as a peer counsellor, which she hoped would look good on her résumé. She and Christina stopped shoplifting, because they worried that security guards at pharmacies had begun to recognize their faces. Samantha made money by panhandling on her days off. In her journal, she noted the intersection and how much money she'd collected—anywhere from nothing to eighty dollars—which she shared with her street family.

Her favorite place to panhandle was a leafy block of Hudson Street near the Chambers Street subway station, where thousands of professionals converged during rush hour. Samantha noticed that when she looked “stereotypically movie homeless,” wearing ripped sweatpants and a baggy, dirty sweater, she could bring in nearly twice as much as when she wore her usual clothes. Christina helped her come up with a convincing hairdo: two braids, smothered with Vaseline. “I wanted to look as small as possible, like vulnerable,” Samantha said. She sat on a milk crate with her knees drawn to her chest, her arm draped over a pink backpack; she was convinced that the color made her seem more sympathetic.

Unless she was hungry or needed to use a bathroom, Samantha could usually trick herself into thinking that she was “just a normal person person.” But, after a few hours of panhandling, she felt as homeless as she looked. She often drank Delsym, a cough medicine, and “accentuated” it with a few pills of Nyquil, a combination that made her bold enough to look people in the eyes. With the right mixture of drugs, she could pass the day engrossed by the irregular shapes on the sidewalk and the beautiful halo at the tip of her cigarette. Every now and then, she would remind people of her presence with a cheery phrase, like “Happy Wednesday!” She rarely offered details about her life. “No matter what comes out of your mouth, they’re going to think you’re manipulating,” she said. “But if you just shake your cup and look them in the eye, there’s no lying about that.”

Samantha and Ryan were both terrified of becoming “lifers.” They saw the signs in their friends, who stopped trying to get job interviews, missed their appointments with caseworkers, and cycled in and out of psychiatric hospitals or rehab centers, becoming accustomed to people telling them what to do and when. Close friends, even Christina, disappeared for weeks at a time. Samantha kept track of them by checking their status updates on Facebook, to make sure they were alive.

Homelessness narrowed Samantha’s field of vision, making the future so abstract as to be nearly imaginary. The concerns of the day—finding food and a place to sleep—eliminated all other thoughts. By early 2011, she was making herself reserve at least one day a week for “dealing with the future.” She subsisted on food she’d procured earlier in the week, and spent time at the Apple Store and public libraries, working on applications for subsidized housing. Samantha’s best shot was New York/New York III supportive housing programs, which pair rental assistance with mental-health services. The programs require proof of a year of homelessness—Samantha compiled letters from all the shelters where she’d slept—and evidence of a psychiatric illness, which was not difficult to come by. Nearly all her friends could meet the requirements for at least one diagnosis, between the trauma of living on the streets and the trauma of whatever had sent them there. (To get Supplemental Security Income, Samantha and her saner friends coached one

another on how to exaggerate their dysfunctions, imitating behavior they had witnessed among the chronically homeless.)

For Ryan, two years older than Samantha, aging out of the youth shelter system—most agencies cut people off at twenty-one or twenty-four—represented a “point of no return.” With state cuts to homeless services, there are few routes out of the city’s vast adult shelter system, which currently has its highest population on record, the result, in part, of high unemployment and rents that continue to rise. The waiting list for public housing has more than a hundred and fifty thousand names on it.

Ryan had already gone through the application process for New York/New York III housing and was waiting to move into a new building for homeless youth called the Lee, but he doubted that a room would ever open. “I saw so many other people fail, and was sort of like, ‘Why bother?’ ” he said. His gay parents told him that he could live with them in an abandoned home that they’d discovered just south of Queensboro Plaza. The two-story house had no heat, electricity, or running water; they all peed in a bucket and dumped it out the back window. Ryan slept on blankets in the living room on the second floor, his parents slept in an alcove, and his gay aunt Jaymmie, a black transgender woman, took over the first floor, which she disinfected with Clorox. They enjoyed discussing how they would furnish their new home. “We were going to turn it into a condo,” Jaymmie said. “We had dreams.”

Only gay or transgender people slept at the house, because those were the people the residents trusted. Jaymmie, who was legally male, had disavowed the adult shelter system after a man attempted to rape her in the bathroom of the Bellevue men’s shelter. “It’s just nasty how people treat me because I’m feminine,” she said. Ryan’s gay grandmother, Donna, had already gotten her own room in an apartment, but she frequently dropped in at the abandoned house. She worried that her landlord found her “too flamboyant, not quaint enough,” and found it helpful to “get away from the heterosexual world and have an outlet.” She said that the house reminded her of her earliest days hanging out on the Christopher Street Pier, when she was thirteen and overwhelmed by the sense of “communion, of having faith in each other.”

In September, 2011, the state’s first permanent subsidized apartment building for homeless gay, lesbian, and transgender youth opened, on 154th Street in Harlem. The building, called True Colors, was co-founded by Cyndi Lauper, who had been troubled by all the L.G.B.T. teens on the Christopher Street Pier who seemed to have nowhere else to go. Samantha happened to meet with a caseworker the day that the building began accepting applications, and was one of the first to apply. Only a few weeks before her housing interview, she had been hired to do outreach work for another youth agency—a paying job. She signed a lease that limited her rent to thirty per cent of her annual income, or two hundred and eighty-six dollars a month.

The apartment had hardwood floors, a single bed, a narrow kitchen, and a large window overlooking Frederick Douglass Boulevard. Samantha found herself avoiding the apartment, which felt obtrusively quiet. For two years, she had longed for privacy, and now she was embarrassed that she couldn’t appreciate it. With her basic needs met, other dilemmas revealed themselves—how to afford college and, eventually, she decided, medical school. It was impossible to stay calm in such silence. On her second night in the apartment, after lying awake

for hours, she got out of bed, showered (using a garbage bag as a curtain), dressed for work, and walked in the dark to the D train. She fell asleep minutes after claiming her favorite seat, the one in the back corner, where she could press her knees against the adjacent bench and rest her head on the train's wall.

Samantha had come to True Colors directly from Ryan's new apartment at the Lee, on the Lower East Side; Ryan had waited nearly a year for a room to open. He, too, felt as if he had forgotten how to be alone, and described his apartment as a kind of "purgatory." "You're stuck between worlds," he told me. He turned his room into what he called his "faux-shelter." When it rained, he would fit up to five people in his two-hundred-square-foot apartment. Christina, who was pregnant, slept on an air mattress on the floor. Once, the room was so crowded that Ryan's gay father, Pablo, had to sleep in the bathtub.

Samantha and Ryan felt there was no longer an excuse for all the substances—mostly weed, over-the-counter drugs, and cheap wine, stolen from Western Beef—that had softened their experience on the streets, and they joined a chapter of Alcoholics Anonymous in which most of the members were lesbians. Samantha saw being sober as her final act of severing herself from her life at home. (She started a new Facebook account for her sober self.) "This is my one chance," Samantha told me. "If I mess it up, I'll be here for the rest of my life."

Ryan felt like a straggler, hopelessly behind on his education, having lost more than three years of his life. He called Samantha when he was fighting the urge to use drugs again, which he yearned to do whenever he felt overwhelmed by impatience. With encouragement from his caseworker, he enrolled at LaGuardia Community College, after writing his college essay at the Apple Store. "I am homeless on the basis that I am transgendered," he wrote. "My Mum kicking me out and disowning me . . . provided me with the permission and opportunity to be myself."

Samantha had been housed only a few months when she came down with bronchitis, mononucleosis, and pneumonia, perhaps because her new job required that she spend the day outside, shaking hands with dozens of people. At the hospital, tests showed that she was H.I.V. positive. Later, she learned that she had tested positive for the virus in 2009, after she had been attacked at the shelter in Brooklyn. It's not clear from her medical records why she was never informed; most likely, the blood results came back after she had left the hospital, and it was impossible to find her. She responded to the disease, which she believes she contracted when she was raped by the family friend in Florida, with a serene kind of anger. She was confident that she would be fine, once her doctors found the right combination of antiretroviral medications, because, like Ryan, she was "stubborn enough"—a phrase she used as the highest compliment.

But living alone made recovery more difficult, and, after being hospitalized for two weeks with pneumonia, she was too weak to walk. She was sent for ten days to a nursing home in a desolate neighborhood in Far Rockaway, Queens, three blocks from the beach, for physical rehabilitation. She appeared to be the youngest person at the institution, which resembled a run-down motel, by about forty years. One of the few people who seemed cognizant of her presence was a half-blind woman, her face lopsided from a stroke, who shouted every time she saw Samantha, "Hello, little girl!"

The diagnosis felt like another insult from afar, reminding Samantha of her inability to escape home. She had been trying to adopt a more nuanced view of her parents, whom she no longer saw as malevolent, just estranged from reality. At one point, she had even bought her parents a card that said “Missing You.” But she never mailed it.

Like Ryan, Samantha felt most comfortable in her new apartment when her street family was crowded inside it. In August, while recovering from a second bout of pneumonia, she was thrilled when Christina, who had been out of contact for several months, showed up with her baby boy. Christina was fleeing the family shelter where she lived with the baby’s father, who she said had just threatened to kill her. She told Samantha she needed a place to stay until she could get into a shelter for victims of domestic violence.

Paul, their friend from the rock in St. Nicholas Park, who was living at an adult shelter, was there to assist with the move. The baby was crying, chewing on a toilet-paper dispenser, and Paul and Samantha tried to get him to sleep by plopping him on the bed and singing some of the songs they’d perfected on the rock: “Hallelujah,” “Hotel California,” “American Pie.” Samantha sang in tune, in a smooth soprano, with goose bumps on her legs and arms, occasionally pausing to cough.

The music put Christina in a nostalgic frame of mind, and she began looking at old cell-phone photographs, many featuring members of their street family on tightly made single beds at the various shelters where they’d stayed over the years. Except for the series featuring Samantha’s panhandling makeover—they had experimented with a few hair styles before settling on the braids—the pictures, like those of any teen-agers, caught them at their edgiest, in many whimsical closeups. Samantha noted with disapproval that in several pictures Christina was bony and gaunt. “Now you see why I fed her!” she shouted. “I keep you eating,” she told Christina. “You need to come over here more so you’ll be healthy.”

When the baby woke up, screaming, Christina rushed out of the apartment for an appointment with a caseworker, Paul pushing the stroller. Samantha was left with a friend from the building named Jacob, whom no one had noticed enter the room. He had come in without knocking and gone straight to the bathroom, in tears. He had just lost his job at a smoothie shop. Samantha said that he must be exhausted—he was in beauty school and slept only a few hours a night. She offered to beat up his boss and then urged him to take down the number of a career counsellor. “You’ll just work hard to make things O.K.,” she told him. He nodded, following her as she moved around the room, picking up random objects that the baby had thrown on the floor. “Eventually, everything will be O.K.,” she repeated. “If you work hard enough, it has to be.” ♦