# The City of Dreadful Night

O. Henry

“During the recent warmed-over spell,” said my friend Carney, driver of express wagon No. 8,606, “a good many opportunities was had of observing human nature through peekaboo waists.

“The Park Commissioner and the Commissioner of Polis and the Forestry Commission gets together and agrees to let the people sleep in the parks until the Weather Bureau gets the thermometer down again to a living basis. So they draws up open-air resolutions and has them 0. K.‘d by the Secretary of Agri-culture, Mr. Comstock and the Village Improvement Mosquito Exterminating Society of South Orange, N. J.

“When the proclamation was made opening up to the people by special grant the public parks that be-long to ‘em, there was a general exodus into Central Park by the communities existing along its borders. In ten minutes after sundown you’d have thought that there was an undress rehearsal of a potato famine in Ireland and a Kishineff massacre. They come by families, gangs, clambake societies, clans, clubs and tribes from all sides to enjoy a cool sleep on the grass. Them that didn’t have oil stoves brought along plenty of blankets, so as not to be upset with the cold and discomforts of sleeping outdoors. By building fires of the shade trees and huddling together in the bridle paths, and burrowing under the grass where the ground was soft enough, the likes of 5,000 head of people successfully battled against the night air in Central Park alone.

“Ye know I live in the elegant furnished apartment house called the Beersheba Flats, over against the elevated portion of the New York Central Railroad.

“When the order come to the flats that all hands must turn out and sleep in the park, according to the instructions of the consulting committee of the City Club and the Murphy Draying, Returfing and Sod-ding Company, there was a look of a couple of fires and an eviction all over the place.

“The tenants began to pack up feather beds, rub-ber boots, strings of garlic, hot-water bags, porta-ble canoes and scuttles of coal to take along for the sake of comfort. The sidewalk looked like a Russian camp in Oyama’s line of mareb. There was waiting and lamenting up and down stairs from Danny Geog-hegan’s flat on the top floor to the apartments of Missis Goldsteinupski on the first.

“‘For why,” says Danny, coming down and raging in his blue yarn socks to the janitor, ‘should I be turned out of me comfortable apartments to lay in the dirty grass like a rabbit? ‘Tis like Jerome to stir up trouble wid small matters like this instead of — “

“‘Whist!’ says Officer Reagan on the sidewalk, rapping with his club. ”Tis not Jerome. ‘Tis by order of the Polis Commissioner. Turn out every one of yez and hike yerselves to the park.’

“Now, ‘twas a peaceful and happy home that all of us had in them same Beersheba Flats. The O’Dowds and the Steinowitzes and the Callahans and the Cohens and the Spizzinellis and the McManuses and the Spiegelmayers and the Joneses — all nations of us, we lived like one big family together. And when the hot nights come along we kept a line of children reaching from the front door to Kelly’s on the corner passing along the cans of beer from one to another without the trouble of running after it. And with no more clothing on than is provided for in the statutes, sitting in all the windies, with a cool growler in every one, and your feet out in the air, and the Rosenstein girls singing on the fire-escape of the sixth floor, and Patsy Rourke’s flute going in the eighth, and the ladies calling each other synonyms out the windies, and now and then a breeze sailing in over Mister Depew’s Central — I tell you the Beersheba Flats was a summer resort that made the Catskills look like a bole in the ground. With his person full of beer and his feet out the windy and his old woman frying pork chops over a charcoal furnace and the children dancing in cotton slips on the sidewalk around the organ-grinder and the rent paid for a week — what does a man want better on a hot night than that? And then comes this ruling of the polis driving people out o’ their comfortable homes to sleep in parks — ‘twas for all the world like a ukase of them Russians — ‘twill be heard from again at next election time.

“Well, then, Officer Reagan drives the whole lot of us to the park and turns us in by the nearest gate. ‘Tis dark under the trees, and all the children sets up to howling that they want to go home.

“‘Ye’ll pass the night in this stretch of woods and scenery,’ says Officer Reagan. ”Twill be fine and imprisonment for insoolting the Park Commissioner and the Chief of the Weather Bureau if ye re-fuse. I’m in charge of thirty acres between here and the Agyptian Monument, and I advise ye to give no trouble. ‘Tis sleeping on the grass yez all have been condemned to by the authorities. Yez’ll be permitted to leave in the morning, but ye must retoorn be night. Me orders was silent on the subject of bail, but I‘11 find out if ‘tis required and there’ll be bondsmen at the gate.’

“There being no lights except along the automobile drives, us 179 tenants of the Beersheba Flats prepared to spend the night as best we could in the raging forest. Them that brought blankets and kindling wood was best off. They got fires started and wrapped the blankets round their heads and laid down, cursing, in the grass. There was nothing to see, nothing to drink, nothing to do. In the dark we had no way of telling friend or foe except by feeling the noses of ‘em. I brought along me last winter overcoat, me toothbrush, some quinine pills and the red quilt off the bed in me flat. Three times during the night somebody rolled on me quilt and stuck his knees against the Adam’s apple of me. And three times I judged his character by running me hand over his face, and three times I rose up and kicked the in-truder down the hill to the gravelly walk below. And then some one with a flavor of Kelly’s whiskey snug-gled up to me, and I found his nose turned up the right way, and I says: ‘ Is that you, then, Patsey? and he says, ‘It is, Carney. How long do you think it’ll last?’

”’ I’m no weather-prophet,’ says I, ‘but if they bring out a strong anti-Tammany ticket next fall it ought to get us home in time to sleep on a bed once or twice before they line us up at the polls.’ “A-playing of my flute into the airshaft, I says Patsey Rourke, ‘and a-perspiring in me own windy to the joyful noise of the passing trains and the smell of liver and onions and a-reading of the latest mur-der in the smoke of the cooking is well enough for me,’ says he. ‘What is this herding us in grass for, not to mention the crawling things with legs that walk up the trousers of us, and the Jersey snipes that peck at us, masquerading under the name and denom-ination of mosquitoes. What is it all for Carney, and the rint going on just the same over at the flats?’

“Tis the great annual Municipal Free Night Outing Lawn Party,’ says I, ‘given by the polis, Hetty Green and the Drug Trust. During the heated season they hold a week of it in the principal parks. ‘Tis a scheme to reach that portion of the people that’s not worth taking up to North Beach for a fish fry.’

”’ I can’t sleep on the ground,’ says Patsey, ‘wid any benefit. I have the hay fever and the rheuma-tism, and me car is full of ants.’

“Well, the night goes on, and the ex-tenants of the Flats groans and stumbles around in the dark, trying to find rest and recreation in the forest. The children is screaming with the coldness, and the janitor makes hot tea for ‘em and keeps the fires going with the signboards that point to the Tavern and the Casino. The tenants try to lay down on the grass by families in the dark, but you’re lucky if you can sleep next to a man from the same floor or believing in the same religion. Now and then a Murpby, accidental, rolls over on the grass of a Rosenstein, or a Cohen tries to crawl under the O’Grady bush, and then there’s a feeling of noses and somebody is rolled down the hill to the driveway and stays there. There is some hair-pulling among the women folks, and everybody spanks the nearest howling kid to him by the sense of feeling only, regardless of its parentage and ownership. ‘Tis hard to keep up the social distinctions in the dark that flourish by daylight in the Beersheba Flats. Mrs. Rafferty, that despises the asphalt that a Dago treads on, wakes up in the morning with her feet in the bosom of Antonio Spizzinelli. And Mike O’Dowd, that always threw peddlers downstairs as fast as he came upon ‘em, has to unwind old Isaacstein’s whiskers from around his neck, and wake up the whole gang at daylight. But here and there some few got acquainted and overlooked the discomforts of the elements. There was five engagements to be married announced at the flats the next morning.

About midnight I gets up and wrings the dew out of my hair, and goes to the side of the driveway and sits down. At one side of the park I could see the lights in the streets and houses; and I was thinking how happy them folks was who could chase the duck and smoke their pipes at their windows, and keep cool and pleasant like nature intended for ‘em to.

Just then an automobile stops by me, and a fine-looking, well-dressed man steps out.

‘Me man,’ says he, ‘can you tell me why all these people are lying around on the grass in the park? I thought it was against the rules.’

“”Twas an ordinance,’ says I, ‘just passed by the Polis Department and ratified by the Turf Cutters’ Association, providing that all persons not carrying a license number on their rear axles shall keep in the public parks until further notice. Fortunately, the orders comes this year during a spell of fine weather, and the mortality, except on the borders of the lake and along the automobile drives, will not be any greater than usual.’

“‘Who are these people on the side of the bill?’ asks the man.

“‘Sure,’ says I, ‘none others than the tenants of the Beersheba Flats — a fine home for any man, especially on hot nights. May daylight come soon!’

“‘They come here be night,’ says be, ‘and breathe in the pure air and the fragrance of the flowers and trees. They do that,’ says be, ‘coming every night from the burning beat of dwellings of brick and stone.’

“‘And wood,’ says I. ‘And marble and plaster and iron.’

“‘The matter will be attended to at once,’ says the man, putting up his book.

“‘Are ye the Park Commissioner?’ I asks.

“‘I own the Beersheba Flats,’ says he. ‘God bless the grass and the trees that give extra benefits to a man’s tenants. The rents shall be raised fifteen per cent. to-morrow. Good-night,’ says he.”