A thousand men each year sit in the black chair next to my desk. I am a mental health worker at the Bellevue Men’s Shelter. These men are between 18 and 80 years old, usually black or Hispanic, usually with a psychiatric problem and a substance abuse history (crack, heroin, and alcohol), often with a forensic history (usually released from prison that day), and quite often with a major medical illness.

At some point during the interview with these men, I get around to the questions: “Are you hearing voices?” “Have you ever seen things that other people didn’t see?” “Have you ever tried to hurt yourself?” A few times a month I hear responses like, “I thought about jumping in front of the subway,” or “I can’t tell you whether I’m going to hurt myself or not.” Or I am shown wrists that have recently been cut, or bellies and limbs and necks with long scars. At that point, I calmly tell my client in the black chair that I think they need to go to the hospital in order to be safe. Almost always they agree without complaint.

I call 911 and write a note addressed to the Attending Psychiatrist, Bellevue Hospital Emergency Room, detailing my observations and my assessment of their mental status. Fortunately, the hospital is only one block away. Within ten minutes, the police and EMT’s arrive. “Good luck,” I always say to the men as they are taken away. To my amazement, they almost always say “thank you.”

The staff and I are instructed to classify the men we see into one or more of the following official categories of disability or distress, as promulgated by the New York City Department of Mental Health:

- SPMI [seriously and persistently mentally ill]
- MICA [mentally ill chemical abuser]
- Axis II [personality disordered]
- Medical
- Forensic [released from jail or prison]
- Over 60 Years Old
- Mentally Retarded/Developmentally Disabled
- Immigration
Physically Disabled
Vocational
Domestic

It’s a nice list of nice bureaucratic categories, but it means nothing, really. I’ve created my own list. These, I’ve learned in my two years of sitting next to the black chair, are the far more descriptive and pertinent categories:

The Travelers and the Wanderers
Guided by Voices
Vietnam Vets
Wegiaid tourists, usually recently robbed
Criminals
“No English” and no papers
Various persons destroyed by alcohol, crack, heroin or some other substance
Alzheimer’s patients and other victims of senility
Manic in America
People who choose to live underground and in darkness
The truly weird, from whom we can find no category that fits

But all this I keep to myself. I sit at the computer and duly check off the city’s official list.

In truth, they are all travelers and wanderers. They come from Jamaica, Georgia, Colombia, Kuwait, Poughkeepsie, Italy, Oregon, Taiwan, Wyoming, Poland, Detroit, and Bosnia. And it is Manhattan—not Brooklyn, Queens, or the Bronx—that they want to come to.

Countless times I’ve found myself in the following exchange:

“Brooklyn! That’s all the beds you got tonight! Just Brooklyn! Shit!!”
“Yes, that’s the only place that there are beds tonight.”
“Shit. I ain’t going to no fucking Brooklyn! You sure that’s it? Nothing in Midtown, or maybe the Wall Street area?”
“No. That’s it. All we have is the shelter in Bedford Stuyvesant.”
“Fuck, if that’s all you got, I’m leaving. I gotta be in Manhattan, man. Maybe I’ll come back tomorrow night.”

And they get up and leave, back to the streets or park or wherever.

I’ve learned that homeless people prefer to be in Manhattan, just like everybody else. At first I was indignant—these people are choosy about where they’re going to stay? But I thought about it, and realized the sources of their livelihood, such as they are, are far more lucrative in Manhattan.
Panhandling goes much better in Times Square than in Far Rockaway. The men tell me that if you do it respectfully, and look decrepit enough—but not so decrepit as to scare people—you can make between twenty and eighty dollars an hour panhandling in a prime location in Midtown. They may be mentally ill, but they’re not crazy: it is Manhattan that the voices tell them to go to, and not, for example, Staten Island.

“So, why did you come to New York…that is, Manhattan?” I almost always ask the people in the black chair.

Some of the answers I’ve heard over the years:

“Because Jesus told me to.”

“Because someone was trying to kill me in Las Vegas.”

“Because where I was staying they only let you stay in chairs, and I want a bed.”

“Because when I got out of prison in Baltimore, I read that Giuliani had brought the crime rate down so I decided to return to New York.”

“Because this is where the bus brought me.”

“Because I can get better health insurance here than in Puerto Rico.”

“Because I can’t find my way home. I left my house on Walters Street in the Bronx ten years ago and I can’t find my way back.”

“Because I’m John the Baptist—a truth serum given to me at Trenton State Hospital in 1969 proves it—and can you get me a bed near the St. John the Divine Cathedral because I have to go there and tell them I’ve arrived.”

“Who said I was in New York?”

“Because when I was working on the chicken farm in Georgia last week, a voice told me to come here.”

“Because I always wanted to see the Empire State Building.”

“Because the people here are less crappy here than they are in Florida.”

“To compete in a Karate championship.”

“Because I want to open a blacksmith shop in Queens.”

“Because my so-called best friend stole everything I had.”

“Because I always wanted to go where no one would find me.”

But even among the travelers, there are the prodigious and ceaseless ones, the ones who are committed to motion as a way of life. Traveling around America—which in this case means visiting one shelter and soup kitchen and church basement and subway station and bus depot and abandoned building after another—is their profession. In the warmer weather, and even in the colder weather, a lot of them camp out, whether it is in Central Park, the woods of upstate New York, or the beaches of California. It doesn’t seem to matter really where they are, as long as they can move away from it.
quickly. A lot of them are actually offered permanent or semi-permanent lodging—half-way houses, community residences, and the like—and they invariably turn them down, to move on to the next city. Their destinations are much like those featured in travel advertisements: New Orleans, Las Vegas, L.A., Hawaii, and New York.

There is a specific look to the professional travelers, instantly identifiable; there is almost invariably a certain healthy and woodsy glow about them, no matter how high or drunk or crazy they are. They tend to have long straggly beards and wild eyes and dusty backpacks and sleeping bags. In the summer, they wear as little as possible, and sport dark tans, and hair bleached blond from the sun; in the winter, they wear layers of sweaters and their cheeks are rosy pink. They are usually lean. A few of them, self-consciously or not, adopt the romantic trappings of the old hoboes; one night, a man plaintively played a harmonica in the waiting room, entertaining his fellow wayfarers. Once I walked past Central Park and saw a group of hoboes sitting around and roasting marshmallows at a campfire, like something out of *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*. The parallel universe of Central Park West and its fabulously expensive French restaurants, celebrity apartment houses, and endless medical—and typically psychiatrists’—offices, was just thirty feet away.

The shelter staff came to me one night, exasperated, saying there was a white guy somewhere in the building who had been eluding them for hours. The shelter workers had been trying to take his photograph and his fingerprints—submission of which is required to enter the shelter—but this person, whoever he was, had been stealthily moving from chair to chair and room to room all night long. In other words, he was a traveler even within the confines of the shelter.

“Where is he now?” I asked the security officer.

“In the bathroom—we think,” he said, and led me there.

The bathroom was a predictably dingy, rank affair, distinguished only by the curious fact that the dividers between the stalls were made of marble, with beautiful gray swirling patterns. On the marble was written, in magic marker: “Bums never have a nice day,” and “Suck my homeless dick.” The man sitting on the toilet had tousled reddish blond hair—lots of it—and a thick beard. He was rocking back and forth on the toilet, with his pants on. He looked, I thought, like a psychotic Viking.

“Excuse me,” I said to the psychotic Viking on the toilet. “Would you mind going to have your photograph taken in the screening room? And when you’re done, would you mind coming to my office down the hall?”

“Oh yeah, sure, sure, sure,” he replied.

And I left there as quickly as possible, thinking that I had done my job for the night and that I would never see him again. But when I turned around a moment later, back in the office, the Viking was sitting quietly in the black chair next to me.

“What’s your name?” I said.
“Leif,” he said. It sounded Nordic or Danish or something, confirming my Viking theory. He probably would have been a great Viking, I thought; a few thousand years ago his wildness would have served him well. As I was contemplating this, he began doing a kind of dance in the chair—arms and legs and hands and neck bouncing away, all of them flowing to different beats—and embarked upon this rushed monologue:

“In case you wanted to know, I’m Norwegian, Ukrainian, Swedish, Danish, Irish,” he began. “I’ve lived in Florida, Hawaië, Alaska, Oklahoma, all over Canada, and Cheyenne, Wyoming, but mainly I grew up in South Jersey.

“The malls there suck, you know? I slept under a car last night. I was in jail for a rape I didn’t commit of my half-sister. What else do you need to know?”

“Have you been in the shelter system before?” I asked.

He looked directly at me. “I need help. I need help! No one’s helping me after I got out of detox,” he said, and as he said it I noticed for the first time that his breath stank of liquor. “I didn’t have nowhere to go. That’s why I’m here. But not for long. Thinking of going back to Cheyenne. That was my favorite place. Happy there. That’s where I got convicted of the rape I didn’t commit of my half-sister”—I noticed he used the exact same phrasing to describe the alleged crime—“and I want to clear my record. Clear my name!”

“Have you been in the hospital recently?” I said.

“I have very bad nerves,” he said, not exactly to me, but, it seemed, to something beyond me—a general statement to or about the world. “Very bad nerves,” he added for emphasis. “You know who helped me? The nuns helped me. The nuns were fucking awesome!” he shouted to the ceiling, and then smiled broadly.

“Do you take any medications?” I asked.

“I brought it all on myself,” he said. “Nobody’s fault but mine.” He stood up and produced from his pockets a series of smudged and torn-up hospital papers. The papers said that he had been in a hospital in Maine, and before that a detox in Providence, and before that a psychiatric hospital in Kansas, and before that a rehab in Oregon, and that he had severe diabetes, a seizure disorder, and bipolar disorder. The medical diagnoses surprised me: he had that healthy look of the travelers, that unworried and rural look that made it seem that, at a moment’s notice, he could set off on a fifty mile hike in the woods.

Suddenly he lurched forward in the chair and thirty syringes fell to the floor. They seemed to have fallen out of his red sweatshirt, but from where exactly, I couldn’t tell. He picked up the syringes, one after the other, and stuffed them into his pockets and what seemed like a pouch in his sweatshirt. As he picked up the needles, he kept on talking, not stopping for a second, about nuns, disputed rapes, Cheyenne, and bad malls in Jersey. At one point he took out a thick wad of bills, again from some mysterious place on his person. “See this!” he said, waving the money close to my
“It’s chump change, and it means nothing,” he said, and immediately went back to picking up syringes. Finally he was done, and I got him to sit down again.

“When was the last time you took your meds?” I said.

“The physical shit is nothing. It’s a test, a test! I wish I woulda died after the seizure, I wish I woulda never woken up. Then I wouldn’t have to deal with the hassle. The physical shit is nothing. It’s a test by Jesus Christ, a test by God to see how much you can take. The only thing, man, is I gotta keep moving. Death is being static, dude.”

I was about to ask him more about tests by Jesus Christ and hassles and nuns, because I liked him and was interested, when he jumped again—as if electrically shocked by something in the chair—and ran out of the room. By the time I got out into the hallway, he was gone. A few syringes had fallen out of his pocket and were bouncing on the hard shiny floor of the shelter. Fortuitously, the security officer hadn’t been at his post, and Leif, the psychotic Viking, the adventurer, was able to leave undetected, free to re-enter his world.

Last January I was asked by the security staff to go to the entrance of the shelter to assess a problem case, some guy in a wheelchair. Security would not let him into the building because he didn’t have papers to prove that he was medically cleared to enter the shelter system. When I saw the guy in the strangely ornate entry foyer (it has marble floors and a hand-painted ceiling), I knew why. He was in a wheelchair, had no arms and no legs, and wore a loose cotton hospital gown that was open to the waist, revealing a still oozing stomach wound. He was distressingly thin, had black curly hair, and looked Italian. A teddy bear was in his lap. A sparkly heart-shaped balloon, with the words “I love you” printed on it in expansive letters, was attached by a string to the back of his wheelchair. “I’m Richie Vecchio,” he said, smiling at me. He appeared to be in no distress.

I wheeled him down the dark hall to the waiting room. The security guards looked at us dubiously—all they knew was that he wasn’t authorized to come in. I looked closely at his hospital bracelet. It indicated that he had been an inpatient at Bellevue for the last four months.

“Which unit?” I said.

“16-North,” Richie said. “I was in an accident,” he added, happily.

I told him that they wouldn’t let him into the shelter unless he got a form from a doctor stating that he was medically stable.

“You better go back to the hospital. Then you can come back here,” I said.

“Oh, I’m not going back there,” he said. “I’ve been there for four months.”

As a legal matter, I said, they weren’t going to let him in.

“Oh that’s okay,” he said, reassuring me. “I’m just happy to be out of the hospital.”

“Did you sign yourself out?” I asked.

“Yup,” he said with satisfaction.
“But where will you go?”

“Oh, I'll figure something out,” he said.

I started in on the legalese I'd been trained with: “It is, of course, your right to leave the hospital, but I strongly urge you…” when he interrupted me.

“It’s all right, man, I’m just happy to be free,” Richie said. “But I was wondering, do you think you could let me stay in the building long enough so I could recharge my wheelchair? The batteries don’t last long in the cold.”

He had spotted the electrical outlet in the corner. He pushed his chin down into his chest, and engaged a button on a metal plate that lay on his collarbone. The wheelchair whirred forward.

“See the cord in the back? Could you plug it in?” he said. “It takes about forty five minutes to charge up,” he said happily. I plugged in the cord.

“Is your wound okay?”

“Yeah,” he said, looking down at it as if for the first time. “Jeez,” he observed. “I guess it is oozing a little.”

“What happened to you anyway?” I said.

“Lost my limbs in a motorcycle accident. My fault,” he said. “I’m an addict. Heroin, coke, everything. Now I’m just on methadone, and a ton of medications.” It was as if he were talking about varieties of ice cream.

He directed me to a pouch on the back of his wheelchair. In it was a hospital paper stating he had hepatitis and HIV, along with fifteen bottles of medications.

“Are you sure you don’t want to go back to the hospital?”

“No way!” he said almost violently. “Four months is enough. They won’t take me back anyway.”

“Let me see if I can find anything for you,” I said.

There are, in New York City, strange entities called “drop-in centers.” They are intended to work as adjuncts to the city shelter system. They are meant to assist those who aren’t medically cleared or not deemed “appropriate” for the regular system. That is, they serve those poor souls who have been rejected even by the New York City shelter system. The drop-in centers are usually a couple of basement rooms in a church somewhere. Contractually they are not allowed to provide beds. The clients of the drop-in centers sit on chairs all night long.

I called the four drop-in centers in Manhattan. I made my usual mistake, which is to ask if they have beds.

“You mean chairs,” said an annoyed voice at the first drop-in center.

“Yes, chairs,” I said.

“No chairs,” the voice replied, and hung up the phone.

I called the next drop-in center. “Do you have any…er…slots?”

“You mean chairs,” said the voice. “No, didn’t you notice? It’s cold outside. No chairs.” Click.
No chairs were to be had at the other drop-in centers either.

When I returned to the waiting room there were three more clients waiting. Normally the guys in the waiting room never talk to one another, sitting silently with their heads down, avoiding eye contact at all costs. But these three were all talking to Richie. One was sharing his sandwich with him, and another was reading him a story from the newspaper.

“I’m sorry, I couldn’t find anything for you. Do you have any money?” I said.

“One hundred and thirty dollars,” said Richie, precisely.

The last resort for shelter were the Bowery flophouses. They charged $10 a night for a “room” with walls made of chicken wire. I called The Palace, The Rio, The Sunshine; none of them had beds.

“It’s cold outside,” the voices on the other end of the line said.

My last call was to the YMCA, ten blocks away.

“We have a bed, but you gotta get here quick,” said the attendant.

“How much?”

“Sixty five dollars a night.” In New York, even the Y’s are expensive.

“Oh that’s fine,” Richie said, after I told him about the Y. “I’ll go there.”

“But you only have enough for two nights.”

“It’s okay. Don’t worry, man. I’ll figure something out.” He depressed his chin, engaged the button and rolled out of the waiting room. “See you guys later. Thanks a lot,” he said, nodding to his instant friends.

I left the shelter with Richie. Smoke or steam or whatever it is that emanates from the city’s innards was billowing up through an open manhole to the surface of First Avenue. The wind had picked up and it must have been twenty degrees. Richie told me he had a jacket in his pouch. I pulled out the flimsy windbreaker and settled it over his shoulders. All he had on underneath was the cotton hospital gown.

I pointed him in the direction of the McBurney YMCA. “Do you think the wheelchair will make it?”

“We’ll see,” he said, laughing. “It looks like it’s downhill.” He headed out onto the street.

Then he stopped and shouted back to me. “See ya later! Thanks a lot, Charlie, I mean it. I really appreciate everything you’ve done for me. You’re a great social worker or doctor, or whatever you are.”

Richie crossed First Avenue, nearly colliding with the M15 bus. He whirred unsteadily down one side of the avenue, in the precarious slip of pavement between the parked cars and the oncoming traffic. The last I saw of Richie was the back of his wheelchair, the heart-shaped balloon bouncing in the wind, as he cut through the cloud of steam escaping from the city’s netherworld.
Homelessness doesn't stop on holidays, but it does slow down. I've worked most holidays at Bellevue: Independence Day, Thanksgiving, Christmas, Labor Day. I think even the clients know it's a little tough to be in a homeless shelter on Christmas, and they stay away.

I watched the millennium come in at the shelter, saw the digital clock turn to 12:00:01 am, 2000. Here at the shelter, nothing changed. No one celebrated. Homelessness in the new millennium seemed to be just about the same as it was in the last one.

But the holiday I'll always remember was last July 4th. The shelter, about fifty yards from the East River, is a great spot to watch the fireworks. The explosives are set off by Macy's in barges in the middle of the river. The city closes down the F.D.R. Drive for the night and the crowds arrive two or three hours before the display to get a good view. At Bellevue, we have a front-row view all to ourselves.

That night I watched the fireworks from the shelter waiting room. There was nobody there but me, and I looked down upon the vast, noisy crowds, nearly fifty yards thick, packed in behind police barricades on the streets. After watching the psychedelic explosions for half an hour, I returned to my office.

Out my window I could see the massive residential wing of the building. A hundred turn-of-the-century casement windows faced me across the garbage-strewn courtyard. As the fireworks continued, I noticed a few faces quietly, tentatively peering out of a few windows. At first everything was murky, but as the side of the building lit up for a few seconds in the startling pink or green or purple aftermath of the explosions, I could see that there were dozens and dozens of faces—all of them black—peeking out of the windows. It was like a delayed strobe: every twenty seconds or so, I could see those heads, each time lit with a different color. As I stared long enough, and my eyes adjusted to the strobe, I could read the expressions on the faces. They all wore the same expression, an odd look, one that I'd never seen before at the shelter, where most people try to be as numb as possible: it was an expression of shy longing, a wish to be a part of something that was unavailable to them. America, it seemed, was a party that they could observe, but not attend.

All of them, I thought, every single one of the residents of the black chair, wanted to embrace the pink and green and purple light, to merge into those streaming lights over Manhattan. All of them possessed songs, songs sung in the midst of despair—songs about mythical places like Cheyenne, or about bobbing red balloons, songs proclaiming there is something much greater out there somewhere, songs hopeful that perhaps somehow, some way, someday... In a moment, I realized how strangely and cruelly exhilarating, how terribly and punishingly great it is to spend my nights listening to songs from the black chair.