

# Sounds From the Street: Writer Nick Flynn on Reconnecting with His Father

Transcribed By: Joseph Doyle

**Nick Flynn (Guest):** I began writing my memoir *Another Bullshit Night In Suck City* almost ten years to the day after my father appeared at the shelter *The Pine Street Inn* in Boston.

**[Music]**

**NF:** It's really the largest shelter in Boston, one of the largest in the country at that point. It had just recently opened. There were three hundred beds there and there were another hundred and fifty sleeping on the floor.

**[Music]**

**NF:** Scan the corners and the edges, the just out of sight. The places where men go to piss. Any horizontal will do. One of those lights could be my father. But he keeps moving through the night, finds a stone mattress and dozes off.

**[Music]**

**Adam Kampe (Host):** That's poet and writer Nick Flynn, and this is *Sounds From the Street*, where we talk about homelessness and life on the margins. I'm your host, Adam Kampe. At age 24, Nick Flynn started working at the *Pine Street Inn*, the largest shelter in Boston. The homeless shelter, like homelessness was a relatively new concept in the mid 1980s. A sort of analog federally subsidised startup. If necessity is the mother of invention, then the need was to house of warehouse people. *Pine Street Inn* not only offered Nick a decent paycheck and dignified work. but ultimately and unexpectedly inspired his moving memoir, *Another Bullshit Night In Suck City*. Today Nick shares the remarkable story behind the story.

**NF:** I worked there for six years until the early 1990s. I started out as a fill in staff, which basically meant you worked on the floor working whatever that needed to be done. So I did like all of the jobs at the shelter. All the different shifts. The day shifts, the night shifts, and the overnight shifts. I got to know the workings of the shelter, which was kind of being invented at that point. There was kind of a sick feeling that we shouldn't make it too good. It always felt like we were trying to perfect something that was a mistake to begin with. I'm not a big fan of shelters as a final solution.

**[Music]**

**NF:** The whole thing, even then you would get a big shelter with like three hundred beds. It was beautiful, it was clean. there were meals. There were things there, but it was also warehouse for people. The problem is that people didn't have housing, this is not housing. This is taking many different social problems, people getting released from prison, from mental health institutions, poverty, single mothers, all of these people just putting them in a single warehouse and out of sight.

**AK:** D.C. shelter resident, Eric Thomson Bay said, 'It's a lot going on in the shelter' "A lot." "Abuse. I see it" "They got them on the floor he abuses clients and I got witnesses to that." "Physical, punches, the guy that runs my floor, it's a lot that really needs to come out."

**NF:** At the time there was a bigger one in D.C. It opened after I started working. It became this even bigger shelter, it was huge. It was a whole block in D.C. Mitch Snider was a very charismatic homeless formerly homeless person. He died tragically by committing suicide, he hung himself inside that building. We would stay at that shelter doing protests in D.C. and stuff. It's also important to take care of yourself in the midst of this. I began writing my memoir *Another Bullshit Night in Sucks City* almost ten years to the day where I saw my father appeared at the shelter. I had been working at the shelter for three years and I had become somewhat

comfortable there, proficient, I was supervisor sometimes. The work seemed really meaningful sometimes. We were trying to change it and become more caseworkers and connect people with facilities outside of the shelter. And then my father who I didn't grow up live with, ended up getting evicted. He was living in Boston. It was at that time where a confluence of historical circumstances and my father's own demons. People were getting kicked out of these , they were being turned into condominiums, these SROs. Single men and women could go and live cheaply and live whatever life they wanted to live. In my father's case that was pretty hardcore alcoholism So he got evicted from that place and he ended up on the streets. He assumed it would be a temporary situation because it had happened before with him. This point in his life he was in his late fifties. His options were getting thinner, less easier to crash friends when you're are in your late fifties and they're in their twenties. He showed up to the shelter. He had probably stayed at the shelter before over the years. It didn't seem like it was totally unfamiliar to him. He had slept outside. He would scam hotel rooms and crash with friends. Then he would get an apartment for six months and he would end up in prison. He had a very colorful life. In my twenties I could relate. I wasn't necessarily stable either. It was a little more frightening to see someone in their late fifties where he's been drinking for a long time so the alcohol started to wear on him.

**[Music]**

**NF:** He showed up homeless for what he thought was going to be a temporary couple weeks just to stop into the shelter that ended up being five years. It's how he and I got to know each other because we didn't grow up together so we got to know each other that way. In the shelter.

**[Music]**

**AK:** So at this point I asked Nick a really unoriginal question: Did he recall the moment that he ran into his dad at the shelter? I chose to leave it in because the answer is too important.

**NF:** It seems like that's the essential question that everyone wants to know. I never understand it. "What did I feel?" "What was it like?" He got evicted maybe two months earlier, and about a

month later I saw him sleeping on a bench. Then a month later he showed up at the shelter. There are many steps toward it. The whole idea of a moment strikes me as kind of strange. It's trying to capture something that's much bigger. It feels like a daytime T.V. question where you only allowed one moment in your life that's really significant. And you're only allowed two or three emotional responses to it. It was a whole kaleidoscope of events, and a series of events. For most homeless people, it wasn't one event that made them end up on the streets. There are so many things that lead to them being on the street. To try to pin it on one moment is reductive and I think dangerous actually. It makes it so we understand it and now we can move on or say this is how we react to our homeless brothers and sisters and this is what caused them to be homeless. It's more complicated, and less complicated in a way. They don't have a home so the priority is to figure out a housing situation for them and often times at that point it a supported housing situation. Something that has some support so they don't end up in the same place.

**[Music]**

**NF:** My father in my poems, my first book of poems especially some aether. He's one of the main threats that goes through that book. Which is often the case for a person's first book of poetry. Is presenting one's self and life to the world.

**AK:** "Father outside. A black river flows down the center of each page. On either side the banks are wrapped in snow. My father is ink falling in tiny blossoms." "A bottle wrapped in a paper bag. I want to believe if I get the story right we will rise, newly formed. That I will stand over him again as he sleeps outside under the church halogen. Only this time I will know what to say." "It is night and it's snowing, starlings fill the trees above us. So many it seems the leaves sing. I can't see them until they rise together on some hidden signal and hold the shape of the tree for a moment before scattering. I wait for his breath to lift his blanket so I know he's alive. Letting the story settle into the shape of this city. Three girls in the park begin to sing something holy. A song with a lost room inside it. As their prayer book becomes unglued, and falls. I bend each finger back until the bottle falls. Until the bone snaps. Save him by destroying his hands. With a

thaw the river will rise and be forced to higher ground. No one will have to tell him. From my roof I can see the east river. It looks blackened with oil, but it's only the light. Even know, my father was asleep somewhere. If I follow the river north, I can still reach him."

**[Music]**

**NF:** Those were my first attempts to write about him. There's probably about five or six poems that deal directly with him. I'm happy with the poems, I think some are quite good. If I can be objective about it, they work as poems. I don't wince when I read them now. But there's always something a little bit frustrating about it. When you read a poem, it's not a documentary project. People rightly don't assume that everything you're writing is a fact as what actually happens. There's this whole character in this first book of poems of a homeless father. People read it as an archetype. This is the archetype of the lost father, the alcoholic father, the wandering father. At a certain point I felt frustrated by that. Just because some things do happen and we live in a postmodern world, but some things do happen. Not everything is based on subjective reality. There is an objective reality. The objective reality is that my father was homeless. It was a strange thing to spend ten years writing a book and have people dismiss, or to feel like they were dismissing it as if it was an invention. This is an imaginative act. A metaphor. It seemed important to acknowledge that this was something that really happened. I hadn't read a whole lot about family members of homeless people at that point. Like writing about it. Why is there a sting around homelessness? There's a failure within the family. The family is centered around a home and one member of that family is now outside that home. And living in very precarious circumstances. People die in the streets. It becomes a public display of failure and private failure in some way. In another level too it's a display of the failure of the entire culture and the society. There are societies where there are no homeless people. America was not a society that had masses, millions of homeless people, up until the mid 80's. When we decided that was okay. Marx has a quote. Something about a five percent profit. People won't compromise their morality. For a twenty percent profit, maybe a couple of things will get compromised. This was a

time where people were doubling the prices of their houses. Marx said, "You would kill your grandmother for that." It just seemed that the society got caught up in that. We as a culture we were willing to accept masses of homeless people on our streets in order to have our housing prices doubled. That was a simple observation of it but it seemed true because it didn't exist before. That was New Delhi. Cultures that we perceived as utter failures that would allow masses of homeless people on the streets. And we became that culture and accepted it. Now we've had a whole generation of young people who grew up stepping over bodies.

**NF:** "All over the city men are falling, nosedive, header. Crab Walking from benches lower and lower until the ground comes up to catch them until the earth says "Stop." The sidewalk tilts and the lights go out. From above with infrared, you can see them, bodies dotting the city, falling to their knees, rolling onto their sides. Frozen in a pantomime of sleep. Points on a map, an electrified tourist map. The scenic spots lit up, marked. Scan the corners, the edges, the just out of sight. The places men go to piss. Any horizontal will do. One of those lights could be my father, but it keeps moving through the night. Finds a stone mattress, dozes off.

**NF:** I did realize that I was sort of handed this opportunity, or this situation where I had a deep knowledge and connection of someone who is homeless. Even beyond what I had working in the shelter. Just the residence of the homeless father and being the son. I recognized it as being horrible. I realized that I had to tell the story as accurately as possible, and adhere to the physics of the world. What happens when one is homeless, what happens when you go to a shelter, what happens when you sleep outside. The rest will correlate around the more archetypal energy would correlate around it. It was a sort of responsibility too, if you're a writer and there is material, I hate to think of lives as material, but my father did come into my life for about five years we wrestled with each other in the shelter. I couldn't write about it for many years after it. After he had gotten house for about five years, gotten into section eight housing. If

you're a writer this dark, subterranean, subconscious, difficult, shadowy material, that's your material, that's your job description. That's what you need to wrestle with. Anyone can wrestle with what anyone sees. If you're a writer or an artist you have to wrestle with the stuff that people don't acknowledge and can't quite articulate. When I put a face on the homeless I recognized that it would be something that could come out of this. It could be a positive outcome of this. It's very difficult because my father's a complicated guy, he's not exactly a poster board for why one should fund social programs. He's fucked up every chance he's been given. He's a non-repentant alcoholic who continued to drink for sixteen years after he got off the streets in his section eight subsidised housing. He used his check every month to buy some more vodka. I couldn't pretend that this was some sort of redemption story. People live their lives, people make choices. There's plenty of billionaires that are sitting in their mansions getting drunk every night. That doesn't mean that they should be homeless. The thing that keeps them from being homeless is that they're billionaires. We all make these mistakes. As a society we all have to make the decision not to present someone as this heroic, romanticized poor person who just given a chance will save the world. I don't disbelieve that, but this wasn't the case with my father. He's just a regular fuck up, who i still don't believe should be homeless.

**[Music]**

**NF:** He was able to take care of himself on his own, in an apartment, which was much cheaper from an economic side. Him taking care of himself being in an apartment, drinking what he was drinking. It was still cheaper on society than him living on the streets. It would have been even cheaper if he hadn't gotten drunk every day. I'm not in a position to judge. When the quality of someone's life is not that we should say they should just die, which is what dumping someone in the streets is basically saying.

**[Music]**

**NF:** He was thrilled that there was a book where the title comes from him. *Another Bullshit Night In Suck City* is something that he said to me at some point when I encountered him on the streets. I would be working in the shelter and I would find him sleeping in one of his spots. He was always full of bluster. This was a wonderful opportunity. He's a writer as well, this was a wonderful opportunity for a writer to gather material out there. Like sleeping with a trash bag. He feels in some way that it is his book. In some way it is. It's filled with his life. There was a debt to him. He did live a very colorful life. A lot of the book takes the cadences of his voice and his stories. He was never able to write his own book. He never pulled it together to do that. He has a book, but the alcohol derailed him over and over again. He had stretches in his life where he would write quite a bit. Here's some of it right here. His manuscripts and things. Some of these were when I was putting the book together and some were from when I was moving him out of his apartment a couple years ago into a long term care facility. The alcohol, once again caught up. I can't believe how many times it has caught up with him. A couple years ago he was going downhill again after living on his own for like 15 years. I would come see him and bail him out every once in awhile. We transferred him into his next and probably his last housing situation. It's this place where he gets fed everyday and there's nurses around. He's living like a king. He's very happy there. He's not going to die on the streets, which is once again through his alcoholism was the risk. He was starting to forget that he had an apartment. The time of being homeless is so intense in someone's life he still goes back there. What's going to happen if he loses this place. He just assumes he'll be back on the streets. He doesn't remember the apartment he was in as clearly as the nights he was sleeping out on the streets. It's like a war. For people who been in war, that's like the most vivid time of their life. For him it was having to survive out on the streets.

**[Music]**

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