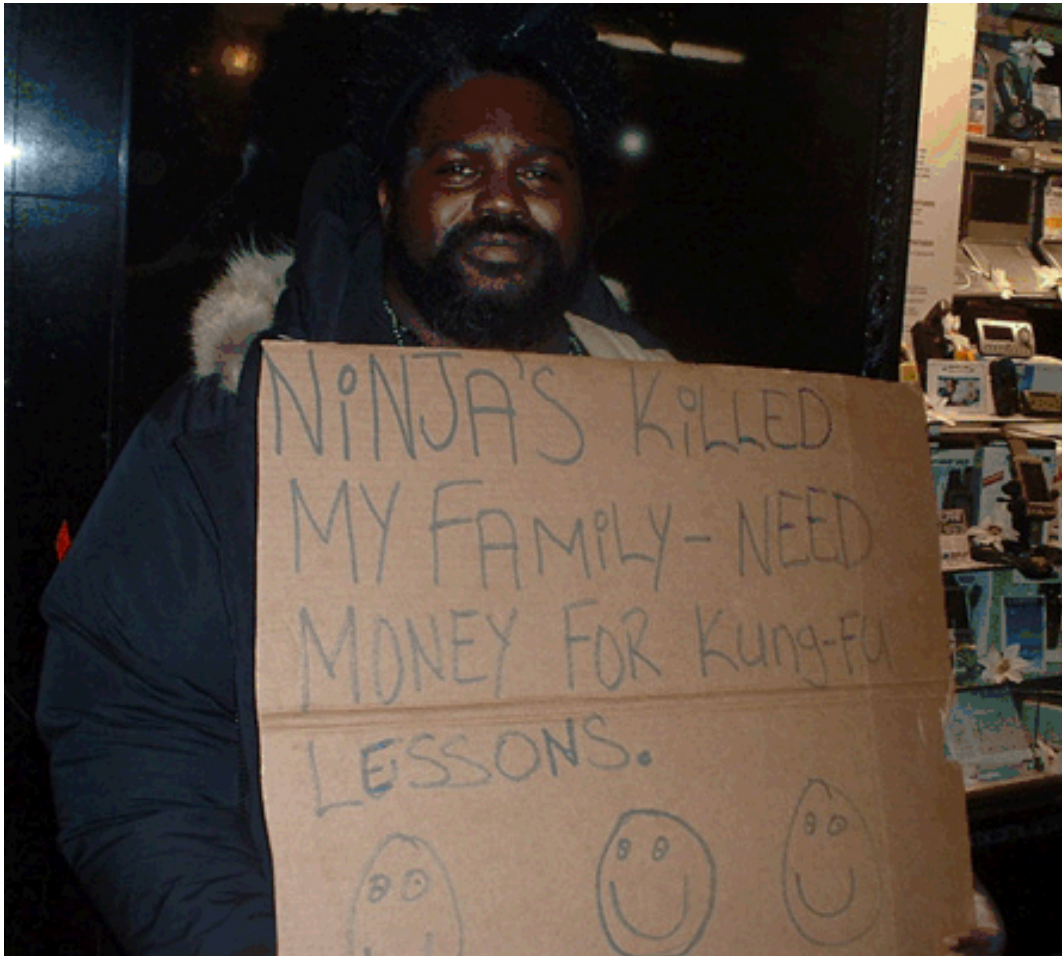


# Ninjas



It was a crisp autumn evening in midtown Manhattan. Scores of pedestrians, each with a story to tell, bustled up and down the sidewalk as a never-ending flotilla of cars and trucks streamed past on 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue. The pennants attached to the top of the newspaper kiosk at the corner of 57<sup>th</sup> Street fluttered gaily in the breeze. Nearby, a shoeshine man cheerfully plied his trade on a women's pair of elegant alligator wingbacks. And in front of the renowned Carnegie Hall stood a man, a one-man band, his instruments wrapped around him like a noisy cocoon. He was playing – was it Schubert? Huddled in the shuttered doorway of the Eureka Café across the street, Dan nodded solemnly. He well knew that melody. It was the opening strains of the 9<sup>th</sup> Symphony, the same tune that that damn ninja had hummed as he and his black-clad chums coolly chopped up his family last July. Eloise, Mabel and little Boise, all reduced to breadbox-sized chunks in a matter of minutes. And all the while, that guy kept humming that damn tune. And now, that man across the street was playing it! Dan peered at him. Maybe he wasn't a musician after all. Maybe he was really a ninja! If only he knew some kung fu, he'd go across the street, make him stop! But wait. Now the man was playing that little set of pipes. A panpipe, that's what it was called. Ooo, now Dan found *that* sound oddly soothing. Its reedy quality tickled his ears, made him forget all about the ... the ninjas. A businessman hastening by paused to read Dan's sign and fling a dollar into his hat. Dan smiled thinly at him, nodding his head in acknowledgment. Just another four hundred ninety-one dollars and those kung fu lessons would be his! Across the street, the man had abruptly stopped playing. He was coughing and clutching at his throat. *No, don't stop*, thought Dan. The absence of the panpipe was so disconcerting that it seemed louder than the honking 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue traffic. Except now those car horns sounded like the Schubert symphony melody! "Nnnnnnnnn," moaned Dan. *Nnnnninja!* replied a voice in his head. And then he saw them, a hundred black-clad warriors disguised as insects with pincers attacking the man in front of Carnegie Hall. Ninjas! He must *do* something! But then his attention was drawn to the woman who dropped another dollar in his hat. He smiled crookedly. Only another four hundred ninety to ....