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WESTROADS, OMAHA, THE ATRIUM, (13th & N) & GATEWAY, LINCOLN

Now's the summer of their discontent

Nobody knows the wino's name. We call him Bumpy, in honor of his misshapen noggin. On any day, Bumpy is around, rummaging for more rubbish to wire to the



David Wood

clattering bike he takes on his tours of the neighborhood garbage sites.

Bumpy is crazy, though, and couldn't possibly be as gloomy as the hunched figure I spied shambling through the weeds toward the dumpster. When I recognized the green welding glasses and natty plaid shorts, there was no mistaking the bum was my old buddy Duncan Drumm.

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HAPPY HOUR

"Hey, fella. How summer treating you?"

Even an everyday kind of howdy can be a gaffe when you say hey to the wrong fella. It is like the supreme idiocy, for example, of saying "How are you?" to somebody obviously ready to put a pistol in his mouth and take off the back of his skull.

Drumm's blank face was worth a thousand words. "It is the worst summer of my life," he said.

"Everyone's, I think. No money?"

"No money."

Once upon a time, my college chums used to return from their summers away with thrilling tales of money come, money gone, adventures had. Now, all the reports are the same — "No money," and "Well, I drank a lot of beer."

My friends and I incessantly mutter, "It is the worst summer of my life," as we putter between one another's homes. Comparing our Plasma Center wounds, our "red badges of poverty," is a main pastime. Also, watching any TV show is always hot. Days are long when phoning Job Service and reading the want ads are our only jobs. The only good thing to come of it is a terrific tan.

No, Mr. Reagan, we aren't poor by choice. We grovel at your heels, eager to suffer any degradation for a buck, a burrito, a cigarette. You love good anecdotes from South Succotash, Mr. President, so jot these on your index cards.

Val Paraiso, a former co-worker of mine, back in the days of jobs, got work this summer — two hours a day at the zoo, hauling feces and rotted meat. But, one evening, police collared him by the bald eagle's cage, where he was picking up the tails left from the white rats that the bird is fed. Paraiso was tossed in the slammer for inability to pay delinquent parking fines. The zoo wouldn't post bail, being in a snit over the animal tranquilizers Paraiso had stolen and sold to make ends meet.

Tracy Lines landed the best job and now is the most upwardly mobile of the bunch. She is permanent part-time at McDonald's.

Anne Archy snagged a food job with a carnival. But she had to forfeit her earnings for leaving the show — that is, getting fired — in midseason after she developed a rare and severe skin allergy to a dye in cotton candy. She hitchhiked back from Saskatoon and is in Lincoln now, soaking in salves, wrapped in plastic and accumulating bills.

I am unclear what happened to Nash Rambler. Last I saw him, he was in his Zen and bad-check writing phase. But I ran into his shrink, Dr. Coddle, one day by the city-county placement boards. His job, by the way, was cut from the university budget. Anyway, he told me Rambler had bought a snappy blazer, two ties and some shiny shoes, burned the rest of his checks and moved to Omaha. Went Thathaway swears he saw Rambler scooting about the back offices of a bank there.

At the time, Thathaway had a scam going based on his theory that, if he opened a network of accounts in several cities, he could float checks over all of them for money that was in none of them. The flaw was that when a check was early, deficting the account, soon three, 10, 40 checks were bouncing wantonly through the many banks.

That was exactly what happened. Miss Happ evicted him from her bomb shelter, and Thathaway moved in with me in the abandoned school bus near Salt Creek where I have squatter's rights.

Drumm grimly sat in the shadow of the dumpster. He had trudged miles through the cruel heat with the apparent reason of cadging cigarettes. We huffed the putrid menthol ultra-lights I bought two-for-one at the 7-Eleven and unavoidably talked of hard times, like a pot and kettle discussing the finer hues of black.

He told me Duncan's Famous Relaxation Spa had scored a few monied hypochondriacs. It was a going concern until it got busted for its fraudulent use of tax-exempt religious status. Drumm already had several residual cases pending from his previous enterprises — suits concerning We-Park-It's predatory business practices, illegal kickback and selling to minors charges from his days as 24-Hour-Delivery, plus a paternity rap from his Dial-A-Party venture.

He always had been the prince of the paupers. "So I'm depressed. I don't let it bring me down," he used to say. To see him at last beaten is the surest sign I have seen yet of our nation's economic calamity.

We numbly watched the sun sink into the humid haze and awaited the swarms of insects. Bumpy, our bum, showed up, wearing a cap whose ear flaps pointed outward like cockeyed wings. He scavenged the two TV-dinner tins I had discarded into the weeds. For Bumpy, an avid collector of TV-dinner and pie tins, it was a mother lode that had him fairly skipping back to his armored bike. I think both Drumm and I felt a tinge of envy.

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