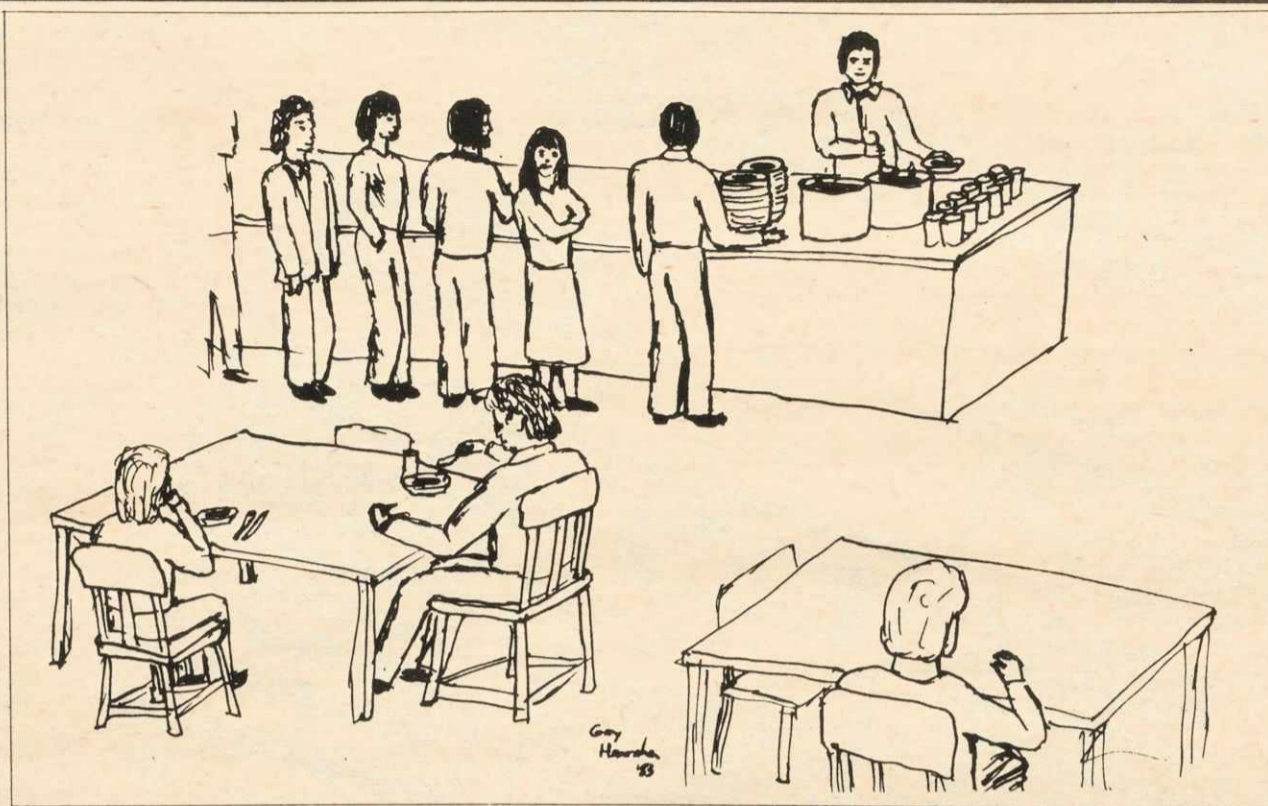


and out and there to stay?



life on welfare. They've got plans and they hang on to them with the determined grip of a couple of Ozzy Osborne animal victims. They're not asking for much: a grade twelve diploma, steady work, maybe even a trade and a union card. They know times are hard - who wouldn't, standing in a sandwich line 600 long in the February rain. "The way things are now it's probably gonna take five years before it's better," says Ed. But somehow they feel that doesn't have very much to do with them personally.

Ed is 18. Dwayne is 19. They blew into Vancouver from Edmonton last October. Life was going nowhere there. Stagnation and winter were creeping up fast. "I thought maybe Vancouver would show me something," says Dwayne.

Within a couple of days their money ran out. "So I decided to try my hand at shoplifting. I went to the Safeway and they caught me with about nine dollars worth of steaks. They gave me four months."

Vancouver showed Dwayne the inside of Pine Ridge prison camp. ("It was boring. Everybody hypes it up so much and says it's violent but it's not that so much. It's just boring.") He was paroled after two and a half months of work at three dollars a day in the prison sawmill.

Meanwhile Ed did another kind of time in the rooming houses and on the streets of the grubby east side of downtown Vancouver. "I was in bad shape, on skid road, for two months," he says now. "But I pulled myself out of it."

"And I came here with a shirt, pants and a jacket. Now I have a stereo. A T.V. I'm clean all the time."

Marcel Patrin, 20, is also clean, so clean he would take the award, if there were any in a life in missions and under bridges, for best-disguised down-and-outer. In a fuzzy grey sweatshirt and a jacket with the designer's name stamped on the arm, he looks like he got lost on the way

to a university lecture, and in a soft Quebecois accent he explains: "I try to look like this to show that I'm not a bum. I used \$130 of my first welfare cheque here to buy myself a winter jacket and a shirt."

"I didn't know that I didn't get any more for rent."

His appearance hides a street-smart steadiness he's learned in two years on the road. When a stranger approaches him in the line, he keeps his eyes straight ahead and returns a cautious "hello" only after a considered pause. Later, in a greasy spoon by the convent, he talks wearily about hitting the road after finishing three months military training and hitching around Canada and the states.

"I'm used to sleeping under a bridge or something like that. There's missions everywhere but a lot of the missions are full. I try the most to keep away from people who take drugs and drink."

He almost settled down in one Oregon town, where he worked for nine months as a cook in a mission, but despite more than 150 sponsors he couldn't get his working papers from the government. There just aren't enough jobs for Americans, as it is, he was told. So he was off again.

"When I get up in the morning I go to Manpower. Then I go back to my room."

And now he waits; for work, for welfare-sponsored job training, for the next cheque (they last about two weeks into the month, he complains), for word from the army on the application to re-enlist he made two weeks earlier. "I should never have left the army," he says. "It's a career,

you know." Sure. No life like it.

And no life like the downtown east side, where Marcel pays \$240 a month from a welfare cheque that provides a \$200 rent allowance (leaving him \$135 a month for food and clothes), in a rooming house where the girl next door regularly flips out, screams and chucks furniture out the window.

"When I get up in the morning I go to Manpower. Then I go back to my room. There's nothing else to do. I don't want to hang around in the street or anything. I don't know anybody at the hotel - don't want to know anybody."

When I called his hotel a few weeks later, Marcel was gone. The local recruiting office can't find him either. Maybe he's become another working stiff at last. More likely, he's moved on to another filthy rooming house or another heartless town. The kids reel off the names and descriptions of their seedy hotels like they're a colossal joke: the Pender Hotel ("the Pender hole"), the new Brazil ("\$170, cockroaches, lice and all"), the Lone Star ("you get a room as big as a finger"). And it would be a joke, if they weren't the butt of it all. Most of the 85-odd cheap hotels and lodging houses in the city, where drifters and pensioners and people without money, contacts or family turn up, are cramped, dirty and often dangerous.

Many of the rents are set to squeeze at least a few dollars more than the rent allowance from a tenant's welfare cheque if they need the place badly enough. Nearly everyone does down here.

It's hard to escape the desperate, derelict, sometimes deadly element of skid road society. Morning and night, intoxicated men and women stumble and sprawl on the streets, overserved by area bars, then thrown out to risk robbery or beatings - especially on welfare payday. Patrons are robbed right inside some bars. A lot of people are armed

with knives mostly, and argument often breaks out when someone cuts ahead in the food line.

A couple of years ago, in from the prairies and down on luck at 21, I found a room in the dingy Fraser Hotel after someone noticed that the old man who used to look out his second floor window above Gastown's Carrall Street all day wasn't looking anymore. By then the body had smelled up the place quite a bit and left a good-sized reddish brown stain at the head end of the bed. In the meantime another room came vacant and I took it, relieved of a nightmare or two.

...a red streak ran up the staircase along the velvet-textured bordello-style wallpaper.

The place always stank. The drafty windows faced more drafty windows facing an alley where a police paddy wagon always parked and pestered pedestrians. The walls were thin, the plumbing unreliable and a red streak ran up the staircase along the velvet-textured bordello-style wallpaper.

Night and day a huge orange W, a garish neon sun, hovers in Vancouver's skid road sky, a thousand festive lights shimmying on and off up and down the standard that hoists it above the Woodward's store. It spins and spins stupidly outside the windows of a thousand one room hell holes, while late into the night the bars and the nightclubs churn a clash of pub schlock and jazz into the streets and the lonely rooms above. There are no visitors after 11 p.m.

It's a kind of hopeless marathon 19 year old George Smith has run, all the way from home on the east side of Newfoundland - The Rock - to rock bottom on the seamy end of Granville

Street. There he rooms, with the friend he hitched here with six weeks ago, in the Yale Hotel down near where you can buy dope from a stranger if you don't look too straight and where women work the sidewalk by the parking lots, the dirty bookstores and the strip joints. Three hundred and twenty bucks for two beds and a shower and a T.V. ("and even that doesn't work") and a chance to get mugged when he goes out at night.

Forty five hundred miles and no work. But still George puts on his boots when he gets out of bed each day, to be ready for the work he hopes to find.

"I mostly walk around. I try the docks and all the ships and every restaurant. I've been back east of here and checked out all of the ranches and farms and all that. Mostly I thumb my way around; I'm very good at it, eh? I spend most of my day looking for work. Night time, I'm usually hanging around some friends, around shopping malls, checking out some young women and just passin' away the day."

He shows me the ring his girl gave him before he left home. She also gave him a choker necklace, some pictures and a watch but he left the choker and the watch in Newfoundland and someone stole them. Someone stole the pictures he brought with him, too. "She was decent," he remembers.

He left The Rock with seven dollars in his pocket and had six when he got to Edmonton. Sympathetic drivers along the way would help him out with a meal and a few bucks before setting him on the highway again. He recalls one. He was hitching through Ontario - "I forget the names of all these towns" - and this big guy, a Pentacostalist, he learned, picked him up. George knew some Pentacostalists from back home in Westport and he wasn't immediately impressed. They never seemed too charitable if you weren't one of their own. But the guy asked if they had a place to stay and no, they didn't, so he took them home to the wife and kids for the night.

A little later George made his way into the kitchen for something to drink and nearly stumbled on the guy, sitting at the table with his head in his hands and crying. Crying. "Oh, God, please help these kids," he was pleading. George could hardly believe it. "I felt like laughing because this guy was crying." But he couldn't forget it either. "This guy comes into my head all the time now."

The interview warms after a half hour of economical question and answer when George leans closer and lowers his voice confidentially: "I think this place'd be real bad if there wasn't places like the sisters' and all that. I think there'd be a lotta violence." Proletarian justice? Massive redistribution of wealth? A new political order? "Not a lady'd be able to walk with a purse, and there wouldn't be a store with anything in it. I know that."