

Asleep at the Wheel

Confessions of a suburban homeless guy

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The most recent Homeless Enumeration from the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments tallies more than 15,000 homeless people in the region. Of those, about 2,000 live in Fairfax County, Va. I am one of them.

But I might not be counted as such. Some of us don't make the official numbers, as Nancy Taxson, executive director of transitional-housing provider Homestretch, recently told the Falls Church News-Press. These folks, said Taxson, "don't show up on the homeless lists because they aren't living in shelters or receiving services. Rather they are living homeless below the radar with friends, family members, in cars, or other makeshift shelters not meant for human occupancy."

I fall in the "in cars" category. I have been spending my third bout of homelessness since May 2005 in the Big Wagon.

And I don't mean that I had a fight with the missus and spend the odd night in the family Buick. Picture instead languishing on the seat belts for long stretches, through the notoriously steamy D.C. summers and the wildly capricious winters. But then, even with a 24-year-old car's leaky roof and lumpy seats, I'm living a life of luxury compared to those sprawled on steam grates, roughing it in the woods, or huddling under bridges.

During the day, I am among you, taking special care to seem no different. I bathe, shave, wear clean clothes daily, and otherwise keep a low profile. That requires effort. The suburban homeless quickly learn to make no offensive, intrusive, or otherwise attention-drawing manifestations of any kind. Tom Star-King, a 30-year off-and-on homeless "veteran" from Fairfax County explained it on a 2002 segment on PBS's Religion & Ethics Newsweekly titled "Homeless in America": "You're gonna get discriminated against if you appear to be homeless. That's why you have to keep up a façade."

Indeed, you're not going to see the urban variety of homeless here in the 'burbs. If you make a nuisance of yourself, you'll end up locked away in a jail cell or doped up in a psych ward. We don't want to live indoors that badly.

It is certainly understandable why those who've only known nights indoors don't want any of the homeless around. A 2003 Council of Governments' report points out that "men, chronic substance abusers, seriously mentally ill, and the dually diagnosed" compose the largest homeless subpopulations. The stereotypes are not completely wrong, then.

Such individuals tend to be smelly, loud, and prone to opportunistic thievery. They're also liable to impose themselves in various disagreeable ways. I recall one sunny day in front of the old Ontario Theater in Adams Morgan observing a rather disheveled gent pissing from the crowded sidewalk into the gutter. No one batted an eye; not even the children. Try doing that in Vienna or Rockville and see what happens.

Even if I'm not bothering anyone, concerned citizens might report me to the authorities if I'm indiscreet about my living arrangement.

One recent cold morning, an engine idling next to my car stirred me awake. I wasn't visible, but a voice declared, "Look at the steam on the windows. Somebody's living in that thing!" Hearing a door slam, I cracked an eyehole in the makeshift blinds as he stood in front of my vehicle scribbling—presumably my tag number—on a note pad. While waiting for him to leave so I could bug out, I muttered, "Nosy prick. I'm not hurting you."

If I'm lucky, they'll just run me off. If I'm not, the responding officers might take me away in cuffs and have my four-wheeled source of housing, transport, and storage for my vital possessions impounded. Upon my release, the towing and storage fees would likely be beyond my financial reach, so I would be out in the weather with just the clothes on my back.

If one has a non-government-approved living arrangement—such as sleeping in a vehicle—it is likely illegal. Your very existence seems a crime, which adds a further challenge to your ability to sustain the motivation to persevere. That's one of the more salient aspects of being homeless.

But the shelters have far fewer beds than there are bedless people—and many are damned unpleasant anyway. I cannot bear to even walk past the Federal City Shelter near Judiciary Square. The piss smell can be overwhelming. And, given the shelter's apparent resolve to not turn people away, its clientele can be hardcore.

Of the nice, clean shelters where the truly offensive are screened out—such as the Embry Rucker Community Shelter in Reston—most are likely dormitories clustered with guys of varying standards of hygiene snoring, farting, yammering, and thrashing in their bunks. If you can deal with that, bully for you.

One night I stumbled out of the Reston shelter's front door, unable to sleep. As I crawled into the back seat of my car, I experienced an epiphany: Quiet. Clean. Alone. Under my complete control.

I never went back.

City dwellers and country folk alike need to consider the suburban mentality to understand what the homeless and others of society's lower rungs must accommodate in order to function in their milieu: Suburbanites want to escape from the city but benefit from urban prosperity, culture, and convenience. They also desire to live in a wooded setting but want it carefully manicured, scrupulously cordoned off, and sanitized of any wildlife that won't fit on their bird feeders.

They want to pay others as little as possible to mow their lawns, clean their houses, walk their dogs, and bring up their children. When such tasks are completed for the day, they want the people who do these things to then go far away. But the only distance that actually exists is in income. And we have to live somewhere.

For my part, I recall quitting a job in 1985 because I was only making \$7.50 an hour. At the time, I was splitting a \$525 monthly rent with two other guys for a three-bedroom apartment in Aspen Hill, Md. As anyone who browses today's "roommate wanted" ads knows, one of those bedrooms now rents for the cost of the entire unit 20 years ago. And yet many of us are still expected to live off that same inflation-unadjusted wage.

A family would need to be making over \$48,000 a year to afford the median rent for a two-bedroom apartment, according to the National Low Income Housing Coalition. Furthermore, as data reported in December 2004 by Falls Church News-Press reporter Darien Bates indicate, Fairfax County's "low" poverty rate still leaves "over 43,000 people...surviving on less than half of what they would need to afford their housing." Paying a larger income percentage on rent, many try to sneak by without medical insurance. Thus, treatable health problems are allowed to worsen, leaving many low-income people one illness or accident away from the economic brink.

Sarah Hoover, also interviewed on that PBS episode, was a pretty, healthy-looking young woman who suffered a "medical emergency" that quickly left her unemployed and living at a shelter. She explains, "There was kind of a—a mocking, I guess, in a way, with my situation. 'What are you doing here?' And, you know, 'How could you come to this situation?' It was hard to find a bond with people, because I didn't really fit a certain mold, I guess, that a lot of people were used to seeing."

I can relate.

For me, the early '90s saw the end of the Cold War and, with it, a shrinkage of the technical jobs that supported the defense industry. I had a well-paying position as an electro-mechanical CAD drafter. Then our company experienced a takeover. The lucrative contracts were kept, of course, but a series of layoffs—graybeards first—scythed through the staff until finally I, too, was summoned for a final chat with the HR lady dubbed "the Terminator."

When I was hired for that job, in the late '80s, I interviewed first with my potential supervisor. Satisfied that I knew the work and would likely show up if hired, he offered me a job on the spot. Then I was sent to the personnel department, where I filled out the standard paperwork for new employees. That was the last time a hiring took such a straightforward sequence for me.

After the notorious “restructurings” of the late '80s and early '90s, hiring and retention practices changed. A new corporate culture emerged, demanding that a job applicant must first convince a human-resources person (who doesn't even know the job) to allow him to meet the supervisor who actually knows what the particular position entails. But, then and now, competence isn't what seems to matter to these increasingly influential HR types, anyway. Instead, they are looking for someone who will “fit in.”

That mindset explains the now-familiar Blade Runner questionnaires that I found difficult to take seriously, much less understand how to successfully answer: “If a co-worker started to hand you a visibly chewed pencil, what would you do?” My incredulity at having to deal with these bizarre irrelevancies must have been evident to these new “gatekeepers” whom before I'd rarely even passed in the hallways, much less talked to.

Perhaps it's a generational thing. The older folks came from a time when being a hard worker who actually showed up was enough to get and keep a job. The younger ones have only known the era of second and third interviews (for which one must write thank-you notes) facing hair-gel-slayered ignoramuses who say, “So tell me about yourself...”

Many of us who endured the layoffs only to face this new system—in which success is measured by arbitrary, non-performance-related approval from others—still have not recovered, years later. Before we lost touch, my former CAD-drafting contemporaries told me how they found themselves delivering pizzas, landscaping, driving trucks, and so forth. Some turned to substance abuse, ended up in jail, or were otherwise institutionalized. Some died young.

Me? I drove a taxi—temporarily, of course. Hacking in the 'burbs is quite different from in the city. It's much easier to get behind the wheel of a cab in the suburbs but much more difficult to make a living.

The overwhelming majority of the vehicles are company-owned. There is no split of the fare—that would supposedly make the drivers “employees,” which would make them subject to labor laws and worker's comp. Instead, they are “independent contractors” who rent the cabs—at that time, for about \$500 per week.

The driver pays for the gas, which is about a tankful a day. Whatever you earn beyond those costs is your profit. Hence the company is guaranteed stable income from each taxi, and the driver weathers the fluctuations—and the dangers—entirely. It typically took the first nine hours of each daily shift to cover the aforementioned costs.

The companies thus have an incentive to get as many cabs on the road as is legally permitted, with little concern as to the drivers' competence or individual profitability. In the suburbs, there is a lot of sitting on cab stands at hotels and Metro stations.

Working 80 to 100 hours a week doesn't leave much time for socializing—or a life. And taking a break from rude and dangerous people becomes increasingly welcome. Eventually everyone but immediate family members fade into memory, replaced by an insidiously comfortable alienation.

As the early-'90s recession wore on, cab driver ranks swelled with the recently downsized. Given such high operating costs and the market saturation, the moderately successful drivers were those who combined good salesmanship with the ability to sleep when it was slow and work when it was busy—in intervals of a few hours back-and-forth. Quite a few then vacated their apartments, put their belongings in storage, and simply stayed in their cars 24/7. I couldn't sleep like that—but being unable to make enough money to pay rent, I had to live in a car anyway.

For a while, I slept in an old Caddy I owned, but there wasn't enough room for me and my stuff. So I bought an aged little Scotty trailer. It was nice to be able to stand up while getting dressed. I owned a lifetime gym membership from years before, so there was a place to bathe. Coin-operated washers took care of the laundry. I was working every waking hour anyway, so it didn't seem as though I were really homeless—just sensible.

I couldn't afford a space at one of the dwindling number of trailer parks in the area. Besides, they tend to be noisy, with unsupervised kids during the day and partying at night.

So I parked the trailer on the side of the road, hoping no one would notice. Thus began my trial-and-error process of learning how to be inconspicuously homeless in the suburbs. There are certain methods that I will not reveal, because the "unfriendlies" don't need help knowing what to look for. They're nosy enough already.

But one thing I learned early on about suburban vehicular domesticity is to avoid parking in residential areas—especially not where naturally inquisitive juveniles might pass by.

One evening, I parked my trailer in a section of a Burke street that had no structures, though some houses stood nearby. Unfortunately, this also turned out to be near a middle-school bus stop. The next morning, some boys took an immediate interest in my trailer, trying the locked door handle and then banging from all sides. As their pubescent voices gratingly crackled around me, I quietly hunkered down, hoping they would tire of it and move on. Alas, no.

Finally, one little shit climbed up on the roof and began to peel the top vent open, crimping the sheet metal to look inside. That's when I rushed out swinging my big Maglite and shouting, "What the fuck?!" Screaming like girls half their age, a half-dozen or so early-teen lads scurried toward Mom's consoling arms as fast as their expensive sneakers could carry them.

Within minutes, my modest abode bumped along in the rear-view mirror, on its way to a nearby park's campsite. It costs money to stay there, and there's a time limit of a week or two, so it wasn't a permanent option. Dropping off the trailer, I went in search of suitable places once again, and I bought a personal alarm. That came in handy a few times—but not always.

Once, I had my trailer parked in a small neighborhood boat-and-RV storage lot. During the cold-weather months, it was quiet and sparsely attended. It seemed ideal. But when the temperatures rose, a basketball hoop installed on a nearby fence post made this spot a social magnet. I was trapped in my trailer one hot afternoon during a game, hoping that biblical torrents of burning toads would issue from the heavens to cleanse these vermin from my life long enough for me to escape. Then a thumping vibration came through the trailer's frame from the front.

I peeked through the front window and saw a boy of about 8 attempting to kick out the cinder block that was holding up the trailer's tongue. I pulled my loudly chirping alarm, but the boy didn't even flinch, much less abort his youthful demolition project. After several agonizing minutes of my contemplating the consequences of his possible success, a woman's voice wearily drawled, "Tyler, come here. Come here, Tyler. Come here." Of course, little kids do not "come here" upon initial request anymore. When he finally became bored, he stopped.

That night, I took a long, heavy double-hooked chain I used for towing cars from ditches, lashed it to my V-8-powered car's rear frame, and dragged the other end toward the basketball net's post. What happened next I'll neither confirm nor deny, but days were quiet after that.

When you're homeless in a trailer or vehicle, nearby foot traffic of any kind is unwelcome. Ideally, the door should face no sidewalk, no windows—preferably nothing but trees. You don't want to be seen exiting or entering, especially with household paraphernalia. Such items must be camouflaged while in transit.

One cold night, I was sneaking toward the trailer behind the tree line, shouldering my laundry in a trash bag. A car approached from behind, so I instinctively dropped into the snow, lying flat. A spotlight panned above me as I strained to keep my heart and respiration rates in check. To my relief, that member of Fairfax County's finest moved on, and I belly-crawled to the door, covered in sweat under my coat. When you come home with your laundry, is it this exciting?

But sometimes the unfortunate timing of an exit would occasion an unwelcome interview, such as on a certain night in Merrifield: "We received a report of someone fitting your description loitering near this trailer."

Red-and-blue lights strobed harshly on our faces.

“That was me—and it’s my trailer. Here’s the registration,” I said, handing him the document always kept in my pocket.

“Are you living in that thing?” he asked.

“Certainly not!”

“Do you mind if we look inside?” It was already padlocked.

“Yes, I do mind.”

And so it would be time once again to tow it someplace else.

Being homeless threatens not only your property but your person, too. There is a certain cadre—mostly young males—who simply cannot abide leaving unmolested those who seem vulnerable. If the little cherubs in Burke had been a bit older, they might have chosen to tip the 6-by-9-foot trailer over onto its door, with me trapped inside. Then they might’ve decided to see what would happen if they were to douse the trailer with gasoline and ignite it. And these would be well-loved kids from good families.

On the subject of fire, there are significant risks associated with heating the inside of a small space, especially if the living situation is to be concealed.

Star-King, from the PBS show, explained that he used Sterno to heat his small forest lean-to. That, basically, means igniting napalm and closing yourself inside with it. You will likely have your supply of flammable heat nearby, so a small error—say, tipping a lit can over while tossing in one’s sleep—can escalate into a catastrophic loss rather quickly. Whatever the heat source, you must be ready to decide: Should I save myself from a flash fire and watch everything I own disintegrate, or should I risk salvaging my things before the flames reach the propane bottles or fuel tank?

The guy from whom I bought my trailer explained that he’d dismantled the propane system because a friend of his had died in a propane explosion. In its place, he’d mounted a gasoline-powered electricity generator on the trailer’s tongue. This was not included. But running a noisy, fume-belching motor attracts attention, so it was not an option, anyway.

Dominion Power was not available, of course. I wasn’t audacious enough to steal electricity, so I used 12-volt car batteries to power inside lights and fans. I had a couple of them so that when one got weak, it could be swapped and taken to a gas station for a recharge. But no reasonably sized battery can generate enough juice for heating. Propane was the only option.

I was fully aware that there was a risk of carbon-monoxide poisoning. But there is a natural safeguard against asphyxiation in small spaces, I’ve found. If the oxygen level is poor, the flame becomes thin. If the heater or stove goes out due to oxygen starvation, it’s impossible to relight it, because even a pocket lighter will not ignite under those conditions.

There is danger that the flame could go out with the gas still on while I’m asleep, leading to suffocation or explosion. I’ve always been a light sleeper, though, and have so far quickly awakened at the odor of gas—or as my heart and respiration rates increased to compensate for lack of oxygen. (I’m still worried that one day I won’t wake up.)

But this “safeguard” is not always a good thing. If it is very cold, sometimes it’s impossible to heat the inside well enough and have sufficient oxygen for the heaters and me—once the vehicle finally becomes somewhat warm, I find myself panting. The space between flame and burner becomes ever greater until it climbs up the thinning air and extinguishes itself. But it has to be extremely cold outside—below zero degrees Fahrenheit—for this to happen. Fortunately, such temperatures are rare in the D.C. area.

Another major winter challenge for vehicular residents is internal condensation. Think of how a glass of lemonade “sweats” on the outside; the opposite effect happens inside a vehicle. If it is significantly warmer inside than outside, the water condenses on the inside—copiously. This happens not only with glass but with metal and even painted wood, as well. One winter, I found my little camping mattress soaked to the point of moldy ruination because it had apparently

been touching the moisture-laden walls and platform for weeks.

Checking other items revealed that any absorbent materials—paper, cloth—touching nonporous surfaces were also saturated and had to be tossed or salvaged. Adjustments needed to be made. An elevated cot replaced the bed. Papers, blankets, and clothing had to be hung, kept on platforms, or sealed in containers.

The entrance itself was a problem. The door had an inside lock, but having the outside padlock secured only while I was away provided too much evidence of illicit occupancy. Occasionally, passers-by would try the door. A few even knocked, saying, “Anybody in there?” Some of them wore badges.

Consequently, I rigged the screen on the crank-open window nearest the door so it would peel inward. Then it was possible to unlock the outside padlock from the inside using a tethered key and then push the screen back into place. This, of course, eliminated the option of a quick exit in case of emergency.

Escaping a possible fire was only one of my safety concerns at the time. Nearly every experienced taxi driver has a robbery and/or fight story. I have been sent to the hospital and put people there, too. Combat veterans will understand my reluctance to elaborate. So I looked for a way out and scraped some money together to buy a car for delivery purposes. The trailer existence continued during this transition.

The work was safer and the payload no longer stank, complained, or came over the seat to necessitate yet another track of stitches. But it wasn’t particularly profitable. Most of my gross income went to repairs and fuel, so there was no thought of living indoors just yet. Later, I found that for taxable year 1996, I lived off a net profit of about \$60 to \$75 per week.

Eventually, I couldn’t keep up with the repairs that resulted from driving 150 to 250 miles a day, so I quit. A rarity in the courier business, this particular company had a small fleet of delivery wagons, so they invited me back to work for a single-digit hourly wage. Rents by that time were high, so I was in no hurry to sign a lease in a bad neighborhood. But sneaking in and out of the little trailer was getting old after several years.

Have you ever had to hold in a crap because people decided to linger near some adjacent parked vehicles and you needed to wait for them to leave so you could exit without being seen? Sometimes I couldn’t wait and had to shit in a bag. And there I was, still listening to their inane conversation, holding a bag of my own shit. Nice.

Naturally, it had been a while since I’d had any female companionship. With steady employment, I felt comfortable enough by early 1997 to start looking and eventually met my future wife. She was the type who would take in strays, so I moved into her little efficiency in Adams Morgan until we married and got our own place in the suburbs.

Meanwhile, the trailer was towed away. “Good riddance,” I thought, daring to imagine that I might live as a normal person from then on. Talk of having kids even came up. We were in our late 30s by that time, so if we were going to start making babies, we had to decide quickly.

My meager wage was simply not enough to support us both if she was going to stay home with a newborn, so that idea was quickly shelved—much to my embarrassment and to her disappointment. She had gotten her degree a few years before and was just starting to gain a foothold in the job market. The nagging problem of my low earnings, however, would not go away. Health insurance was not within reach, so any aches and pains had to be either lived with or treated out-of-pocket.

My wife repeatedly confronted me with the very real possibility that I might become a lifer at the courier company. Reliability and the willingness to accept a low wage certainly equal job security. I had one year of college under my belt —albeit from more than a dozen years earlier.

The job ads that involved salaries at even a third of the median income demanded a sheepskin—unless I wanted to work construction. That was not an option for me anymore. I have been diagnosed with (but not treated for) cervical kyphosis, which eliminates any job involving much standing, lifting, or bending. Even the relatively light courier work, a chiropractor said, worsened the condition. So, in 1999, I applied for student loans, was accepted at a suburban university, and found myself a sophomore at age 40.

The remaining 90-plus credit hours loomed as I chipped away two classes per semester while still driving delivery full-time.

A few years later, I landed a writing internship that paid a stipend that was less than half of what I made at the courier company. It was a good stepping stone toward my aspirations to be a public-affairs-oriented writer, but the pay was grossly insufficient for making a proper contribution to the household. Most internships pay nothing, so I was still somewhat fortunate. But stipends are meant to be beer money and bus fare for youngsters whose Moms and Dads foot the bill.

I worked hard and did well. I had a few editorial and news pieces published, started my own Web site, and even nervously gave a speech at a support-the-troops rally in front of the U.S. Capitol. This did not lessen the pressures at home, however.

Whatever annoyances that a man presents to a woman are all the more magnified when she is paying most of the bills. Though admittedly clueless, I'm certainly not abusive when it comes to women. But I'm no saint, either. My wife deserved someone who would take care of her for a change, and I offered no prospect of becoming that guy for several more years.

Our frustrations at having to do without needed items and live with pain because tending to a creaky joint was not in the budget began to mount. Often, they came to the surface when I had an exam to study for or a term paper to write.

So after being together about five years, I realized that I would have to strike out on my own again. Unfortunately, I was still drawing an income that would have been difficult to live on three decades earlier, let alone in May 2003. The trailer was gone, but I'd since bought the Big Wagon.

The internship was in uptown D.C., and I couldn't afford to drive back and forth on what I was making, much less get a place. Consequently, I had to look for a spot to park in the District that had no residential restrictions or meters and was relatively secluded. There are a few such places—a very few—which I won't divulge here.

Living in a vehicle during the warm-weather months is challenging enough. Windows cannot be left open but a crack, lest citizens and cops become intrigued. Being inside a vehicle with poor ventilation when the sun is out, of course, is impossible.

As the weather turns colder, new challenges arise. Keeping warm at night in a vehicle is not easy. An older car tends to have poor weatherstripping, so drafts are a problem. And then there is the already-discussed internal condensation. Propane burning with a cloth headliner above is a tad dangerous, so I tore the material out and vacuumed out its foam backing.

But I was unable to solve the coldness problems very well that time around, so in December, I decided to apply for a dorm room at the university. That meant I could quit the internship, go to school full-time, and get a degree more quickly. Indeed, I secured an on-campus billet, but at the cost of greatly increasing my student-loan debt—including an exorbitant, non-consolidatable private loan.

No worries, I thought. Once the degree is awarded, I'll surely be commanding wages sufficient to buy a house, a new car, perhaps even a nice divorce. (That finally came through during this article's preparation, at my now ex-wife's expense. And that makes me further feel like a bum.)

For a year and a half, I lived in a dorm with people less than half my age. That was peculiar, but I was living indoors and had nothing to worry about but studying and writing the odd editorial if the impulse beckoned.

During my last year of school, I sent some initial feelers looking for employment. The responses were not encouraging. My parent-subsidized younger colleagues could afford to go on unpaid internships, but my financial status didn't permit this essential component of building a relevant work history. Furthermore, an employment record stretching back to the late '70s seemed to be a liability. Noses particularly turned up at my years of "professional driving."

“Why did you go from CAD drafting to being a taxi driver?” they’d ask.

Perhaps once I get my diploma, I thought, things will be different. Upon graduation, I sent résumés to any place I could think of, but there were few nibbles. Meanwhile, my savings dwindled. The graduating seniors were kicked out of the dorm a few days after commencement, so it was back to nights in the vehicle for me. It doesn’t become easier the next time, either. The dread only increases with each successive transition to homelessness.

And I’m not getting any younger. This past summer, I had an interview for a \$1,000-per-month internship. (That’s \$6.25 an hour in the year 2005.) There I sat as this youngster scanned an employment history that likely began before he was a tingle in the mailman’s boxers. He looked down at my résumé and then up at his salt-and-pepper-maned, bifocaled prospect. “What year did you graduate high school?”

“I have a college degree,” I replied. “What difference does that make?”

“The other applicants are about 20 or so—” he started.

“Unlike them,” I interrupted, “I have tangible proof of showing up and being able and willing to do all kinds of things.”

“Well, I’m going to have to bring my boss up to speed on this,” he said, promising to telephone. But I never heard from him again, and the company did not return my calls or e-mails.

This was but the latest in a series of possible instances of age discrimination that began while I was still an undergrad. As they occurred, I documented and forwarded them to my alma mater’s career-services office. None of these were even acknowledged.

So after this particularly blatant example, I made an appointment to see my designated career counselor in person. “Maybe they’re afraid,” she said, as the condescendingly patient social-worker smile smeared across her face.

Yeah, yeah: We older folks tend to have costly medical problems. We’re not as energetic or able to keep up with new technology. We’ll take low-paying jobs only briefly until we get a better offers. And we might have skeptical minds of our own, borne of experience rather than youthful malleability.

I suggested to the career counselor that she at least call one or two employers who raised eyebrows at my age. Maybe they should know that this university cares if one of their cum laude alumni might have been rejected for a reason that’s been illegal since 1967. “That would tread upon the confidentiality of the job interview,” she said, still smiling.

Of course, many of these firms spend money to set up booths at on-campus job fairs. Why make waves on behalf of one middle-aged curmudgeon?

On prior occasions of possible age discrimination, a couple of my professors were adamant that I notify the Equal Opportunity Employment Commission (EEOC). But the career-services office showed no interest in supporting my claims before, and I was reluctant to take on a corporation single-handedly.

When I mused about filing a complaint with the EEOC this time, my career counselor’s smile melted away. “That’s not going to get you a job,” she said.

Upon reflection, it was clear that I was naive about how employers would view a mid-40s candidate with a fresh undergrad degree. It’s akin to being a shavetail second lieutenant with an armful of service stripes.

So I chopped 18 years off of my résumé and dyed my hair black. The necessity of going to the gym to keep clean had already helped me shed about 25 pounds. Substance abuse was never an issue for me, and I don’t sunbathe, so I have no wrinkles. My appearance then roughly matched my résumé.

Glory be! Responses actually trickled in. Even places that had ignored me before started to call. But then, by appearances, I was a late-20s-to-early-30s guy with insufficient experience. There were more interview requests—especially for sales—

but no offers. (Showing up in a suit and tie is not easy from the back of a car, by the way.)

I do get the odd temp job stuffing envelopes and filing, however. That helps keep the car street-legal and running. But I still had to get food stamps. Clearly, my marketability needed to be enhanced.

As I've found in the employment ads, even someone with a social-science type of degree is expected to have proficiency—not merely intermediate ability—in myriad software packages these days. One theory I was offered is that as jobs are increasingly “outsourced” from the country, those who fill the remaining posts are expected to be able to do a bit of everything—including what used to be considered “secretarial” duties. So I'm boning up on office software when possible.

Several employment ads indicate grad-student status as a plus in my field. So I applied and was accepted at my alma mater once again. Being a middle-aged grad student isn't so unusual. Then I discovered that the student-loan people had given me about \$4,000 too much for my undergrad loans. It was their mistake, the financial-aid counselor conceded, but I would still have to pay it back before they would loan me the funds to get a master's.

Hoping for some extra effort in the face of an extraordinary situation, I explained to her my living and employment circumstances. Her face pinched skeptically, and she said that she could not believe that I did not gain any marketable office skills as an undergrad student. I pointed out my lack of internship experience and the fact that employers might find someone my age with a new bachelor's degree a trifle odd.

“Consequently, untested, sullen, pimple-faced pukers are indeed preferred over the likes of me,” I said as she winced. “Thus only hard physical labor, standing, or driving jobs avail.”

And I learned the hard way that taking such jobs when qualified for better ones is held against you later on. Shaking her head, she said, “I've known some ‘nontraditional’ graduates who've found office employment.”

The implied question: What are you doing wrong? So much for graduate school.

Apparently, some people's first reaction to a story of chronic bad circumstances is that the principal must somehow be at fault. Sure, I'd like some hindsight-educated do-overs, but...

Even blood relatives feel compelled to “helpfully” review my (apparently numerous) flaws in search of the ones responsible for such consistent rejection. It's difficult enough to keep one's spirits up in such a situation as it is. Arguing over whether it's somehow deserved is beyond my capacity.

Others simply become worried, and I find myself having to give assurances that I'll be all right—while I actually have no such confidence. Or better still, I avoid the subject altogether with anyone close. Thus the alienation deepens.

And yes, I have some relatives in the area, and they've been helpful. If it were feasible to stay with any of them, I would, but I'm not about to besmirch any of them here by going into why it is not. Besides, I don't know how long a stay would last, because there is no way of knowing if and when I'll have any sort of consistent earnings. I'm not imposing myself like that on anyone.

As winter drags on, I have learned to adapt. Out of necessity, I'm in better physical shape and can take walking outside for longer periods. The vehicle's interior is better insulated than it was during the previous episode of homelessness two years ago. It has been an unusually mild winter, too, but there still have been nights in the teens. I've survived fairly well so far.

As for the days, I live as anyone else, but always in public.

When I shit, shower, or shave, someone is always nearby—and I never was a “people person.” I am in a public place right now as I bang this out on my old Pentium II laptop, cursing as some thoughtless prick paces back and forth, blithering loudly on his cell phone. The lack of consideration that many exhibit in public places—such as leaving Band-Aids in the shower, pissing on the toilet seat, or parking behind me and blasting music while I'm trying to sleep—is magnified when living this lifestyle.

The difference is that they have a right to be here, but I do not. I have no business being in virtually any place I happen to occupy. Others merit smiling hospitality by spending money. I'm just here avoiding the weather while furtively composing my inflammatory rhetoric and surfing the Web, looking for work.

That's the way it is for us homeless in the 'burbs if we dare to be visible. If I'm found out, it will once again be necessary to move on.CP