

# 'Vagrant': A label applied from an earlier life that never left me

Having to choose between food and shelter is a terrible situation

DAVID L. CLARK

The night that I spent in the Brockville jail, now more than half a century ago, has never left me. Strictly speaking, I was locked in a holding cell, but when you are in the custody of the state that is a distinction without a difference.

How did I get here?

As a teenager finishing high school, I fled a deeply disturbed home. Parents of friends helped out, offering me meals and a place to sleep. To this day, I thank them not only for keeping me safe but also for treating me as worthy of being safe. One loving couple, alarmed at how thin I had become, offered me cash for every pound that I gained.

After graduation, I moved from job to job, seeking work that paid more and that put me one step closer to being able to afford university. Having enough to eat sometimes meant not having a roof over my head, a terrible choice for anyone to be compelled to make but one that I made without reflection. It was just the way that it was.

Completely immersed in my circumstances, I had no time or inclination to consider how insecure or unjust my hitherto middle-class life had become, only the blind impulse to get through each day. I worked in factories for which my high school provided an endless stream of labour. I put in long hours at a local gas station, and sometimes bedded down in a locked storage room where there was a sink in which to wash up and fresh uniforms to start the day.

Looking back, I realized that my boss, a veteran, knew I was occasionally squatting in his place of business but out of respect he looked the other way. And then a kindly librarian told me that there was good work laying a natural gas pipeline joining Brockville to Ottawa. Dangerous work, to be sure, but unionized and with better wages. I packed all that I owned in a duffel bag and headed for eastern Ontario.

Once in Brockville I had nowhere to stay, so I prepared to spend the night in a sweltering and buggy downtown park. I had barely closed my eyes when I felt the firm nudge of a baton in my chest. Two police officers stood over me. "My friend," one of them said to me in a gentle voice; "you can't stay here. Please come with us."

Perhaps it was the politeness with which I had been rousted that made me comply so easily. Or perhaps living a precarious life made encounters with the authorities feel ordinary or expected. In any case, I was walked to the police station where I was placed in a cell and charged with the misdemeanour of "vagrancy." Many years later, by then a humanities professor, I learned that "vagrancy" is how the state sweeps the streets of "undesirables" and makes a crime of poverty and homelessness.

But truth to tell, for me there was no cruelty in my detention, at least none that I felt. Dishevelled as I undoubtedly was, being a white boy mattered — I was not allowed to be unhoused and loitering in a public space, but the colour of my skin meant that I deserved shelter and posed no threat.

As the rusty old cell door closed behind me, I could see that the man in the adjacent cell was suffering from terrible hallucinations. He yelled loudly and incoherently in pain. "The DTs," was all that the night watchman said, before shuffling sleepily away. But I had witnessed this agony before, the result of sudden alcohol withdrawal.

The previous summer I had worked as an orderly in a psychiatric ward. During my first shift on the job, the police escorted a man trapped in the throes of a similar sickness. In those days, busy emergency departments struggled to



"As a teenager finishing high school, I fled a deeply disturbed home. Parents of friends helped out, offering me meals and a place to sleep," writes David L. Clark.

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know what to do with psychiatric crises of this kind. Best to keep them out of sight. So while the nurses attended to other patients, the delirious man and I were locked in a tiny converted closet. The "safe room," they called it. For whom, I wondered. I had never before seen someone in such sweaty, hopeless distress, much less in such close quarters. His torture struck me like a blow to the face. What could I say?

Without realizing what I was doing, I put my hand on his convulsing shoulders. We sat hunched together on the unwashed floor. He writhed with his demons but never left my side, as if using me to anchor

him in the last bit of reality that he could call his own.

And then I found myself, yet again, in a locked room with someone in excruciating mental torment. Quietly, I shimmied down against the adjoining cell bars and pushed my hand through.

"My friend, my friend," I said, the words tumbling unbidden out of my dry mouth. He grasped my outstretched fingers tightly, too tightly, and together, alone, we sat for hours into the long night.

Alone, together, under the buzzing fluorescent bulbs, and without a blanket between us, we were nakedly legible to each other and to

our unseen jailor.

We kept each other company, distant worlds briefly touching in the same strange place and at the same strange time. In the morning, he was taken away by ambulance and I was released, now forever bearing the name, "vagrant." The world lay all before me.

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## LETTERS

### Hockey injustice continues

No surprise that Hockey Canada has its funding restored, meaning a one-year rebuke for ducking responsibility for sexual assault. While the victim got some compensation in the form of cash, the backstory getting scant mention is the perpetrators "buying" their way out of criminal charges. Those individuals should be named, shamed and jailed. There is a big chunk of justice missing here.

Emil Andrew Sekerak, Beamsville

### Flyers don't offer deals anymore

The talking heads often tell us that one way to mitigate the high price of groceries these days is to peruse the weekly flyers and shop for the deals. I do that weekly, and I have just finished looking at this week's flyers. Here's my take.

Every flyer presents, on the front page, three or four products actually on sale. This is the bait designed to lure us into the store. The remaining pages list products at their regular prices, but presented as if they too were on sale.

The flyers are a scam. Perusing them is as fruitless a pastime as cruising around town looking for low gas prices. This is what happens when we lose our status as citizens and descend to the lower status of mere consumers.

Jim Young, Dundas

### Irony of the federal worker strike

I am entertained by the delicious irony being displayed by the Public Service Alliance of Canada. Among the issues about which they are striking against their employers — Canadian taxpayers — is the right to continue to work from home. But in order for union members to receive strike pay, they must report to an active strike site, known as a picket line. One would think it

would be just as easy and effective to not work from home as it is to work from home!

Dave de Jong, Burlington

### Who wins in remote work debate?

Workers shouldn't expect that it's their inalienable right to work remotely. Especially if it doesn't meet the needs of the business. That you're "capable of remote working" doesn't mean you should be remote working. Remote work offers little benefits to customers and employers as productivity and innovation suffer. Remote working only benefits the employee. Remote working is a costly and inefficient approach. As employees have continued to work from home, service quality and delivery have declined. A hybrid working model is the only mutually beneficial solution. Don't expect to work remote.

Blanche Baldwin, Hamilton

### What about the in-line skater?

What is wrong with our police? They ticket a 16-year-old for riding his bike on the sidewalk (granted he shouldn't have been there but should have been using the bike lanes), and let an adult caught in-line skating down the middle of the Lincoln Alexander Parkway off with no charges?

If this is what we are paying our police service for I say no thanks. The in-line skater should have had multiple charges laid against him and the young cyclist given the warning.

Diana MacKenzie, Hamilton

### Police need better judgment

I fully agree with Bill Matetich of Mount Hope. I was about to write a letter of support about the police charging the bike rider for riding on the sidewalk, which is a very inconsiderate and illegal thing to do, but his letter reminded me of the other incident with

the fool on in-line skates on the Linc.

That was a ridiculous lack of judgment on the part of the officers involved. That incident was so very dangerous, foolish, and impudent. Let's hope we see some better judgment on the part of police.

Robert Coxe, Hamilton

### Fix the city's roads already

Well, I have finally reached the age of being a "grumpy old (wo) man."

Travelling Hamilton streets is like taking your life (and tires) in your hands and generally, like going on a roller-coaster ride. Where taxes are the highest, the roads seem the worst. With all the money saved during the pandemic, can we please get going on paving what I would bet are the worst roads in the province.

Bernadette Flis, Hamilton

### Maybe a new arena for Brantford

It is very appropriate that Cirque du Soleil has been booked for the FirstOntario Centre arena in December. Mercanti and his reno group are a clown posse. The Bulldogs could already be playing in an arena at Lime Ridge Mall if Hamilton's city council had taken Michael Andlauer up on his offer to help build it in 2019. Instead, the Bulldogs begin a move to Brantford that is looking increasingly more permanent with each reno delay.

My prediction is a new arena will be built in Brantford before the Hamilton reno is even finished.

David Robinson, Ancaster

### Stripped down cabin for sale

I see the Ponderosa Nature Resort has a compact cabin for sale at \$120,000. That might sound tiny, but then, at the Ponderosa, who needs closets?

Stew Brown, Hamilton

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