

**THE HOTEL ROVER**  
**Personal Reflections on Homelessness and the Road Not Going on**  
**Forever**

**"The System Only Dreams in Total Darkness"**

**-The National**

**The Daily Planet, Richmond, Virginia, Fall 1977**

"`Scuse me, Sir. Let me get out of your way."

Walking up the front steps, I encounter a scuffed suede boot and denim-clad leg extending from about 6 inches under the door across the concrete floor of our front stoop.

"Hey Joe, take your time." Getting vertical appeared a 50-50 proposition for him. "I'm Jim, we met last night. Come on in, pretty cold, huh?"

Joe had shown up last night right before our community supper prepared nightly with salvaged food by Henry Seventy-Seven, our caretaker and self-proclaimed guru, (well, he claimed to travel with R.D. Laing as his massage therapist during one of the notorious psychiatrist's American lecture tours).

"Oh ... I can't do this, how am I gonna' get back to 'folk (Norfolk)."

Joe's story, which I half-listened to until the background blaring of Duane Allman's Gibson Les Paul drowned his words out, included Inchon, the Norfolk Shipyard, a woman or maybe two and being done wrong. No wonder Live at the Fillmore East was rocketing around the dining room. It seems he was in transit from Staunton to Hampton Roads when his journey stalled in the Fan District of Richmond.

"Joe, you can't sleep outside. No money, right?" Just a nod.

"Man, we've gotta get you back home."

I'd arrived about 15 months ago in my forest green 1965 Rover Mark III (an English marque via Canada, since it was never imported into this country, found in the parking lot of a roadside repair shop on Route 6 in Wareham, complete with a

cloth sunroof and cushy leather upholstery). Now it sat behind the Planet like a found art sculpture, victim of a seized engine.

"Hey, I've got an idea. Let's use the Rover as a crash pad." Addressed to Marshall, the Planet's therapist, and 77.

"Hey Joe, I think I've got an idea, but you need some coin. Have you talked to John about selling a pint? He can walk you to the Blood Bank. It's about a half a mile from here."

Through the winter we started taking reservations - capacity 2. Soon a waiting list appeared.

In the spring we closed the venue, victim of rodents and pissed-off beat cops. It was back to the drawing board.

**73 Hollis Street, The Winthrop Hotel  
Spring, 1987**

A decade later, I'm standing in front of the glass windows where the Framingham Fruit Store just vacated, thinking about how we can fit a single adult shelter in a space where people used to shop for bananas and mangoes. We'd acquired this shimmering jewel of a building a few months before when the owner overheard a couple of his tenants plotting to kill him and steal the rent money, and subsequently decided to get out of the business. The second and third floor of the aging, somewhat unkempt facility (what better word to describe a building where the heat was chancy and the plumbing barely functional, not to mention the settled tilt of the floors and stairs) contained 50 or so SRO units. This will work great. People will come into shelter, get their act together and be able to move upstairs to their own room. Joe's face flickers across my consciousness. I wonder what became of him.

**Winter, 2021: 34 Years, 96 Properties, 22 Communities, More  
Than 1400+ Housing Units for the Unaccompanied, the  
Disadvantaged and the Disabled**

I'm counting buildings instead of sheep . . .Wow, that feels like a fever dream, with me playing the little "Dutch Dude" with

his finger in the dike. I see the rivers of Babylon flowing around me, once rivulets now gushing streams, when I meditate on our service system architecture.

**"He has the will Vince, but not the way."**

- "Mean" Gene Okerlund to Vince McMahon, commentary during a televised WWF match.

Actually, it's probably the other way around. We do have the way. We seem to lack the will.

There's only one industrialized country that has gotten to functional zero in its approach to unaccompanied adult homelessness. Check out the Y Foundation's reports. It's like they borrowed the strategies developed here in Massachusetts.

Maybe it is rocket science. Or, more disturbing, maybe it's the symptoms of a social disease so well-articulated by Vaclav Havel in his New Year's Eve address to the nation (Czechoslovakia, 1990).

So,

- Let's restore the development pipeline created by former Lt. Governor Healey from the Housing Bond Bill with a goal of 1,000 new units for homeless folks.
- Let's create a new Housing Ops or subsidy program modeled along the old 707 or ISSI program.
- Let's celebrate the achievements of the CSPECH Program created by the Mass. Housing & Shelter Alliance which links the Medicaid system to provide case managers.
- And while we're at it, let's take the best ideas from the Community Health Worker Movement and selectively embed them with the shelter/housing continuum.

Sort of a realistic wish list, don't you think?

Today I'm figuratively staring at the door, trying to figure out if I can hop, skip or dance out of it. Unfortunately, I think it might be a crawl. Whatever way it winds up being, I'm fortunate to carry with me the images of the people who we have brought in from the cold and those dedicated people devoted to

guiding them on a new journey. Their images burn in my head like the profiles in a Warhol pop art presentation.

Those images include Joe, the Korean War vet, who only had to endure a two-night stay in the Hotel Rover before getting back to Tidewater, Nestor the artist, Cheryl the Unicorn and countless others.

Here's one final thought. We have to find the boat that allows us to cross the Rubicon before those vibrant images take on the sepia tones of old Daguerrotypes.

Then we need to launch it.

Jim Cuddy  
February, 2021