

Lysol

By Jay Thiemeyer

Sunday in Hotlanta. Blue Sunday. Sunday on Ponce De Leon Avenue. Ponce, the homeless main drag in Atlanta, Ga. Ponce and Georgia Avenue and Fulton and Forsyth. On and on. In the Reagan Revolution '80s, deluged with an army of hundreds (some said 5,000) of homeless and near-homeless. The downtown was awash with us.

De-institutionalized. Laid-off workers from outside, from the Rust Belt, from the oil fields, from the tent city spilling outside Galveston, Texas. Workers come to Hotlanta, looking for construction jobs. Hundreds. Camping in the weeds or empty low-slung buildings. Intent on cadging a job.

Hotlanta was booming. Building commercial towers, some as high as 80, 90 stories, would lie fallow come the crash in commercial real estate development at end of the '80s, and the workers would be left to go back to the Rust Belt. My friend back to Detroit to sleep again on his sister's couch. "Better than nothing," he said. No doubt still there. Lost in the Motor City.

Others dispersed to camps on the periphery of Atlanta, still hoping for work. Others would just disappear on the streets, finding in the booze a pliant companion. Just to get by during the hard times. Which surely would pass with the next election.

Nameless and dulled in the feed lines at the handful of sites where the homeless were somebody. Lined up at midday, four or five hundred at St. Luke's on Peachtree, within spitting distance of Margaret Mitchell's home, due for repair. Blacks from the nearby projects. Whites from the SROs and shabbily regulated hospices, and refugee workers from the distant tent city. Indelicate mix, prone to volatility and eruption. The women few, anonymous, avoiding notice as best as possible.

No question there were some on the run. From something. From no jobs, from the law. Getting lost in the mass. Some refugees from the '60s, from lost ideals. Getting lost in the growing mass.

Juiceheads, potheads, hopheads, albies, hope-to-die junkies and albies, down-and-out and headed for slaughter.

Down-and-out on Ponce. Blue Sunday. Hotlanta drowning in homeless.

The gentleman's club of the four of us would gather in the weed patch off Ponce, out of sight, and drink. Pass the Pepsi jug of Lysol. Lysol, with just a dash of water. Cleanest bowels in the South.

Package stores closed, ya gotta do what ya gotta do. Sundays in the Blue Southland were rough.

Pursuing the idling dream. Peace and freedom is all in how you look at it. And it would last till that squalous squad car would slip soundlessly down the alley. Which was only on odd Sundays. But we were as easy to snag as the opossums hanging from the overhead wires.

Our heads full of Lysol cocktail, we could give a good goddam. At least we had our afternoon "in the fast lane," as Fred put it. Sitting on a cinder block dreaming of the fast lane. Better than nothing.

Ripping off cannisters of Lysol from the Piggly Wiggly. Then, Fred, our Vietnam war vet, trained in the arts of deception and the keeper of the key, the sacred nail, would pound it into the can with the sacred brick. Let out the aerosol, pour the alcoholic contents — Lysol was 40 percent alcohol — into the sacred vessel, the ancient but trustworthy Pepsi jug, and save our souls from another Hellish "Blue Law" Sunday. Away down in Dixie was somewhat cool except on those withdrawing, dead Sundays.

If we had money we'd go to the bootlegger's garage. It was just down the alley from where we sat in the weed patch. Bootlegger's garage to one side, Open Door Community to the other. During the week, Open Door served a meal. But it was a vegan compote that didn't digest well with Vodka, Blue Label. The community, developed by young Presbyterian clerics who also protested racism, war, the death penalty, thriving then in Reidsville — then like now — and homelessness. They were the only people who had beds for the homeless. Them and the Catholic Worker house.

I had once, in more opulent days, stood in line with a discipleship of others, waiting on a Sunday morning outside the bootlegger's door. It was wide open. The depths of the garage were clearly visible. On the unmade bed a naked girl, sprawled, looking like spilled milk, was busily giving the bootlegger head. Gray people vaguely lit on gray tangled sheets. The only reaction in the line was that everyone wished she'd hurry up. The shakes were merciless.

It was after that that I decided on Lysol as the easier, quicker way to go. I joined several others who felt the same.



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