

# Dry Rot

by Robert Crisman

Sometimes Seattle's the next thing to heaven. The sky's diamond blue, the sun's a caress; your whole soul can breathe. You know what the shouting's about. But the sun quickly fades to Protestant gray and the gray last a long time.

Still, things have changed...

Fifties Seattle was hidebound, provincial, surrounded by mountains and water and stuck upper left on the map, away from the action. A hick Norwegian crew-cut kind of a place, sort of like stew without salt.

Culture was bush-league: hydroplanes, Seafair, Triple-A baseball, accordian players in bowties named Stan getting down with the two-step in lounges. The jazz riffs on Jackson, Ray Charles's old playground, were gnarls and mutters in dreams as the squarejohns slept on.

Dads put on suits and went to the office, or did what they did down at Boeing. Moms stayed home and took care of the kids. The kids were all fresh-faced and cheery and bright. The place was Leave-It-To-Beaverland North.

Or so went the story. Nobody spoke of the suicide rate, up there with Sweden's. Or Dad's weekend binges and Mom's hidden bruises. Or Wally and Beaver torturing cats in the alley to work off their blues. That stuff got swept out of sight like dates out on Frat Row at UW.

This was the deal: Seattle was "middleclass" down to the bone. What it was, a lot of the wage slaves thought they'd stepped out of the pits since the war. The U.S. was rich, the only rich country left on the planet. The factories and offices were humming, the money was rolling--war spending in peacetime could do that back then--and enough shekels fell into working folks' pockets that many forgot they were merely the means to make rich fuckers richer. *Class* in the '30s was determined according to who owned the works and who slaved for nickels: capitalist, workers, all that old commie shit. But after the

war, McCarthy storm-trooped into the headlines, the commies got rolled, and all their ideas got tossed out the window. Madison Avenue then sold the serfs a new line of bullshit, i.e., the notion that class was determined by *income*. There were rich folks and poor folks, like always, and then all the folks in the middle.

Just for a moment pretend you're Ward Cleaver. You've moved to Seattle and this is your life; if ever a man stood smack-dab in the middle... You've got the house and the wife and the kids, and the nice, brand-new car. You're thinking of buying a boat--easy credit!--and Wally and the Beav will make college no sweat. And when you retire, you'll still have enough left for supper. Meanwhile, your lovely wife June's like a *chef* in that kitchen. What's not to like?

Sure, they sweat you down at the office and, yeah, your boss just bought a new island so he can tryst with his bimbos in style--and then stacked your workload so he can catch up when he's back, whenever that is--but so what? You get to wear a nice suit and tie and the car's almost paid for. It's *different* these days. The sky is the limit! *You too might get rich!* You can get on a quiz show, *any* damn thing! Just stay in step with the program and you've got it dicked!

Hell, even Joe Sixpack down at the shipyards keeps change in his pockets. The man has a house and a car, the whole bit almost. His union dumped all its commies, kissed up to the fatcats, and worked out a deal: throw breadcrumbs our way and we'll keep our mouths shut, stand for the National Anthem at ballgames, and send our kids off to shoot dinks in the wars...

Joe went and wangled a middleclass lifestyle. Well, close enough. Life sure was good for most of the white folks, you know? And, all that workingclass bullshit? That class *warfare* shit that the commies and pinkos and fags were trying to stir up in the '30s? Deader than Edsels, my brother, way deader than Edsels...

Don't misunderstand: some wage slaves got left behind, in go-nowhere jobs or on welfare, or just, they fell through some crack. You know, like I said, there's always the poor folks. But dig this about them: since you hit the middle, they seem to be mostly black folks or brown folks--with maybe some Okies and hillbillies scattered

around from the '30s or something. You always knew you were different from *them*, am I right? Now, here's more proof: your Ward Cleaver life! You never see *them* playing catch with the Beav on prime time TV! They're just some statistics, the crime news and so forth...

Of course, there's that civil rights stuff and, well, you guess you support it. Hell, you're a liberal of sorts. It's just, well, tell the truth, you wouldn't want a bunch of them living next door.

I mean, it's okay, they can vote and get jobs and all that--as long as they're kind of off to the side, out of mind.

Out of sight, out of mind...

Old Ward was a *trip*. And, as I said, '50s Seattle was Leave-It-To-Beaverland North. Out of sight, out of mind all the way. Social Ills? Pardon? There's nobody here on the ground but us white folks, soaking up ads for toilet bowl cleanser and trying to forget where we came from!

Okay then, but hey--what about cops getting fat rousting gay bars in Pioneer Square? Or jacking up black kids for fun up on Cherry? Or Indians, ripped off and raped, lying stark, puking drunk in the gutters downtown? Are you kidding? Black folks hadn't yet started to riot. Indians were day-before-yesterday's news. Gays were *deep* secrets. Who gave a rusty rat's ass, besides them?

Those were the days. The Lone Ranger rode...

But then Kennedy got bushwhacked, the '60s revved up, and Seattle, like everywhere else, got plugged into politics and dope. The whole social bag got to shaking and baking. You could hear sphinctors cracking from burbs to the boardrooms, and in white city enclaves as well.

And--poor old Ward! It wouldn't be long before June would be burning her bra and Wally was brought up on heroin charges. The worst, though, was catching the Beaver in bed with some rough trade. *Two* of the fuckers! One of them had a spike through his dick!

You *know* Ward felt *that* one...

Don't get me wrong. Rude shocks notwithstanding, life was still soft here compared with, say, Newark. You could work or not work

and somehow still eat. Even a lame could keep change in his pockets. Rent was *way* cheap. Our riots here were popgun affairs next to Watts...

City fathers were more or less liberal. You could even blow dope on the sidewalks downtown in the daytime and nobody'd sweat it. The squarejohns were trying to get hip.

Then the '70s landed like green, toxic fog. Seattle crash-landed and woke up strung out. Boeing went tits to the sky. Aerospace workers learned to flip burgers at Wendy's or boogied, or fought off the winos for space on park benches. The lights all winked out. Junkies crawled out of their holes then and liberals went into "strategic retreat"...

You should have seen downtown. Ghosts bumming smokes in the doorways on First running north out of Pioneer Square up through Belltown. History, heritage, smothered in shit.

Take Pioneer Square, where Seattle popped out of the ground and got grabby. Where profits got rolling and all the Indians got rolled. The thin, wintry heart of Seattle--until after the war when the last of the money fled uptown. Nothing was left then but vomit and pigeons, gay bars in shadows, and Indian kids sleeping eight to a room in the flops.

And so on up First. This street had been the honky-tonk playground for sailors and hustlers and chippies and hos through two world wars. By the '60s, however, First was a graveyard for shitbums and drifters in piss-smelling bars and two-dollar rooms. Block after block, the facades of the old office buildings blackened and buckled. "For Lease" signs in cracked, soot-stained windows turned yellow, fell over, and died.

The '70s ran like a nightmare down there, especially at night. Porno took over the corner where First runs past the Market at Pike Place. Tourists wandered the Market by day. By night all around it, peepshow flotsam: dopers and skulks, low-bottom dicksnatchers, runaways selling their asses to sneaky-petes circling the block.

Imagine yourself on that street in those years with no place to go, shambling around like a zombie at four in the morning, when even

the winos have clocked out for home or wherever. No one and nothing but you--and creeps standing guard in the doorways, autistic wreckage in old army coats, bad breath and werewolves. A *miasma* of dank, dark decay. Who'd ever have thought that hell was so *empty*?

Time marches on: in '75, the street was a cesspool. These days it's cold, gleaming towers and cold, fast-track spenders. The bones of the ghosts have all been paved over. A *blitzkrieg* of progress! Ghosts six feet under, the gelid indifference and bland, sneering laughter of mutants with money, dreams sucked from marrow and spit into gutters...

Ah yes, money, money. By '75 Seattle in fact had already started to bounce its way back from the Big Boeing Bust that had punched out its lights as the decade kicked off. Hot plans were drafted to ride the wave of Pacific Rim trade to a place on the map with the west coast's own Big Dogs: L.A., San Francisco, like that. The nub of the plan was to rescue downtown and the central core city from going the way of those bombed-out craters and shitholes back east like Detroit. The real estate monkeys who run the place saw that Seattle was still mostly white folks, a lot of them having disposable income and credit, who didn't particularly want to move to the burbs. They liked what the cities offer in all those brochures: services, culture, excitement, and so forth, along with the chance to work close and fuck the commute.

The real estate guys got together and cooked up a pitch to sell yuppies wet dreams and thereby make millions. Hey, folks, downtown living! Condos on clouds overlooking the bay! Heaven On Earth for women and men in the Fastlane!

The You-Belong-To-the-City crowd lined up like ducks.

What a wet dream it was! They ripped out the old shit and trucked in the new. Corporate greedheads, lured by the bright lights of China and sweet deals with the in-crowd, moved in. Dot Com got launched. Skyscrapers--a sort of leached beige or Antarctic silver and black black black black, like those in all the millenium's cities, shot up.

Ten thousand hotel rooms got built. New shops, boutiques, a new art museum a couple blocks south of the old kiddies' ho stroll. A bus tunnel, built to haul in the shoppers, gawkers, and grunts.

They tore the place *up*! Mid-eighties downtown Seattle looked like Beirut in the wake of Israeli cluster-bomb runs. The old crowd got rolled, along with the low-income housing. Pensioners, old folks, certified crazies huddled in SRO doorways or stacked up like cordwood on sidewalks down by the Courthouse.

Skid Row got spitshined. Out went the muscatel watering holes. Strip joints and pool halls and peep shows got skunked. The El Coco tavern got leveled and up went the Watermark Towers. Indians used to get squiffed on this spot for five bucks. Now, lawyers and fixers chow down on scampi and steak while they carve up the rest of the town and get nicked for \$250.

Then came the '90s. Not all the homeless got broomed in the '80s. You could still see some roaming the alleys, dining in dumpsters, and snuggling on grates for the night or until the cops came. There were dirt-caked, ragged-ass young guys sitting on sidewalks with dogs and tin cups. You'd see blitzed-out young mamas with kids or no kids and no hope. The missions and shelters were packed to the rafters, at least til their leases ran out.

Who else made the cut? Bottom-rung dopemen--though some of the top dogs, white guys who also own banks and your mother, stayed up in those condos on clouds overlooking the bay...

Down by the courthouse and north up on Third into Belltown, young brothers slung rock. On Pike by the Market, the *vatos* had the concession on smack. It wasn't quite the open-air drug zoo it was when the Cubans were ripping and running some 10 years before, but you still could get loaded easy enough. Rock was the only thing cheap in downtown. But you wouldn't want to get fried and then sit on the sidewalk to groove on the day. They'd ticket your ass for just sitting. You wanted to get loaded, well, okay, cool, but you had to keep moving.

Looking to land you just might hit Broadway, a hop up Capitol Hill to the east. Here was the glitter parade, a near-promenade, the

word-of-mouth mecca for Jet City's young hip-eoisie. Chock to the brim with rock 'n roll airheads, punk porno bimbos, dog-collared brokers, weed-sucking Rastas, and bald-headed nazis with lip rings. Also Jesus freaks, muscle fags, Mao-shouting nitwits; 12-year-old glue-sniffing mutants from Kansas; toe-sniffers, whip-lickers, junkies with trust funds; lithium babies, panhandling grandmas; all sorts of strays with pins in their clits and no roadmap home. Last but not least, boatloads of slummers from Bellevue with charge-cards and take-off tattoos who kept the place running.

Down a bit was Broadway's spiritual ass-end, the gauntlet bounded by Denny and Pike running west toward the freeway. A huddle of densely packed, faded apartments, and houses chopped into rooms. Filled up with schitzos and skag freaks, tweakers, parolees, drool cases, pensioned-off old folks, professional students, lower-end wage slaves, a cluster of registered sex fiends on Summit off Howell, unclassified geeks up the ying-yang--the shavings and sweepings of 20th Century life in the city. All that was asked of them was, could they dredge up the rent? Turned out, not for long; the yuppies were coming...

Nineties Seattle! A cutting-edge city! The jump-off to 2001 and beyond, it's attitude sneering and bland, with a lah-de-dah shrug at the blood on the ground spilled by those who don't make it.

The human condition? The haves and have-nots, all that shit? Pre-Dot Com dinosaur news!

The city *was* liberal, don't get me wrong--and hip with a capital H to go with it. We knew about World Beat and all that good stuff. Seattle used to be whitebread, but now, aftet Microsoft, lattes, that grunge shit, etc., we were...still whitebread...

But if '50s Seattle was Leave It To Beaverland North, 40 years later it was Birkenstock mamas and Superdads trying to pretend that the Ma and Pa Cleaver act, tintured a little with Gloria Steinem and New Age bibdribble, still made the nut. And maybe it did--if your income clocked in at six figures and mom didn't have to stay home with the kids. She could if she wanted to, of course...

Ideas expressed in this town? People talked shop, relationship

dramas, above all who's boning who, plus the real-estate racket, the stock market--natch--nail polish gossip and update, and always, the Hawks and the Supes and the Dawgs. Blah-blah, blah-blah-blah. All the small change.

And bullshit from some other planet. You might stroll along Broadway and see some weedy professor in sandals and shorts, the kind that puff out in front, which made him look pregnant or something. He'd be sitting there at the Cafe Septiem, sipping tea with his white birdlegs crossed as the sun worked its way toward the evening. A post-modern philosopher-dipshit, he'd be laying the moves on a young thing with cleavage, expounding the shopworn idea that ideas--the ones that seek to make sense of the world--are passe. Reality, he'd say, is your own little bubble, your fact is my fiction, life's but a dream, on and on...

He'd allude he first read this in French in a sidewalk cafe in Montmartre. What a champ.

But real is real, *n'est ce pas*? That young thing had *lungs* and hips that would *roll* you, and that tuning-fork woody that dipshit had under his shorts there had weight, mass, duration, a short spitting distance--a *monkey* could have measured his philosophical interest, from prostate to foreskin, down to the last micro-inch.

How real was that?

Seattle was jumping and humping and bumping with all *kinds* of real in the '90s. Low dogs in high places, the war of the races... Check this one out: most of the folks in the King County Jail were black or some shade of brown, and still are for that matter. Now, as it happens, most all the jailbirds were and are dopers. Yet seven out of ten of Jet City's dopefiends back then, like now, were white as Prince Charles, or passing. So--why weren't the white boys celled in? Were they out on a pass? Did the cops maybe lose them or something before they got booked? There was an answer no doubt. But you sure wouldn't find it by asking how come, or any of that stuff. What you'd get would be pasted-on blank looks, and maybe a feeling as if you'd broke wind in the middle of *Tosca* or something.

And so on and so on.



Nineties Seattle, the 20th Century's swan song.

A whole lot of water has vaulted the dam since those days. NASDAQ pancaked. The WTO and Fat Tuesday riots tore the town up. Boeing flipped us the bird and left town without telling the mayor. Then Broadway tanked it. Seattle sort of fell off the map of hot places.

Some things stayed the same: rents kept on climbing. A sizeable number of people continued to sleep under bridges, the freeway, in alleys, tent cities, and so forth.

Yuppie ethos metastasized...

The hurt just kept coming. The real estate monkeys' recycled the yuppy wet dream of two decades before and renamed it "high-density smart growth." Which meant of course, gentrify, gentrify. Tear down old housing and slap up cheap condos that cost lots of bucks. Watch real estate prices shoot way past Uranus. Watch poor folks and blue-collar drudges flee town like Okies in front of a dust storm.

They plan to tear the Alaska Way Viaduct down. Condos right on the water downtown at long last! The real estate dickheads get well once again and we're stuck in gridlock forever.

At least we can say that Seattle's in step with everywhere else. A good chunk of the world economy has gone off the cliff. People are even starting to wake to the fact that the check is *not* in the mail. Meanwhile, the country is still bogged in wars, for the eight-trillionth year in a row, with no end in sight. The 21st Century is stone fucking drag time all over.

Purely local travail seems a bit of a chump-change concern.

How can mere dry-rot compare with the mess in Afghanistan, right?

Still, dry-rot is soul-killing stuff.

It sticks like a bone in the throat as gray skies press down.





