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High Pains Drifter

Will Leitch

Almost two years ago, I was interviewed by *The Village Voice*. The story was about dotcom kids—who had become accustomed to ludicrous salaries and affluent lifestyles—being thrown onto the street with little to show for their efforts when their respective dotcoms crashed.

The *VV* story, like just about everything written about the dotcom era, is hilariously dated, full of angst-filled twenty-somethings fretting about how they can't believe their new offices don't have private masseuses. But there's a little quote at the end that continues to resonate.

"I really don't know where I'll go," Leitch said. "I might stay here with some friends in the city. I have uncles in Philadelphia, so I might head there."

According to Webster's, a drifter is defined as, "One who drifts, especially a person who moves aimlessly from place to place or from job to job."

Well, for a substantial number of months, friends, I was a full-fledged drifter. I don't mean someone who moved around a lot on some sort of voyage of self-discovery. I mean someone who had no money, no place to go, nothing to do, absolutely zero worldly possessions. I'll put it this way: You're reading a former homeless guy.

I had nothing to my name but two suitcases full of clothes and books, and a cat carrier. Let's track those months.

October 2000—Months behind on rent, I cry mercy and take a two-month sojourn to my cousin Denny's home in Mattoon, Illinois. There, I eat his food, drink his beer, tie up his phone line, and sleep in his guest bed. I contribute nothing but tens of thousands of words for a book that will likely never be finished. Income during this period: \$0.

December 2000—Fearing that if I do not head back to New York when I had initially intended, I never would, I spend my last \$65 to hop a Greyhound bus from Effingham, Illinois, to the Port Authority in New York City. It is a 25-hour trip, with stops in Cincinnati, Cleveland, Pittsburgh, and some other condemned properties I mercifully slept through. I do this even though I'm fully aware that when I get to the city, I have no money, no job, and nowhere to live. Income during this period: \$0.

January 2001—Out of options only a week after arriving, I finagle my way into my girlfriend's apartment in Brooklyn. Even though we hadn't been dating long and didn't know each other well enough to survive a drive uptown together, let alone sharing quarters, we convince ourselves it will work out because, heck, she can't just kick me to the street, can she? There, I eat her food, drink her beer, tie up her phone line, and sleep in her bed—well, for a week anyway, when I am then kicked to the couch, justifiably. Income during this period: \$0.

Early February 2001—She kicks me to the street, because, yes, she can. Scrambling, I plan to stay on a friend's couch for two weeks. I last a week, because "it's getting crowded in here. You understand, Will, right?" Before I leave, I swipe some stray beer and food. Income during this period: \$35, thanks to a used bookstore.

Mid February 2001—A friend is invited to stay in a SoHo loft for two weeks that is manned with 36 cameras sending a live feed to a Website. (Will people in 10 years really believe what it was like here during the dotcom craze? It's hard for me to fathom, and I was *here*.) This is a fascinating sociological experiment, worth documenting for the raw audacity of it, but this is lost on me. I'm just ecstatic that it has a full bar, a shower, and, most joyous, a washing machine. I contact my uncles in Philadelphia and tell them I have nowhere to go and that I may need to move in with them for a while. An hour later, I am interviewed by *The Village Voice*. I then speak to a friend in New Jersey about staying with him for a week before heading to Philadelphia, and he agrees. Months later, I will borrow a sizable amount of money from him, which, to this day, I have not paid back. Income during this period: \$5, in change, swiped from the Webcam house owner's dresser. I make a mental note to pay him back. I have not.

Late February 2001—The day before I am to leave for New Jersey, fate intervenes. Not only do I learn I have been offered a job, but, upon a visit to a friend's house, I learn a neighbor has a spare room for a month that I can rent, and she doesn't even want the money upfront. I call off my friend in New Jersey and my uncles in Philadelphia, gleefully plop my suitcase and cat carrier on her couch, and declare myself home.

April 2001—I find an apartment on the Upper East Side. A week after I move in, I am laid off. At my housewarming party, a friend points out that when she went through her datebook, she found four different addresses and three different phone numbers for me. Various temp jobs bring me to a new apartment, which brings me to my new job, which brings me to now.

I have lived in Inwood, a nifty residential neighborhood at the northwestern-most tip of Manhattan, for two months now. I have a stable home, awesome roommates, a bed, a desk, a computer (which doesn't work, but no matter), and even a litter box. I am as stable as I have been since I moved to New York in January 2000. But I'm still finding it difficult to shake the habits of a drifter.

To wit:

Over the last two months, I have slept in my office four times. This is not because I have been working all that diligently; I just wanted the air conditioning. I lay my head on my briefcase and crawl under my desk. My daily meal typically consists of the complimentary cereal my employers graciously provide.

My room has no decorations on the wall. My books are stacked on top of one another against the bed, as are my CDs. The room's only light is a desk lamp borrowed from my roommates. I have a closet, but the majority of my clothes are folded neatly in a suitcase. If I feel a night has gone too late and I don't feel like catching the long subway ride home, I simply pass out on a friend's floor.

Recently, I had a busy day. I had work until 2 p.m., a job interview at three, and a softball game at six. This required three different sets of clothes. Rather than plan accordingly, perhaps making sure the outfits were where I needed them ahead of time, I simply folded a suit jacket, tie, pants, dress shoes, a T-shirt, sweatpants, and cap into a suitcase. I then dragged it across the city from point to point. This led to the inevitable moment when I had

to explain to the woman I was trying to convince to give me a job why, exactly, I had brought carry-on luggage into her office.

This is being written at work, simply because it's where I happened to be when I came up with this idea. The last six pieces I wrote have been written on my roommate's computer, a friend's computer, a Kinko's, a hotel's "Business Center," here at work, and on a notepad. That one was then read over the phone to a loyal friend, who graciously typed it for me. It is logical for a writer to, lo, have a ready-made area where he produces his work, but a drifter has neither the time nor the resources for logic.

In this economy, one never knows how long any job can last or when we'll be tossed out with no severance and no parachute. I cannot say that financially I have prepared myself for this possibility ... but I assure you, I know that I can handle it. I am quite resourceful. That's one way to look at it, I guess.

Hey... that's a nice couch you have there.

Buy the book!