

DEAR FRIENDS

Vol 15 No 10 3416 Calle Poco Tucson, Ariz 85715

February 3, 1978

1959

Greetings:

There he was, sloshing down his beer, making himself sodden with the stuff. It was late afternoon, before the home-bound rush would take up all the vacant stools in the saloon. I started the conversation. "That was a great piece you wrote about the heatless tenement and the unfortunates who had to call it home. I admire you for bringing such misery to the attention of your readers."

"Yeah" he grunted. "It's depressing. Hard to get used to. What a way to make a living."

"Do you ever follow up your stories - no heat, the plight of 14 year old prostitutes, slobbering, good-natured drunks? What can be done about these?"

He shifted his pudgy frame on the stool. "There are a million stories. Where do we start? Do we castrate the landlord? What do you suggest?"

I scratched my head. "It's funny", I said, "But you never hear about a heatless saloon. If the boiler here went blooey, you'd have a repairman in before the suds settled in your beer mug. We can keep beer guzzlers warm and comfortable. Why not old people, sick folks, children, pregnant women, whatever?"

It must have fired him up. "You're damned freaken right" he blurted out. "I'm going back to that freaken tenement to stay with it until they get that freaken boiler working again. Give me a bunch of dimes, Cassidy. This time it's not going to be one sob-story and then off to the next. I have a lot of phone calls to make. I'm going to stay with this one until I put the fear of God in that freaken landlord or whoever is responsible."

Wouldn't it be great if I could wind up this little episode by telling you that my saloon companion went off to the heatless tenement and accomplished what he said he was going to do. How he made the phones ring in the real estate office, at the city departments, in the Mayor's office, the city editor, the press photographers hangout, the TV news crowd - one dime after another, chipping away at the cold, stony heartlessness of a city unmoved by freaken inhumanity to unfortunates.

It didn't happen, it is my sad duty to report. He straightened up, took the stack of dimes Cassidy had passed to him from the cash register, and then slumped down again on his stool. "Ah, what's the use" he muttered, "there are a million of these" and he reached for his half-empty beer mug.

That is where it ended that afternoon. Was it only his problem? What about the rest of us? We read his stories - cluck, cluck over them - wonder what a sick world this is - what are we passing on to our kids and grandchildren. It gives us little more than a passing moment of discomfort, displeasure at having such sordid stuff rubbed into our consciousness - conscience - like a dog's snout is rubbed into his droppings.

And we turn the page to read about the \$500 billion Federal budget. It will be sweetened with a \$25 billion tax cut. But the budget is up about \$40 billion. That has to come out of taxes. So who is nuts?

Forget about the other news distractions - the circus debate about the canal that is indefensible in this nuclear age. Consider the bread - \$500 billions. Who gets it? Who pays it? Does it have any relation to heatless tenements, 14 year old hookers, drunks? The Romans had circuses and bread and we know what happened to them. What is our gimmick?

--- Joseph Zashin