

Boulevard of Broken Bikes

In Which the Author Travels to 14th Street to Buy a Bicycle, and Encounters So Much More

It's said that the Rev. James Kenney stocks over a million items in his establishment; if you count things like telephone cords and soup spoons individually, that's probably true. A burly, good-natured man who appears to have found a workable way to serve God and Mammon at the same time, Kenney runs an eponymous thrift store a few blocks up from the theater district on 14th Street NW. If you want, you could furnish a 26-room house, a fitness center, and probably a UFO tracking station by pawing through the contents of Kenney's treasure trove. People come here because they need radio antennas, couches, church pews, or bucket seats; I come because I believe in supporting mom 'n' pop businesses before they're driven out of the metro area altogether, bludgeoned to death by cappuccino shops and bath-tiques.

And, on an afternoon recently, I came because I needed a bicycle.

Kenney greeted me with a smile and half a pitcher of orange juice. When I told him what I wanted, he waved toward a small mountain of random machinery, where his mechanic—who doubles as a salesman—

8 AUGUST 9, 1991 WASHINGTON CITY PAPER

pointed out a bike he had ridden just the day before. Buried under a bouquet of 8-track tapes was another, which the mechanic said he had ridden the previous week. We dragged them both out. They were so twisted and flattened that they looked more like conceptual art pieces than transportation. We smiled, in the good spirit of people who recognize Tacitly Allowed Bullshit when we see it, and started piecing a bike together from the workable parts of both.

Pretty soon the store got too crowded for the job—which expanded rapidly—so we went outside to complete our work on the sidewalk, in 95-degree heat. Every time we found a piece and wrenched it into place, something else would break. The mechanic's toolkit consisted of a single screwdriver and some pliers that looked like a dental instrument in a Three Stooges movie.

I wasn't the only one interested in supporting small businesses that day; half an hour into our reconstruction, a big, sassy woman strutted in, looking to buy a television. She had exactly half of the asking price for an elaborate color model, relying on personal charm to take up the slack. The reverend wasn't impressed, so she came back outside to see if anybody else might be. The bike mechanic, 6 feet tall and built like a middleweight boxer, caught her attention.

"All I ever do is give it away," she sighed, watching our project.

He nodded, concentrating on the bike. He either knew her, or didn't care to.

"And there sure are a lot of guys on this street who want it, too."

He nodded again, curtly, making it clear that he wasn't one of them.

"It don't matter," she said. "I don't give it to you, I'll give it to somebody else."

He shrugged. It was too hot for both the lady and the bike, and the lady didn't seem to be paying.

He got involved in something intricate and I went for a stroll down the street. Outside the pawnshop down by P Street, a pipehead was trying to sell a trumpet. It was a good trumpet—the kind we associate with high-school marching bands. The pawnshop had refused to accept it, for the obvious reason that some high-school marching band was probably minus one trumpet at that very moment.

I played it. It seemed to be worth \$150 or so. His price was \$8. Little things like this keep you current on the local rock prices.

It was a frustrating development. I would have loved to have that trumpet. I even saw myself practicing with it and getting work in a mediocre—or at least desperate—funk band. But then I thought about whatever heartbroken schoolkid he'd snatched the horn from, and I refused. Supporting Mom and Pop is one thing. Supporting a pipehead with dubious title to the property is quite another.

I went back up the street. Beside me, a

guy came running along, carrying a plastic bag, hollering "Toothpaste! One dollar!" and waving a tube around like Herbert von Karajan. He was moving pretty fast, too. It was as though someone had warned him always to keep one step ahead of the police and he was taking it literally. He was certainly too fast for three other guys who, apparently, actually wanted to buy some.

Back at Kenney's shop the bike was ready—except that there was a hole in the front tire and the tube was bulging out like a sebaceous cyst. I pointed it out, and the mechanic groaned. I was only paying \$45 for the bike, after all, not enough to provide him with much of an hourly wage. But he brought out his pliers (it was either that or the screwdriver) and I sat down on the sidewalk. There were about nine other guys sitting around on milk cartons and homemade chairs, like checker-players on the front porch of a general store. Doo wop music was pounding out of some homemade speakers. At every song, some of the older guys would nod and smile with nostalgia. Everybody, sooner or later, was singing.

One of the storefronters was on a drunk—a dirty, mean drunk, and I got the impression that even bathed and sober, he couldn't have been much of a treat. His eyes were purple and murky and reflected a whole lot of shattered brain waves. He slurred his words and snarled at me to pack up my motherfucking bicycle and get the fuck out before I got my ass killed. By him. I thought that was a laugh. Judging from his stumbling half-sprawl, it would be a good two hours before he could even stand up.

"I said pack up your motherfucking bicycle and get the fuck out before I kill your ass." I just glared at him. Most streetcorners have their incorrigibles, the ones who can't stop running their stupid mouths, the ones who end up bleeding at D.C. General, cursing the doctors. Sensible people avoid them—unless, like this one, they're blotto and helpless.

I stuck out my tongue.

Tired of his banter, another exasperated storefronter finally grabbed and then shook the added fellow, knocked his cap off, and pushed him onto the sidewalk, where he spent the remainder of our acquaintance-ship.

The drunk was still inspecting the cracks in the cement when the ragged, feisty sound of drums burst out onto the sidewalk. Two doors up the street, a storefront church was tuning up. I heard tambourines and exultant voices, and crept inside.

The church was about the size of a doctor's waiting room, and not even half full. The band was a teen-age kid with a trap set and a handful of ladies with voices and tambourines. This turned out to be plenty.

The kid on the drums went into a two-beat rhythm and everyone started singing and moving. There wasn't any bother about tuning up or finding the right key to sing in, they just started somewhere and assumed that it would blend. And by God, it did. Every so often the preacher, who weighed about 200 pounds, would snap back his head and call to the Lord. The song lasted for about half an hour. In a rare burst of generosity, I even waited around for the collection plate, but nobody seemed to care. The music got stronger and stronger. It was, easily, the high point of my week.

Back out on the street, the drunk was still face forward on the sidewalk, still trying to kill me. Using more optimism than gravity, he tried to stand up and do it right. I thought: If I must have enemies, then this is the kind I want.

Three hours after we began, the bike was ready. It ended up as an amalgam of the various chunks of bike that had been lying about the reverend's store. A wheel from one, a basket from another, a tube from a snake pit of them coiled inside a Capehart radio. Most of it had been a three-speed English Hercules, circa 1949, with

chrome fenders and whitewalls; now, it looks like something Miss Marple would ride to the market. The front wheel wobbles and the brakes shriek like a heretic on the rack, but what's that compared to the dashing figure I cut, tooling down Columbia Road at three-and-a-half miles per hour?

The population has given me nothing but compliments and smiles. A guy on 17th Street NW offered me \$100, double my money, the instant he saw it. A beautiful Latina on my block has suddenly decided that I'm worth smiling at. And even little old ladies—the ones who can remember those bikes as the rage of their youth—chirp pleasantly as I roll past. Just last evening, around 17th and S, one of them came out of the shadows, and, aiming for the chrome fenders, nearsightedly poked me on the leg with her umbrella.

Squinting at the bike through the pouring rain and the glare of the streetlamp, she recalled, "I used to have one of those, too."

—Kevin Lambert