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Summer of (Real) Discontent

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NCR Today

With the passing of Labor Day, summer-as-a-state-of-mind is officially over. And not a moment too soon.

Throughout the country, it has been a mean season of the center-not-holding. But while the rest of the population has been subjected to town hall madness and other prescriptions for political paranoia, the Left Coast (always on the social forefront) has taken a much deeper look down the hole.

The summer of our discontent began in July, when 17-year old Lily Burke was killed in downtown Los Angeles while on an errand for her mother. The accused killer, Charles Samuel, had a history of kidnap, robbery and drug abuse. On the day of the murder, Samuel ? a parolee ? just up and left his state-funded rehabilitation center across the street from where Lily Burke had parked her car. No one, it seems, was paying any particular attention.

This was all-too-quickly followed by a string of brutal and avoidable crimes here ? vulnerable children or troubled adults who fell through the cracks and were left exposed to the lesser impulses of human nature.

The trend reached its apex last week, with the recovery of Jaycee Duggard in Northern California, kidnapped 18 years earlier by a convict named Phillip Garrido. He was at one time serving a 50-year sentence, but was ? for some reason ? let out of prison after ten. Three years ago, suspicious neighbors called police, who questioned Garrido but ? for some reason ? never bothered to enter his home and inspect it.

Then, this past weekend, one more: two daughters had their lives taken apparently by their mother. She lost her job three months earlier and had no prospects for finding a new one. The family was living in the converted garage of a house owned by the girls? grandmother ? but that woman got caught in a familiar cash crunch; the home had just been foreclosed upon. According to the Los Angeles Times, the

grandmother had resorted to collecting recyclables out of neighborhood trash for income.

And, as always out here, the climate seemed to follow suit. In the midst of these mounting tragedies, the temperature climbed to unheard-of levels, and the largest wildfire in local history spread an end-of-days-like layer of smoke and ash over Los Angeles for nearly two weeks. Four days ago, officials announced the cause of the blaze was arson ? the fire had been deliberately set.

By Labor Day, the skies were finally (somewhat) clear ? again, goodbye Summer. Take your time coming back.

As these very real stories of despair and hard times stalk the far-west landscape, television speaks of an alternate reality, a pre-fab fury: uncontrolled anger over disproven ?death panels;? outrage against a presidential speech to students encouraging them to stay-in-school; and an unstoppable ire among those who believe that president wasn?t really born in the United States.

I listen and I watch and I imagine the parents of Lily Burke, of Jaycee Duggard, and the families of two firefighters killed trying to control a scorching 140,000 acre crime. I look around at the concrete pain and consequences of a system that seems suddenly frayed by the stresses of the Great Recession and more.

In Washington, political pundits call summer ?the silly season,? when crazies come out to play in the midday sun. Here in California, ?silly? is last word anyone would use to describe what this season had wrought. And all too often, what starts in California comes soon to a theatre near you.

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