

The Savings Book

My wife, Carolyn, married me for my savings: Not the double digit figures but the strange three or four dollar withdrawals and deposits. The first time she saw my pass-book she laughed until her eyes became moist and then hugged me as she called "Poor baby." And there was truth to what she was saying: Poor.

I remember opening my savings account at Guarantee Savings May 27, 1969, which was a Monday. The previous Saturday my brother and I had taken a labor bus to chop cotton in the fields west of Fresno. We returned home in the back of a pickup with fourteen dollars each and a Mexican national who kept showing us watches and rings for us to buy. That day my brother and I wouldn't spring for Cokes or sandwiches, as most everyone else on our crew did when a vending truck drove up at lunch time, tooting a loud horn. The driver opened the aluminum doors to display his goods, and the workers, who knew better but couldn't resist, hovered over the iced Cokes, the cellophaned sandwiches, and the Hostess cupcakes. We looked on from the shade of the bus, sullen and most certainly sensible. Why pay forty cents when you could get a Coke in town for half the price. Why buy a sandwich for sixty-five cents when you could have slapped together your own sandwich. That was what our mother had done for us. She had made us tuna sandwiches which by noon

had grown suspiciously sour when we peeled back the top slice to peek in. Still, we ate them, chewing slowly and watching each other to see if he were beginning to double over. Finished, we searched the paper bag and found a broken stack of saltine crackers wrapped in wax paper. What a cruel mother, we thought. Dry crackers on a dry day when it was sure to rise into the nineties as we chopped cotton or, as the saying went, "played Mexican golf."

We had each earned fourteen dollars for eight hours of work, the most money I had ever made in one day. Two days later, on May 27, 1969, I deposited those dollars; on June 9th I made my first withdrawal—four dollars to buy a belt to match a pair of pants. I had just been hired to sell encyclopedias, and the belt was intended to dazzle my prospective clients when they opened the door to receive me. But in reality few welcomed my presence on their doorsteps and the only encyclopedias I sold that summer were to families on welfare who so desperately wanted to rise from their soiled lives. Buy a set, I told them, and your problems will disappear. Knowledge is power. Education is the key to the future, and so on. The contracts, however, were rescinded and my commissions with them.

On June 20 I withdrew three dollars and twenty-five cents to buy a plain white shirt because my boss had suggested that I should look more "professional." Still, I sold encyclopedias to the poor and again the contracts were thrown out. Finally I was fired, my briefcase taken away, and the company tie undone from my neck. I walked home in the summer heat despairing at the consequence: No new clothes for the fall.

On July 13 I took out five dollars and eighty cents which, including the five cents interest earned, left me with a balance of one dollar. I used the money for bus fare to Los Angeles to look for work. I found it in a tire factory. At summer's end I returned home and walked

proudly to Guarantee Savings with my pockets stuffed with ten dollar bills. That was September 5, and my new balance jumped to one hundred and forty-one dollars. I was a senior in high school and any withdrawals from my account went exclusively to buy clothes, never for food, record albums, or concerts. On September 15, for instance, I withdrew fifteen dollars for a shirt and jeans. On September 24 I again stood before the teller to ask for six dollars. I bought a sweater at the Varsity Shop at Coffee's.

Slowly my savings dwindled that fall semester, although I did beef it up with small deposits: Twenty dollars on October 1, ten dollars on November 19, fifteen dollars on December 31, and so on. But by February my savings account balance read three dollars and twelve cents. On March 2 I returned to the bank to withdraw one crisp dollar to do God knows what. Perhaps it was to buy my mother a birthday gift. Seven days later, on March 10, I made one last attempt to bolster my savings by adding eight dollars. By March 23, however, I was again down to one dollar.

By the time I finally closed my account, it had fluctuated for five years, rising and falling as a barometer to my financial quandry. What is curious to me about this personal history are the kinds of transactions that took place—one day I would withdraw three dollars while on another day I would ask for six. How did it vanish? What did it buy? I'm almost certain I bought clothes but for what occasion? For whom? I didn't have a girlfriend in my senior year, so where did the money go?

To withdraw those minor amounts was no easy task. I had to walk or bicycle nearly four miles, my good friend Scott tagging along, and afterward we'd walk up and down the Fresno Mall in search of the elusive girlfriend or, if worse came to worst, to look for trouble.

My savings book is a testimony to my fear of poverty—

that by saving a dollar here, another there, it would be kept at bay.

I admit that as a kid I worried about starving, although there was probably no reason. There was always something to eat; the cupboards were weighed down with boxes of this and that. But when I was older the remembrance of difficult times stayed with me: The time Mother was picking grapes and my brother ate our entire lunch while my sister and I played under the vines. For us there was nothing to eat that day. The time I opened the refrigerator at my father's (who was separated from our mother at the time) to stare at one puckered apple that sat in the conspicuous glare of the refrigerator's light. I recalled my uncle lying on a couch dying of cancer. I recalled my father who died from an accident a year later and left us in even more roughed up shoes. I had not been born to be scared out of my wits, but that is what happened. Through a set of experiences early in my life, I grew up fearful that some financial tragedy would strike at any moment, as when I was certain that the recession of 1973 would lead to chaos—burned cars and street fighting. During the recession I roomed with my brother and I suggested that we try to become vegetarians. My brother looked up from his drawing board and replied: "Aren't we already?" I thought about it for a while, and it was true. I was getting most of my hearty meals from my girlfriend, Carolyn, who would later become my wife. She had a job with great pay, and when she opened her refrigerator I almost wept for the bologna, sliced ham, and drumsticks. I spied the cheeses and imported olives, tomatoes, and the artichoke hearts. I opened the freezer—chocolate ice cream!

At that time Carolyn put up with my antics, so when I suggested that we buy fifty dollars worth of peanut butter and pinto beans to store under her bed, she happily wrote out a check because she was in love and didn't know any better. I was certain that in 1974 the country would slide

into a depression and those who were not prepared would be lost. We hid the rations in the house and sat at the front window to wait for something to happen.

What happened was that we married and I loosened up. I still fear the worst, but the worst is not what it once was. Today I bought a pair of shoes; tomorrow I may splurge to see a movie, with a box of popcorn and a large soda that will wash it all down. It's time to live, I tell myself, and if a five dollar bill flutters from my hands, no harm will result. I laugh at the funny scenes that aren't funny, and I can't think of any better life.

1-116620-C

DATE	WITHDRAWALS	INTEREST	ADDITIONS	BALANCE	BY
1 NOV 27 53			14.00	14.00	CR
2 JAN 5 54	4.00			10.00	DR
3 JAN 20 54	1.25			8.75	DR
4 JAN 18 54		.05		8.80	CR
5 JAN 18 54	5.80			3.00	DR
6 SEP 5 53			140.00	143.00	CR
7 SEP 17 53	15.00			128.00	DR
8 SEP 24 53	6.00			122.00	DR
9 OCT 23 53		.55		122.55	CR
10 OCT 30 53	20.00			102.55	DR
11 OCT 16 53	20.00			82.55	DR
12 NOV 20 53	10.55			72.00	DR
FRESNO GUARANTEE SAVINGS AND LOAN ASSOCIATION					
13 DEC 11 53	10.00			62.00	DR
14 DEC 22 53	4.00			58.00	DR
15 DEC 29 53		1.00		59.00	CR
16 DEC 29 53	22.00			37.00	DR
17 JAN 19 54	6.00			31.00	DR
18 FEB 16 54	4.00			27.00	DR
19 FEB 26 54	9.00			18.00	DR
20 MAR 5 54	7.00			11.00	DR
21 MAR 23 54	9.00			2.00	DR
22 MAY 12 54			50.00	52.00	CR
23 MAY 18 54		.28		52.28	CR
24 JUN 5 54	6.28			46.00	DR

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AND LOAN INSURANCE CORPORATION

