

## Getting By

What was there to do in summer? After seeing my wife off to work at 7:00 in the morning, I climbed back into bed and fell asleep with our cat Benny, who was equally oblivious to the fact that most people were off to their tasks of making money. I slept hard, open-mouthed and dreaming and woke up about ten to a spear of sunlight through the curtained window—a window that was screenless so that a few flies, loosened from tuna cans and pie tins in the alley, circled the room, their blue engines coming and going from the window to the different points of my body.

It was mid-morning—or two-and-a-half hours after my wife had started answering questions about financial aid at Fresno State—when I sat at the kitchen table with my coffee and the *Fresno Bee* opened first to baseball scores, then to the tragic murders or attempted murders, then back to baseball scores. The facts always woke me up.

By eleven I was dressed in jeans and a comfortably loose T-shirt. I sat in the living room, legs crossed, and literally waited for a poem to surface from a brain cell, because I was clear-headed and eager to push words from one side of the page to the next. I was eager to reinvent my childhood, to show others the chinaberry tree, ants, shadows, dirty spoons—those nouns that made up much of my poetry. On that day in August nothing came except

a few stilted lines about loneliness in contemporary society. I felt sick. The poems I had written in the previous weeks had been dismal efforts to rekindle a feel for the past. There I was, author of a prize-winning collection of poems, with another on the way, and I was troubled, even scared, that an empty head might weigh my previously square and confident shoulders. I sipped another coffee and rechecked the murders, this time in the *Fresno Guide*, and still came up with “loneliness in contemporary society.”

We lived in a complex of seven identical cottages which, if in another part of town, might have been considered charming and even historically interesting. But our complex sat between busy streets in an area of loud service vehicles. We were fenced in on three sides by Barnett's Key Shop, a bar called The Space, and an adult movie house called The Venus. It was a “convenient” area. If one day I had locked myself out of our cottage, I could have shouted and Mr. Barnett would have heard; if I had grumbled at my bad luck, I could have downed beers at The Space and talked with those who couldn't talk and felt much better about myself; or if I had lusted over the unattainably wicked, I could have crossed the street and entered the cool dark of The Venus to sit among the fidgeting patrons, their laps full of popcorn.

Because the area was suspiciously run-down, the rent was only a hundred dollars. We were in the seventh cottage, some distance from the busy streets and milky stares of the regulars leaving The Space. It was a relatively quiet complex since most tenants were retired. One of them was a slow-shuffling problem-drinker named Ziggy. His problem was that he couldn't get enough. By late morning, after making a few swipes at the sidewalk with a broom and stooping for candy wrappers that had scuttled in from the rush of traffic, he was ready to put on a jacket

and take the 50 or so steps to The Space where he spent the day mumbling, head down and looking into beers. Like most quiet alcoholics, Ziggy was common and uninteresting, except that he had become friend to cockroaches. "Those critters ain't nothin' . . . thur like you and me," he said to me once at his front door and waved for me to come with him. I followed lamely and was led in shuffles to his kitchen. When the light went on, hundreds of cockroaches began to scatter and bump into one another, creating a dull clicking sound. Ziggy laughed stupidly and watched my face wrinkle with a frown as I stepped back, obviously disgusted. In a way this was Ziggy's entertainment: To lure a person to his cottage in order to laugh at a startled face when the lights went on and the floor began to move.

The other tenants kept to themselves, and we did the same. That summer we poked a few holes in the triangle-shaped plot behind the cottage and planted zucchini and tomatoes. Within a month the zucchini fattened and the tomatoes were bloated red as Christmas ornaments. In the evening I often sat behind the cottage marveling at how these plants had grown scraggly with fruit; how from small plugs they had taken over the small patch of earth within a matter of weeks, inviting snails, worms, spiders, and "creepy things" I couldn't even begin to name. I considered anything that didn't talk, bark, meow, roar, screech, chirp, or hee-haw an insect. It made the world much easier to understand.

By late July we were eating tomatoes daily: Eggs and tomatoes for breakfast, tomatoes bleeding between two slices of toast for lunch, and tomatoes in an austere salad of lettuce and vinegar for dinner. A late evening snack might be a chilled tomato enjoyed in front of Johnny Carson when the air conditioner had just been turned off and the windows raised, the night heat slowly descending upon us like a heavy jacket.

By early August we were at the point of unloading bags of tomatoes and zucchini onto our relatives who, in turn, wanted to shove even larger bags of the same into our arms. Throughout Fresno the gardens were full and a whole community busied itself trying to force gifts of home grown produce on one another. "Here, let's look at photos of our vacation, and while we're at it, let me give you a couple of bags of zucchini," one might say to a favorite uncle, the garden at home producing more than one could possibly pass around on a good evening.

It had been a difficult year for my wife and me. We had returned in May from Mexico City with little money to inherit this cottage from my brother who was on the way up to an apartment with beamed ceilings and a swimming pool. He had had enough of the drunks who seemed forever circling the cottages, on occasion knocking at his door to borrow a wrench to fix their steaming cars or to use the telephone because they were bleeding under their shirts.

We gladly moved in. We painted one room, then another. We became ambitious and waxed the hardwood floors with my worst T-shirts. We tore off the contact paper stuck on the bathroom window, fitting it with a bright yellow shade. A week later the apartment was in order, and the next order of business was to find jobs. We scanned the want ads; we thumbed through the job listings at the unemployment building and followed the faintest rumor of work. But the truth was that neither of us wanted to be locked into jobs. We therefore brainstormed to figure a way to get by without going outside the house and came up with sign painting. An artist by training, Carolyn could paint FM Motors, A-1 Body Shop, Victor's Repo Depot and the like with little effort. This decided, I was made salesman and my first attempt was to snare Garoupa's Grocery, which had just moved

next to The Space. A mistake for the owner, but money for us we thought.

Garoupa, a second-generation Portuguese whose laughter rose from his belly first and then into his mouth, was a small-time capitalist. He had come to love money late in his life and worked eagerly at becoming successful, first with a small store that was no bigger than a child's bedroom and then a full-fledged grocery with a meat counter and vegetable bins—what zucchini could not be given away wound up in his grocery slowly growing soft.

"Go out there and do it," Carolyn said. I put on an ironed shirt, slipped into my best shoes and walked to his front door briskly with a sense of audacity. But when I opened the screened door, I spotted Garoupa behind the meat counter sniffing a handful of ground round. He threw it back into the glassed counter and asked if I needed help. I looked around, from the smoke-dusted ceiling to the poorly stocked shelves. A flurry of small fans stirred the air, and I, with cold feet, pretended not to hear him and went off to search the vegetable bins. Yes, the zucchini was there, puckering in the heat. I picked one up, weighed it, and tapped it in my palm, a maneuver that gave me time to muster courage. I didn't know how to approach this burly character. What words could I use to ask for work. "Hey there, Big Daddy, how 'bout me painting a sign for you," I could say to which he might wave, "Get outta here." There I was, a prize-winning poet, with another book on the way, growing useless before bins of sad vegetables. I knew the works of the best poets of this century, most of the novelists, and the short story writer who wrote: "There's every reason to cry." I had studied the Bible. I had underlined passages from Hamlet and knew an epigram from the Vietnamese by heart: "Spit straight up and learn something," which I easily could have applied to that day.

I examined an onion, then a handful of limp peas, and

then turned to Garoupa. I searched his coughing face behind the meat counter, a face the color of the sausage he was selling. He wiped his mouth slowly and said: "Yes!" I asked for raisins to which he replied he had none. I turned to the freezer and bought a Popsicle and brought it home to Carolyn. It was her favorite: Cherry. I broke it in two, and it was something like love, the juice running down our arms.

Garoupa's Grocery started slowly but later snowballed into a success. He himself became adventurous and opened Garoupa's Dance Studio next to The Venus. I suppose he imagined that after watching a porno flick patrons might want to rush next door to take lessons in the Cha-Cha. Perhaps so. The dance studio, too, became a success, but later closed for reasons we were not much interested in; we were gone and living in the Bay Area.

Carolyn found a job in financial aid at Fresno State and I was left to my own devices: reading Yourcenar's *Hadrian's Memoirs* and writing poems that I crushed into balls and hurled at our cat Benny. The poems failed to excite, although when Carolyn came home, red and steaming from the ten mile drive from work, I hugged and kissed and told her about the wonderfully effortless lines that I had written for the day—lines that would raise us from our poverty. "I'm boy wonder," I often told her, flexing my muscles. She would go through a pantomime of excitement and rub them, cooing: "O you hot Latins."

When it was obvious that, for whatever reason, the poems I had been writing were bad, I began to consider finding a real job. Gas station attendant, car salesman, apprentice baker? The choices were endlessly sad, and so was I when I woke one day to the realization that I could only write and teach poetry and grow sad after each chapter of *Madame Bovary*. I thought of my brother who, at

twenty-two and down to three dollars and an ashtray of pennies, said "Damn," pumped up the tires of my old bike and rode off to the Whirl Wind Car Wash to plead for work—my brother the artist, the not-so-hot guitar player, child of a difficult past.

So this is what it's like, I thought as I scanned the want ads in the *Fresno Bee*, scratching out the god-awful jobs, which left mostly technical ones—dental hygienist or landscape architect—or those that rang suspiciously false: Earn money at home . . . I spotted, however a promising lead:

Summer Help Needed  
Pacific Telephone Company  
800 N. Fulton, East Side  
*An Equal Opportunity Employer*

and suddenly I grew confident that things would work; that my application would be admired—the education, the teaching experience, the world travel—and passed to the higher ups who, in turn, would beam, "That's our man!"

I called Jon Veinberg, who had been my roommate in graduate school and my best man at our wedding, and the next morning, just after eight, he came riding up on his bicycle, already sweating from the Fresno heat which had been balancing between 103 and 104 for the past few days. We had iced tea on the front porch and talked poetry: Montale and Hikmet, Transtromer and Stern.

At nine we got up stiffly from the porch, slightly reluctant about following through with our plans, and began the three-block walk down the alley (yet another landmark of this cluster of cottages) to the telephone company. When we arrived a staggered line was forming, and we linked ourselves to it, waving at a few friends we recognized, one of whom was an artist—and a very good

one! We joked about "selling out," but secretly we were all hoping for the best.

Within fifteen minutes we were inside sitting on folding chairs and filling out a simple application. One set of questions asked: Last Job? How Many Hours per Week? I wrote T.A. in English and three hours. I smiled at this fact and shared it with Jon who chuckled behind his moustache—a great wirey moustache that nearly touched his collar bones when he was sitting down. "You lie, sucker," he said. "You only worked two." We laughed into each other's faces and returned the applications to the would-be interviewer. Instead of returning to my seat I circled the room studying the equally unemployable who were dressed in faded jeans, T-shirts, mismatched leisure suits, baseball caps, pointlessly loud shoes, rubber thongs—the unemployable in long hair or cropped hair, their cigarettes rolled in the sleeves of their T-shirts. I spotted one face in particular, a Chicano I recognized from high school, and walked over to say *Orale ese!* We shook hands, raza style, and passed stories back and forth like a beach ball: Our marriages, children, cars, and misplaced friends.

I wished him luck and went to sit with Jon. He too was studying the people because his face looked defeated. He stared at me and I at him, and no words were necessary to say times were bad.

I perked up, however, when my name was called and I walked over to a middle-aged woman in a bland dress whose lacquered hair was piled into a bee hive. She asked if there was an error about the three hours. "You mean thirty hours," she asked, pointing to my application. "No, you see, this T.A.-ship was a class in remedial English and we met only three times a week," I explained to her. She studied my face, pencil in her mouth and said, "Oh, I see." She wrote something on my application.

A few minutes later a business-type clapped his hands

and announced that the applications would be processed and those whose work experience fitted their needs would be called. He said we could go home, and someone among the unemployable said: "Muther, you can go home!" The business-type pretended not to hear and walked away down the hallway.

Jon and I left laughing but were at once dazed by the heat and harsh light when we opened the outside door. It was late morning and already the day left us no choice: To stay inside in front of the air conditioner to nurse iced tea and a book that we hoped would never end.

My first book came out in March and Carolyn planned a party in June. A book-selling party. Carolyn stirred up a minor invasion of colorful dishes: Fruit platter, shrimp salad, and party-time meatballs. Then there were bowls of potato chips and guacamole. A few bottles of Wente chablis were chilled for a toast and beers were iced in a tub.

We spent the day rearranging the house. We scooted the couch against the front window to face a small handsome Japanese print. We wiped the leaves of our three or four house plants, and cleaned the windows both inside and out. The bathroom was scrubbed, the floor vacuumed, and the living room scented with cut flowers from Carolyn's mother, an amateur flower arranger.

By seven the first guests began to arrive, some in pairs and others alone, but all were awkwardly quiet at first because few had been to a book-selling party and didn't know what to expect and because few had seen Carolyn and me in nine months—or years! Most guests were my relatives: brothers, sister, mother, aunt, uncles, cousins, and would-be cousins. Even my grandmother came with a cigarette in her shaking hand, and repeated in her gravely voice all night: "Honey, your hair, your hair is too long!"

Then there were my literary companeros: Jon Veinberg

and Leonard Adame. I handed out beers like tickets, and they were on their way to laughter and their overblown stories.

I had also invited my former teachers, Philip Levine and Peter Everwine, and they arrived with their wives and a well-known poet who had just ended a visiting professorship at Fresno State. The well-known poet shook my hand and retreated with Levine to take up a wine glass. Later, when Leonard Adame went up to ask about his translations from the Spanish, the well-known poet didn't feel much like talking. He answered Leonard's questions as simply as he could and then turned away to search out Levine.

By eight the party was loudly clever with reminiscences about my childhood. My mother: "Remember when this kid used to go raking leaves and he went up to one house and asked this lady—Armenian, I think—if she had any work to do and the lady says, 'Yes, I have to do the ironing and cook dinner,' and this kid don't know what to do except say 'Oh' and turn around and get his little butt off her porch. *M'ijo*, you crack me up."

By his third beer, my older brother started in: "And remember when he was in kindergarten I told him that peanut butter was also shoe polish? So he buffed it into his loafers and took off to school smelling like a sandwich. Gary, I'm sorry; I had to do it. You were so stupid."

They were stories dragged from the closet, stories that were a tradition at family gatherings, especially at Christmas when they nailed my brother to the wall, reminding him of the year he tore small holes in his Christmas presents to see what they were and later, on Christmas Eve, cried because none of them was a surprise.

I laughed along, although I tried unsuccessfully to change the subject. Carolyn finally intervened to ask if this knot of relatives would be interested in buying a copy of my book. My relatives flew to their purses and brought

out their wallets. I signed books and tried to explain the poems at which most of them would only stare. They were very proud.

It was while signing books and making up stories about how I composed each poem in a blaze of concentration that my sister Debra tugged me into the bedroom where she pointed out the window at a young woman on top of the tin shed in the back yard. The woman was cursing at a young man who was waving a steak knife at her. He cursed at her and she returned even more fierce words about his and everyone else's mother.

They were a redneck-looking couple who lived in the apartment whose brick wall was a tall fence to our yard. A week before, while we were barbecuing with another couple, the woman's voice lifted almost beautifully from a high window, "Charlie, this new Tide even gets the shit out of your shorts," just as we were sitting down to eat and toast the good life.

Pulling down the shade, I felt inclined to telephone the police. I hesitated, however, and went over to tell Carolyn about what was happening outside. She rushed to the bedroom window and peeked through the shade. They were gone. Only the tin shed and the scraggly tomatoes.

My sister again tugged at my sleeve to whisper that the girl was at the front door. I scooted quickly past my guests, who were oblivious to what was going on, to answer the door. Calmly I answered, "Yes," searching her face for a clue to her feelings. She asked if she could use the phone because her car had broken down. I stared at her openly but her eyes refused to meet mine, even when I swung the door open and showed her to the phone. I left her alone but waited not far from her wondering if I should be direct and tell her that it wasn't a stalled car that brought her to my door but a steak knife. I didn't want to embarrass her, but I felt she must have been crumbling inside and was in need of comfort.

But I said nothing, for fear of getting involved, and when the young woman was off the telephone I walked her to the door and—very stupidly—wished her luck in getting her car started. On the steps she half-turned to me and looking at a cockroach that had scuttled out from the porch, said, "Thanks."

The party was a success. I sold twenty-two books and received many handshakes and loud cheers.