

FIRST JOB

I awoke in my tent covered with sweat. The sleeping bag was too warm even when sleeping naked. I took a swig from the water bottle next to my bag. I put on my t-shirt and jeans and my olive-green Army jacket. I scratched my zits. They were all over my face. I knew I wasn't supposed to touch my face, my Mom always said, but these were nasty zits, red, white and bumpy, and when they didn't itch, they hurt, if I wasn't high on beer or pot.

It was foggy and cool in the morning, but warmed up in the afternoon. It was officially Indian Summer in Berkeley that week in early October 1974 because it had been over 80 degrees two days in a row according to the temperature sign on the Bank of America on Telegraph Avenue. I hoped it would be warm again that day. It was only half a block down to Telegraph Avenue from People's Park where I lived. I had slept very late.

It was just after noon according to the pocket watch my grandfather gave me when I was 10. That was six years before then. He had died five years earlier. Then both my parents died in a crash the past winter driving the pickup truck to Tahoe to play some blackjack, I was told, skidding on some ice and over the cliff or something like that. No one told me exactly.

I took the watch with me when I ran away, leaving the foster family paid to feed me. They fed me different from their own two kids. Like I got a cheese sandwich while they got pork chops. That hurt me in my stomach, especially when I thought about Mom and Dad. Dad was good on the barbeque, and Mom mostly made me my favorite foods for dinner. But this was my life now. I was on my own. I liked that. Someday, I thought, I'd go back to Marin and see my friends from school. So far no one had found me. None of my friends came to Berkeley. I missed them, but I didn't want to be put back in some foster home.

Time moved pretty slow around there, especially when I was sitting on Telegraph panhandling and there was no dope around. By dope, I mean pot because that's what we called it. I didn't use smack, but some of my friends did. One of my best friends there OD'd. I did not have the want to, thank God.

I had my regular spot where I liked to panhandle between Durant and Channing Way. I sat with my hand ready to put out to the passing tourists, "Spare Change?" I would say. There was no need to be creative about it. I just needed some money to eat. My spot was on the east side of Telegraph just a few doors down the hill from the corner where the shoe store was, where the guy with long curly hair and the floppy green hat always sat and played guitar for change. The street vendors were the same every day in the same place. It was like they owned their spot, just like I owned my spot. It was like a law of the street. I had the chubby lady who sold jewelry that she made between me and the street. To the left of her was the big guy and his girlfriend who sold candles. They had a long display table on the corner, a choice busy spot. The table was covered with candles of different shapes and sizes. Their big seller was multi-colored candles in the shape of a large dick. The candle guy bragged the candles were molded from his. He was a tall white guy with a deep tan and muscles that he showed off with his sleeveless muscle shirts. He always wore

a cowboy hat which he told me was a Stetson when I first asked him about his hat and he took it off to show me the brand name on the inner hatband. He said he lifted every day.

It was later in the afternoon and the sidewalks were very crowded as usual on a weekend. I made some money panhandling and was feeling pretty good. I could buy a turkey sandwich, with the turkey hand-carved by a chef dressed in white wearing a white chef hat at the restaurant across the street or a couple of big slices of pepperoni pizza and a coke at the pizza place I liked at the next corner up the street. The banjo guy who came for a couple hours on Saturdays and Sundays was playing the theme from the Beverly Hillbillies for probably the twentieth time. I watched him set up once. He showed up in the afternoon when the crowd was at its peak, perfectly timed, with his banjo case opened up. He had a picture of Jesus and a couple of fives and tens, and a few ones, with some change already in the case when he opened it up on the street to give you the idea of what to do when you were standing there listening to him play. All he played was Dueling Banjos and the theme from Beverly Hillbillies. So, people only stayed for a short time, but he played well and they paid him. He made a lot of money fast and left each weekend day.

The banjo guy had just finished, packed up and left when a black teenager got in a big argument with the big candle guy. The candle guy accused the black kid loudly of trying to rip him off. He shouted that the kid was a thief. The black kid was standing there screaming at the candle guy that he was not a thief and that the candle guy was a racist pig. The candle guy grabbed a baseball bat that he had for beating up thieves, I guess, and started threatening and waving the bat at the black kid. The black kid picked up some beer bottles from a trash can, one in each hand, and started waving back at the guy. They were about ten feet apart. The black kid's friend was dragging on his arm, yelling, "C'mon, man, let's get out of here." The candle guy's girlfriend was just standing there not saying anything. All of a sudden, the black kid throws one of the bottles at the feet of the candle guy, breaking it into little pieces that flew all around, but didn't hit the candle guy. But, the candle guy was furious beyond belief and came after the black kid swinging his baseball bat and there was a brief chase as the black kid ducked around the corner and ran up Channing Way. The candle guy was nowhere fast enough to catch the black kid and he disappeared up the street.

I was standing in the afternoon crowd that gathered to watch the confrontation. Suddenly, someone yelled, "He's on the roof!" and pointed up at the roof of the building right there on the corner. The black kid had gone around back of the building and somehow climbed up three stories to the roof, probably a stairway or fire escape in the back, and was standing on the edge of the roof holding the other beer bottle, a long-neck, waving it like he was going to throw it, yelling at the candle guy, "Racist Pig!" The crowd had its mouth open in unison at the sight and so did I, staring up at the black kid. The candle guy waved the bat at the black kid daring him to come on down and see if he had such a big mouth here on the street. Then, the black kid threw the bottle down from the roof and it burst in an explosion of glass. The crowd was angry and yelling, acting like there had been a meeting and a vote, everyone running in a mob up Channing Way as if it was going to find the kid and lynch him. The crowd was so big that the Greek guy that owned the gyro stand

on Channing Way got excited and rushed out on the street hawking a gyro that he waved in one hand above his head, waving the other hand at his stand, shouting with his Greek accent like he did,

“You get gyro right here! Good tasty meat here!”

The black kid disappeared and the mob broke up and was a normal crowd. I was standing there counting my spare change, which included a couple of fives I got from some sympathetic out-of-towners, maybe thinking about their own kids who had to eat just like me. The guitar player from up the street with the green floppy leather hat was standing next to me carrying his guitar. I knew him because I liked to sit and listen to him play sometimes and we talked about things. He played lots of songs. He liked to play the Beatles, and I liked them a lot.

One night he was playing and doing pretty well in the change department. I was there with my friend Betty. Parents called their girls Betty sometimes back then. She was from Orinda on the other side of the hills. Her parents didn't know where she was, but she did have parents. I missed my parents, and my sister, but I did not want to be in Marin now that I was an orphan.

Anyway, we were sitting listening to him play when the Hare Krishnas showed up not more than 20 feet from the guitar guy, just banging their drums and hand cymbals, chanting “Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Hare, Hare, Krishna, Krishna, Hare Krishna,” ad infinitum. The guitar guy was being drowned out and it looked like they were doing it on purpose. The guitar guy started strumming and singing louder like it was a contest. He kept amplifying up, and they kept Hare Krishna-ing louder and louder, until – twang – the guitar player broke a string and stopped. As he gathered up his change and put his guitar back in the case, the Hare Krishnas just disappeared.

So, anyway, I was standing there on the corner with the calmed-down weekend crowd getting back to shopping and strolling, buying t-shirts, jewelry and candles. I was thinking about what I could do with my change. The guitar guy said,

“Hey, you want a get a piece of pizza or a sandwich? My treat.”

“Sure,” I said, “where do you want to go.”

“What do you like?”

“Let's get pizza up the street on the corner across from your spot.

“Okay, Pizza Haven it is.”

We walked up the street to the next corner and got a seat in the restaurant by the window. We could watch the people. I liked to sit there. We ordered our pizza slices and drinks. I had two slices. I was very hungry. The guitar guy asked me a lot of questions

about me. He was curious. He said he had dropped out of college and was seeing the world. He had a job, he said, during the day at a bookstore. He was going to go to Hawaii in a week. He wondered why I was living on the street. I told him about my parents dying in a plane crash and about how I just wanted to go away. I told him that I was living in a tent and that I had friends. He wondered if I had spoken to anyone in my family. I told him that I had a sister, but I didn't want to talk to anyone. I had a drug addict aunt in Marin, too, I told him. He told me that I seemed to be too smart to just live in a tent on the street and panhandle, that I should think about going home and going back to school. I wondered what a guy in a floppy leather hat with a guitar was doing acting like a counselor or something. I told him that. He laughed. He said that he spent a lot of time watching the people on the street, that he felt like he knew us, and like he knew me. We had had some conversations over the past couple of months. He said that he wouldn't do this forever, and would probably go back to school someday. He asked me if I had ever had a job. I told him, no, I hadn't. I would like to have a job, I said, but I didn't know what to do to get a job.

“Well,” he said, looking around the restaurant, “My first jobs were in restaurants. I have been a busboy, dishwasher, cook, sandwich maker. All those things. One thing I know is that the managers and owners like someone who works hard. At one of my jobs, I worked real hard bussing tables and washing dishes because I wanted to be a bartender and pour draft beers for my friends.” The regional manager from New York City – this was in a suburb of New York – came up to me and told me he liked my work and would I like to think about being a manager. I told him no, I wanted to be a bartender, and a guitar player. He said, ‘Don’t you want to have a big house and drive a nice car?’ I said I didn’t know about that, but that I did want to be a bartender right now because I thought that my guitar playing would require more time than I had to be a manager. He was nice, he laughed, and tussled my hair like I was a kid or something. I was 21, so it was funny him doing that. But he was encouraging me because I had a couple of years of college. The others in the restaurant just had high school.”

“I’m not sure how to get a job. I have zits and my clothes are not too good. I’m pretty sure I smell.”

“Here’s what I would do if I were you. See these tables around the room. There are a bunch of tables that have dirty dishes and papers on them. They can’t make money if there’s nowhere to sit. You could just start bussing the tables.”

“What’s bussing the tables mean?”

“You go to the table, and pick up the dirty dishes and papers and put them in those gray plastic boxes over on the stand over there. There’s a wet towel hanging on the stand. You can use that to wipe off the tables. The worst they can do is tell you to leave. You

can't get arrested for cleaning tables. They might admire your work ethic and offer you a job. Who knows? It's obvious from the dirty tables they need someone to bus. There must be a place to take a shower if they offer you a job."

I was silent for about a minute thinking about it. He was right. I knew they would not have me arrested. So, I finished my pizza. I got up and started bussing tables. The guitar guy picked up his guitar, smiled at me, and left. I kept bussing tables for more than an hour. It was fun. The manager kept looking at me, but he didn't say a word. I got more comfortable. When the boxes were full, I asked someone behind the counter if they had any more boxes, or if they wanted me to put the boxes somewhere. They went to get the manager. He came up looking at me sort of strangely.

"So, you like to clean off tables?"

"I wanted to learn how to do it, no one else was. I thought it would help you."

"Very strange for you to do that, but . . . I can use someone to be a busboy and dishwasher. I pay \$1.80 per hour. You have to be over 16. You will have to have some clean clothes. I have a white apron for you to wear."

"Okay, that would be really far out. I'm over 16. I would be a good worker, I'm pretty sure, if you pay me, I mean. When do you want me to start working?"

"You can start tomorrow at 11:00, right before lunch. No, why don't you get here at 10:30 so you can fill out some forms and I can show you around before people start coming in for lunch. What's your name?"

"I'm Wendell."

"You will need a local address and a Social Security number and you should clean up a little. Is that a problem?"

"Oh no, no problem." I wondered how I would get a local address. I had a social security card in my wallet. I kept a few things in my wallet for identification in case I got knocked out in the night or arrested. I would ask around the street for a local address and where I could shower.

I think with the help of God or something, a girl told me about a shelter of religious people nearby where they would let me take a shower, give me some clean clothes. So I did that, and I started my first job ever the next day and kept it for more than three months until a cop, or maybe he was a detective, found me and took me back to Marin. A sister of my Mom's, my good Aunt Linda, came from the East Coast to live in my parent's house for some reason she never explained, and adopted me. But I learned how to work on that job, and I never forgot.

I have a string of sub sandwich shops now, and I depend on kids with zits to pay the rent and send a check now and then to that religious society that had that shelter. They're still around. I never saw the guitar player again.

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