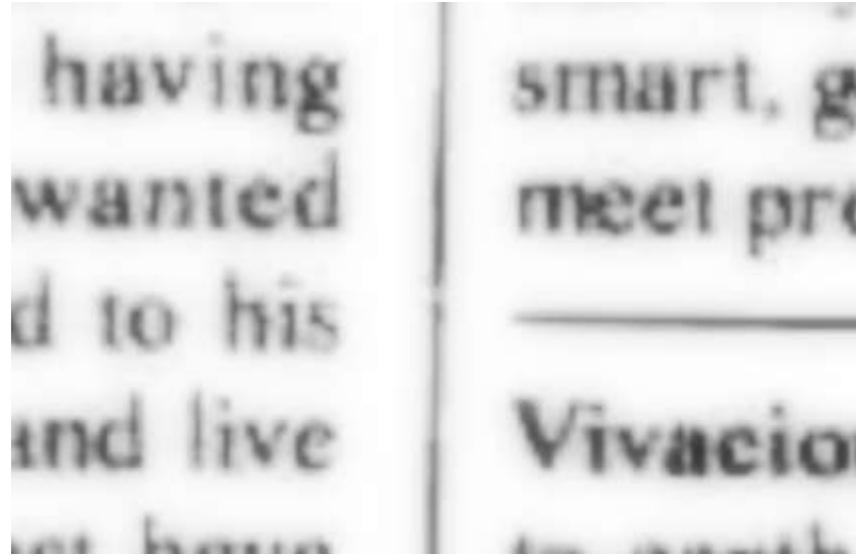


another pSecret pSociety pshort pstory



The Classified Ad by Mike Bozart (Agent 33) | MAY 2017

The Classified Ad

by Mike Bozart

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December 1986. I was 22 and living alone in an older but by no means historic, though recently renovated, one-bedroom apartment at 235 Maryland Avenue (now razed). It was just south of the old Sunset Park neighborhood (a dicey area at the time) in Wilmington (NC, USA). I had been living there for several months. After getting settled in, I was ready to take a trip to somewhere new. When I saw the Piedmont Airlines ad in the local newspaper with discounted airfares to the West Coast, I jumped at it. A day later I had my tickets. I was now all set for my first visit to San Francisco (CA, USA).

On Tuesday morning, the 30th – the eve of New Year's Eve – I flew from ILM (Wilmington) to CLT (Charlotte) to SFO (San Francisco). I had a whopping \$105 in my wallet for the three days and nights in the city by the bay. And, not a single credit card. Yes, I was astoundingly naïve and quite foolish.

At 3:13 PST the Boeing 737 landed on a wet asphalt runway. Twenty-seven minutes later, I emerged from the lower level domestic arrival area. Assorted motor vehicles were scurrying and splashing about. I had a dull headache (later diagnosed to be related to aqueductal stenosis). It was raining, cold, and already almost dark. With an occluded mind, I considered my transportation options. *Hmmm ... Where is that darn MUNI bus stop? Hey, there's a taxi! No, can't take a cab – that would eat up half of the money. Would love to just lie down somewhere and pop some aspirin.*

Then I saw a green van for a lower-tier hotel stopped at the concrete median. My line of thinking suddenly changed. *That's a free shuttle to a nearby budget hotel. Why not just 'splurge' the first night? Yeah, let's. Probably get a free breakfast, too. Then go ultra-cheap the next two nights. Maybe stay in a hostel downtown.*

I walked up to the van. The front door was open. *Here goes.*

"Any vacancies at the hotel?" I asked the late-50-ish, rotund, African American driver.

"Plenty of rooms available, sir," he kindly answered.

"How much is the rate?" I queried.

"The cheapest room with taxes is \$48.48 tonight, sir. That includes a complimentary continental breakfast." *That's*

almost half of my loot. But, a warm, dry room with a clean bed sure would be nice right about now.

“Ok, you sold me.” I promptly stepped into the van and took a seat in the back. There were only three travelers inside, all having dense, opaque, rainy-day thoughts. *Did I leave the stove on?*

After checking in at this frugal name-forgotten Burlingame inn, I flopped down on the queen-size bed and slept for three hours. Around eight o'clock I walked over to a convenience store and bought a jug of tea and a frozen pizza. I paid the Arab-looking man \$4.52. *Ok, the first day here has cost exactly \$53. Only fifty-two dollars left. Must go much cheaper the next two. Have already blown over half of my wad o' cash.*

The raindrops slowed on the window pane as I ate the cardboard-crust microwaved pizza. After watching the ten o'clock news, I was lights-out.

A nightmare soon engulfed me. I was completely broke with 24 hours to go. It felt so real. Too real. *Prescient?*

Early the next morning after a nice hot shower, I indulged – or overindulged – at the free breakfast bar in the lobby. I must have consumed over 2,500 calories in carbs and sugars. I was completely refueled now.

At noon I checked out of the hotel and moseyed over to Max's Restaurant on Old Bayshore Highway. I just had ice water and a baked potato with butter and Worcestershire sauce (still a cheap favorite). Yes, I was living it up on the peninsula. Another high roller. Ok, maybe not. Even close.

Well, the middle-aged, brown-haired Caucasian waitress was quite convivial. She told me that she had seen a lot of change in sleepy Burlingame over the past decade. Despite my bill coming to a grand total of \$1.93, I left her a \$2 tip. *Forty-eight dollars and seven cents left to cover forty-three hours and sixteen minutes. What does that come out to per hour? [\$1.11] A little over a dollar an hour. Got to be super-thrifty from here on out.*

As I sipped my water, I considered transportation options to downtown San Francisco. *A taxi? Nope. Even more expensive from here. The bus? Doubt there is a MUNI stop*

in Burlingame. Oh, let's just go for it. Add a slice of risk. Live a little, sport. Write about it later. Well, if we don't die.

At 1:11 PM my left thumb was getting wet. Yes, I was hitchhiking in a downpour in my lurid, highlighter-green, hooded K-Mart raincoat at the US 101 freeway entrance ramp. And, boy was it ever chilly. It was a damp coldness that reached the phalanges. *How long until I get a ride? Will it be some homicidal nut-job? Or, will the local cops pick me up? Another red-haired freak trying to get to Frisco. Book him, Danno.*

To my astonishment, a tan sedan pulled up just four minutes later. The passenger-side window lowered. The driver was a 60-ish, white-haired, beret-topped Caucasian man in a royal-blue jogging suit. *Is he some old lech cruising for a twink? Hope not.*

"Where are you headed?" he asked.

"Downtown," I replied.

"Ok, get in," he implored.

We made small talk as he motored north on the Bayshore Freeway (US 101). The rain ceased as we paralleled the bay, but the skies remained decidedly overcast. It turned out that Gary was an apartment landlord heading to Market Street for a lease signing. I told him that I was on a limited budget, seeking ultra-cheap lodging. Thus, he dropped me off in front of the old YMCA Hotel on Turk Street. I thanked him profusely. Gary wished me well before driving off into the gray mist. *That sure was nice of him. A free ride with no hassle. Serendipity, don't run away.*

I checked in at the turn-of-the-century-appearing front desk. I got two nights for a total of \$22.50. I suspected that the 30-something Caucasian lady reduced the rate for me. Maybe she could sense my forlornness. *Another lucky break.*

Over to the old-style elevator I marched. Upward the brass-trimmed car clanked. *Hope the cable doesn't snap. Or, an earthquake strike.*

Room 601 had a little desk, an ancient dresser and a well-worn single bed, which I sat down upon. *Excellent. Shelter is now taken care of for the remainder of the trip. Let's see ... I now have \$25.57 for food and drink for a day and a half.*

Well, no more restaurants. Just hit a convenience store. Or better, hit a grocery store. So much cheaper. Need bus fare back to SFO on Friday morning. Must not drop below two dollars.

I took an hour-long nap on the slightly lumpy bed. When I awoke my window was completely gray: The fog at 3:03 PM was incredibly dense; I couldn't even see the buildings across the street. *There's your classic pea-soup San Francisco fog. Such a strange town with weird weather. Would love to live here. Well, maybe someday. [I would live there for nine months in 1992.]*

My headache was long gone, but I now had a persistent cough. I hocked up a big green oyster. And then another. And another. *Oh, jeez ... Do I have walking pneumonia? Need to get groceries before it gets dark and rainy. Would be nice to check out Golden Gate Park, too. Maybe ask for directions.*

The desk clerk informed me that I could pick up the (route) 5 on McAllister Street. The bus stop was only two and a half blocks away.

Soon I was headed west on a MUNI electro-bus. At 33rd Avenue, I got off and took a muddy path over to an eerily serene Spreckels Lake. Then I wandered by the bison-less paddock to North Lake. And then, yet another squall moved in from the Pacific Ocean. *So much for this hike.*

I took another footpath from Chain of Lakes Drive to 47th Avenue, and was soon back on Fulton Street. The raw rain was arriving in sheets as I walked west on the multi-pooled sidewalk. In two blocks I was at La Playa. *Yey! There it is – Safeway. Just as she said.*

Inside the grocery store I briskly went. I bought a loaf of dill-rye bread, three tins of sardines and a half-gallon of tea. The total: \$7.57. *The bus ate a dollar and will eat another one going back. Will have \$16 left.*

While waiting at the bus stop at Cabrillo Street, my coughing worsened. I was spitting out green mucus left and right. Luckily, I was alone under the shelter. As I looked at the plastic seats, I noticed a free weekly publication that had been left for dead. Just as the bus arrived, I grabbed the discarded *SF Netherground* copy. *Reading material for the ride back. Wonder what the personal ads are like in this rag.*

I took a middle seat and flipped to the classified ads at the back of the thin 16-page newsprint periodical. There were the usual categories. Stuff for sale, including a real Mellotron. Services available – lots of exotic massage ads. And of course, the personals. Under the 'Women seeking Men' rubric was an intriguing four-liner:

SAF, 21, seeking SWM for a rarest reality.
Unconventional lifestyle. No TV. No radio.
Income is not an issue. Questionnaire first.
Describe yourself in four words. [Box 241]

I read it again. And again. Well, I couldn't stop reading it. *Wow! Too bad I don't live out here. It would be worth it just to meet this chick.*

The bus stopped for a red light at Stanyan Street. The rain had now subsided, but darkness had moved in. A reflective-taped young Asian woman was jogging through the crosswalk. *Is that her? Ha! Boy, you really need to settle your mind down.*

I exited the bus on Market Street about 15 minutes later. My eyes immediately started to scan the dark, wet, gray sidewalks. And there it was at Golden Gate Avenue and Taylor Street: a payphone. And, even better – an available payphone. *Just want to hear her voice. I can afford it. Already have food, drink and shelter covered.*

I deposited 35 cents into the vertical slot. Two seconds later I heard a dial tone. *Good. This phone isn't broken.*

My right index finger depressed the 11 digits. I heard a recording that prompted a box number. I had memorized it.

Two seconds later I heard a young Asian lady's voice: "Please do what the ad stated. Thank you. Chanda." *Huh? That's it?*

And then, I heard a beep. *Ok, that's the cue. Talk now, fool.*

"Hello Chanda. My name is Mike. Tomorrow is open for me if you want to conduct your questionnaire over coffee somewhere in downtown. I'm staying at the YMCA Hotel.

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