

The Bread Truck

I had nothing to loose. Obviously, Amherst was not going to work for me, and it was time for a fresh start. At least I knew I would have a couch to sleep on. I still have anxious dreams about this kind of life, of coming to a dead end, and deciding to move, usually it is to San Francisco, and then getting there, and realizing I had tried that before, and it hadn't worked. But at least, in DC, I had a newly minted MA in political science, to be awarded the next January, and a demonstrated commitment to the people's bicentennial movement, a counter cultural take on the 1976 celebration scheduled for the following year.

The previous year, I had learned the history of Shay's rebellion, against the greedy Boston bankers, and I had hiked up past the horse caves, where he hid after he had closed down the courts in Springfield. I thought it would make a good, progressive, movie, and had written what is called a treatment, and sent it to Jane Fonda, or maybe to Tom Hayden, asking him to see what she thought of it. She did respond, turning the idea down.

So maybe the People's Bicentennial Commission were interested. They were not.

I slept on Mike's couch, and got to know his girlfriend, Erma, and her two kids, Robbie and April, 10 and 12 then, or thereabouts. I needed to make some money, because the non-profits of Washington were not opening their doors to me, so, from the Washington Post, I found occasional work setting up and taking down conventions. Typically, it was a 32 hour shift, no breaks, bull work, haul this, push that, just show up and keep moving, and it paid, for that kind of work, relatively well. I did not have to pay rent, so I was able to survive. For some reason I never pursued getting in touch with Martha or her husband Mike.

Erma was from New York. She mentioned that she grew up with Lew Alcindor, that is, Kareem Abdul Jabaar. I thought it was a funny picture, because Erma was very short, and Abdul Jabaar, of course, is something like 7 feet. Her children's father had no presence in their lives that I could tell, but was a cop, in New York, narcotics. This fact is important.

A friend of hers, Vince, used to come over almost every evening, and we would sit around the kitchen table, He would roll joints, and we would smoke them. Oh, did you

figure out that Erma is African-American? Vince too. In fact, except for me and Mike, the entire social scene at the house was black. Vince was large, well muscled, and had scarified his left upper arm a large Omega sign “Ω”, which, as all of you electricians know, means resistance. We would just sit there and chat, and Erma kept the sociability going.

Boom. I was in love again. Nothing was said. They all knew it, I am sure, but I felt guilty, because, here I was, receiving Mike's hospitality and hungering for his woman. I could not afford to move, but then Erma saved me.

Mike was the director of a national University Year for Action funded project called the Project for Service Learning. The original director of that program had gotten a job on Senator Frank Church's staff, Mike was to have been Assistant Director [at Umass, he had been a student participant] and was therefor elevated to Director. This meant that there was some extra staff money, and once Erma figured out that I had no money, suggested to Mike that he hire me, as a consultant, on the program. For some reason, maybe having to do with hiring policies at the agency where the program was located, I needed to be hired as an at-will consultant, but the idea was that the job would last until May or June.

And it paid, real money. I needed a real place to live, close by, but no longer on the couch, and found a place about three blocks away, in a large house owned by a woman who rented out rooms. All of us were in our thirties or forties, as I recall, and it was not so much a commune, like the house in Belchertown functioned, but shared living space. This is in the Mt. Pleasant neighborhood of Washington, near 16th and Columbia Road, NW.

Mike and Erma were puzzled about this, I think, but I knew that I needed my own space. Now, I was no fool, and knew that I was in Washington, DC, the belly of the beast, as Mike would say to me with a smile, my last name being Jonas. What became known as Cointelpro was very much on my mind. Was I under surveillance? You tell me.

The very first night I spent at my new digs, a police helicopter came over the neighborhood, with its spotlight, and spent a very long time illuminating the roof top adjacent to my bedroom. It might have been entirely random, but then, it might have been THEM telling me that THEY knew where I lived. About that time I wrote to get any files on me under the Freedom of Information Act. They said they had no record of me.

Hah! And Mike once said to me later, being happy with the work I was doing for him, that while I would not sell out, I sure could be rented ... (I don't think I told anyone about the offer that was given after my volunteer work on the Campus Center.) In my mind, I was hiding in plain sight. The Weatherman were still on the loose, and any halfway intelligent terrorism analyst would have been interested to see if I was in touch with them. Here I was in Washington, where everyone works for the government, and no-one would tell you if they were part of the surveillance system. And, as Mike had pointed out to me, there is always room for one more at the trough.

A couple of years ago, I tried to find Mike via Google, and found he had died a decade or more ago, of Parkinsons, which was too bad. When I looked again, I saw that he had been predeceased by Erma ... Maybe if I had been able to reconnect, and we had some time together, I would have been able to ask. But if the surveillance was really that intimate, who else was part of the team. A couple of people come to mind. One I tried to connect with, but he never responded, and, several years ago, I again tried to get my files ... but that is a story for later.

I saw Mike everyday, and spent a lot of my social time with Erma and Mike and Vince, and their friends. I also reconnected with another Mike, by then ex-husband of Martha who had been my boss at OEO the summer of 1969. By then, the other Mike, Martha's husband, had left HEW, where he had a fairly high position, and become a farmer near Lancaster, PA. He was raising sheep, and each Saturday, he would come in to Washington selling cheeses and what not from Pennsylvania Dutch country at the Adams Morgan Farmers Market. I would sometimes stay at the farm, where he had a herd of sheep. The house was at the end of a dirt road, and my sense was the farm had been abandoned, before he moved in. To me, it was like being with my father, who had grown up in New York, like Mike T, and taken over an abandoned farm. To complete this fantastical side story, Mike T even told me one that his father, or mother, I am not sure which, ran the small news stand on the corner where my grandmother lived, in Manhattan, 3rd Avenue and 23rd Street. But, honestly, I don't trust memories like this. Had I been just a little more footloose, and not had the consultant job, I probably would have talked with Mike about staying at the farm. Mike had, and probably still has, a very egalitarian vision, and the farm originally started as a back-to-the-land Kibbutz.

Martha had left federal employment also, had trained as a welder, and was working construction, union iron-worker, on the then being built Washington subway system. Both of them had done considerable occupational shifts, obviously, and, looking back, it may have been that they were forced out by Nixon's regime. Both of them were, and

are, social justice warriors. Well, Martha, Google says, died a while ago, which is too bad, I would have liked to reconnect with her, and Mike is now best known as an organic farmer. Check out the website at <http://lickingcreekbendfarm.com>

I remember with fondness both of them, and will send a draft of this piece to him, in honor of his great soul. I mean that Mike.

I asked Mike what Martha was up to, after I learned that they were divorced, and he told me how to connect with her, and urged me to do it. I did. We became very close, lovers actually, sleeping together, but not sexual partners ... They both respected me for what I had done that summer of 1969 in Washington, and genuinely liked me.

Erma too. After she and Vince had got to know me, and Erma was pretty plugged in to the Washington world, she indicated, indirectly, what I had done at OEO that four summers ago. I of course had been fired, but, as Erma put it, my response was, "They can't do that to me," and I went ahead with the project, as if nothing had changed.

The Project for Service Learning was located at the American Association of Junior and Community Colleges. Why there? Perhaps because, in many ways, service learning is a way of giving students practical experience in the field in which they are studying. Typically, the arrangement was that a student would develop a contract with a teacher, for specific learning goals, which were to be accomplished in field settings. The student would then, upon successful completion, get academic credit. Almost of the field settings were in non-profits, especially advocacy or direct service, so, for example, if a student was interested in alleviating hunger, they might work for the local food bank, distributing food.

The purpose of the Project for Service Learning was to mobilize a constituent base to pressure Congress to insert into the higher education bill the authorization that Work-Study could be used to pay students involved in such projects. The major work of the Project was a conference, in the Spring, co-sponsored with the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators. We were successful. Those five or so words were inserted, and, last I looked, they are still there. Some schools use them. Harvard is one, as you will learn. Bard college is one, as I discovered when I met an Associate Dean from the school. Boston College is not, for some reason, because, when, by chance, I was talking to the director of the off campus service program at BC, he had never heard of it. The authorization is still there, and it means that people who take on unpaid internships can get paid for them, if they are work study income qualified.

In January, I moved again, a few blocks, to a house with art students at the Corcoran School of Art and Design. This was a much better fit. It felt far more like the house in Belchertown.

While I was at UMass, I had played the banjo next to the campus pond with a couple of other musicians, and learned to hear the chord changes, so I was getting better. In Washington, I would play out in two places, one a small stage in an abandoned store front on the edge of Adams-Morgan and Dupont Circle neighborhoods, and other nights at an open mike, in a coffee house nearby, on Connecticut Avenue near R Street.

The storefront was called "Music Carryout", Tuesday nights were folk music, and whoever showed up, we would play together. There was a great sign up on the wall: "If you can't hear the other musicians, you are playing too loud." The coffee house was pretty large, and at the end of my "set", I would walk around for contributions. I never got much, but I wasn't doing it for the art, not the money. Years later, in the town where I now live, I had that same attitude when I played at the local Farmer's Market. Everyone knows that music is love.

Some specific memories:

One night, as I was walking home up Columbia road, I looked down, and saw a VERY LARGE REVOLVER on the ground, next to the curb. I stopped and looked at it. A large car with two or three pretty unsavory people pulled up and looked at me. I looked at them, and kept walking. Erma told me that if I had picked it up, I would have had to use it. I thought to myself, "Was that just general advice, or was this a specific test of my pacifism?"

Another night, I was walking home, and stopped at the local pizza place. It was late, but it was still open, and I ordered a slice. They looked at me like I was from another planet, opened a hatch in the floor, and I looked down to see several people gathered around a table with a huge pile of bills. My guess was they made their money selling something other than pizza, so I left.

Another evening, I was walking over to Erma's house, and I sensed someone was walking close behind me. We were only a short block from 14th Street, which, in those days, was a very tough neighborhood. And then they walked even more closely, and then they were stride for stride, an inch from me. I calmed my fear, kept going, and

suddenly they were gone.

Another evening, I was at Erma's, and the phone rang. She answered it, handed the receiver to me, and said, "It's for you." A man's voice I did not recognize said, "How would you like a blow job?" "What, um, no, um, who is this, um, no ..." I gave the phone back to her, and she hung it up.

Another evening, for some reason I was carrying my banjo, around the ellipse, south of the White House. A voice came from the trees, on the other side of the fence, "Banjo." I peered in but could see no one. I kept walking.

Another day, for some reason, I was to meet Erma in her office. She worked in the national headquarters of University Year for Action, which had been spun out of OEO by Nixon as he demolished the War on Poverty. It was based on the VISTA program, Volunteers for Service to America, and programs such as City Year are its direct descendants. I got through security, went up the floor her office was on, I think maybe the 7th floor, and went in her office. I was surprised. She had a window office, looking out over Lafayette Park, and down on the North side of the White House, the side you see in most of the newscasts. And she had in front of her a phone with maybe thirty different lines into it. I did not know she was that far up there in the hierarchy to have an office, alone, with a window, and I had no idea why she would have such a phone, unless she was the receptionist, but why give her this office, especially looking down over the White House, where, I imagined, someone with a rifle would have a clear shot.

This might have been the same day I had an even weirder experience, going over the Library of Congress, to interview for a job with the Congressional Budget Office. I took a cab from Dupont Circle, where the projects office was located, and the cab seemed to take long and lazy circles getting there. It was a fixed fee, so it did not matter, but it felt like the circles of Hell, and the sky seemed to be getting darker and darker, and I got to the interview, which was perfunctory, but had to pee, and went to the bathroom, to the urinals, which were VERY close together, without a privacy divider, and it was Friday the 13th of December. Later I discovered why the mid day became darker: there was a partial eclipse of the sun. That much I know is true. I looked it up. I did not get the job, but I did write it up, because it just seemed so much like a something from a fantasy novel, a Philip K Dick story, as opposed to true history. Of course, much of my life, I mean, why I am writing all of this down, is because looking back my life seems as much the plot of a novel and a dull and true recounting of the facts.

Now, is this memory real? I don't think so, because when I looked at Google maps, the building on the corner which I remembered was only 3 stories tall, an old and no doubt most elegant townhouse used for influential social gatherings. But this memory is so clear in my mind. Are the other memories I have listed only fantasies, snatches of dreams. It is for this reason that I call all this writing a piece of historical fiction. Now you know why I chose the title I did.

Another memory, probably true, was the collapse of the South Vietnamese army, and the desertion of Vietnam by the United States. I cheered it. Mike, who had been there, cheered it. I wanted to celebrate it with something artistic, some guerrilla theater. I made up some South Vietnamese flags on large pieces of cardboard, that I had hoped my artist friends would wear. My idea was that we would run around with them on us, like ponchos, and then collapse, as the South Vietnamese army was collapsing. They chose not to join me. So I reused a Halloween costume, I was a witch, or warlock, as Vietcong outfit, and, in front of the Corcoran, danced wildly in support of the good news.

This was probably not a good career move, not that I had much sense of that, but, as the Service Learning project was winding down, I looked for other work, real work, work which paid, but was not seriously considered for anything. I decided to go back up to the Amherst area. To their credit, Mike and Erma had given me a chance to show my stuff, to meet people, to network, and if, with that, nothing came of it, that was how it was to be. And if the People's Bicentennial People were not going to pick me up, I could do that same work on my own.

I'd saved up some money. I remembered being homeless, and so, with this pot of cash, decided if I lived in a camper, I would never be homeless. I bought a used delivery van from Wonder Bread, removed the racks, replaced the transmission in it, working on the street in front of the house where I lived, sold off all of Wally's books at the Farmer's market, and headed north.

That summer, I stayed in Belchertown, putting a skylight in above where I planned to have a loft bed, with a small kitchen unit. My plans for a restaurant/folk menu turned out to be mine alone, and it was not going to happen – several people mentioned that a couple of restaurants in Amherst had mysteriously burned down, and the town wanted no more of that – so I built a small cart that could fit in the back of the van, from which I served organic cheese and alfalfa sprout sandwiches, with fresh apple cider from the local Atkins farm. In my mind, it was a way of advertising what the

restaurant would become. I covered my costs, plus a little and kept me active, but I was not getting any bites for my larger plans, in the Fall got rid of the cart, and headed north, living in the van.

I headed North because one of my roommates from the Lower East Side, had gotten married, was living in Maine, bought some land, took a course in environmental home building at the Shelter Institute in Bath, ME, and was building a cabin on the land he had bought. He was willing to pay me, he had the money, and he really needed another set of hands. I had a modest amount of carpentry experience.

The idea was to get it weather sealed by winter. We were starting in mid-September; I am not sure we made that deadline. The worst part of the job was digging the post holes for the columns. In Maine, they had to be 4 feet deep, below the frost line for structural stability, and the earth was COMPACTED. Hard, hard clay. We got that done, by hand, and we, using rough cut lumber were able to frame the deck, as I recall the walls, and the roof, perhaps sheath the roof and the walls, and then my time was up. Perhaps he was disappointed in me for our lack of sufficient progress, perhaps I knew that I had to head south, to warmer climates, if I was going to be able to live in the truck, but middle to late October, I remember the trees had just become bare, I headed south.

One of the spots I stopped was the Christmas tree land on the remains of the old farm. I drove in, and got stuck. At the farm itself, on the other side of the top of the mountain, hippies lived in the old farm house, or so it looked to me. Too many cars of uncertain vintage scattered around the driveway. I walked on the wagon trail I remembered from my childhood, and asked if anyone could tow me out of the mud. We got to talking, I said I used to live here, which room I was asked, and I was told, no, that is my room, and then I said, when I was a little kid, and he said, when was that, I told him the late forties, and asked, what is your name, and he realized, here, before him, was a counter-cultural person, just like him, who was a Jonas from the Jonas farm.

Chet Lyle, Jr., the son of a neighboring farmer, Chet Lyle, bought most of the farm from my father. My father kept the land with the view, which is where we planted the Christmas trees, on the other side of the mountain. But Chet, Jr. quit farming to run the local Sears store. He built a house for himself on the land, and sold most of the rest of the farm to a successful Long Island dentist. The dentist's son, Peter, was a graduate of Rhode Island School of Design where he studied photography. He convinced his father to let him start a photography school atop this remote and beautiful mountain.

Perhaps this is why is father had bought the farm. The school was called Apeiron, a Greek word meaning infinity. I imagined there is a good reason it sounds so similar to Aperture, the pre-eminent art photography magazine which was located in the village of Millerton.

They invited me to join them. They needed another set of hands for the extensive renovation of the barn, in which they planned to put the studios and darkrooms. Since I had a camera, and darkroom experience, hey gave me full access to their top line equipment.

It was like a commune, except the people were from very wealthy backgrounds. Well, I suppose that makes it like a commune. Every week, another well known and respected photographer would spend a week, teaching and critiquing. I participated in all of this, and learned a lot about photography. After the excitement of my novelty wore off, and at the end of their winter quarter, I left and headed to Washington, to try my luck, again.

Once again, I was on the couch at Erma's house. I thought I might find work. I did not, but my camera and banjo were stolen out of the truck. Somehow, someone gave me a banjo to replace it. I was living off the savings from my job the previous year, but by March, I headed south, and spent several weeks at Don West's farm, in West Virginia. Don had been one of the founders of the Highlander folk school in Tennessee, where early civil rights workers trained, and had had a storied life. I was just passing through. He was running a camp, but it was April, and the camp was not open. I said I would work for food, and he grunted, and accepted me. I remember, on Easter Sunday, that year, I was sitting on a pile of horse manure, my job was to move it to the garden, and he grunted at me, "You're working on the sabbath." He was trained as a minister.

The next stop, for me, was Asheville. Don had told me of Andy Cohen, a blues singer who was living there, and passed off this strange nomad, that is me, to Andy. I showed up in front of his house, and spent about a month there. Andy was, and still is, an excellent blues guitarist and had staying with him then Johnny Shines, since deceased, one of the originals. Jonny taught us how to play pinochle.

My trucks engine was making odd noises, and I got a junk car from a junk yard, rented and engine hoist, and replaced the truck engine with the car engine, same make and model, I think American Motors. It worked! I am still amazed that this did not fall out on the road. We got a piece of rope, and towed the junker back to the junk yard, Andy

in the car, and me in front, with the van. The rope did not break, but came close. It was really a crazy adventure.

When I saw Andy decades later, I asked him how strange he thought it that I should just show up like that. His response was that it was not out of ordinary for the times.

While I was in Washington, at Erma's, I had volunteered for a medical study in Baltimore, something about testing a flue vaccine, I think, food, lodging and some cash, which required me to get back up there for the final assessment in May. Johnny needed to get back to Washington for a gig, so I drove him up there in his car, and somehow got back to Asheville, or maybe I drove him up in my truck, yeah, that's it, and then continued on up to Amherst, to try my luck again.

Someone told me of a spot I could park the truck next to a stream outside Leverett, in the woods, which is where I spent the summer. I would ride my bike into town each morning, to a woman's house who had hired me as a handyman, work there, and then ride back, picking up dinner food and cooking it over a fire, or over my camp stove, bathe in the creek, live in the woods. Sounds idyllic, but honestly, it got lonely, so I headed back to Millerton, where I applied, and got, a job in the local supermarket. I rode my bike there, and on the way back, got caught in a thunderstorm. I think I got pneumonia, because I was out of it for almost a week. Needless to say, I no longer had the job, and headed for the Catholic Worker Farm located in a decaying old mansion next to the Hudson River in Tivoli, NY.

I needed some time to recover. I slept in my van, and ate the simple meals prepared there, and helped with the simple chores. I had very little strength. One day, I was sitting on the front steps, talking with an older man, it was around sunset, and the light was streaming across the front yard, and he said to me, "I like getting up early in the morning." In case you missed it, there is a sexual double entendre there, and he knew it, hoping I would respond. As I did, "I like getting it up any time, day or night." I turned to look at him and noticed that sitting just behind him, was Dorothy Day, who gave me a big smile. I was emotionally healthy.

The building itself was rotting into the ground. Since I had some experience as a carpenter, they suggested I do what I could, and I looked at it, and said I could do nothing without a lot of money for materials, and it was way beyond my skill level. Since then it has been converted into a very posh Bed and Breakfast, and I am sure would no longer welcome itinerants. But they did fix it up.

My parents had mentioned that they wanted their house painted, and once I felt strong enough to do it, so I drove to where they then lived, in Rockland County. It had already been done. So I took out the bed structure in my truck, and started delivering packages for a package delivery service, from Rockland County in New York and into New Jersey.

One day, in the city, I squeezed the van past a garbage truck, and the next day my boss told me never to do that again. I was surprised that they knew how to contact him.

I was still smoking cigarettes then, and my mother told me that she was glad I was no longer smoking marijuana, which was not true, but I did not argue. She told me that she knew because she had taken an ashtray down to the town police, told them the butts in it were from me, and that I had a history of smoking pot. They told her that the butts were cigarettes, but asked if she had any further suspicions, to contact them. Family, you can't live with them, and you can't live with them.

I was done with the East Coast, and wanted to head out to California, where at least the winter was warmer. I drove the truck across country, making into San Francisco in January. My first stop was the Mime Troupe, where Joan, the writer, arranged that I could park the truck there for a week at their new studio. She also gave me a look, and said to me, "But is he sane?" I got the joke. Izzy Sane. A memorable name, which I have used for my blog site, izzysane.net in this time when politics seems so crazy. By the way, the answer is yes.

The week of grace was up, and I asked her where she thought I might park the truck, and she mentioned the street where the Mime Troupe had been, Alabama, and that people camped there, and used the toilets, etc., in the building across the street. It was an old American Can Company plant. The building had become Project Artaud, a barely legal artists cooperative studios/housing amalgam, maybe a hundred units.

And there I was, and I began meeting people, and one guy wanted to move his girlfriend to New Mexico, and asked if he could use my truck. In exchange, I could stay in his loft in a wood frame warehouse on Church Street, five blocks away. I said, "OK.", still very much the happy hippie sharing everything. Stay tuned for some really wild adventures.