

HOMELESS IN PARADISE

June 16, 2017

Column #140

Dining without Dollars—Part 1



An Insider's Guide to Eating Free in Monterey By Wanda Sue Parrott

BEING unable to afford food happens. If I hadn't been with my friend MJ, she'd have experienced it in May.

I met MJ at the airport and took her to rent a car. At the rental agency, her purse vanished.

"I lost my wallet, credit cards, cash, medical records, cell phone, camera and driver's license," MJ told the Seaside Police Department. If it hadn't been for Wanda, I could have been homeless in paradise, without money for the first time since I was 33."

MJ is now 73 and her survival skills, learned in the military, helped her keep a cool head during the shocking realization she was robbed at or by an auto agency she trusted.

MJ borrowed a cell phone and immediately cancelled her credit cards, then reported the theft.

Being a veteran helped her keep cool under duress.

What will you do if you find yourself suddenly homeless and hungry on the Monterey Peninsula?

Think Like A Lost Soldier

Thinking like a soldier can help. First rule: You need food and water for survival. In basic training, a grunt learns to eat grubs, bugs, rats, roots, and drink dew collected on leaves.

The homeless near Monterey's beaches can dine on sand crabs, bird eggs, seaweed and free scavenged suppers, aka dumpster-dive dinners.

The starving don't call this dirty dining. Ernie, the formerly homeless Gay Gourmet whose recipes have been featured in this column, considered himself a master chef who kept raw meat free of harmful bacteria by marinating it in orange juice.

Dumpster diving means eating others' scraps.

Before you raid garbage cans, consider these mental snacks.

Move Over, Steinbeck!

It's been almost five years since now-Monterey City Councilperson Timothy Barrett presented this column's namesake Homeless in Paradise symposium at Monterey Peninsula College.

I reflect on what's happened since 2012 both literarily and literally.

Literarily, it's bad poetic imagery: "a spread of human-algae jam on the toasty sand of paradisiacal discontent."

Or a revisionist class-clash plotline in a novel similar in tone to Steinbeck's "Of Mice and Men" married to "Cannery Row."

In today's plotline, homelessness clashes with short-term rentals to form a strange-bedfellows antagonist now threatening the wealthy protagonistic way of life that sprang from Cannery Row's marriage in the 1960s to Bing Crosby's Clambake.

Their love-child offspring, Grow, changed the formerly dark and smelly waterfront fishery scene to today's glitzier grandchild Glam that includes diners, dineries, and upscale dinero-mucho restauranteries.

Literally, this means the Monterey Peninsula is a great place to be if you can afford to eat.

What To Eat When You Can't Pay For Food?

Some homeless near Monterey's beaches have learned to eat pet food set out for dogs and cats on the peninsula.

"Kibble is like cereal, made from grain," a veteran said. "It don't taste half bad once you get used to it, but you gotta have a good set of choppers 'cause you can't gum hard pellets and if you swallow 'em whole, your gut'll be impacted."

Others buy cans of cat tuna and dog beef-in-gravy to scoop from the can or spread on bread.

Constipation and diarrhea are evidence of dumpster dumping along the bike path/rec trail between Windows on the Bay in Monterey and Roberts Lake in Seaside.

A homeless man across from the Naval Post Graduate School told me, "There's no work to be had. I've stopped looking because, well, how can I feel good when I look like this?" He spread out his hands. The rims around his nails were black.

I declined his offer of a drink of bottled water and bread scraps from a backpack.

Take A Lesson From The Birds

If you wind up hungry and penniless, look to the sky. Seagulls, pelicans, pigeons, and crows know where tasty tidbits abound. Find a frenzied circle of airborne scavengers and locate their destination.

If sea birds are circling offshore, they're raiding a fishing boat; above land, there's probably fast food, a supermarket or picnic area nearby.

True "dumpster diving" entails climbing into large dumpsters like those behind retail stores, then sorting through contents. The term has come to mean digging through any trash can, garbage can or refuse canisters.

If possible, wear gloves and wash your hands with hand sanitizer or in a fast-food restroom.

Dumpster divers dine at their own risk.

Meanwhile, if you're in a jam like my friend MJ was, contact the police.

If you don't want to contact law enforcement, and dumpster diving is too unsanitary, stand on a corner and ask for cash.

Or, try hotel-hopping; it will be featured next week.

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