

I Live in the Past: The Rent is Cheaper!

by Zoe Noe

I used to think sometimes, after visiting a place like New York, how thankful I was to have wound up in San Francisco. New York seemed the kind of place you'd get buried alive if you weren't careful and didn't have a plan, but San Francisco afforded me the chance to spend years basically bumbling around without a clue about what I might eventually want to do. I had a poignant moment last summer when we needed to fill a room for a couple months. No friends were expressing interest, so we posted an ad on *craigslist*.

I was unprepared for the response. The phone ringing off the hook. Hundreds of emails. The answering machine tape filled up within the hour. I got home from work to find that my roommate had told everyone who called to just come on over that evening between 8 and 10 and take a look at the room.

During our insane impromptu open house, with my attention flitting from one desperate seeker to another (and some who were just taking in the scene, I got into a conversation with a 22 year old, who had just moved out here from St. Louis. He reminded me a lot of me when I first arrived. I was 22, from the Midwest: gentle, soft-spoken, full of hope and curiosity. The biggest difference was that he came with \$4,000 saved up, Internet job contacts arranged ahead of time; yet he had been couch-surfing for months in San Mateo, chasing after that elusive place in the city. I couldn't help thinking how different it was for me when I came here in 1981, fresh off a Greyhound with \$300 in my pocket.

I was any-

thing but focused in those days. In my first couple of years here, I think I had close to 30 jobs; some lasting only a matter of hours, others dragging on for several months. (See "Lose Jobs Now, Ask Me How!" in *PW*#17.) One week it might be conducting telephone surveys, another substitute teaching at a day program for retarded adults. (More like glorified babysitting; it didn't seem to matter that I lacked formal qualification. I showed them a few "letters of recommendation" that I'd instructed a classroom of 3rd graders to



write for me on April Fool's Day at a Catholic school in the Mission District.)

Job security was not a concept I could relate to. But then my rent was only \$100 a month for a tiny converted laundry room with a loft in the back of a huge, rambling flat on Haight St. As many as 12 people lived there, all sharing the same phone line with no answering machine, amazingly enough. Hardly anyone had a regular job, quite a few were unemployed, and some dealt drugs to get by *

If you were broke it was easy to scam on MUNI. (We had a complete set of the color-coded transfers they were using at the time—we'd find out what transfer they were using that day, then consult our collection, or paste like-colored transfers together to make them longer. Some months we'd be styling with color xeroxed fast passes. I went two whole years once without paying fare!)

Food stamps were easier to get then, and there were numerous soup kitchens, plus the fun free feast on Saturdays at the KaliFlower Collective that was both soup kitchen and cabaret—very theatrical! Failing that, one of the roommates would often show up with one of those huge plastic bags filled with day-old bagels.

Being so sketchily employed meant having time to spare. I could put in lots of time on *ProcessedWorld*, and do the street theatre/magazine hawking every Friday lunchtime in the Financial District. There was time to indulge flights of whim—take a Super-8 film class at City College, sew a rug out of carpet samples, or just walk in the park.

*Folks still deal drugs to get by, although the price of pot has kept pace with San Francisco rents!



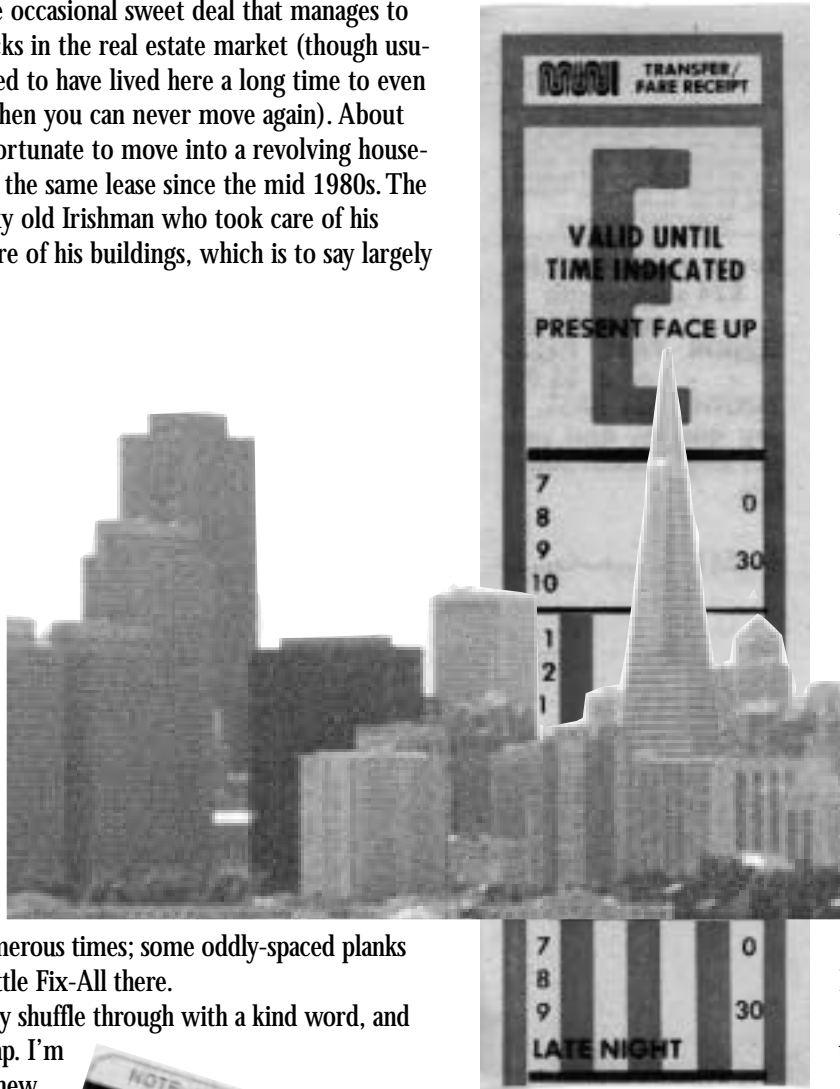
There is still the occasional sweet deal that manages to slip through the cracks in the real estate market (though usually it means you need to have lived here a long time to even know about it, and then you can never move again). About six years ago I was fortunate to move into a revolving household which had held the same lease since the mid 1980s. The landlord was a cranky old Irishman who took care of his body like he took care of his buildings, which is to say largely by neglect.

The Dept. of Inspections kept trying to nail him, but he always ignored them or told them to fuck off. I found an inspection report from 1985 urging replacement of the back stairs, which still hadn't been done when he passed away in 2000 (at the height of the dot com juggernaut on the city's neighborhoods). Oh, he patched them up numerous times; some oddly-spaced planks pounded in here, a little Fix-All there.

He would usually shuffle through with a kind word, and he kept the rent cheap. I'm not even sure if he knew just what market rents were, as his were about 10 years behind the times, and most years he would forget to raise it.

Legends abounded about his generosity. When our friend Tyrrell first went to meet him and see the apartment, she showed up in her peasant dress and lively Irish smile, and he was so charmed that he rented the place to her and told this pair of uptight yuppies to beat it. Or another time, later, when a bunch of extra folks were crashing at the apartment, Tyrrell got nervous that he might find out how many people were staying at the flat. He did find out—and he actually commended her for taking in all these extra people and putting a roof over their heads—and even gave her back \$100 of the rent!

The Dept. of Inspections finally caught up with him after



Zoe photo by Joni Lyn

years of being deflected, and started tightening the screws.

After he ignored another hearing, they seized his three houses and put them in court-appointed receivership. I think that's what killed him. His health, which never had been robust in the time that we knew him, suddenly declined precipitously. Cancer spread like wildfire, and he was dead within three weeks.

The house has been in a strange state of limbo since then—which has been advantageous for us despite the lingering uncertainty. Our rent has stayed the same. We pay it to the receiver, who has

ostensibly used it to fund the repairs that Mike had been so delinquent on. We've been satisfied to see the repairs drag on and on, since the building can't

really go on the open market until it's out of receivership, and the San Francisco housing market has cooled considerably.

Now it seems that San Francisco has become much more like New York, and a young person arriving today hardly has the same options

I did; to land in San Francisco with only \$300 and know everything will be alright. A luxury of unstructured time that San Francisco used to be so generous in giving. (It's weird to think of it as a luxury!) The San Francisco I'm eulogizing has completely disappeared, but you have to be damn lucky to find it.