

## **Golden Advice for a New Resident**

*By Peter Dudley*

I wasn't really plucked, tear-stained and clinging to my skateboard, from the gutter of a Berkeley street, as Chris tells it. I think back now, though, and realize that there, but for the grace of God and a bit of sleight-of-hand, I could have gone.

Fresh off my eighteenth birthday, I'd abandoned my dream of riding my bike from my childhood home in Connecticut to college in Berkeley. Maybe if the housing lottery had gone differently, or maybe if I had ever ridden farther than the Farm Shop ice cream place in East Hartford, I'd have taken on the challenge of the endless fruited plains, the grueling purple mountains majesty, the pit bulls and dueling banjos and drive-by bullets that grace our great nation.

But the UC Housing Office had spoken, and my lottery number—4,172—arrived with the friendly advice that if I was lucky, I might get a dorm room some time around March. I was an east coast suburban kid who grew up on warm, straight-from-the-cow milk from the dairy farm next door. How was I supposed to know that I had the option of waiting out those seven months by squatting with the other Berkeley homeless in People's Park? The UC Housing Office's letter did not mention that. A traditionalist at heart, however, I figured I could just rent a place.

My brother, while skating through MIT, had rented a townhouse in Cambridge. My sister had her own place while she finished her double major at UConn. Surely I could find an apartment in Berkeley. To be on the safe side, however, I scuttled my bike riding plan; it did not seem prudent to arrive days before school, skinny and sun-baked

and smelling like melted desert tar, and only then begin looking for some place to sleep. So I packed up and crashed at my brother's house across the Bay at Stanford, where he was now shirking his way through a PhD. The day I got there, he and his wife both told me I had two weeks. Then, if I didn't have an apartment, they'd give me a hearty handshake and a threadbare camping tarp. Whether I put it under me on the mud of People's Park, or over me atop some city sewer grate, they didn't seem to care.

The next morning, my sister-in-law drove me to San Francisco. Here, she gave me her first golden advice nugget: "The BART train to Berkeley is somewhere over that way," she said, waving her hand in the general direction of downtown. Before me, a chaos of thundering buses and frantic cars, and, though I didn't know it then, two weeks of hope turning to frustration, panic, and finally desperation.

Two hours later in Berkeley, I stood in front of a suspect brown building that had the dubious look of a hastily erected refugee camp. The sun beat down on the front courtyard, lined with a bizarre maze of tarps strung between makeshift poles. The tarps displayed columns of index cards with smudgy vacancy listings. This town must have so many vacancies, I rejoiced, that the listings had to overflow into the courtyard! I could have my pick, I thought, since only a dozen or so people prowled the maze. Quickly, however, I found that I was only partially right. This was indeed the Housing Office; it was not, however, the overflow area. This was *it*. What had moments ago seemed like a cornucopia overstuffed with ripe fruits suddenly looked like a meager scattering of stale crumbs. As I re-counted the index cards and the people, the ratio of demand to supply

jumped out of the bushes and whacked me in the head harder than my brother ever had. Maybe this wouldn't be as easy as I'd thought.

By the end of a week of fruitless hunting, I was ready to sign up for the fly-infested upstairs closet in the house of the McCreepys for just six hundred bucks a month plus a share of utilities and household chores. The place had an indistinguishable odor composed vaguely of sweat, mildew, bad breath, and the remains of some family pet that had spent its last living moments—and the ensuing five years—in an entirely unreachable cavity under the foundation. The location, however, was terrific, less than a mile south of campus, and on a bus line. This surely was a bargain I would be lucky to snatch before other wild-eyed freshmen with high lottery numbers swarmed over it like maggots on a rotting carcass. If my brother hadn't come along that day to knock sense into my head, I'd have signed that lease for sure.

Until that day, my best hopes had lain more than two miles north—among the oil refineries of Richmond, where angry-looking men idled on graffiti-encrusted stoops and liquor store corners—or two miles south, where the upstairs back room would provide me a wholly unobstructed view of Oakland's gang drug sales under elevated train tracks. Everything else had been claimed before I arrived. Calling ahead and making appointments seemed to make it worse—more often than not, I arrived at my appointment to meet newly signed tenants on their way out.

On the eleventh day, just three days before my deadline, my sister-in-law gave me her second valuable gold nugget of advice: If I saw any good listings, swipe them.

But I couldn't possibly *steal* a listing from the Housing Office. That wouldn't be fair. It would be cheating, and cheaters never prospered. When I was in second grade, one morning I missed the school bus, and rather than walk a mile in a twenty degree chill, I stayed home and watched Godzilla on TV and played GI Joe all day. When my dad asked how school went, I burst into tears and begged not to be sent to the special prison for truant children. I'd seen the Truancy Officer in old "Little Rascals" shows, and he was one scary dude.

So, if I swiped a card, I knew I'd get caught. I'd have my lottery number stripped from me and be forever banned from campus housing. I'd be pilloried and have to wear some sort of badge, maybe a big, red "C" on my breast for "Cheater."

The next morning, like all the others, the sun heated the little greenhouse of card-covered tarp walls and sweaty freshmen into a breathy humidity. A few of the early listings looked promising, but nothing worth risking a future seat on the Supreme Court for. And then I saw a girl with long, brown hair and Elvis Costello glasses pull one of the cards down, pushpin and all, and slip it into her backpack. She didn't even scope out security first. The black-haired girl who checked IDs at the front simply stared down at her tattered paperback.

Well, if she could do it, so could I.

The first one was the hardest, but by the time I sauntered past the unsuspecting guard into the fresh air, I had three separate index cards and a real Berkeley stick-it-to-the-man sneer. One card in my pocket, another in my backpack. The third I simply held in my hand. If cornered by the black-haired authority figure, I would say innocently,

“You mean I can’t take cards out? Oh, I’ll put this back, then,” smiling inside at the two other cards securely tucked away. She never even looked up.

Despite how Chris tells it, I wasn’t crying in the gutter but standing at the curb when our future housemate Shinji picked me up that day, and I did not even own a skateboard yet. Shinji’s naïve nerdiness reminded me of high school friends I’d left at home. He drove me to the house, where Berkeley fades into Oakland, behind a Co-op store that would later supply me with the bulk popcorn, 50% lean ground beef, and cheap beer that would sustain me through my freshman year.

I did not meet Chris, Doug, or Rob until move-in day in August. Today, I count them all among the best friends of my life, and I owe it all to my sister-in-law’s good advice.