

The Search for Inspiration, USA

Or, how I looked for Elsewhere and found home

▶ ABOUT 15 YEARS AGO, MY WIFE AND I were living happily in Los Angeles—not far from the beach, in fact—when our landlords suddenly decided they could do better than us and our shallow pockets. The rent went up 20 percent, and we went apartment hunting. Our search eventually led us north to Los Osos on California's central coast, a few miles from San Luis Obispo. I had recently finished a master's degree in creative writing, and I was dreaming of a place that was fresh to my senses and easy on my wallet—in other words, a place where I could hunker down and write Something Great. We found a small, shadowed, slightly damp bottom-floor rental, put down a deposit and readied ourselves for an exciting new life. Jobs? Well, we'd figure that out.

Then, I—let me put this as delicately as I can—chickened out.

We went to check out the apartment for the first time since the previous tenants—a pleasant elderly couple with matching moist eyes and crepe-paper skin—had moved out. On the carpet where their bed had been was a large, red spot, maybe two feet in diameter, as if someone from an old noir film had been shot before being dumped off the bluff by the Port San Luis Lighthouse.

We asked the property manager if perhaps the stain could be removed.

"We've tried," she said. "It won't come out."

"Then we'd like you to change the carpet."

"No."

"No?"

"No."

What would we do? This was our dream, after all, our romantic grasp after crazy freedom. We'd been to a writers conference in Mendocino a month earlier, and I'd read a piece by the campfire; the group had laughed where I'd hoped they would laugh and gasped where I'd hoped they would gasp, and, at the end, they'd asked, *Where can I buy that book?* and I'd told them that, at the moment, it existed only in the hard drive of my Toshiba computer. Los Osos was the dream of getting enough good words into that old Toshiba that I could take the words out and send them to New York, or



Hollywood, and live happily ever after on the central coast. Were we really going to give up the dream because a gangland killing had apparently once taken place in our bedroom?

We returned to the San Luis Obispo Days Inn to sleep on it. I woke up at 5 a.m. with a 103-degree fever.

We went back to the apartment, and I couldn't feel anything—not revulsion at the spot, not excitement about the place, not a thrill about the prospect of beach-town bohemianism. The sky was steely gray. The entrance, we suddenly noticed, was laced with spider webs. Charlotte herself was proudly perched on the porch light. The ocean was a mile away, just over a small hill and some sand dunes, but we felt we'd landed somewhere in, say, northern Scotland, in some Hitchcockian land of craggy stones and taciturn watchmen and suspicious seagulls. We wouldn't have

been surprised if all the town's telephones suddenly went dead.

The real problem, of course, was the job thing. We just didn't have it in us to make the gamble we were proposing to make.

We surrendered our deposit and wound up returning to my hometown of Las Vegas, where I became the editor of a family magazine. Within a year, we had begun a family of our own. Happy endings have a way of arriving on their own terms.

Still, the romance of a creative roost, of an inspirational portal in space and time, hovers and haunts. I've tried to fight the feeling, but it wells up like water when you dig too deep, this notion of *another place* as creative aquifer.

Maybe, though, the real aquifer is the feeling itself, the stubborn longing of the mind. Surely you could tell a good story about a man too nostalgic for a place he's never been to truly be where he is.

Maybe the real creative subject is our hesitance to look for inspiration to the world at our fingertips and the ground at our feet, right here on this dry land. ♡

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Ask a Native

JAMES P. REZA

WHAT SHOULD I BE TIPPING VALETS AND BARTENDERS THESE DAYS?

Tipping is *the* quintessential Las Vegas question, and its complexities—including stories about who tips well and who doesn't—could fill a chapter. (See my March 14, 2013, column for advice on tipping your busser.)

As for how much to tip a valet, I find it difficult to pass less than \$3 upon return for basic service. If that service is especially speedy, or I'm feeling generous, or a fancy place warrants it, I'll bump it to \$5. Of course, psychology is always at play here, as tipping reflects the tipper as much as the tippee. Under pressing circumstance—facing a "Valet Full" sign when you and/or your date are sporting heels—offering \$10 might make a spot appear, or vault you to the front after a sold-out concert.

Meanwhile, tipping bartenders used to be simple: a couple of bucks for a round of three to four basic pours. Now, with mixology playing a larger role in our nightcap repertoire and drinks requiring more than just popping the top off a lowbrow lager, that old rule hardly seems appropriate. I'll still follow that rule if I'm dive-barring it one round at a time. But if I am running a tab (usually in a less-divey place), I tend to tip 20 percent of the pre-tax total. With intricate cocktails costing \$9-plus per drink, that's a lot more than two bucks a round. Then again, my friends in the service industry have a rule, too: If you cannot afford to tip, drink at home!

HOW LIKELY IS IT THAT I'M GETTING MY CLEANING DEPOSIT BACK AFTER VACATING MY RENTAL?

Our city's transiency (even when people stay, they hop from place to place), combined with how the recession ravaged home ownership (which fell to 48 percent in mid-2012) means a mass of deposit money is in the hands of landlords. And they're not likely to want to part with it. If it's specified as a "non-refundable fee" in your lease, they won't have to. If it's a "damage deposit" ... still not likely. A friend and real estate management executive says somewhere in the neighborhood of 20 to 30 percent of renters can expect a refund. And if your lease doesn't require a "damage deposit," most can still expect a portion of their "security deposit" to be withheld even when lease terms appear satisfied. The executive says it's a sneaky way of padding profit, especially at apartment complexes. I've also heard angry tales from home renters who spent a few days making the place "spotless," only to have the landlord withhold deposits. My best advice? When you rent, understand what you are likely to lose before you sign the lease.



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