

Let's Us Not Exaggerate

by Steven Gowin

Call him hobo or homeless or junkie.

But Gary's a reader and neither worthless nor pitiable in my mind. In that, he's my key to the highway. He helps me refrain from judging.

He squats in front of the Potrero Safeway, his normal spot. It's raining, and I'm on the way out, standing at my cart of groceries. You're always looking down on him when he's like this.

I see his bald place and his scraggly hair greasing down his back. His teeth are pretty brown today. They're always brown. He looks a little wet, but he's opened a New Yorker on his lap.

Good to see you, Gary, I say, hell, you keeping dry? And he says what do you think. I say yeah dumb question. And I say, could be worse, I suppose and hand him ten bucks and don't know why. I suppose because I want to tell him about yesterday.

Yesterday, my birthday, our dog escaped the vet, and my wife and I spent six hours in the vet's neighborhood walking around calling the dog's name and dreading that the M Ocean had squished her dead. My wife cried. We got her back, though. I say, the dog. I don't like birthdays anyway.

Gary says, Jesus, happy birthday, man, thanks me for the sawbuck and he asks my age and I tell him, and he says I look pretty good for that, and that he looks pretty damned good too for his age. He says in fact he looks better than his old man had at the same age.

I try to see it, see Gary in better shape than his father. But I can't muster that much imagination; or maybe the imagining scared me, the father worse than the son and what he might have done to produce a Gary, hunkered down in the rain, dope jonesing, people worrying about whether you're dry or not.

But maybe Gary's thing isn't like that at all. Maybe it's disappointing. Maybe I'd prefer to make up his story myself. With a Gary, with Garys, I want histories of how and why they are, but I

don't want to know them to find out. Don't want that responsibility. A character flaw.

So I agree with Gary. I guess we're both in ok shape, all things considered. I say we're in decent shape, in fact, even though I don't think I am in decent shape in any way at all. But think maybe there's a joke here, one about righteousness.

So I tell Gary I know the simple secret of being in shape, the health and happiness mystery solved, and Gary says alright he'll bite, what is it, and I reply that the secret's in clean living. Clean living.

Clean living, Gary repeats. He carefully folds the ten spot, stands and starts away towards his man, I guess, starts away in the rain, but stops a second dripping wet already.

You're exaggerating man, he says. Let's us not exaggerate.

