

ON THE TAKE

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by

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B.S., Kansas State University, 1974

A MASTER'S REPORT

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

1980

Approved by:



B. Nyberg
Major Professor

Spec. Coll.

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1980

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c.2 "...so even when they get the money, they can't handle it. It goes out to pay for the color T.V. and the dope and the car and the gasoline, and before long there isn't any money for the rent and the food. And then they have the terrifically loud party and the landlord calls the cops on them and then tells them they have to get out. But they can't find a place to live because no landlord in town will take single women, even if they have children -- in fact, especially if they have children, because of all the smack freak dykes and the cheap, street whores. So they find themselves in the wrong town. And most all of their problems start because they can't handle money. So if somebody would just take the time to teach them how to handle the money, pretty soon we'd have the main hassle licked."

"But Stan, what about all that budget counseling that Service is supposed to be doing with all of them?"

"Well, yeah, but that doesn't amount to anything. It doesn't work."

"Yes, but why do you think it doesn't work?"

"Well, because they do it out at the clients' houses and they get sidetracked on the plumbing and on whether the food is all divided up so the stamp eligibility is safe. They don't get to talk about budgeting. The setting is wrong."

"But surely that's the place to talk to them. The Service workers can see what it is they spend their money on. And it beats the hell out of trying to talk to anybody in this place."

"Yeah, well, this isn't the right place either. What we ought to have is a new place for this financial counseling."

"As opposed to a new place for every other kind of client contact that the agency has to have?"

"Well, but this is a special thing. This is the root of the problem."

"And the root of this is that they can't handle money because they are used to being taken care of. They have no experience handling responsibility."

"So now you're going to tell me that they're children. We've been all through that rap a hundred times. They aren't children. They're just adults with special social problems. It isn't the alcoholic's fault that he's a problem to the society. And this is just like that. Wait a minute. I've got an appointment." Stan walked out of the conference room and turned towards his cubicle. That was O.K. He was full of it and no amount of disgorging was going to empty him out.

So I leaned back in the big chair and looked at what was left of my brown bag lunch. I was in the conference room getting myself up to go back to work after lunch. The conference room was a box with two cheap doors, a cheap rug, two magic marker on posterboard charts, and a huge table surrounded by an assortment of chairs. The walls had been painted white once but were now greasy and dirty up to shoulder level all the way around the room. Through the open door I could see the regulars passing back and forth on their way to type, file, fill out, interview, confer, chat, politic, hang around, and sleep. As I watched I considered the afternoon I had ahead of me and, with a little cringe, settled back into the vinyl chair.

One time a friend of ours named Joe, who lived on the third and top floor of our apartment building, took off for a week. He left the key with us and asked that we feed and water his gerbils once every couple of days. One evening while Barb was working on dinner, I dragged myself out of the basement, where our apartment was, up to Joe's.

All the apartments were basically the same in that building. But all of the locks were slightly different. Joe's lock was upside down, compared to the one on

our place. It took me a couple of tries before I figured the thing out.

As soon as I got the door open, the gerbils ran to the food dishes in their cages. I figured that Joe was only home once in a while even when he was in town, so they were used to being fed whenever anybody came in. I fed and watered them.

Then I went around the apartment. Compared to ours it looked empty. That was only partly because there was not much stuff in it; it was also partly because everything was organized and put away nicely. The rugs and curtains were the same as ours, and the furniture was almost all standard furnished apartment junk that looked like it belonged to a rental agency.

In the living room he had a little bookshelf that was made of planks and cement blocks. It it were textbooks and a complete set of some cheap sci-fi books -- paperbacks -- that ran about nine titles. Underneath the shelves he had a couple of Bibles, a Book of Mormon, some tracts with Salt Lake City written all over them, and Dale Carnegie's How to Win Friends and Influence People.

That last went well with the few more expensive things he had. A six hundred dollar foreign made color T.V. sat in the corner with a three week old T.V. Guide on top of it. He had a huge stereo with every possible gimmick on it, but under that was a collection of only about twenty albums, all of them less than a year old and all of them right off the easy listening playlists. Inside his new guitar case was a shiny classical guitar. Two how-to-play books for the instrument were on the coffee table.

The bedroom was really vacant. A couple of photography magazines lay on the night table. The closet was messy, but the door was closed. The bathroom was completely uncluttered and clean. The water in the toilet bowl was blue. All the kitchen had in it were empty quart and bigger Coke, Pepsi, and Seven-Up bottles. Their lids were screwed back on and they sat in their oversized cardboard six packs.

I went back into the front room and found the ash tray. Inside were a couple of butts smoked down about half way which I picked out, straightened out, and lit

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up. While lighting the first one, I dropped the match. When I looked for it, I saw a couple of dimes lying on the carpet. I glanced around and saw that there were a couple of bucks in small change scattered along the length of the place. I picked up the match and put it in the ash tray.

Then I perched myself on the top edge of the sofa and looked out between the leafy tree branches to the north. It was the sort of small, sullen grey afternoon sky that makes what is left of the daylight look particularly yellow. And there was no breeze. The quiet got to me after a minute and I had to leave. I went down the stairs to examine a couple of applications for eligibility before dinner.

My car was broken, so when Heather and Sue and Mandy asked me to join their carpool, I decided it was the safe thing. Besides, carpools can save you a lot of dough. And originally I thought it might be kind of fun to ride over with three good looking girls.

But after I'd been in the carpool for a while, I was anxious to get out. Pretty soon my car would be fixed so I could pay back all the rides. Then I was getting out. I just couldn't take the conversations.

Heather was a really talky, bitchy, flighty woman who was always right and always cute and always on somebody's back or offering somebody the benefit of her terrific experience. She was one of those people who read Psychology Today for information and who really want new LTDs. For the week before this one episode I'm thinking about, she'd been painting with her husband. They'd bought some old apartment building and now they were painting it. It struck me that any apartment building they owned was probably a lot like one of those beat-up old steamers that reek of paint and burn at sea. Her husband was the kind of businessman who would send a bunch of customers off in a broken-down steamship. Naturally, Heather hated Lucille, who was the sort of kindly matron type over at the office and the senior

member of the Income Maintenance staff which I was a member of.

Mandy was nice but nothing. Just like Heather and Sue, she was on the Service staff and had her Bachelor of Social Work degree. Mandy was in charge of adoptions, and she talked to everyone as if they were seven, tops. Maybe that was her natural level.

Sue was the oddest of the three. She was, or could be, charming. That was partly because she was so cheerful almost all of the time. But just when that began to wear on you, she'd get depressed. Sometimes she'd let you cheer her up. She had a smile that really rocked you when you weren't expecting it.

Sue had gotten married at about eighteen to a hippy sort who had a job doing some kind of laboratory experiments at the University. But he just didn't want to do anything, or at least she told it that way. He sat around at home all the time and ducked out of work to sit around some more. Then he started sitting around somewhere else. That doesn't sound like a giant problem in a marriage to me, but I guess the two of them decided they didn't have much use for each other so they got a divorce. I don't really know why. Anyway, now Sue acted the part of the sex-starved divorcee all the time and Heather made her tell about all her dates every day as we drove in the car to work. Right after breakfast.

Heather and Sue were practically attached at the hip sometimes. They both got off on these silly spurts doing stuff like wolf whistling at M.P.s and going into uncontrollable, unprovoked laughing sprees in the car. But except that they could both be adolescent and were real buddies, they had absolutely nothing in common.

One night after work, Heather and Mandy decided that we should have a drink. So we drove out to this motel which had a club and which was on the way home. It was one of those great blocks of motel that they lay in on top of a wheat field and then are always trying vainly to grow grass around. Prefab yellow brick walls.

The club was around the corner from the motel office. We came in from the afternoon brightness into the darkest room I've yet to see. They all sidled in,

but I ran into chairs and tables all the way over to where I heard their voices. In a few minutes my eyes got used to the dark a little. The carpet and the flock wallpaper were relief maps. The chairs were comfortable, but I still knew I was in some chain motel bar, and knowing makes all the difference.

After the waitress left with our orders, Heather said: "Did you know that Luella Stankey came in today?"

We didn't. Luella was the craziest of all the agency's clients that I knew.

"She came in wanting to see Shauna."

"Oh no," said Mandy. "What did you tell her?"

"I told her that we'd sent her away. I mean I tried to explain the custody thing to her and what the judge said..."

Sue broke in. "Wasn't she in court?"

"Yes, but she didn't understand anything that was going on. She just kept making speeches about a mother's rights until the judge told her he was going to put her in jail if she didn't shut up. So I tried to explain all the new custody stuff to her, but she wasn't interested. She kept trying to get me to bring Shauna to her."

"What was it today -- demanding or sooo nice?" Sue asked.

"Both. First one and then the other."

"Oh," Sue said, "that woman can be so frustrating. She'll say anything. And all she'll do is ... thank you," she said as her daiquiri was served. Heather went into a fit of chuckles. When we were all served and the waitress had gone, Heather said: "Oh she'd just leave the kid locked in the room again while she went out to party."

While this continued, I looked down at my shoes. Once I got them out of the shadow of the table, I had just enough light to see them. They did indeed need polish. The scuffs weren't much though. They were mostly just dry looking. Running over my schedule in my head, I tried to work out when I could polish them. Right after supper would probably be good.

"How does the IM case stand?"

I looked up. Then I said, "I'll have to look. She'll lose A.D.C. for sure if the kid is out of the house. I don't know if Don will be able to put her on General or not. We'll have to see."

"Well hey, pal," Heather said looking at me with her concerned and forlorn face on, "be sure to tell me how it comes out."

I went back to examining my shoes until the girls started to get up.

"I put down a nickle and a quarter," Mandy said.

"So if I throw in a dime and he puts in a dime..."

"That's sixty cents. Doesn't that seem like a lot for four drinks?"

While they argued I paid my bill and, tossing a dollar on the table, wove my way between the tables and headed out to the parking lot.

Dick brought it in. The manilla folder had been wedged into enough full file drawers that it was worn and dirty. It must have been wet once because it was flaking in a couple of darker places. The code number confirmed the fact that this case had been around for a long time.

The case name was Ella Ferguson, who now had grandchildren receiving assistance. I opened it up and found that it had originally been a county case that was set up, according to the log, for Ella when she was sixteen and expecting her first child. She was unmarried. And her father had first beaten her and then disowned her when he heard she was pregnant. The opening log note went on for two pages and was signed by Lucille.

But Dick wanted me to see some comments entered in the log after the case had been around for about two years. He lit a cigarette and pointed with a shaking finger to the line he wanted me to see. The worker was discussing Ella's third pregnancy. She had, the note said, "...that tendency for promiscuity typical for

her age and race..." The woman who had made that entry was long gone.

"Isn't that," Dick said deliberately, "the living end?"

Actually, he was shuffling and snorting and fidgeting so much that it came out more like: "Isn't (snort) isn't th-that the, ah (shuffle) the living end?" Thirty-five years old and he couldn't sit still in his chair.

"Well, Dick, if you like this one so much I'm sure you can get into the old closed files and find a million more entries just like it."

"But, ah, don't you find this (giggle) one particularly -- amusing?" After he laughed silently (as if he were lip-synching to an unheard record) for a couple of minutes, he fidgeted farther towards the end of the seat I kept up near my desk for clients to be interviewed in. Then he looked nearly serious. He cleared his throat. "You know..." he said. Then he threw himself through a semi-contortion during which he rubbed the shock of hair, which blew down over his forehead, back over his scalp with the back of his wrist. "You know (fidget), I'm certain that this particular attitude towards blacks is part of the reason we still have such a large percentage of them on the welfare rolls today."

"You're probably right, Dick. But we do have the consolation that that sort of stuff doesn't get into logs much anymore."

"Well, ah, not so overtly, no, but (fidget)..." He went on until somebody buzzed for him.

After he left I looked around my office. Of course, my office was just like all the other offices in the building. The dirty, white walls looked like they'd been thrown up in about fifteen minutes by some guys who were chuckling about "the welfare" the whole time. I could almost hear echoes of their rasping cackles over the muffled foot traffic passing my hollow door. Wincing, I shook my head. The building was too new to be really falling down yet. Before the state bought it, it had been a body shop. It still smelled a little of paint.

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"Did I ever tell you," Roy asked me one day, "about Miss BeBe?"

"Nope. Tell me," I said as I stretched back into one of the good red chairs in the conference room. Lunch had been particularly filling that day. And for once, nearly everybody had gone out to eat. So, once the clerks moved up front for dessert and intra-office politicking, Roy and I had the place to ourselves. He had been discussing recipients' sex lives and interests for purely prurient reasons. He had some great tales to tell.

"You," he said "have a client named Janice Washington who is the daughter of Rose Washington who is one of Rod's clients. Well, Rose has another child: a boy who she named Otto. But he is a transvestite and a homosexual and he calls himself Miss BeBe."

Roy was one of those guys who looks all around before he speaks. He was a chain smoker and a heavy coffee drinker. He laughed a lot (although the laughter never seemed real) and was out of the office sick or on convention trips more than anybody I ever knew.

"And this Miss BeBe is your case?"

"No. He/she/it belongs to Stan. Don used to have the case but he couldn't handle it. Miss BeBe kept making passes at him."

"Well, tell the story."

"Miss BeBe is a street whore. Now I'm sure nobody is fooled into thinking he's a woman, so there must be some market for gay hustlers around here. Miss BeBe certainly dresses the part. He's straightened his hair just a little and dyed it yellow, oh, about two inches of roots ago. But he should let it grow out. The dye job only half took. He wears little hot pants outfits so he has to shave his legs and arm pits. And he always carries a purse."

"Been a case long?"

"Oh, I'd guess he's twenty-five so he's had a case of his own for six or seven

years."

"But his main support comes off the street."

"But who's gonna prove that? You know what that whole deal is like."

"So how do you know that he's into all this stuff?"

"From Don and Stan. And Heather has the Service case."

"Another odd case. Doesn't it seem to you that there's something wrong with ninety percent of the cases you handle?"

"Yeah." There was a pause. We both looked at the clock. Then Roy smiled and said: "Let me get another cup of coffee and I'll tell you about what happened when Miss BeBe came in with Janice's kids and tried to leave 'em with Heather." We both smiled politely and he left the room.

He came back in again with a serious look that demanded a knitting of his brows. "Could you take Intake for me this afternoon? I just remembered that I've got an appointment at two to see Betty Hale from over at St. Mary's about a case I'm transferring to her."

"Come right on in, Mrs. Cooper. Sit down over there."

She was about forty-five and the most tastefully dressed woman who'd been in my office all week. When she'd called the day before and asked to see me about her daughter, Gloria Cooper, I'd given her time after appointment hours. Her accent was too sharp. She spoke reasonably good English and enunciated pretty well. That made her a change.

"What can I do for you?" I asked her.

"It has to do with my daughter, as I told you yesterday. I understand that she is ineligible for assistance from the state unless she is bringing up her child."

There was a pause. "She may be ineligible if she isn't taking care of her daughter. Why? Isn't the girl with her?"

"No. I've been taking care of her for almost two months. The reason I've come in is that Gloria refuses to give me any of the money she receives from the state for support, and the financial burden is quite a bit for me to handle."

"Has Gloria been sick, Mrs. Cooper?"

"No...It all has to do with Jeanette Fuller."

I looked in the case folder which I'd gotten out before the interview.

"Your daughter lives in an apartment with Jeanette, doesn't she?"

"Yes. And Jeanette has some control over Gloria. She takes the money as soon as Gloria has cashed the check."

I promised to look into it, said goodbye, and ushered Mrs. Cooper out. I went back into my office and looked in the Cooper folder for the name of the service worker. Mandy had the case and I knew she was out of town some place. So I walked up to the Roll-o-dex up front and found out that Sue had the service case on Jeanette Fuller. From the appointment desk I called Sue to tell her I was coming down to talk to her about that case. When I got there she was looking through it.

"What does it say?" I asked, opening the Cooper folder as I sat.

"Oh, Jeanette isn't any damn good. I don't even have to look."

I read that the two shared an apartment somewhere over on the Boulevard.

"Jeanette has a history of keeping lovers almost as income property. Between the State and the soldiers, one girl can be worth some dough to her."

Gloria had been arrested twice in the two years covered by the log.

"And if it's your case it must be A.D.C., which means an extra hundred a month and a lot of excuses for not training or checking in at employment."

"O.K. Thanks. When's Mandy back?"

"Tomorrow."

"O.K. Thanks." I got up and walked back into my office. I swung into the desk, wrote a memo to Mandy, and then, after checking out the manual for a while, wrote a hell of a 114, which is a letter, to Gloria Cooper.

The 114 didn't bring her in. Neither did the two that followed it. So, a

couple of weeks after the first letter, I sent off to Topeka and canceled her check. The second of the month, she came into the office and wanted to see me. I brought her back to the office. She looked O.K., but tired.

"Where is your daughter?" I asked her after she sat down.

"Out at the house."

"Has she been living with you?"

"All except for while I was moving. Then her granny had her."

I paused for a second.

"Where's my check?" she asked.

"I stopped it because you didn't answer my letters."

"I didn't get them. I was moving."

"Did you ask for your mail to be forwarded?"

"Yes, but you know the Post Office."

I paused again.

"Look," she said to me as if I were beginning to try her patience. "I'd like to get back to my daughter if you and I are all straightened out now. Does that get it?"

I slammed the car door, looked down, and walked. The street lights made the asphalt look black. Pulverized glass lay sprinkled out across it. The alley was rough grained concrete. Water stood down the middle of it. The foot of a rusting, battered trash dumpster stuck out at the corner we turned. People were walking on the side street. The glass door opened. Up a step. Linoleum.

After Barb and Bob and I had gotten our menus, he continued the lament he'd started in the car. "You know, the whole thing is that they keep laying it on and I keep taking it."

"What?" I asked. "You mean like your landlord?"

"Right. I've been in that place three years and they bring in a new management outfit. So fine. But what happens? The creep comes around and wants to be pushy. Who the hell is he, pounding on my door at midnight and then demanding to know when the guy upstairs was coming in! I never saw the jerk in my life!"

"Pretty pushy."

"Sure it is. So I lean on him. I follow him up the stairs. Then I keep cutting off his space. I crowd him. He gets intimidated. Then he's not such a damn tough guy. And that's the only way to get any respect. Intimidate."

"You think so?"

"Sure. People haven't got enough manners or brains. So you've got to lean on them."

The waitress showed up and Barb cringed a little.

"Well for boxers it's slick when they shake the punches, but you go around shaking off responsibility and that's not the same thing. You're always late. You're always unwilling. You just let everybody else do for you."

I was really warmed up by then, rocking back and forth in my chair and gesturing up in Jake's kitchen. He lived above a gift shop and spent most of his time in his kitchen glancing down occasionally at the brick stores across the street. It was dusk and the street lamps hadn't come on full yet. I got up and started to pace.

"You'd live up here like some recluse if we didn't get you out sometimes. And you never call us. Or anybody else. You'd rather just sit. Man, don't you get fed up? That's not the way we were brought up. How are we going to get things going? Huh?"

There was a long hesitation. I started to let down a little. I stroked my lower face.

"O.K. I'm sorry," I said. "I guess work has got me kind of wound up."

"It's O.K.," he said.

"I'm sorry."

"Well," he said, drawing himself up into full mock self righteousness. "I hope you feel better now." We both chuckled.

"Hey," he said. "You want a beer? Let's go in and see what's on the tube."

After we cooled off with the tube for a while, he gave me a lift home so that I could get my sleep.

By my Friday afternoon coffee break almost everybody was gone. I sat down at the big table in the conference room with my friend Bob. Jake had gone back to his office. I started to play solitaire.

"The whole thing about divorce is all because everybody thinks marriage has to be the perfect free ride the whole time or they get out quick. That whole line of thought just infuriates me," he was saying.

"Which reminds me," I said, "how are you doing with your temper?"

"Well, I'll tell you. It isn't easy. It still seems like I'm expected to mind my manners and keep cool while idiots waste my time and inundate me with inanities."

"Nice line."

"Yeah, well, I have to put up with all that and smile, but then I can't unload on them no matter what I feel like."

"That's just the penalty of being superior."

"Well I may be superior, but I'm not super-human. But to directly answer your original question, I've put up with just about everything today. I'm proving to myself that I can take anything."

"What have you taken?" Stan asked as he walked into the room.

I continued to play solitaire, but I was losing.

"Oh, nothing. How's it going, Stan?"

"Can't complain."

"Well, you guys, I better get back to the files. I've got a couple of 114s to get off yet this afternoon. By the way," Bob said to me, "seven thirty."

"Fine," I said. He left. I returned to the deck.

"I just got a print-out back from the State that I requested two weeks ago. They're so slow," Stan said, sitting down.

"A tradition," I said.

"But you know it seems like they're always late. Always slow. And all they have to do is run the thing through the computer once and stick it in the mail. I sent it in a week after check day. So all they had to do was ship it through while they didn't have any big log jam of orders on the computer. It was just one T, after all. They are so slow at sending everything back. Everybody says so. But they treat us like we didn't make any difference to the agency at all. And all the while we're the ones on the front lines. We're the ones in the trenches. They don't have sub-human crazies with overactive imaginations running around slobbering on their desks and ranting and raving about how the baby hasn't eaten and how the agency is looking down the barrel of a law suit. They haven't got any of that going on. So they just put this stuff off to try to convince us that they have all this work to do. That's the way the whole State is."

"Is it?"

"Well, the whole State isn't, but the government is always putting the work off on someone else and then putting the blame on them too. Like in this case. I've got to go to these people and say that the State didn't get the form back to me by deadline, so their check will be about a month late. And that's because the people at State don't have to put up with the client's whining and moaning, so they loaf and let me take all the heat; but then I'm accountable when the case is read and we miss a payment."

"Are you going to miss a payment?"

"No. But it will be late."

"There's money in the fund. Make out a warrant and pay it from here. Then rewrite the T for continuous payment, send it in right after deadline, and the thing will take care of itself until there's a change in the case."

"Yeah, O.K. But why should I have to go through all of this? Why couldn't the State have paid on my T in time to save me all this bookkeeping?"

"I don't know. They've always been slow."

"So we have to find ways around their being slow all the time."

"But that's just a constant. You take the ticket; you pay the price."

"O.K. But then why do they even bother to set up this whole big system if they expect us to find ways to do things that make up for it all the time?"

Deuce of Clubs on Ace.

"I'm gonna go write up that warrant. I'll see you." Stan left for his office. I returned to the pile.

"Where do all of these people come from?" my wife asked one early fall night when I'd been talking because I couldn't sleep. Insomnia was already starting to be a problem for me.

"Which people?" I asked. "The clients, the workers, or the people of the State of Kansas?"

"Well, now that I think about it, all of them. It's not just that the workers are bad. They're bad because the State is bad and the State is bad because the people it serves are bad."

"O.K. And that doesn't leave any of us an out."

"And leave it to you to want to be guiltless. The only way you're going to be happy is if you have some way to protect yourself from your own failures."

"Listen, let's just forget it for a while. I'm sorry I was talking about work. I'm just really tired and hazy and I'm not in complete control."

"So what are you going to do? Sit up and smoke?"

"Yeah. I think I will go out to the living room for a while. You lay down, now, and get some rest."

Out of the desk drawers I pulled all the likely forms. 114s were letters, and I would probably need two in triplicate. Interview sheets were 340s and had to go with the 101b application for assistance which they had already filled out and which I had there. I got out a fresh log, a 110. They were requesting food stamps, and seemed to be eligible, so I got an FS135 food stamp activator and application out. The 310t ruled the computer on the whole transaction, so it was essential. The Location and Support LS4 was called for. Since they needed money right then I had a 448 warrant request for the emergency fund. The 259s request for service was required and the 187 medical assistance application was possible. I got all the forms out and stacked them on the work space cleared out from the clutter on my desk. Then I got up and walked to the front to call Mrs. Tucker.

The reception area was small, hot, crowded, and squalid. It smelled of sweat and baby vomit. In it were about twenty people. I called out Mrs. Tucker's name and saw a short thick, black woman gather three small children around her and head towards me. I led them down the hall to my office.

"Please sit down," I said to them. They did. The smallest of the children sat on the rug and, staring at me, began to push a little rubber car back and forth. I looked at the child's mother.

"How are you today?"

"Oh, I guess we're fine." She giggled. "We found us a place to stay over to the Boulevard."

"Mobile home?"

"Yes. It's a trailer house."

"That's good. I've figured from your application the the State will send you money, and now we have an address to send it to. And all four of you will live at

that house?"

"Now we do."

"Good. Does anybody else live there?"

"No, sir."

"Good." I got the address, the amount of rent to be paid, and a rough estimate of the monthly cost of utilities. With that data I filled out an FS116 food stamp budget and added the total into the T. Using the information on the original application and occasional questions, I plowed through several of the forms. Taking from her the social security cards and birth certificates of every family member, I photocopied them and clipped them into the folder, noting with a check on the T that federal welfare enumeration had been completed. Another question proved her exempt from WIN registration, though she expressed interest in a CETA program that she'd heard about from acquaintances. I noted that interest on the 259s.

"One more thing, while we're waiting for that check to get printed up, Mrs. Tucker. Are you sure you can't tell me any more about where the children's father might be?"

"No sir, he just left and ran off with some woman as was down at the bar every night. I don't know where they could have gone."

"Well, O.K. But if you hear anything about him, I sure would appreciate it if you'd call me on the phone and tell me. Is that O.K.?"

"Yes."

I filled out the Location and Support forms and then wrote a memo to Bob telling him to open a case on the father and hinting that Mrs. Tucker might know where her husband was. The bar line sounded familiar. After getting Mrs. Tucker's warrant for her and explaining how and where to cash it and how and when her checks and food stamps would reach her, I let her go.

Two weeks later I found that Sue had been assigned the Service case for the Tuckers. I went into her office, sat down in a chair, and, when she looked around,

asked her about her end of the case.

"Oh I went out to see them on Tuesday. The babies are so cute."

"They're all well and all? Have they used the medical card yet?"

"Yes. Mrs. Tucker is pregnant. They just found out the day I came by. The children all look O.K., but I'm a little worried at the seven of them all living in that one little three bedroom trailer."

I looked up. "Is your report in yet?"

"Yes. Your copy should be in your box this afternoon."

"Well, excuse me. I've got some paper work to do."

I left and went down to check my box. It was empty. So I went up the hall to grab a coke before the long afternoon of forms I now had before me. After I dropped the quarter in and pushed the selection button, I stood there almost shaking. But I didn't hit anything. Instead, I grabbed my pop, jerked off its crown, shook my head, and walked back to my office.

On the average night during that period when the Olympics were on, my schedule went like this almost every night:

The first thing is that I would get dropped off or I would finish dropping the girls off. Either way I ended up crawling out of a car, with the summer road dirt all sticking to my sweat and making everything even more gritty than it would have been if I'd been lying around in the grass all afternoon. So I'd get out hot and tired and aching and I'd walk down stairs and into our apartment carrying my saturated tie and a brown paper sack full of cases. I only brought home new cases that needed to be opened.

As soon as I came through the front door Barb would come around the corner and give me a kiss, but she wouldn't hug me because I was gritty dirty. The air conditioner in the place worked O.K., but it was still at least 80 until about eight.

I would take off my shoes, unbutton my shirt all the way to the waist, and stretch out on the sofa until she brought dinner in. She would spread it out on the coffee table. An average dinner might consist of spaghetti, a green salad, and a glass of milk. That would be fine. But I would always want to have a piece of garlic toast to go with it. Sometimes I would mention that. It was no big deal. We usually ate well enough.

After we ate she would clear the table. Then I would flip on the T.V. and, while I was waiting for it to warm up, I would get out the cases I'd brought home. I usually brought about fifteen.

Surely you can remember the Olympics that summer. Jenner won the Decathlon. Our boxers were incredible -- especially Sugar Ray Leonard. And, remember we had that terrific high jumper who didn't win because they wouldn't let him wear his Mickey Mouse shirt and because it was raining so hard that he kept losing his footing. I watched those things solid from the time they came on in the evening until the 10 o'clock news started.

And all that time I'd be opening cases. For each case you open you have to fill out about a dozen forms. Well, I'd learned how to figure out the eligibility of most cases at home. Then I could fill out almost all of the forms and only have my clients in my office for signing a couple of things. So all night I'd sit there and watch the Olympics and fill out cases. I could usually get through about ten of them in an evening.

Some of the information that comes on those applications is pretty funny. People will detail the most incredible things in the most illegible handwriting using the most impossible English. I'd read an entry on health or on any one of several other topics like, say, insurance, and then I'd laugh. I laughed through more smell-good-um commercials that way. And I'd end up explaining to Barb what it was that was so funny.

Then, while I watched the news, I'd pack up all my stuff to take back to the

office the next day. I'd also look through the mail, but all it was was bills and junk and stuff from senators or congressmen telling about what swell guys they were and about how they had done this and that for their constituencies and asking for answers to questionnaires. It was an election year.

After the news I'd turn off all the lights, chain up the door, and head off to bed. I had some trouble getting to sleep while I worked for Soc. Rehab. and I always had a hell of a time getting up in the morning, in time for my shower.

"I'm a Democrat," Don said chattily to me one morning in my office. "I don't really have a reason, but then I don't think I need one. Besides, almost everybody is one or the other, and most of them don't even vote. Besides, I'm a civil servant. Civil servants are supposed to be Democrats. That's just the way things go. You're a Democrat, aren't you?"

"No. I'm not anything political right now. But why do you suppose there is such a steady tradition of civil servants involved in politics as Democrats? And organization Democrats at that?"

"Well, part of it has to do with the origin of civil service jobs. And part of it has to do with the fact that a good civil servant can spend so much time on politics. Now take just the job thing for a second. Just the job thing. Now supposedly the people elect the people in government. But actually it's all a machine thing. I don't mean that in some nasty way. I don't, for example, mean that dead men are voting and all of that. I just mean that the rank and file party members know on which side their bread is buttered and they, though they're a small minority of the total possible voting public, end up making the election winnable or not."

"What the hell sense does that make?"

"I'm not here to tutor you in the basics." He waxed catty. "But everybody

knows that if the rank and file produce, the election can be won, but only if the candidate isn't some extremist who's alienated half the damn popular vote. So the government gets in. And remember, the governor appoints the heads of the agencies and they make most of the agency policy and hire and fire. Now surely an elected official is gonna remember who put him in a position to win the election in the first place. So party guys get the jobs. And they get jobs for people like them, which is to say Democrats. Now the reason the Democrats almost always win is because so much of the population is civil servants. And the reason that almost all civil servants are Democrats is because the Democrats always win."

"Now what was this thing about time?"

"I've forgotten." He lit a cigarette and leaned back. "One thing about civil servants and time is that they have a lot of time at work to do nothing."

"If they choose."

"Oh, certainly. Some of them work sixty hour weeks. But the point is that the average civil servant doesn't have to be what I'd call 'efficient.' He doesn't have to be anything much more than there. The politicians mix their pals in with the career civil servants on down to county offices. Well, some of these people are super incompetent. Consequently, it's just standard procedure to protect incompetents in civil service jobs."

"You've got particular examples in mind?"

"I do have a couple of nominees from around this very office. For example: what in the world does Heather do? All she does is party. She just sits around the office all day laughing and smoking and gossiping with all the girls down the wing. She gets paid, I believe. And what possible service could she perform for the State?"

"I know she interrupts me a lot, but usually that has something to do with some case of mine that she's working on."

"But, nevertheless, she does interrupt you and thus compounds the crime. And how about Bob?"

"Now what's wrong with Bob?"

"Well for one thing, he's over serious."

"That's a fault?"

"It is when you're working with other people. It certainly makes him spend entirely too much time on any single project and that keeps him far behind on his work in general."

"So is everybody who is the least bit conscientious around this place. I'm backed up over my ears. I've got sixty cases on file that are past the thirty day limit for opening."

"But that's exactly it. When you are backed up on something like that it doesn't make anyone look foolish. It only looks like you're overworked. Bob is holding me up waiting to accept about a dozen transfers that I wrote up sixty days ago. He says he hasn't had time to verify their continuing eligibility. And he says it may take him a couple of weeks to get around to checking it out. He won't take my word for it. They're eligible."

"So can't you go to Harry?"

"He's out of town again. He won't be back for another two weeks. First he had his sick leave, and then he had about a month of vacation time built up."

"Well, isn't there somebody around in authority? How about the chiefs? What do they do anyway?"

"It's no wonder that you don't know what they do. They haven't ever done anything. They were supposed to oversee the supervisors."

"I thought that's what the Regional Exec. was supposed to do."

"Not since the chiefs. Now all the Exec. has to do is to write the State for more money and sign leave forms for people who are going to social work conventions. But the point is that the chiefs have become bookkeepers. All they do all day is plot out graphs showing what it is that the supervisors can document as their ratio of effectiveness, their cost per charge, their agreeableness per square inch and all

this other stuff that they either can't measure or don't need to know about."

"Just a bunch of dead-end stuff, huh? You know, a lot of the stuff in this agency seems dead-end to me."

"And I'd be gone tomorrow if I had somewhere else to go that paid."

The Kensington case went back to F.D.R. The grandmother of my clients had a General Assistance case still. Most of the voluminous notes on the Aid to Dependent Children case had to do with my clients' mother, who I think still had a G.A. case herself. The mother, if you could trust the notes and the agency shop talk, was nuts.

I had cases for two of her six children. The earlier one was for Ruth Jones. There had been a case for her for two years. At that time, on her fifteenth birthday, she'd had a daughter. Her husband had been gone for two months by that time. Her sister, Nancy Kensington, was fifteen, unmarried, pregnant, and a fairly new case.

One afternoon they came in to see me.

"Hi," I said. "How are you, Nancy? Been to the doctor?"

"I'm fine. The baby's been kicking."

"Good. And how's your grandmother?"

"She's fine," Ruth said. "She said for us to say hello."

"Did that deal with your mother get all straightened out?"

"Yes. She's moved out now. Gran'ma said to thank you for getting Mama's worker to call her."

"It's O.K. Now what did you want to talk about today?"

"Nancy wants to go back to school."

"Yeah. I want to get the high school diploma so that I can go to the technical college like Ruthie."

"Yeah, but hold on a second. You mean after the baby is born?"

"Well...I guess I will have to wait until after the baby is born. You know, I hadn't thought about that."

"Ruth, you knew she'd have to wait."

"But, I didn't tell her you'd put her in school right away. I don't know where she got that idea. They got night classes?"

"I don't know. You went to school after your baby was born. Did you go to class at night?"

After I told that story to Jake one night in the park, he asked me if I had any working clients. So I told him about another pair of cases of mine.

"I got these two hippy type girls -- Marcia and Cindy. They live in the same building and are practically inseparable. Both of them have daughters. Cindy's 19 and Marcia's not quite 18. Marcia was married. Now this new Location and Support stuff, which is what Bob is doing, is all there to find her ex-husband so that they can put the screws to him for the child support money."

"And both of these women are working?"

"No. My case load is just the A.D.C. cases where the mother isn't working. Roy has the working mothers. So Marcia, who is working, is Roy's case. But she was my case before WIN got her that job. And she still comes in to see me when Cindy comes in. Like I said, they're almost inseparable."

"What happens to the working woman's kid while she's at work?"

"The kid stays with Cindy."

"But what if Cindy wanted to go to work?"

"Luckily, she doesn't."

"Why 'luckily'?"

"Because Marcia's attachment to that kid is just about scary. It didn't leave her sight until she first went to work. And then she almost backed out about three times for fear of leaving it."

"And you don't think Marcia will go out to work if Cindy isn't home to take care of the kid?"

"Right. Marcia is all right. And I hear back from the WIN office that she's doing fine at her work. And I can understand her attachment to her child -- especially under the circumstances. Then maybe my outlook has gotten all stilted because of all the mothers I run into every day who treat their kids really crummy. But there's something that doesn't seem healthy about the way Marcia holds onto that kid."

"Well, man, there isn't anything you could do about it even if you could figure it out. Meddling social workers, you know."

"People are no damn good," I said, almost shouting, as I walked back and forth in the yellow light of Jake's kitchen. Looking down to the street below we could see the bundled-up idiots popping into the bars before the sun set and left them stranded in the streets, shivering and sober. "Even the people who work down at the office are no damn good. There was a guy on the Service staff, a college graduate with a B.S.W. and a \$10,000 a year job, who left the office a couple of weeks before I came to work down there and they're still trying to straighten out the mass of screw ups he left in his case load. This guy left active cases out on top of file cabinets long enough for spiders to spin webs to them and for enough dust to settle on them for you to be able to write your name on them with your finger and have anybody read it from across the room. He'd been making service payments to foster homes for about forty kids the agency hadn't had custody of for up to eighteen months. And that also tells us something about the honesty of the people who run foster homes for us. None of them said anything. They just cashed the warrants."

Jake blinked when I grabbed the pack of cigarettes from the table in front of him. After I grabbed a cig and tossed the pack back, he pulled one out too, and lit mine with his match. Then he leaned back in that dinette chair. "And then you were

telling me last week about the secretary who showed up drunk," he said.

"Well, I found out that wasn't an isolated incident. I heard she comes to work smashed all the time. You know, man, this stuff just gets to me. These people aren't even capable of showing up to work and turning out the stuff every day. They just let everything ride because they've got problems or because they're underpaid. I just..." I paused and looked out to the street again. The street lamps were on, but they were widely scattered and a couple of them had burnt out or had been knocked out by young, drunk rock tossers.

"What makes you stay on? What possesses you? You're obviously not happy."

"Maybe I'm not happy. Maybe the whole thing has just got me mesmerized. I'm no jerk idealist who thinks he can have any effect on the process. But if I'm inferior to the problem, I'm certainly superior to most of the rest of the people working down there. And that's a sort of added responsibility. I've got to just bang away at it for fear my leaving will look like weakness to the other idiots, or it will throw the cosmos out of whack or something."

There was a silence while Jake looked out the window and I just stared.

"Listen," I said. "Forget all that about superiority. I'm not even sure I believe that. It's a sort of comforting shuck, especially since I don't have a reason."

"You aren't happy," Jake said. "Isn't that a reason?"

"I'm not happy or satisfied and I don't really think I'm doing any real good. I'm just stretching myself. I'm just demonstrating to myself. I'm just testing myself for myself." I paused and looked at him. "I don't know what I'm doing."

Bob and I had been friends. He was always telling me about specific raw deals that he got and I'd always hear him out. He was so sensitive to this stuff that he almost always had a load of complaints to dump. Consequently, his company was not

always enjoyable. In fact, after a while he got on Barb's nerves so bad that she began to avoid the Friday evening suppers out that we were in the habit of going to with him.

And then one day in his office he and I had a falling out. Up to a point, I could take his complaining. He seemed to want to keep testing the limit -- to see how much harping he could do and how close he could come to lumping me with the "them" he constantly referred to. Eventually he got to the really touchy stuff and wouldn't leave off. I was telling him that I thought he was putting too much emphasis on the competitions between workers on the basis of time in and out on particular units of work. He began to badger and try to buffalo me: he quoted Lucille; he forced through some of his own estimations about time taken on each procedure; he kept demanding my explanation for the rationale behind time studies. Worst of all, he cut me off in mid-sentence several times and continued to rush the pace of the discussion. Then he told me that I shouldn't let myself get too flustered. Dick walked in, but Bob continued, saying that emotion held up my thought process. I said that I didn't know I was that upset. He snickered and said that I was the only one who didn't -- that I always turned bright red as I was now, whenever I was this defensive. I left.

And that was the last of that friendship, really. The funny thing was that nobody down at the office ever tumbled to the split. They kept on referring to us as if we were some sort of unit, and neither of us straightened them out. At least I didn't and I saw no evidence that he did.

But the thing is, I saw almost nothing of him. We always nodded and smiled when we passed in the halls. A couple of times we had coffee together. Once Bob called us up on the phone and asked us out to supper. We went and got along satisfactorily, but we didn't get beyond small talk and we didn't get together again after that.

He started missing work about a month and a half after that last dinner. One

day I did ask him if he'd been sick and he just nodded towards his chief, who was standing a little way down the hall talking to Don, and said "I've been getting fed up," and that's all I heard on that subject.

Three weeks later he came around and announced to me (as he did to almost everybody) that he was leaving the agency at the end of the week.

Now Bob had made a lot of enemies, so the Friday noon going-away party wasn't all that enthusiastic. The gift committee bought him a pen stand with his name and the agency's initials engraved on it. So, about 4:30, while everyone else was leaving, I walked down to his office. I sort of felt obligated.

He was packing up when I came in. "Hi," he said. "Hi," I said. Then I sat down in the clients' chair and watched.

He was sorting all of his stuff into two batches. The crud was going into the waste basket. The things he wanted he was stuffing into an army green plastic trash bag. He went on for a second and then he said: "I could have gone on, you know."

"Sure, but if there's anything else to do, you know..."

"Yeah, well, I was getting pretty lonely, really."

Then, after a second, I asked: "So what are you going to do now?"

"Well, I think I'll move into K.C. for a while and get another office job. But business, this time, with an expense account for lunches, and all.

In another minute I wished him good luck and then pushed on to my office where I got to work figuring some case budgets.

"...so let me make a couple of suggestions. First of all," I said, "I'd like to see us have a uniform weekly schedule. One of the reasons the girls up front get so confused all the time about when we're to be disturbed and all is because we all take appointments at different times, have conferences at different times, do our desk work at different times -- we just have completely different schedules. Now

Quality Control wants us to have twelve more hours a week up for appointments. And for some of us, that should be easy. But I've already got twenty four hours a week assigned to appointments. An even distribution would give us each twenty hours a week. That's not bad. After all, we are all doing pretty much the same work. The other way that this would be helpful is that it would allow us all to have the same hours open on any one day for conferring among ourselves.

"And then the other deal that I want to suggest is a patterned 114. It takes me as much time to write my letters each week as it takes me to do everything else put together. I'm sure our typists here will agree that they spend most of their very limited time typing those letters up. Now I was thinking that we could save a lot of time if we had a 114 printed up with five or eight of our most regularly written messages. It could have boxes off in the margin so that you could check any one or combination of several messages. Then every day what you'd do would be check the right box (if the message you wanted to send along was on the sheet), sign your name, and send it on to the typists with a note giving just the case name. And that would be all there would be to sending a 114.

"Those are my suggestions."

Lucille said, "Are there any comments?"

We -- we being the IM staff -- were all in the conference room having our weekly conference. Harry was still away, so Lucille was chairing the meeting. Besides the IM staff, our two much-overworked clerk typists were there. It was getting close to the end of the day, but Dick was still nibbling on a sandwich. During my pitch he'd crushed the thick plastic carton it came in. The noise annoyed me.

"Of course, I'm new so I don't understand all the ins and outs," Jake said, "but it sounds pretty good to me. Could we get the money to have the 114s printed up for us?"

"It's really only pocket cash. And there is an agency provision for local forms," I said.

"Well," said Don, "it doesn't sound bad, as long as it all gets done through channels."

Then Stan spoke. "Well, I hate to be the spoil sport, but it's just too pat if you ask me. Now the first thing with the schedules and all doesn't take into consideration that we really aren't all the same and that our case loads really aren't all the same. I mean I know that some of us need a lot of time with any given client just to extract the smallest bit of information, but then I don't think I should have to forfeit any of my planning time to make up for someone else's inability. I mean that's just too simple minded. It -- well I can tell you, it's a nice idea, but that's the sort of thing that always gets to me. anyway -- all the simplistic ideas that don't really settle anything. They just contort everything so that you have a new mess altogether.

"And the other thing, the thing about the 114s sounds like more of the same thing to me. I don't write the same letter to all of my clients. And I certainly don't write the same letter in the same circumstances that some of my colleagues would write. And I don't want to get to the place where we're just a big impersonal outfit that turns out the same computer chain letters that the junk mail people do. I mean not that we're going to do anything like that, but there are just so many things in the way of this proposal. Like where is the money coming from and why are they giving it to us? And how are we going to let the secretaries know which message and which client gets what 114? And what messages are we going to have printed and who is going to write them? But most of all since most of my clients can't read anyway, how are they going to know what to do? And how impersonal can we get, anyhow?"

I gritted my teeth and then lifted my eyebrows while the lids flicked open and closed about thirty times real fast.

"I've, ah, got a couple of questions," Jake said. "They are questions for, ah, Stan. The first one," he looked down at his legal pad, "is why would one have to

use all scheduled appointment time in appointments? It seems to me that if your clients don't make appointments to see you, then you should be able to do any other agency work during the time you had left available to them.

"My second question is how do your clients that can't read know what to do when they get you l14s that you personally write up now? It looks like a system of checked selections on a form letter would be advantageous when dealing with an illiterate client. He could simply learn what each of the five or six messages meant ahead of time and then count down to the check to find out what message was intended."

Stan said: "Yes, but that's assuming that they'd memorize a pattern of messages. They aren't going to do that. And as far as how do they read the letters now, well, they take them to friends who can read. And I've been here long enough to have met most of those readers. I know what to write to make an impression on them."

"So why don't you volunteer to write the form texts?" I said. "Really, I'm surprised at the hoopla."

"You think it's hoopla?" Stan said. "Well, I'm sure that your intentions are the best and all, but this really reeks of the stuff I'm beginning to see the agency faced with more and more. Impersonalness is the thing here. What happened to personal responsibility? This is just hiding out behind assigned schedules and form letters. We're all getting to the point where we don't do anything but push paper around. Well, I don't know about the rest of you, but I think that's low. I want my job to be more than paper pushing. I want to do something to better the damn country. So I can't stand the cynical outlook that says let's reduce the work to filling out the forms. There's got to be more than that."

"And there may be, somewhere," I said, "but not in this job. All I'm trying to do is go with the flow. Now I admit that checking the right box is not as personal as writing the letter, but I'm hoping it will give me more time, not to see my clients in, but to clear my desk with, so that I don't always have women calling me up day after day and telling me about how their kids slept in the park the night

before and can I please open their case or am I happy I shut the money off? I'm tired of all of that. And I need to save some more time just to do the basics of my job. And, we're down to two typists. Now they simply cannot type every 114 for the whole unit. I think they can type the 114s not covered by the form and type the envelopes for the form letters. So as far as the impersonality thing goes, I guess I'm guilty, but only because I'd rather be impersonal and be sure I've done everything than be Mr. Charm and always be six weeks behind. These suggestions should help me catch up and I figure they can't really hurt anybody. Let's face it: schedules and forms are the order of the day, so I just tried to make some of them work for us for a change." There was a pause. "What do you say, Lucille?"

She laughed. "It all seems pretty silly to me. I understand the effort you've made to make us all more efficient, but I end up saying, with Stan, so what? What are the advantages? It seems awfully simplistic to me, too. I mean the first thing is really going to change absolutely nothing and the second thing is a whole lot more involved than the system we now have. Besides, the real problem we have here with the 114s is not that we are incapable of writing them, but that we don't have enough typists. Why don't we figure out how to get more typists from the State instead? Then the typists could type up any letter form which you had already given her and then had indicated in the assignment. That's the way the agency was set up to handle the situation.

"Now I've known you long enough to give you some credit and to assume that you would not make these recommendations unless you had some reason for thinking they'd be to our advantage. But these are just nice ideas. There isn't any bite to them. There isn't any inspiration here. These are not new, fresh bursts of conception that will lead us to any new ways of understanding what our jobs are and how we can best do them. I think we'd better table this until next week."

And we went home for the day. The next morning I was in Jake's cubicle enjoying my brief coffee break. He brought up the meeting.

"Listen, man. I'm sorry they jumped on you like that. What was it that got Stan going?"

"Bob disliked him. And he knows that Bob and I were friends. Stan's so paranoid that he probably thinks we spent hours discussing him."

Jake said, "What was it that Stan didn't like about your suggestions?"

"I don't know. Maybe all it was was that he knew they were my suggestions."

"O.K. That makes sense if he had it in for you for something. But you and Lucille have always been friends. Why'd she jump in on you?"

"For several reasons. For one, she must be getting used to me, while Stan has been here just about long enough to get the New Kid In Town plus. Another thing is that he took me by surprise yesterday and my asking for her comments gave her a chance to take me by surprise again. Drama is a sought-after commodity. She may also have seen this as her opportunity to debunk any brown nosing stories that have started up about us. For the last couple of weeks I've been fighting that a little by feigning a little disrespect and she may have taken that act seriously and decided to get back at me for it. But the important thing to remember is that Lucille wouldn't have done that at all if she had understood that this was a shoot out between Stan and me that had nothing whatsoever to do with the issues I brought up in my suggestions."

"What you ought to do is explain to her."

"There are a couple of reasons why I can't do that. One of them is that the reason you admit you have superiors is so that you can accept their errors and pretend that you believe there may be some reasoning beyond your comprehension which led them to act the way they did. That may be a stupid way to proceed, but that's the way the game has been lined out.

"The other thing, of course, is that the good guys take it. The socially inept and the evil dish it out and the good guys take it. The jerks are not apt to respond well to anything you do. So you put up with it all. And the more you take, the

more they dish out. But the more you take, the better you are."

"No, man," Jake said. "The more poison you absorb, the more poison you are."

"That's where we diverge," I said.

The car finally ran. For years I'd been doing and having done all the preventive maintenance. But the car simply would not respond. It was no damned good. But it was no worse than any other machine.

One morning I was driving myself to work. I came down over a long curving hill. As I looked out from the crest I could see miles of wet grey fall morning. The rain was coming down in moderate volume, but steadily. It was chilly.

The highway was a divided four lane. Just ahead was a flat three-mile stretch approximately halfway to the town I worked in. The traffic was light.

Then, right after the car lost its downhill momentum, it started to lose power. Pretty soon it was struggling, even to go really slow. I pulled to the shoulder. The engine died.

I had just gotten the car out of the shop, so I was cursing. I got out to look at the engine. I stepped out into about four inches of water. All the way back to the engine I was walking in water over my shoes. My socks were soaked.

I lifted the hood. First I traced and checked all the wires. Then I fiddled with the gas feed. I sniffed. That was all I knew to do, so I slammed the hood closed. It was then that I caught my finger, but I didn't really notice it then.

Back in the driver's seat I was able to immediately start the car. I got it back on the road and cheered. It died and stopped before I could get it completely off the road.

I got out again, sighing angrily, and ran to the back of the car. I started to push. I had to get the car off the road. I got it onto the shoulder.

Then I leaned, head down, against the back end of the car. I cursed as I tried to catch my breath. When I heard a car go by, I wondered what I looked like. But I didn't move. Looking down, I saw rain, oil, and a growing little sample of blood there in the crumbled asphalt and the sand. It was then that I became really aware of a pretty awful sting at the end of the middle finger of my left hand. When I looked at it I saw that I'd taken a little under a quarter of an inch of the finger and all of the nail off when I'd slammed the hood shut. Somehow that didn't seem like a big deal. I looked back down at the liquids. They weren't mixing. And even considering the heat that built up and then burned off as each big drop of too red blood swelled and fell, none of those liquids seemed to be of any importance. They were just not the same. And they were near each other. And none of them seemed to be bringing the asphalt back to its original shape, that's for damn sure.

I looked up. Then I walked very calmly to the door and let myself into the driver's seat. Without thinking about it, I wiped my finger off onto my rain-soaked, mud-splattered pants. I turned the key. I pumped the pedal. My stomach muscles tightened. The car struggled to the top and started. I controlled myself and, letting the clutch out ever so carefully, let the car roll carefully onto the road. I went very cautiously at first. Then, slamming the gears, I egged it on to work.

Three months after I'd left the agency, and a full year after he came, Jake quit. He had no plans.

Jake, I'll tell you, man, there are three kinds of friends. With the first batch, you are equals. That's like I was with Bob. But, despite the fact that that sort of thing can work out fine, if your friends who are your equals are around you all the time, you'll always be fouling each other's plays. The only way to be friends with an equal, after a couple of months (or at most a couple of years), is

in recollection and at a distance.

The second kind of friend is somebody who is better than you. Those things never work because nobody is ever better than you, so you have to put up with a whole lot of phoniness.

The third way to be friends with somebody is when you're better than they are and smarter than they are. But then you screw up their lives by either having them learn everything for themselves or by trying to lead them so they don't go into anything without the benefit of your experience. And it screws up your life because you start living vicariously.

Those are the only ways I can think of for people to be friends. That doesn't, of course, include lovers and brothers, which are completely special relationships. And since we don't fit into any of the categories I've outlined and since we're not lovers at all, that must make us brothers. I'll like to think of us that way.

All I can tell you is that the outlook is generally bleak. I'm no longer sure that anything ever was or ever could be necessarily better, but what we've got now doesn't seem to be so hot either. What can I say?

The only thing I can tell you is that I feel a lot of warmth for you. Despite the fact that we aren't probably ever going to see each other again or talk to each other again. Surely that warmth should convince me that there is some reason for all of this. I'm not sure I can honestly say that it does.

But it has been good to know you. I'll think of you every once and a while and it'll cheer me up. Try not to worry too much about not laughing it all off.

AFTERWORD

In writing "On the Take" I used a technique I call "structural fragmentation." By that I mean the construction of stories from bits of action or, on occasion, of description as building blocks. Gaps of white space, rather than conventional expository transitions, are used as the mortar to hold the fictive structure together. The gaps allow the reader to prepare for new times and settings in each new segment, but the order of the segments should suggest chronological order.

I had read fiction which used structural fragmentation long before I began to use it, but I did not consciously try to ape that fiction. Evan Connell wrote Mrs. Bridge as a series of story segments, none of them directly dependent on information conveyed in earlier appearing segments. The effect of the book is emotional and thematic, and plot is not a very important consideration. A year after I read Mrs. Bridge I encountered William Gass's "In the Heart of the Heart of the Country," a little less successful attempt at doing a similar sort of thing with the short story. I noted the technique but did not then apply it.

I spent the first few years I wrote short stories turning out bits and pieces of interesting fiction which was always trapped in a mire of bad writing and very bad plotting. No matter how many times I rewrote stories I never managed to satisfy myself, but I did have several portions of stories that I felt should not go to waste. Three months before I began writing my report I found myself in need of a story to fulfill a class assignment. I had noticed that the story portions I liked were thematically related; so despite the fact that the units did not share setting, time, or character, I put them in order of increasing dramatic tension and typed them up (leaving six space gaps between them) and counted on the theme to tie the segments together. The tone of each segment was its reason for inclusion, usually. That experiment was a wild one, but the effects of structural fragmentation were

remarkable enough to make me recall Mrs. Bridge and "In the Heart of the Heart of the Country" as works in which the technique was used. In fact, I was so struck by the effects of fragmentation that I decided to write my Master's Report using it as a further experiment. My intention here is to describe some of the effects of fragmentation and to offer examples from "On the Take" to illustrate the uses I have put it to.

It seems to me that when a story line is made up of these fragments the story itself closely resembles any set of memories, so that fragmented stories are formally very like a series of recalled experiences. Some of my own most vivid recollections are of events that happened long ago. I can remember small details of incidents which happened to me as long as twenty-five years ago, but I cannot remember anything of what occurred five minutes or days on either side of those incidents. These are bright islands in the monotonous grey sea of the past. And so these recollections resemble in form the segments of story which make up "On the Take." Each segment is like one recollection. In that admittedly limited sense, a story made of bits of action or thought laid next to each other without any transitions between the segments is like a run of memories, each following because something in the one before it (perhaps a thematic association) triggered its recollection. In "On the Take," something happened to cause the one remembering to think about his experiences as a social worker.

Structural fragmentation tends to emphasize what is dramatic in a story. I felt a great need for drama in my fiction just before I began my experiments with fragmentation. My stories, for the most part, describe everyday events and incidents which are not inherently exciting. Life or death struggles and races, high passion, monumental sacrifices -- such things simply do not occur. But with structural fragmentation the events I use are more striking. I think there are at least two reasons for this. First, fragmentation makes the fact of incident selection apparent to the reader. If the writer chooses this to tell me, the reader thinks (at least subconsciously), there must be some reason for its inclusion. Consequently,

events which would ordinarily be considered almost unworthy of notice are charged with importance because they are selected for recounting. Second, I discovered when using fragmentation that the differences in emotional energies and intensities between different fragments could be played up by abutting them. This creates drama in the form of dynamic contrasts. One case of this in "On the Take" occurs (p. 35) when the story moves abruptly from an emotion loaded conversation between two friends after one has been under attack in a meeting of a committee they both belong to to a discussion of the repair status of the narrator's car. When I began using such sharp contrasts I found that the resultant jarring shifts acted to emphasize the differences between the segments. That, coupled with the obviousness of incident selection (and so of incident importance), focused the attention of the reader on each segment a little more completely. The reader spent a little more energy on each segment so each event was a little more vivid, emotional, and striking.

Finally, the suspension of the incidents between white-space gaps suggests, parallels, and emphasizes the emotional isolation of the protagonist/narrator in structurally fragmented fiction such as Gass' story, Connell's novel, and, I think, "On the Take." In fact, it may be more true in "On the Take" than in the others. My story starts with a speech made by one of the narrator's colleagues. The reader is asked to begin reading the story in the middle of a sentence in the middle of a speech which may have been going for some time. There is no friendly conventional small talk or even any statement of a new discovery or fresh grievance which prompted the diatribe. The narrator's contacts with most of his fellow characters are quick and business-like and not at all social. Several segments (as for example that beginning on p. 9) end with a line from an unresolved conversation. It is also true that the narrator pops into and out of his clients' lives with little or nothing in the way of social transition and when he is working on someone's case he is privy to very personal information about them and is making very important

decisions about their lives. The "Tucker" segment (p. 17 ff.) is an example of this. He meets with the woman for just a few minutes and agrees to get assistance for her and her family (several of whom he never even meets). Then on the basis of some information he picks up from another worker he begins the process that will stop the Tucker's income. He gets selected information about his clients and gives the reader selected information about himself. He does not have complete friendships with his fellow workers and the reader does not get complete conversations between them. He is ordinarily out on his own making do with glimpses of people and their lives and trying to understand the whole on the basis of the parts he can see. The reader is left to make sense of the little bits of incident that make up the story.

II

In the half year before I wrote "On the Take" I read, reread, or saw the works on my report bibliography and each of them influenced the writing of the story in some way.

Winesburg, Ohio made quite an impression on me. I suppose it most affected my report because it is made up of short incidents which do not directly depend on information we have gotten in earlier incidents. We learn about the protagonist by focusing in on other characters. And the most devastating events Anderson describes are not inherently exciting events but rather almost everyday occurrences. I think I have tried to imitate the tone of Winesburg, Ohio in "On the Take" and I know that the idea that a small midwestern town could be a good setting for fiction was important to me.

The midwestern setting is prominent in "In the Heart of the Heart of the Country" and in Mrs. Bridge. These works (particularly the latter) share with Anderson's book tone as well, but I think the application of structural fragmentation in them is what was most important about them to me.

Ford Madox Ford's The Good Soldier and Joyce Cary's The Horse's Mouth are examples of masterful uses of first-person narrations in which the reader is able to understand things in the story which the narrator cannot. I was least successful in writing "On the Take" when I tried to let the reader know something the narrator didn't know or couldn't make use of. In the segment taking place in Jake's kitchen (p. 13 ff.) the narrator stops not because he finds himself taking his frustrations out on Jake but because he is tired of lecturing him. I do not think a reader would be aware of that distinction. But this fails because I failed to make proper use of the techniques Ford and Cary used so well.

From Raymond Chandler's The Long Goodbye I took some of the story's theme (the impossibility of certain friendships) and the story's tone. I tried very hard not to take up his tendencies of using overblown description and forgetting to tie up the secondary plot lines.

The protagonist in the film Blow-up is something like my story's narrator. The lives of both are built around their work. The work itself is not glamorous but it leads them into other people's lives at dramatic junctures. Neither of the main characters maintains warm relations with his fellow workers and each rather pities his main friend.

III

Most of the writers and works discussed above were no more than general influences on me while I was writing "On the Take." On the other hand, because of their use of structural fragmentation Connell and Gass were important influences when I wrote the story. But I have used fragmentation differently from either of them. Gass gets poetic effects using the technique. His incidents are various and colorful and recounted in a very poetic, occasionally even high-flown language. My incidents involve only a few drab settings and the language in my story is pedestrian

inasmuch as the narrator is himself pedestrian in his use of language. Gass's story is about the isolation of his character from his sweetheart, who does not appear in any of the story's incidents, and from the people in the small town the story is set in. Those fellow residents appear in the story, but they do not speak and they are little more than observed phenomena. In "On the Take" the story is about the narrator's isolation from his fellow workers and from his clients. These people not only speak and act so as to directly affect the narrator, they actually take up more of the story's space than he does.

Connell uses fragmentation very differently. In his novel the segments of the story do not depend on each other. Fact from one segment is rarely important to another segment. Few characters appear in more than one segment. In "On the Take" the fragments depend on each other in a couple of ways. First, the effect of the story depends on the dynamics of abutting segments having very different emotional intensities (and this I have discussed above). Second, several characters and a rationale for action (the narrator's reason for continuing to work at the welfare office) reappear in various segments and are, in fact, developed by their recurrence.

What I think I have done, then, is to produce a story which explores themes and uses techniques that can be found in other people's work, while all the time manipulating what I had learned so that the final product is totally my own. To what extent I have been successful in writing a good story, though, is not for me to say.

LIST OF WORKS CONSULTED

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ON THE TAKE

by

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B.S., Kansas State University, 1974

AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S REPORT

submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

1980

"On the Take," a short story about 6,500 words long, pretends to be an edited version of one man's recollections of his days as a young social worker assigned to the Junction City, Kansas, welfare office. He retells incidents involving ten or so young men and women who were his friends at the agency. Also included are sketches of his ordinary day then and of the procedure for determining applicant eligibility. The segments of the story are each fairly short and the verbal transitions which would ordinarily link them have been replaced with white-space gaps. The use in this story of this fictive techniques, which is called "Structural Fragmentation," is discussed at some length in the critical Afterword which is included. Besides the use of "Structural Fragmentation," the Afterword concerns itself with the influence certain novels, movies, and short stories (all of which are listed in the bibliography) have had on "On the Take."