

ON THE TAKE

309

by

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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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