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To anyone who thinks it's

got to be bad enough to be fifty-six years old and four months unemployed, Bill Roubideau would like to say guess again. They have to go and put the welfare office in Coney Island. To anyone who's been buying the hype about Coney Island "recovering" to the point where middle-class people are going to start rolling in there with kids in the back of their SUVs like it's some kind of *Disneyland*, he'd like to say *keep dreaming*. And to anyone who might have bet that he'd wind up standing in the rain in Coney Island waiting for the welfare office to open at this stage in his life, he'd like to offer his congratulations: *you must be psychic*. On TV and in the papers the reporters acted like it was news that all the decent jobs were going overseas, but even before his accident Bill hadn't felt like he had any kind of job security in years.

The line is a mix of white, Spanish, and black people. There's an SUV parked at the curb with Chinese people sitting inside. After a few minutes they send somebody out to stand in line for the group. That's the way the Chinese are, very group oriented. That's why they're still hanging on to communism when just about everybody else in the world that had it has kicked it to the curb. The smell of food reaches Bill a few seconds after the van door opens. They're eating take-out in there. Sitting in a late-model SUV while they eat take-out, and waiting for the welfare office to open so they can apply. To anyone who sees something wrong with this picture, Bill Roubideau would like to say *the line forms here*.

Of course, even the Chinese aren't as communistic as they used to be. The whole week the nightly news has opened with pictures from a town over there where a mud slide buried a school. Nearly all the children inside died. Now the parents were showing up at the site with signs that asked why the school was the only building in the area to collapse. They cried when they talked to reporters. Some of them held up pictures of the kids. You could tell from the poses they were school pictures, and Bill had noticed that most of the kids weren't that good looking. Faces only a mother could love. But he had to agree that probably the worst thing that could happen to anyone was losing a kid. Even though he'd never had any, that he knew of.

A demonstration like that in China was something new. Before, if any of those parents had showed up asking questions and talking to reporters, they would have been shipped off to brainwashing camp. At first watching the reports he'd thought, *poor bastards*, like it couldn't happen here, but you only had to remember Katrina to realize that the story was really the same everywhere. In Katrina they just bussed the people out after the devastation, and left it to them to find their way back if they could. *Fat chance*.

A skinny guard in a blue suit finally beckons them in. Spanish guy. Nice looking, mid-

thirties. And like Bill does all the time now, as he walks past the guard he asks himself, *would I take that job?* He thinks he'd go crazy, all day long telling people: "Stand on this line, you're on the wrong line, you should be on that line." But the Spanish guy is working. He's got health benefits and a regular paycheck. What does Bill have? *Don't answer that.*

The same guard stays with them all the way upstairs, into the elevators and out onto the second floor. At the end of a long hallway they come out in an open area where a lot of plastic chairs are set up facing a counter. The way the guard talks to them while he is showing them where to go and when to stop makes Bill feel like he's being processed for jail. Which is not mean or harsh like you might expect. More like the guard knows he's dealing with a group of people who don't have a clue to what they're in for. It's the KISS treatment: Keep it Simple, Stupid. And yes he knows what that's like because a long time ago back home he got into a fight in a bar. Not for the first time, but unfortunately that time there was a bat handy and he used it. The other guy was in a coma for two weeks, and Bill served six months. *So who suffered more, he still wanted to know?*

On the way past the counter he hears somebody on the phone, but the counter is too high to see the person. He can tell it's a female and that she's black. He tries not to make any assumptions from those facts, but it's not easy. He reminds himself that where he comes from the people are sweeter, black or white, they just are. Up here it's a different story. He'd swear all the races drank rude juice before leaving the house in the morning. *All* the races, so that meant he wasn't prejudiced, right? Unless you could say that he was prejudiced against northerners and leave it at that.

Bill is one of the first people in the line outside, and the guard does a pretty good job of maintaining that order on the way upstairs, so he doesn't have to wait too long before it's his turn. Two Spanish people have just left after their consultation and are still carrying on in that language. He eases up to the counter and starts to explain how he got hurt washing out bottles so he could store leftovers in them. The accident didn't happen on the job so he couldn't get workers' comp, but he was cut bad enough that he hasn't worked in months. The glass severed a tendon in his right hand. His hammer hand. The woman doesn't think to ask him if he was drinking when he was washing out the bottles, and he doesn't volunteer that information. Bill is always, *always* polite because that is how he was raised and he feels like he has to set an example for the people up here, but before he can get the whole story out she says, "Stop!" Stop? He didn't hear her tell the people who went before him to stop, and neither of them was a native speaker of the language. Her face is puffy and she's wearing a wig that doesn't fit right. She looks like hell in fact, but somehow she is in a position to tell *him* to stop.

"I don't need all that information now," she adds, like that was something Bill should already know. She slaps a form onto the counter. "Fill this out. See what it says here? Don't leave anything blank. That means don't leave *anything* blank."

He's still trying to show her how it *ought* to be done. "This for me?" he says, smiling, to show her that despite her attitude he's not about to forget *his* manners. "Thanks, thanks a lot. Where should I bring it when...?"

"Hold up, hold up," she says; "You're just one person. All these people got stories to

tell. I'm not the right one to tell them to. Listen to me: fill this out. Don't leave anything blank. Put it in this basket when you're finished. You'll be called."

If her aim is to humiliate, it works. At one stage in his life, yeah, if there had been a bat handy, he might just have used it. He isn't proud of the impulse, but a bat sure took care of the humiliation problem. As it is, he just looks around to let her know that he could count plenty of witnesses in the immediate vicinity. She doesn't seem impressed, and as he heads back to his seat, he realizes it's probably because she already knows the way everybody's eyes will slide off his as he passes. *You didn't see me here, and I didn't see you.*

Bill glances through the entire form before he starts filling it out. It depresses him to think how some people are answering the questions. *Yes a teenaged mother lives in my household. Yes I have a child with a severe disability. Yes I have made one too many bad moves in life and ended up here in the welfare office in Coney Island.*

Could be worse. After the incident with the bat everyone decent that was still talking to him wrote him off, and he knew he had to get out. People teased him when he told them his plans: *Ain't you leaving that a little late?* Most people were in their twenties when they made their big move, and he was well past that. But Bill knew he'd never get clean if he didn't quit New Orleans. On the bus ride to New York the scene of his return played constantly in his head: how everybody would stare when he drove back in a late model car with a good looking woman in the front seat to show them all how wrong they'd been. That was twenty-two years ago. He can't even remember the last time he'd tried to picture his homecoming. Now he is two months behind on his rent and couldn't afford the fare home on a Greyhound.

He fills out the form. He doesn't leave anything blank. When he walks up to put the form in the basket he tries to catch the clerk's eye to smile at her but she keeps her focus on her computer screen. He can see her point. Burnout would come pretty fast in a welfare office. *Everybody's got problems.* Don't waste your time or hers. She's not the person you tell them to.

Back in his seat again he takes a glance around. A few people have kids with them, but they're quiet. Maybe because it's early. Kids might still be sleepy. Or maybe they've caught on to their parents' vibe and realize it's not the kind of day to be calling attention to yourself. Now he sees why the Chinese people with the SUV are here. They all look good, nice clothes, kid's got a video game. But Grandpa's with them too and he looks pretty out of it. Maybe they want to put him in a home. It would probably cost more than the damn SUV parked outside to keep him in one for six months, if they paid for it themselves. All that kind of thing must be free back in China.

Bill remembers seeing photographs of the orphanages over there in a *National Geographic*. They always had a subscription because his mother thought it would help him and his sister do better at school. He remembers one picture that showed a whole wall of babies sitting on potties. They were all fed at the same time too. And they didn't seem to mind. They got used to it, until that was what they liked. That's why the whole family is here with Grandpa to apply for welfare. The other old people in the room are alone or with

one other person, usually a middle-aged woman. That's the American way, individualism: *You're not a weakling; you can do it on your own!* And the Chinese are fed the opposite: *You can't do it alone, we have to do it together!* His sister Suzette always hogged the *National Geographic* issues that had anything to do with archeology: mummies, pyramids, old bones. Now she worked for a big oil company, telling them where to dig for oil. Which was another kind of buried treasure when you thought about it, so his mother was right about the *National Geographic*. At least in his sister's case.

Bill liked reading about the Russians. Probably had something to do with all the Russian spies that were in the movies and on television at the time. From Natasha and Boris in *Bullwinkle* to the spies that Emma Peel and Napoleon Solo went up against. For her own reading his mother got the *Readers Digest* condensed books, and one time when he was home sick from school he read one about the last tsar's family. That story hooked him: the way Rasputin controlled the mother through the hemophiliac son. The way the tsar's enemies used the fact. He was only a kid, but he picked all that up from that book. His mother was very impressed. That might have been the last time she praised his intelligence, that he can recall.

Bill hasn't seen a *National Geographic* since high school. He wonders if they still run many features about the Russians. He wouldn't be surprised if the government pressured the editors to run those stories back then, just to remind the public who the enemy was. He could remember some of the photographs from those articles too. A picture of a very large woman in a very small bikini at a beach on the Black Sea. Kids up in the Arctic Circle getting light therapy. People lining up for shoes (or bread, or cheese, or vodka) that were all the same. Writers sitting in over-furnished rooms to exchange books they weren't supposed to have. You were meant to look at the pictures and think *that would be awful, I'd never want that*. Now he wasn't sure it sounded so bad. You were never alone; you knew where you belonged; you were guaranteed food and a place to live.

Of course that might be sour grapes talking. He wasn't supposed to end up here, in the welfare office in Coney Island. Not with a father who was the most successful insurance salesman in six parishes, so good he got a new Cadillac every year. Golf and cocktail parties every weekend. Got on the horn when his son graduated from elementary school and called in a couple of favors so Bill could attend the best Catholic high school in New Orleans despite his poor grades. Old man thought that would protect him from the drugs that were becoming so common. *Wrong!* If anything the Catholic school kids had more, because they had the money to buy more. Bill was smoking weed regularly within a month of starting high school. He started taking pills his senior year. But he'd been drinking since seventh grade.

The priests were regular visitors at the house on Sundays after mass. Father Darcy was his favorite. He liked gin and orange juice or a Tom Collins. Sometimes Bill got the job of bringing around the tray. After his first sip, Father Darcy liked to say: "Now that's fortifying." *Some great example for a kid*. When Bill took the tray back to the kitchen he'd finish what was left in the pitcher his mother used to mix the drinks.

And of course his father was an alcoholic, though nobody ever used that word inside the family. How many times had he come home from school to find Bill Sr. sleeping one off on the couch? But his old man managed to make good despite his addiction. Big

house, new cars, entertaining priests. Maybe Bill would have been able to do the same if drinking was his only problem. Coke was the nail in the coffin; he'd like to meet anyone who could say no to coke once they tried it.

There's an elderly man at the counter now who's causing some kind of problem, but Bill is too far away to hear what his complaint is. The guard starts over, but by the time he's reached the counter the argument has ended. The old guy stalks off but the guard remains at the counter, not saying anything, staring at the wall of windows on the other side of the room. All the blinds are half-closed, so there's not much to see. The guard might be skinny, but he looks pretty fit. *There's nothing like a man in a uniform.* The last person Bill heard say that was one of the queens in the Quarter. It was around Mardi Gras, and fake uniforms were everywhere. Bill hadn't exchanged sex for drugs or money for years when the queens started dying, but it spooked him anyway. By the time he left, the public campaigns were in full swing. AIDS for the natives and SIDA for the Mexicans. He put off getting tested until he got to New York anyway, half-believing the result might come out different if he got far enough away from the scene. And then he'd felt so strange when the results came back negative. Almost nostalgic. He'd never get so drunk and stupid again. He'd once let a queen fuck him for a leather jacket. *I'd look better in that jacket than you*, he said; *you know you ought to give it to me.* And the queen said: *That may be true, but right now it's on my back, and if you want it you're going to have to let me ride yours.* He saw it as a dare, and everybody knew Bill Roubideau never walked away from a dare.

He'd never have done it if he wasn't coked up. Something else everybody knew about Bill Roubideau: women were his thing. Business women looking for diversion at the end of some three-day conference. Girlfriends on vacation from their husbands and families back home in dullsville. College girls on spring break. Easy to pick up; easy to drop.

The incident with the bat happened around Mardi Gras too, after days of drinking and drugging. He was eligible for job training when he got out of jail. He had two choices: commercial diving or construction. He didn't see himself fixing oil rigs underwater, so he chose the construction program. Construction workers always looked good, didn't they? Of course at the time he was only noticing the young ones. Now he realized how bad the older guys looked—big guts on almost all of them. And they complained all the time about their backs and knees. He still looked pretty good, but he was going to have to start doing sit-ups soon if he didn't want to end up in the same shape. Not that anybody but himself would notice. He hadn't been with a woman in a couple of years. Not since Katrina. He was with someone he met at an AA meeting when that disaster started coming on the news. She was all right at the beginning. But when the story from New Orleans dragged on and on it was like she was *obsessed*. Kept asking him if he didn't want to call his mother to make sure she was all right? He got sick of telling her that if anything happened to his mother his sister would call him. At one point she even offered to buy him a plane ticket so he could go back and help. He said he'd be too upset seeing the destruction up close, but the fact was all he felt when he saw how much of the city had been washed away was relief. He felt sorry for the people who died or lost homes, but deep down he was grateful. Now the place couldn't haunt him anymore. No one would

know if he didn't make it back there in a late-model car with a pretty woman in the front seat. Relief and a sense of being on the upside of misfortune for once. If he couldn't live there he didn't care if anybody could.

The sound of heels in the hallway diverts his attention. A group of Russians walks in. Three guys and a woman. Bill knows they're Russians because their voices drift back to him. The men are all dark, with short hair and black leather jackets over new blue jeans. But he doesn't notice much more about the men because the woman they're with is breathtaking. Her eyes are wide set and her lips are full, two things that he knows from reading a *Time* magazine article are considered beautiful everywhere in the world. Her hair is so pale that it's one shade shy of being any color at all, and long. She sounds like she's complaining to the men about something, but then he thinks there is something about the Russian language that makes all their talk sound a little mournful. The guard points to the counter and she starts forward, with the three men around her like secret service; all they're missing are the wires. She's wearing one of those hats that look like someone used half a bear to make it and her coat is some other kind of fur, very white and fluffy. Now the men are speaking, and he thinks their Russian makes them sound like bears. Disappointed bears. Ronald Reagan called them that. He said we shouldn't wake up the bear, or let the bear in, or something like that.

They don't stay too long at the counter. They get a form and start walking toward the chairs. The woman's coat is open, and underneath she is wearing a tight-fitting white sweater, white jeans and thigh-high beige boots. All the prostitutes and trannies in the Quarter had those boots one year. *Do a little dance, make a little love, get down tonight, get down tonight.* She is holding the form like it's a platinum credit card application, and not something full of prying questions to get you to spill your guts about your sorry past. She's tossing her hair and looking around like she's squeezing this visit to the welfare office in between appointments with the hairdresser and her personal trainer. He's starting to get her perfume. He knows he should stop looking at her. He's been in trouble before with people who thought he was coming on to their women, and these guys don't look like they'd think twice about working him over. But he can't help himself. It's like he's starving and she's the first food he has seen in a long, long time.

Then something happens. As the woman approaches Bill's row, the form slips out of her hand and sweeps under his chair. For an instant he feels like he did it, he made the paper fall. He bends down to retrieve it, trying to think of what he can say when he puts it into her hands because all of a sudden he's not feeling so sorry for himself anymore. He's feeling pretty good. He's thinking: *I've pulled women better-looking than her...!* But that doesn't last. As he's reaching for the form he loses his balance. He sways a bit and has to use one hand to brace himself against the floor, and one of the men she's with laughs. Then he wants to stay down there until they go past, but they won't do that unless he returns the form, naturally, so he swings up. "Here you go," he says, falsely cheerful, holding it out to her. His voice sounds a little choked so he clears his throat even though he has nothing else to say. She blinks at him. *Do I need to notice you?* One of the guys sticks out his hand to intercept the form. The woman smiles, faintly. *I am beautiful, aren't I? But I am not for you.*

It's hard keeping his eyes forward after that. He wants to track the Russians' progress

through the hall, but if even one of them glances back to find him staring after them the humiliation would be unbearable. So instead he thinks about how the room he's in was constructed: how the cubicles were put together, and ceiling panels hung. From time to time a worker drifts forward from the offices at the rear of the floor to exchange a few words with the woman behind the counter. Before retreating these people gaze out over everyone waiting in the chairs, like judges before a competition begins. They don't say anything—no free evaluations. Finally a door opens in the row of offices off to Bill's right. A woman comes out and fishes around inside the basket. Lifting out an application, she reads the first name.

Bill starts to compose a story he can tell people when he finally goes back to work, about the woman coming to the welfare office in Coney Island wearing thigh-high boots and furs. He will say someone else told him the story so they won't know he'd also had business in the welfare office. At the close of the tale he'd repeat the moral he knew they would draw from the story: *Can you believe that? They learn where the welfare office is even before they can speak the language!* The local boys would appreciate the slur, all those bambinos with their family connections in the union. As though that wasn't another kind of welfare. But there was nothing they liked better than hearing about how the immigrants were ruining the country. Of course they clammed up when the crew included Jamaicans. *Eye-ree*. Whatever the hell that meant. Sometimes he couldn't understand a word the Jamaicans said, but at least they worked, didn't come here and go on welfare.

He supposes the Russians were proof that the end of communism wasn't all it was cracked up to be. Because if getting rid of communism was so great, how come they were all coming here? Maybe everybody was better off before. Bill knows he can't be the only American who misses the old Russia, the place that seemed like a reflection in some kind of magic mirror. Like in one of those children's books he remembers his teachers reading aloud, where everything is just a little off. The hero only realizes he's stepped into the mirror universe when his mother offers him ice cream for lunch and tells him if he finishes every bite he can take a tiny piece of broccoli for dessert. The Russians had been such good rivals in everything—sports, space travel, military. He guesses the way things were going, China was the new rival. Their economy was booming. Plenty of jobs in China. The next Olympics was going to be there.

The last Olympics Bill could recall in any detail was the one where Olga Korbut won so many medals. He wasn't home much by that time, but for that Olympics he'd stick around to watch. The games were something else his mother thought was educational, so they were always on. His sister loved Olga Korbut, but Bill preferred the other one on the Russian team: the big dark one who never smiled, whose family lived in Ekaterina berg. That was where the last tsar's family was killed, except maybe for Anastasia. He remembers looking at all the Russian gymnasts to see if any of them resembled the photographs of Anastasia in his mother's condensed book about the last tsar. If she had survived they might not have told her who she really was. They might have decided to let her blend in with the population, marry, have children and grandchildren. One of them could be in the Olympics. Bill always enjoyed the little biographies they did of the Russians during the games, showing the athletes' everyday lives, all bundled up walking

through the snow with their families, and then inside their small apartments where they lived crammed in with rugs and sofas and old fashioned lamps. He remembers thinking the rooms looked very cozy. *I wouldn't mind that at all.*

Bill gets called in for his interview. Another black woman, but this one isn't so harsh. He pulls all the hospital paperwork out of his wallet and hands it to her. She frowns while she's glancing through the papers, and he gets a little worried. But then she sighs, and silently folds them up before handing them back, so he figures he's okay. She seems a little skeptical about what he says the union said it could do for him after his injury, which was nothing, but once she gets past that she seems to think he might be eligible for some kind of benefits for a short period of time. She asks him when he thinks he'll be able to work again. Bill tells her that he's been showing up at the hiring hall for the last couple of weeks, but there wasn't anything for him since he still can't grip a tool for more than a minute. She says he needs to get some physical therapy, and also that he has to show up at another city office to be interviewed for a job or training, or he won't continue to get benefits.

"In case you haven't heard, this isn't the old welfare," she says.

He can't tell if she thinks the change is an improvement or the worst thing to ever happen in her line of work. She tells him that once he's approved he'll get a benefits card instead of a check: "The stores where you can shop have machines, and you swipe the card in that and then you type in your number."

He says, "Sounds like a credit card," trying to make a joke to show his appreciation for what she is doing for him, getting him set up. He grovels a little bit, humiliates himself, for no good reason. She doesn't appreciate the effort.

"Not really," she says, wearily. So that's that.

When he gets outside her office, he looks around, but he doesn't see the Russians. His first impulse is to wait to see if they come out of one of the other rooms where the interviews are held. But in this kind of place someone might ask him to move on since his business is completed, and he doesn't want the woman to see that. So he leaves, finding his way back to the elevators and downstairs where the guard who let him in earlier is talking with another guard. There's a clock on one wall and Bill is shocked to see that he's only been inside the place an hour. An hour and ten minutes ago he would have seen that as a positive, but now he wishes the process was a little less efficient if it meant he could see the Russians again.

The rain has stopped. Bill decides to go up on the boardwalk before walking to the subway to take a look out at the water. It's not like he gets down here that often, and he doesn't plan on coming back again real soon. Not if he can help it.

The boardwalk is in pretty rough shape. It looks like someone's taken an axe to it, splintered everywhere and big chunks missing in every direction as far as he can see. He picks his way over the gaps to the railing. The beach isn't completely deserted: there's a man with a dog, and another man without one. He looks out at the water, gray green and calm today, not a lot of breakers. A container ship, far out on the horizon.

The view reminds him of a writer he'd seen on TV a few days earlier, promoting a new book. Something called *The Earth is Flat*. This was on channel thirteen, so Bill knew better than to think the writer had missed the social studies lesson about the mistaken belief people once had that ships would sail off the edge of the world if they went too far from home. But he was curious about what the writer did mean, so he paused to listen. It turned out that all he meant was that if somebody in India can do your job cheaper than you can, and if your company fires you and hires him, then somehow that is good news for everybody. That was his theory, the flat earth theory.

Now Bill looks out and tries to make himself see the horizon as a kind of drop-off point. He can't do it; you can't forget whI was born hereat you know, *you can't stop progress*. He guesses that's as true for the Russians as anyone else. They can't go back to what they were before. And we can't go back to having them that way. That's when he thinks he understands what the writer on TV was talking about, maybe better than anyone in that studio or anyone listening at home. He ought to write his own damn book. His book would say: It's true, the earth is flat now, really really flat, because in China the children get buried in mud after somebody looks the other way when their school is constructed, and in New Orleans the levees break, and the Russians are here with us, down in Coney Island at the welfare office. That's the real flat earth society.

Bill heads back to the staircase. He's looking down at the boardwalk to avoid stepping into a hole so he doesn't see the Russians until they're just about to come over the top. There's no time to adjust his stride and he ends up face to face with the woman on the top step. Automatically, his standard reaction to such encounters kicks in: *I was born here, why should I be the one to move?* But she yields and steps around him. Shamed, he shifts; they end up facing each other again. She laughs and he smells her cosmetics. They are the expensive kind, even warmed by her breath they smell fresh and light. *Empty my pockets, take all I have.*

One of the Russians bumps into him and he steps aside. They've already moved off a few steps when he hears himself say, "Why don't you lose that trash and come with me?" He says it the way he would have in a club at Mardi Gras, half joking but half serious, and up until the last couple of years before he left, it worked. Believe it or not, it worked, more times than you would imagine, with all kinds of women: the ones in town for conventions, the ones on package vacations; all eager for an adventure so they'd have something to tell their friends when they got home.

One of the bears wheels around to look at him and snarls something. He'd welcome a punch; hell, he'd rather go down fighting. But the woman makes an appeal and they turn away. *He's no threat.* He steps after them, frantic to say something that will bring them back.

"Hey—mother fuckers!"

Now all of them turn around at once. The woman's forehead creases into two soft rolls and he can hear that mournful voice trying to draw them off.

"Hey, why don't you fuckers go back to Russia where you belong!"

One of them is coming for him; he's forgotten how fast an angry man can close in. The first punch lands. He staggers back. *This is more like it.* He tries to keep the woman in his

sights, *Anastasia*, pleading for his life. Another punch and he's falling, his brain reeling with the effort to find the words that will make them stay angry enough to beat him senseless, the flat earth rising up to meet him on his way down.

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