

Word Count: 3,082

Row 12

The front doors of the unemployment office wouldn't open for another fifteen minutes. Karen was twenty-fifth in the line that wrapped around the building. She could see the front doors from her vantage point, and like the rest of the Friday group she could picture herself anywhere else on that sticky August morning. She'd been in the same line every other week for the last four months. She applied for work but the only jobs available were retail sales jobs at minimum wage. Rich said any job she found had to pay more than unemployment. Before the layoff she'd made almost ten dollars an hour, pretty good for no degree in 1983. With so many mills shutting down, she doubted she'd find a position that paid that well.

To pass time in line people drank coffee, read newspapers, smoked, or talked. Stop-n-Go's profits remained steady. People left their spots (not before asking that their place in line be saved) to form groups of former co-workers and friends. She didn't see anyone she knew. There'd been a good number at first but each week the number grew smaller and smaller until this week when she'd known no one. She wondered how many of her former co-workers ran out of weeks. Benefits ran twenty weeks but then so many people were out of work the government extended it to thirty-nine weeks. After that, nothing.

The humidity trapped the cigarette smoke and it hung in a fog above them. She'd never taken up the habit and didn't understand it. The man in front of her inhaled with a sense of desperation. He sucked at it, trying to get as much nicotine as he could before the doors opened and the wait inside began. Others finished with a quick drag, not bothering to exhale through their mouth. They ground their cigarettes into the scorching sidewalk, their anger validated by

the butt's paper membrane shredding away to reveal a once snowy-white filter speckled with sickly caramel colored streaks. A few, resigned to the wait-and-shuffle of an unemployment line, flicked smoldering butts into the adjacent parking lot, ignoring both the sidewalk beneath them and the ashtrays placed every few feet.

The sound of the bottom of the plate glass and aluminum doors clacking and scraping against the concrete caused a quiet hush to descend followed by murmurings, as people reclaimed their "spot." The concept of personal space ceased to exist as the crowd moved towards the doors.

"Finally."

"Sorry. Didn't mean to bump you."

"Hey, how about picking up the pace up there?"

Voices rose then quieted as they reached the bottleneck of the opening and filtered into their assigned rows.

"Good to see you, even under these circumstances. How many weeks you got left?"

Once inside the building, smells associated with a lack of personal hygiene, stale beer (or whiskey), and cigarette smoke that clung to clothing made Karen hold back a gag. She looked around to be sure no one noticed. She didn't want to offend anyone, especially not anyone standing around her.

The overhead fluorescent lighting caused everyone to pause and squint as eyes adjusted to the dimness, still blinded by the early morning sun. It reminded Karen of driving into one of

the tunnels on the parkways: Everyone slowed down. Four large exhaust fans, not of much use other than to create an illusion of cooling, hummed as they rotated back and forth in each of the building's four corners. The addition of sweating bodies to the already sweltering room thickened the air.

Inside was like any other government office: tile floor, the only evidence of having been mopped in the way streaks of dirt formed patterns across the floor, institutional furniture and men in white shirts and ties, reporting to their desks, carrying stacks of manila folders as people queued into their assigned rows. More government workers, mostly middle-aged women, manned the windows at the end of each row, the numbers one through twelve on placards above their heads.

Karen's social security number ended in a five, which meant she reported on Fridays and because her last name started with an L, she reported to row twelve. Her row wasn't too terribly long yet. She figured that she should get to the window right about ten thirty, her assigned time, as long as nothing unexpected happened. She always tried to get to the window at or right after her time.

Once she'd come extra early, first in line, but they'd refused to let her sign up. They told her she was too early and sent to the back of the line. She did as told. It was embarrassing to walk past the people behind her and see them shaking their heads, some even smiling. Eventually she learned to time it out and, if she happened to reach the window before ten, to let people go ahead of her. If she was there on the correct day, and in the morning, why did it matter what time she got to the window? It was degrading. She turned to check the clock.

Still hours away, she dreaded seeing Rich when he got home. He didn't understand why standing in line for what he called 'free money' wasn't enough for her. She shouldn't have mentioned her plans to register for the Dislocated Workers Program at the community college. He had no idea what it was like to be in the unemployment line. There was always work for master electricians, he said. She didn't argue with him but she knew the truth. He had his own company and didn't hesitate to lay off workers when the jobs slowed. He called the shots at work. He was a call-the-shots kind of guy.

When she brought up school, his response felt like more of a threat than a vote of confidence. It frightened her and she didn't know why.

"An associate's degree? Why? There's no jobs out there for someone with a two-year degree, and besides, you probably wouldn't even finish. As long as it doesn't affect your unemployment check, go ahead, sign up. You've got nothing better to do. Besides, if you manage to get a job that brings in more than me, I'll quit. You can support us for a change."

His words bruised but hadn't devastated. Going to school would change things. The thought, frightening as it was, exhilarated her. She felt the same when she thought about him dying. At first, she felt guilty wondering what life would be like if he died but she justified it away as something she should think about, to prepare for it.

She imagined finding him on the bathroom floor, just after he'd showered. He'd clutch his chest, still breathing, his eyes full of fear and desperation. She'd call 911, the EMT's would arrive and she'd follow the ambulance in a frantic drive to the hospital where the doctor would take her aside and gently explain that he was gone, that there was nothing that they could do, did she have anyone she could call? The house would fill with food, flowers, and family. They'd

insist on staying with her. She'd wear her black suit (her only suit) to the funeral home and be the widow receiving condolences while he lay in a casket behind her. The more she thought about it any sadness and guilt were replaced by a surreal sense of relief.

A loud voice brought her back to the present. A man a few rows over yelled to the man in front of her.

“Stan, what the hell are you doing here? I thought you'd be one of the last to go.”

She knew the people in her row and 'Stan' hadn't been in line before. He was new and that irritated her. He'd ask a lot of questions and slow down the line. His hair, coal black, shiny and in need of a washing, hung well past his collar. He wore welder's greens (she'd dated a welder once and recognized the 'uniform') that were streaked with oil and grime. He looked and smelled like he had come straight from changing the oil in his car, or more likely, his truck. He could have at least showered and put some clean clothes on. Then again, on any given Friday there were a dozen men there, some shaven, some unshaven, who needed a bath.

Stan waved and nodded in the direction of his former co-worker.

Recognition and reunions were inevitable. When someone new showed up, plans were made for coffee, lunch, or a couple beers. Mostly just a couple of beers. Men who defined themselves by their occupation hadn't yet given up on returning to their old life. Keeping up with what was happening at the mill, with what management was up to, helped them hold onto their hopes of being called back and more importantly, hold onto their dwindling sense of self. For Karen there'd be no news. Asema Machinery, a small family-owned business, went belly up. She'd started there straight out of high school as a filing clerk and worked her way up to

invoicing. All she had was a few years' experience and no college degree. Rich was right, no one would hire her.

Her thoughts were interrupted when the shuffle towards window twelve began.

"Next." A woman's voice called from behind the window.

Karen watched as the man at the head of row twelve headed towards the woman at the window to answer the questions they were all there to answer:

"Were you able and available for work?"

"Did you work and if so, do you have earnings to report?"

"Have you registered with JobCorp?"

Only idiots said no to the first and last question. Honesty in the answering of the first and third question wasn't appreciated by the government workers doing the asking or those waiting to say 'yes' to all but the one about work and earnings to report.

It never failed. Within the first fifteen minutes of entering the building the first idiot of the day had approached the window. A collective groan went through row twelve as the young man began arguing with the woman at the window. The kid would learn just like the rest of them. A no-win scenario. He finally gave up and walked over to sit in one of the orange plastic chairs. It would be late afternoon before he would move to one of the green pleather-clad chairs and explain to the man at the desk why he was unavailable for work and learn, that as such, would not be receiving a check for that week.

To pass the time Karen looked around to see if there was anyone she knew there. Men outnumbered the woman two to one. She hadn't any occasion to know any of the mill hunks. A couple women dressed as she had: scoop-neck cotton t-shirt that clung to a sweaty back, jeans and wedge heeled sandals. Most were her age and by the way they flirted made her doubt if any were married. If they were, it wouldn't be for long. A few women, who probably had interviews after they signed up, wore big shouldered business suits with bow-tie blouses and pumps. How could they stand pantyhose in this heat? They kept to themselves and she surmised that they thought they didn't belong there, that they were better than everyone else. Maybe if she got a degree she could wear a suit and heels to work. Be better somehow.

She counted three women with children that morning. Women who brought small children had it the toughest. The one closest to her, two lines over, kept a tight hold as a little boy squirmed and fussed in her arms, until she tired of the struggle and the seemingly endless wait. She sat him down for a moment's relief. The look of exasperation on the mother's face conveyed that she expected the brief respite still wouldn't lessen the fidgeting. She attempted to hold onto the child's hand and threatened him with no television. They began a tight dance, the little boy twisting in circles as his mother tried to keep a grasp on his forearm. Finally, he managed to break away by reversing direction, forcing his mother to let go. He fell to the floor, crying.

The mother grabbed him by the hand to pull him up. He broke away for a second but as she grabbed the back of his other wrist he swung around and clipped his mother in the face. She reacted without thinking and raised her hand to strike him, but caught herself.

A voice from behind Karen startled her.

“Go ahead, smack him. That brat needs his ass whipped.”

Humiliation in the form of a flushed redness swept up the neck and across the mother's face as she looked up to see who made the comment. The rows quieted for a moment but were soon replaced with murmurings in judgement of the mother's ability to parent. Karen looked down, face warm, not wanting to witness the mother's shame.

An older woman in the row next to Karen turned and said, "Mind your own goddamn business, Ed. You don't even have any kids. Your wife couldn't even stand you. Let the poor woman alone. She has enough on her plate without having to listen to your yapping."

All eyes in the room turned towards the man, Ed, and waited for his response. Karen became more and more uncomfortable. She just wanted to get to the window.

The security guard took an interest in the two's conversation and began to walk in Ed's direction.

"What's going on? Is there a problem?" he asked.

"No, nothing at all," said the man whom Karen presumed was Ed. "That's the problem."

The men around him snickered.

"Look, do you want to go to the back of the line and start your day over?" The guard's face, ruddy to begin with, turned an ashy red. "What, nothing to say? I thought not—just mind your own business and keep your mouth shut."

Afraid that the Ed person would swing at the guard, Karen stood perfectly still, staring down at the floor, intent on remaining invisible. Fights at the unemployment offices weren't unheard of.



The little boy quieted, aware of the tension in the room. He plopped down on the floor in front of his mother. She looked around her to see who was watching then quickly picked him up. Without meeting the eyes of the people around her she hurried towards the door.

The guard held the door open for the mother and child. As the door closed, the murmurings returned.

It was 11:58 by the time she reached the sign-up window. She watched the clock, silently urging the woman to hurry and ask the questions to the greasy haired welder so she could sign her benefits card before noon. She'd already had specialists shut the window in her face when the clock struck noon and she didn't want to waste more time than she had to. Most of row twelve behind her had already left—one or two, hopeful that Karen would be quick, remained, but she'd be the last one signing that morning.

Twenty or twenty-five files sat stacked to the right of a large woman in a white polyester blouse with silkscreened bouquets of navy, pink and purple flowers blossoming up around her double D breasts. Her blond hair was teased up in the front, stiffened by layers of hairspray to form a wall separating her bangs from the back of her head. Her desk was no more than a shelf below the window. A pristine copy of *A Duke in Danger: A Barbara Cartland Romance* lay on top of the file cabinet behind her with a half full mug of coffee, creamer clumps floating at the top, next to it. To the woman's left sat a considerably smaller stack of the files; files of those already seen that day. Karen handed her the benefits card and waited.

“Karen LaBanz? Where's your sewsh card?” without ever lifting her head to look up.

“Yes, Ma'am. Here.”

A robot could do her job, Karen thought as she handed the card to the woman, and probably without an associate's degree. The wavy glass panel above her shook as specialists on either side closed their windows, ignoring the hopefuls who remained in line. Dejected, the hopefuls complained among themselves as they turned and headed to where the security guard waited to lock the door.

The woman checked the cards against Karen's file. Satisfied that she had the documentation needed to confirm her identity, she returned Karen's social security card. She asked her the questions, not stopping to pause in between for Karen to answer.

"Yes, no, yes," Karen replied, mostly out of habit, not realizing that she matched the woman's pace and how that might sound.

The woman, wondering if she had been mocked, was obviously displeased when she finally looked up at Karen.

"You being smart or something?"

Without waiting for a reply, the woman stamped two dates and initialed each line. She returned her social security and the dog-eared benefits cards to her and spoke in a tone that removed any doubt as to whether or not there'd be further conversation.

"Sign here and here," she pointed to a spot to sign for each of the prior two weeks.

"Don't lose your card. We'll see you in two weeks unless you get a call-back. If you do, call the number on the front and report your return to work date."

Karen signed twice, once for each the previous two weeks and then thanked the woman for working into her lunch hour, even though it was less than five minutes time. She never knew who she'd have at the window next time and she didn't want the woman thinking she was ungrateful. The guard locked the door behind her and she made her way past people who weren't lucky enough to beat the clock, waiting for the office to reopen at one o'clock.

She sat in her car a few moments, windows down, air conditioner on high, while considering different routes that she could take to the community college. She'd sign up without Rich's approval. He would be mad but what's the worst he could do?

She closed the windows, shifted from park to drive after deciding on the most direct route.