

Out-of-Work Line, 1980

Dumped on the curb after teaching seven years at Wayne State, I became a regular down at the Detroit branch of the Michigan Employment Security Commission. It didn't matter when you arrived. The line began a step inside the windowless, steel doors of a squat one-floor building and weaved snake-like from side wall to side wall. A security guard kept the line of us in shape, weeding out stray drunks and other casualties of the recession, shepherding newcomers with stricken faces to the rear.

Yesterday I gave the guard a nod of recognition. This was my 54th week of collecting unemployment benefits and surely I'd earned that right. New applicants sat in folding chairs off to the right, awaiting interviews, chin on chest, like bundles dropped from the ceiling. Now and then, a defeated temper tantrum would signal a lost form. The rest of us just smiled knowingly and yawned.

The line inched forward like a parade of dominoes. One golden rule preserved order. No one who arrived later than another ever left earlier, and with that systemic fairness came a remarkable acceptance of delay. The minute hand on the wall clock would leap abruptly ahead, sucking us into a backwash of lost connections. By now my losses included my wife and friends, as well as colleagues at Wayne State, but others here had lost much more: health, even identity. Most of us just stared at the floor or ceiling as if reading a message from God. Some talked quietly. Paperbacks and newspapers bloomed. Others just checked each other out, taking a fresh look with each weave of the line.

Two weeks ago a man just ahead of me, upon reaching the counter to collect his check, turned with a glance at his watch and announced, "One hour on the dot."

"That's not bad," I said.

"No, sir," he said with an ambivalent grin. "Not a bad hourly wage at all."

The trouble was we worked only one hour every two weeks.

The line showed no sign of malnutrition yet. *Those* people were caught in the crevices of the city, in neighborhoods and states of

mind beyond the reach of monetary relief. But we were the mainstream. Ahead of me was an elderly couple, behind me two brawny men who'd been pumping a lot of iron. The line was a democratic blend of chemists, secretaries, carpenters, auto workers, businessmen, teachers, you name it. We were united by a common bond of bad luck and stoicism. You had the feeling a lot of talent and character was going wasted in this line.

Beyond the far counter was an acre of metal desks, a zone where spirit slumbered as employees of the state of Michigan processed our claims under sallow ceiling lights. They offered no incentive to rejoin the world of work. Their skin was blanched from reviewing so many forms, and at times they seemed paralyzed with their noses in manila folders.

The crush of numbers over recent months had expedited matters at the counter. "Have you had any income this week?" "No." Always the same question, the same reply. I'd done a little freelance journalism and ghostwritten testimonials for a shady weigh-loss clinic north of the city—undeclared work for small change—as had many in the line. Yet we met with no suspicion these days and passed through like clumps of snow falling off a roof.

Conversation in the line veered toward the basic: the weather, the Tigers, abrupt firings, the job hunt. "I packed the family in the van and went to Texas," a man told me last week. "Nothing down there. Texans ain't so friendly either. They tailgate Michigan license plates, drive you right off the road. We came home."

You overheard little talk of politics in the line. People seemed reluctant to link their joblessness to policies out of Washington. But times were changing. Last month, a black man with a chortling bass voice and walrus mustache turned to me and observed, "That Reagan ain't worth two dead flies."

It was the scientific precision of that *two* that thrilled me, cinched his case.

So we continued to bounce on the trampoline as life went on, heading nowhere. Indeed, the highlight of the line for me was the kids. Young mothers had their hands full. An hour's wait in a crowded, stuffy public space could tax a kid's patience. By afternoon, the wake of crumbs and puddled milk made the footing hazardous.

Last month my 18-month-old son waited with me for two hours, then finally broke loose. He cut through the line like a shark

through a school of blues and, to accompanying cheers, was out the door. I sprinted after him, then bribed him back with a last remaining cracker.

Yet standing in line all those months was largely meditation. I had time to think about receiving “benefits” for losing my job. I didn’t object. It enabled me to survive, although not to find a job, since there weren’t any. It felt a bit like getting something for nothing, but the guilt was not crushing. It cast the “system” in a benevolent light, taking the edge off our desperation for now. It seemed to dull political rebellion. It made us a little soft, lethargic, passive. It acted like a pain-killer enclosing us in a rubber bumper as we floated through the days.

No sharp economic edges, not yet.

In this sense, unemployment benefits set us up for a nasty fall. I had one more check coming. Then nothing. Having passed through the “system,” I would no longer be counted among the unemployed, would lose even my status as a negative statistic. We all stood there in the line, in decent spirits, feeling a quiet solidarity until our time ran out and we fell into an economic black hole.

Then the struggle began for keeps.