

Cass Corridor Blues

"Junior, don't do that to the cat!", the woman upstairs is screaming at her kid. I pretend not to hear and slam the front door. Before, when I lived next-door, I thought the people who lived in this house were a bizarre bunch. Now that I live here too, I prefer to think of us as merely a motley crew.

Today I'm on a mission. Tired of being hungry and poor on my own, I'm off to seek comfort from the State. I've heard that a place near my house hands out cheese and honey to those who start lining up at roughly seven a.m.

Trying to shake that early a.m. blurriness, I can appreciate that because I've become so destitute, at least I'm not hung-over, too. Of course, my cats are getting a little tired of hardcore poverty. I convince myself that my trek to the cheese line is just to save them from a life of brown rice and oatmeal. A concoction they've noticed I won't even eat anymore.

At 6:30 a.m., my neighborhood, the Cass Corridor, is a sleepy village where yuppies dare not tread. The night trade is switching off, *i.e.*: the prostitutes are going home to change, and the homeless are waking up. Strangely enough, people I pass squatting in doorways are asking money from *me*. In answer, I jam a hand through the huge hole in each front pocket and wave my fingers.

It's a gorgeous summer morning and everyone looks depressed. No. Dead.

I can tell by the change in traffic that it is nearly seven o'clock. I see a large gathering of people up ahead and I figure it's The Line. In the Cass Corridor, people only gather for civil insurrections, or something else that's free. Since no one is yelling or clutching rocks, it's gotta be the cheese line.

Like most people approaching a long line, I walk to the front, cosmically hoping that That Line is not My Line. Of course it is, and a security guard redirects me to the back. Down the block.

"Didja bring a book?" the old guy next to me breathes all over me. You know, the kind of guy whose cotton plaid shirt doesn't match his polyester plaid pants with the crotch stain.

"Uh, no." I say, wondering if there's a special kind of book I should have brought along.

"Well, you learn. You see, a book helps pass the time" he explains helpfully. I nod, noticing that this old man with the crotch stain, whose breath smells surely flammable, is holding a work of Kafka.

Next to him are two more old people. They are arguing about the mayor, the governor, and Reagan. Both agree that the mayor and the governor don't care that we are poor, and that Reagan is an asshole.

My ears tune into more of The Line banter. A topless young man holding a bottle of brandy has just launched into a diatribe about why, twenty years after the rebellions, We The People still need to take to the streets. It begins to make sense to me that in the 1980's, it takes a walk to a cheese line to find intelligent anger. I turn back to the man next to me and we chat about Kafka.

At about eight o'clock, I get to the front of the line. I have just spent an hour discussing politics, art, theatre, and revolution with some of the most intriguing people I have ever met. I no longer feel hopeless, hungry, and dead. In fact, I feel like once I get my cheese, I'm gonna find the guy with the brandy and make a rebellion!

"...your card." A woman at the door to the neighborhood help center is talking at me. I sense she is not one of 'us'. For one thing, her clothes match.

"I have to see your card before you can get commodities." Commodities. I almost laugh. Everyone knows this is a cheese line, only people who can afford to (have something to hide) use euphemisms. I automatically distrust her.

"I don't have a card." I find myself coughing, trying to look more destitute, which is hard.

"Then you have to sign up for a card next week" she says impatiently, like an adult reminding a child of something for the nineteenth time.

Knowing my new friends are already inside and can't coach me on this one, I start to spill the whole horrible story about my recent eviction, meeting my rich landlord in court without benefit of representation (losing one's job is not a defense for non-payment of rent, the free legal aid lawyer told me), my starving felines, my buggy brown rice... And she pulls me out of line!

"Listen," she says more patiently, as I watch people who should have been me, disappear through the magical commodities door.

"You should go down to welfare and get on emergency assistance. Then come back here and we can help you."

Now that I have her attention, I start to smile my 'O.K., the State is fucking with me now' smile.

"You mean," I say slowly, and she's starting to smile now, too. "I have to have a card to get free cheese? Not only do I have to get up at six-thirty in the morning, walk ten blocks to stand in a conspicuous, humiliating line for an hour, I have to have some cosmic-karmic registration to get food that should be mine anyway just by virtue of living in this country?!"

"Yes." I watch her sad expression, and I can't figure out why she's still standing there. Finally, I decide she must be one of those beleaguered liberals who's genuinely sorry that in her quest to champion solutions, she became part of the problem.

"Oh, okay." I say dejectedly, "Where is welfare?"

Walking down Third Street, past the prostitute bars, past the piles of rubble that used to be buildings I frequented in my acidic youth, past an old guy starting up his public barbecue pit in the vacant lot where residents are growing veggies, and past the people who have lived through such oppression and depression that each breath etches new lines upon their tired (mostly brown) faces, I am ashamed that I feel so sorry for myself.

I do have three dollars in my bra, I'm not too tired to walk another mile, and I know my cats have eaten better than some of the neighborhood people. As sad and dismal as this neighborhood can look, it is a neighborhood, these are still people, and they are my neighbors. I feel my spirits lifting, as I walk the three miles to the welfare office. I am not a piece of shit, I remind myself. I am a person, someone's neighbor, friend.

I walk into the welfare office a little before nine-thirty. I nurse the beginning of a shoulder sunburn, before I step up to the counter to unload my ugly story on the already bored woman at the desk.

After writing my name a million places on notepads on her desk, she grabs a green and white one inch thick packet of papers, and writes my name again. This time it's official. It's on the green and white packet. She begins to ask me vital statistic information: address, age, directions to my house... Directions to my house? I question her.

"Ma'am, we have to be able to verify that you live where you say you do." She cracks her gum and looks at me like I'm stupid to have gotten myself into this situation, so I deserve what I get. Out of the corner of my eye, I see a sign on the counter that says something like 'this office wants to serve you with dignity', etcetera. I look over my shoulder and ask myself: if there's so much dignity given out here, then why do all these people, including their babies, look like they just came here to die?

When I tell her the directions to my house, she interrupts me to ask which part of the Cass Corridor I live in. I, a woman who lives in a neighborhood that the city of Detroit all but disregards, cannot figure out what is the significance of which side of hell I live on.

And before my eyes, she rips the inch thick packet into quarters, and says, "Sorry, ma'am. You're in another zip code. Your office is..."

Before I know it, I'm crying. My hot, precious tears, manufactured from days of eating only bug-infested brown rice and unsweetened oatmeal, are falling on the welfare counter. She is not impressed that I was evicted, ~~and that~~ I have to report to the welfare office in my zip code.

"...those ten blocks you walked to the help center put you into another zip code. You'll have to go back to your house and go to the proper office." She cracks her gum again. I don't even look at the clock as I turn away. I know the 'free' cheese ran out an hour ago.

On the same way home, I stop at the ghetto store and linger at the liquor counter. I can't believe how powerful the urge is to buy a half pint of Jack Daniels. It is now ten-fifteen in the morning, and I have never felt more like obliterating my soul.

I turn to the pet food aisle.

SUZANNE

BLUES... cont, 3

