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## Two Workers

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# TWO WORKERS

by Kenneth Lasson



I.

## A Telephone Operator

**T**he way the company used to be, that's how I liked it. Service was more personal then—you could talk to the customer, help him—and the girls had pride. Working for the Telephone Company was a good job in those days.

“Now the girls aren't interested, they don't like information. Everything is speed. My supervisor told me, ‘You give very good service, but you go into too many unnecessary questions.’ I feel if I can help the customer better by asking another question, I will. Telephone Company policy is to look up what the customer gives you, and that's it. I don't like that if you're not helping.”

Five signal lights flash and buzz simultaneously on the front board. It is nine thirty in the morning. Dotty Neal turns into her station, adjusts her headset, and plugs in. *Directory Assistance, may I help you?* No answer. Seven seconds later, she repeats it: *Directory Assistance, may I help you?* For her they are words wired together and delivered by rote, hundreds of times every day. The speaker on the line

asks for a number. Dotty Neal punches at the page corners of the telephone book, pushing through layers of K with a pencil eraser. Kean, Keane, L. Keane. *The number is listed in your directory as six four three, nine eight oh nine.* Pause. *You're welcome.* Dancing like bumblebees, her fingers move in a rhythm trained to locate and relay information rapidly and accurately. She can get to a residential listing in under ten seconds. She's been timed.

Despite the continuous look-alike rows of women plugged into their answering stations, Dorothy Patricia Neal stands out in the crowd. At fifty-one she is thirty years older than the average information operator. Five-eleven, big-boned, a hundred and sixty-two pounds, her frame dwarfs the three-sided stall she occupies, attached to the station by a two-foot umbilical wire connecting her headset with incoming calls.

For the past twenty-three years, Dotty Neal has been an operator with the Chesapeake & Potomac Telephone Company. That length of service was not

unusual when she began working at C & P. The company's turnover rate now approaches 51 percent every six months. Only four workers in this office have been employed here for over one year. But seniority offers the usual advantages: Dotty Neal is allowed to choose her hours and work regular shifts.

Ten years ago her husband bought a large wooden frame building situated in a lower-middle-class section of Baltimore near a major artery leading into the downtown area. She was born and raised in the city, and though she's traveled to parts far and wide on vacations, she's spent most of her life here. Her second husband is another native; he works for the advertising department of a local newspaper. Her kids are all out of school: three girls and two boys.

"When I first came to the company, I couldn't get day work. The only shift open was the ten o'clock swing, so I ended up working all night. I couldn't go back and forth or afford to pay someone to mind the children. Both my mother and dad worked at the time. I started at twenty-eight dollars a week. After a hundred dollars a week at the war factory, that was quite a drop. I'd be coming in in the morning just as my mother would be leaving. I'd be home to eat and look after the children, and then leave in the dark for work. I didn't get much sleep, but I guess I got used to it. I didn't have much choice then. It was one of those things you had to do.

"Course this was when they still had what they call manual-and-dial. I used to love that. People dialing would come up on the board, and the operator would press a button and a light would appear on like a little window frame. Where I was, I would get the local operator and plug in the call. That was much faster; I could handle four calls at a time in that position. And at ten o'clock when I came on, I used to take over the whole board. All the day girls would go, and the night girls would just be coming on. After twelve o'clock there weren't that many calls coming through.

"I worked at the old Gilmore Building where there were only three operators, and what you did was wear a headset with a cord that stretched the length of the room. There was a board on one side and a board on the other. They used to have what they call patchcords all along the board, and I'd go down when the light would appear and I'd plug my patchcord into this huge board. That would throw it up to the center where another girl would answer the calls. Then she'd transfer it back to me and I'd find the exchange and take one of those big trunks and plug it into the right exchange number. At that time there were about three thousand possibilities.

"I still like information best. I love talking to people, and each call is a challenge. It's sometimes hard to understand people and get out of them what they really want. Information service is one job where I think a girl has to know what she's doing more than any other. You get customers on information that don't know themselves what they want, and you're there to try to help them. Common sense is

really all that's necessary, but we've had girls with college educations that weren't as good as girls that were only sixteen years old. They had common sense and knew how to go around and ask these people questions, to pull out of them what they really wanted. If you put a girl on information who doesn't understand the system, you're bound for trouble. How can she possibly help others if she doesn't understand?

"I like it busy. I always find something to do. Usually I check reprints—they're new listings that get posted and inserted every day. Sometimes the girls really mess them up. They'll use their fingers when they're actually supposed to use their erasers to turn the pages, and they tear pages. We have extra ones, and I go around and check positions, to change classifieds if they're torn, take them off and put new ones on. There's always something to do. Every hour on the hour I take the pay count for the girls who get paid by the hour. I subtract it and I average it out for the supervisors. And any little thing like Xeroxing and typing they have, I do that too.

"Course, anytime it's busy I stay on the board. Each office has an answering average it has to maintain—this many girls to do that many calls. So if it's busy, I answer."

**T**he group chief operator or the supervisor checks in all the girls. They usually start two minutes after the hour, or the half hour, because there are girls coming in every half hour. The supervisors check to see if everyone is in her proper place, and if she's not, they check to see if she has changed with anybody. They check in Dotty Neal at eight o'clock every morning.

At the entrance to the Telephone Company building, she stops to chat for a minute with Alfred Baker, a security officer for thirty years. He knows all of the regular operators, even the new ones, but he won't let people pass unless he sees their official company badges. He checks visitors' bags and briefcases carefully. Sabotage is a very real word to the company. (*Things aren't getting any better, you know.*)

Every day Dotty Neal takes the elevator to the third floor, passes through a thick wooden door which opens to two large rooms enclosed by glass panels. In one of them there is a large array of machinery, blinking lights, multicolored wires. In the other are two long rows of switchboard stations, a young girl connected to each of thirty-five stalls. Dotty hangs up her coat on the rack outside, and withdraws her headset from one of the pigeonholes lining the wall.

Around eight forty this morning, the flow of incoming calls begins to increase. Dotty Neal gets on the board then and stays until the nine o'clock girls come. About five minutes before nine, when the businesses start opening up, the stations begin to flicker and beep. Most stores don't open until ten o'clock, but a lot of the businesses open earlier. At

nine she moves over to watch the master box for a few minutes. As soon as there are more than three lights at one time, she returns to her board. Except when she does the hourly counts, she remains there.

Two years ago a mild stroke forced her first extended absence from the company in eighteen years. For a time the right side of her face was partially paralyzed. She recovered, but the line of her mouth was left slightly asymmetrical, catching and freezing an unintentionally winsome smile on her large, pleasant face. She wears her age well under a frosted black hairdo, always well kept, and looks almost studious behind horn-rimmed spectacles. She's grateful to have recuperated and returned to work, and she shows it through a continuing cheerfulness. The only thing that bothers her face now is an extreme in temperature.

"It's an outlet for me to go to work. When I was out sick and I wanted to go back to work, my boss said, 'Are you sure?' I said, 'If you don't mind looking at me I'd better come back to work. It's getting on my nerves staying at home.' At work I have something to do.

"The company was good to me then. Sometimes I get irritated, but it's not the company, it's the office. When I was out for six months, I got my full salary every week, and then after I went back I had to go to the doctor's four times a week to take treatments. I had laid the money out myself, and it came to about four hundred dollars. The company reimbursed me 80 percent of that. They have group insurance for us.

"It was especially good to get back to this office—it's just like a family here. In some offices it's different. If you're in personnel, it's like your nose is up in the air because you make a few more dollars than others. But in this office, it isn't. Everyone is treated alike, and I think that's the reason I enjoy it."

**T**oday Dotty Neal is operating at the end of one of the two long rows of stations. The room is organized carefully. Two extended panels, each divided into seventeen stalls, form the general switchboard areas. Special-service operators are situated at a center table, and in the back corner a small glassed-in space encloses the group chief operator's office. Smaller, open desks along the wall serve as supervisory stations. There's no excessive camaraderie, mainly because of the nature of the work—operators talk to their boards. Yet the constant shift of personnel and position creates an informal atmosphere. Girls get up and walk around as they please, always carrying their plugs and wires and wearing their headsets. As in a Chinese school, everyone is reciting. The voices vary, but the words and the routine are identical: a steady chorus—constant, repetitious, chattering—contradicting the visual image of a quiet office. Here the human voice, not the clack-clack of a typewriter or the drone of Muzak, competes with the silence. Somewhere beyond the surface pleas-

antness—the efficient, programmed responses in thirty-five different tones—the voice pays unconscious tribute to the winking, flashing, buzzing board it addresses.

"I don't really notice the noise. You get used to it. You're calling out numbers just like everybody else. But I remember when things used to be different. I hated it with a passion when they first changed from letters and numbers to all numbers. It sounds silly, but if there's two letters in a listing you can remember it better than all these numbers. They just stick in your head. And now if you have a problem you have to flip the call over to the supervisor. You can't call out; you used to be able to call out yourself and it was quicker and more personal. You can't help as much now.

"I remember once (this was before we had integration in the office) when people if they were colored couldn't get help. I mean nobody—police departments, taxicabs—no one would help. This particular night—it was about two or three o'clock in the morning—I had a call from a colored guy. He was so excited I could just barely understand him. He was on a street corner, his wife was expecting a baby, and she was in labor, and he had called three different cabs. Because he was colored they wouldn't come. He told me this. I said, mister, where are you, what corner are you on, and where's your house? He told me. I said, you stay right there and I'll call you back. So I called the Diamond cab and I said, look, I'm burning up, can you help me? The dispatcher there asks why, and I told her I have a colored man calling for a taxi and he can't get one and his wife is in labor. And I said, I don't care if she's white, black, pink, or what color, she's expecting a baby and she has to get to the hospital. Can you get me a cab? She said, where do you want it, honey? I told her and said, would you please call me back when your driver gets there, because I thought they probably wouldn't do it. She said yes she would, and she did. Later the man called back. He was so thankful, and I was still sorry for him because he had been waiting at that phone so long."

**D**otty Neal glances at the clock again. It's twelve noon. She gets up, unplugs her headset, takes it off, and walks out of the room for lunch in the company cafeteria.

"I can't deny some good things come with these changes. Today we have room, and we can relax and even talk, if there's a lull in calls. Where I used to work, in the Light Street office, it was real bad. The board where you were stationed was no wider than the telephone book. You would sit right by the next girl, so that her book would actually hit your book, she sat that close; and when you had to look down the corner, your head was in her book. This particular office, they had something like forty-four positions on one side and forty positions on the other

side. The girls worked that close together all the time. We had a lot of trouble, but we still use that office.

"I guess I miss the working together as a team. There're so many different people working nowadays that you can't say you have a bond. In the old days, there weren't as many people, and there was a closer group. Telephone operators just aren't like they used to be, especially with the bigger offices. We used to do so many things together.

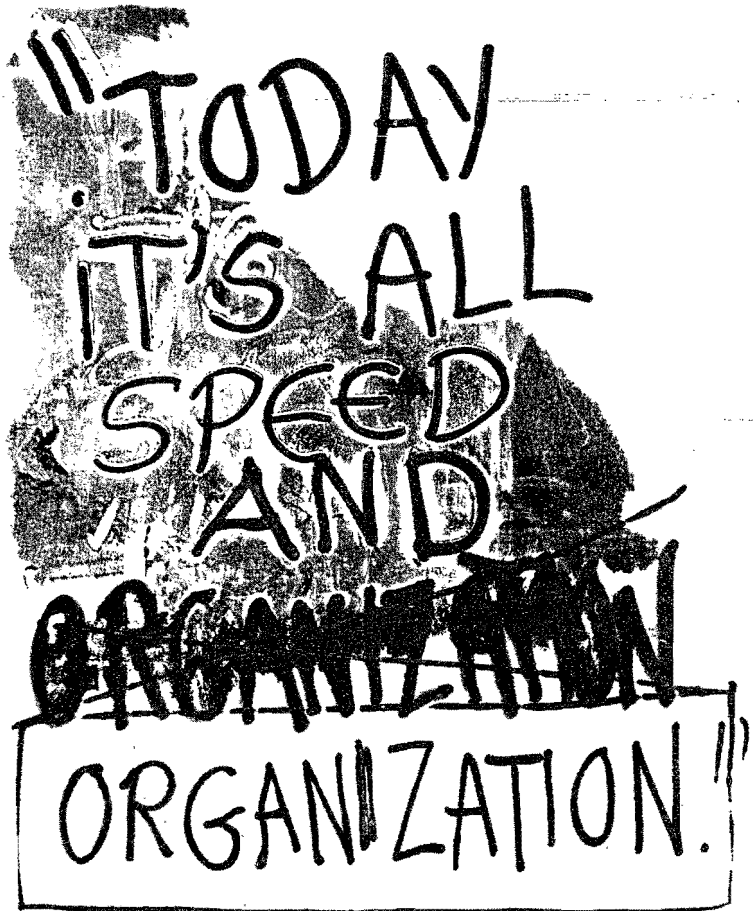
"This was before we had integrated offices. I think the company started hiring blacks about thirteen years ago. We haven't had any trouble here, and everyone works fine together. Some of the older women resent them, but the office generally is OK. Of course, now it's more black than white, but to me this doesn't mean a thing. The only thing that I do resent, and one of the reasons that I gave up supervising, is that they hire blacks because they *have* to hire them, whether the girl knows what she's doing or not. This I don't believe in. I believe in integration and I think that everybody is entitled to a job, *if* they can do the job. But to push it just because they say you must, because she's colored and she must be given a chance—that doesn't work. I say give them a chance; but to me information is a job where you're helping people that can't help themselves, and if you put someone in here who doesn't know as much as her customer knows, she can't help him at all.

"Not all the problem is hiring. I think it has a lot to do with everything being so scientific nowadays. For instance, people who are coming in now, younger people, they just don't take the interest in the job which I took. When I get a customer, I like to go all out to help him. But a lot of young people nowadays—well, not only young people, older, too—think to themselves, I'm going to give just what they ask for—if it's not there, then that's their tough luck.

"Even people working in other public service jobs are reacting irresponsibly. All these strikes in public services, I just don't believe in it. That's the reason I belong to the union that I belong to and why I don't belong to the CIO. There are other ways of settling things, especially when it's a public utility. Actually the Telephone Company has three or four different labor groups. But in Maryland we have this independent union, and I think that we have just about as much influence as the others. We had one strike when I first went with the company, but that was really just to be recognized.

"I still think that we need unions, because if you don't, then the everyday person doesn't have a chance. The boss can bring his favorites in and they get all the good jobs. I just took a test for a new position; I passed, but I didn't get it because they decided that the Telephone Company's not making enough money, and the new boss wants to cut down on expenses. So I took up a grievance.

"The union representative said, after all, you have a good fight, because you were promised the job, they weren't just talking about it. You took a test and you



passed and you were told that you had it. So right now I'm waiting to hear, because all our bigger bosses have just gotten a promotion. They had enough money to pay *them*—that was going to be our argument."

**D**otty Neal catches the light-buzzer a split second after it sounds, her arm and fingers and mind coordinated by reflex. *Directory Assistance, may I help you? Pause. There are a number of different A. Freemans listed. Could it be F-r-e-e-d-m-a-n? Pause. What about F-r-i-e-d-m-a-n? Pause. Two n's? Yes, there is an Aaron Friedmann on Redwood Street. The number in your directory is seven two seven, three five one six. Pause. You're welcome.*

All the directory-assistance operators are trained to pick up names with alternative spellings. The older women know them by rote, as well as numbers for airlines, hotels, train stations. During April, when five hundred callers a day ask for "the income tax bureau" or "the tax people," the right listing is taped on each station's board. In other months the operators know to look under "U.S. Government—Treasury Department—Director of Internal Revenue." There are a few more clues for quick search, but most of the shortcuts are learned by experience—which is why it sometimes takes customers a long while to get information. By the time the younger girls master technique, they're ready to quit.

Wandering supervisors monitor calls at random, testing for courtesy, voice tone, efficiency, length of conversation. Company policy is for "a minimum of fanfare." There's little glamour to being an operator; Dotty Neal can tell you that. She's been at it a long time now and can count on the fingers of one hand the number of calls that have been out of the ordinary.

"Used to be women could only do information, then secretary work. Now, we even have some male operators. Not many, but a few. Really throws me to see a man doin' this job. The customers always comment on hearing a man's voice. Of course nowadays women can do men's work too. Before, it was just something that women never did—we just had to teach these men that we could do it. And eventually they're going to learn.

"We have our first girl wireman—what do they call them down there?—frame hops. This girl wanted this particular job and they said no, it was a man's job. She went to the union about it, and she got it. It's the wiring part that men always do, but she was ca-

pable—she had had an engineering course—and they hired her."

Dotty puts down her pay count, takes her headset and tucks it into the pigeonhole marked *D. Neal*, and leaves; the other girls still on the boards gaze goodbye. Down the elevator. On the ground floor, Alfred Baker nods farewell. Nine hours earlier he'd checked her in. That was one hour after she used to leave, twenty-three years ago, when she worked the night shift. Eight o'clock is an important hour at the information office. Pay counts, addenda, the morning rush. But all the hours, days, and weeks seem to blend together. Twenty-three years. Dotty Neal sometimes finds them hard to add up.

"Now we have a room, we can talk when there's a lull in the calls, and we can even stand or sit while we're working. We used to have to wear gloves, and we had to have on a hat and stockings when we came in. Then you had to be a lady; everything was just so. Now we can wear anything. Today it's all speed and organization: just look up what the customer asks and tell him a number. But I still like information."

## II.

### A Garbageman

**N**ot long after Dick Cavett waves good-night to Boston's television insomniacs and the national anthem ends Channel 7's broadcast day, an alarm clock buzzes on the table next to Ray Murdock's bed. He has lived through two harsh decades of premature reveilles, but Murdock still needs the clock to shake him out of slumber. On the double bed beside him, his wife sleeps through the commotion. She learned a long time ago to ignore the noise that brings her husband to the bathroom at three o'clock every morning; a clock radio and two noisy daughters will wake her four hours later.

Murdock lets the water run cold, then splashes himself awake with a facecloth. He is thin, a prematurely gray Art Carney of a man, with hair flecked white and cropped into the short beginnings of a wave in front. His heavy blue eyes are small but expressive. One tooth protrudes from under his top lip, which gives the impression that he's always grinning.

Getting into gray coveralls and grabbing his black baseball hat from the bedpost, Murdock steps downstairs to the kitchen, where he shaves quickly and without a mirror. He is never without his baseball cap. Even indoors he keeps it hanging from a back pocket, like some lanky kid almost forty years old. Soon he is out the door. It's getting on to half past three in the morning, and dark. He pulls yesterday's garbage from one of the barrels in the backyard, slides the bag onto the rear seat of a 1966 maroon Chevrolet sedan, and drives off.

Usually Murdock's are the only headlights to be seen at this hour coming in on Route 138 through suburban

Stoughton. Seven years ago he brought his wife and four kids here, to a small white six-room house which he got on a twenty-year mortgage with no down payment.

Murdock cuts down the Southeast Expressway. At 3:45 A.M. he reaches the venerable Irish ghetto of South Boston and pulls into an all-night diner for coffee. Fifteen minutes later he leaves and makes the short drive to the fenced-in yard of Walter A. Digby, Inc., the city's largest refuse contractor. It is a chilly morning for midsummer. Murdock puts on a pitcher's jacket over his coveralls, leaves the key under the floor mat in case they have to move his car during the day, grabs the garbage bag from the back seat, and walks across the lot. He tosses the bag into the hopper of a very big truck. There are over two hundred very big garbage trucks in the yard, most of them still half full from yesterday's collection. Murdock punches his time card and checks with the dispatcher to see if he'll have to change his route today to cover any called-in orders for refuse removal. There have been two calls. With his own route engraved in his mind, he figures that this will be an above-average day: thirty-two stops.

"When I started shakin' barrels as a kid, they made me join the Teamsters. 'Course they never asked how old you were. In them days it was only 'get it up.' It wouldn't matter if you were twelve years old. I had a friend in the business and the money was pretty good, so I went in. That was around 1947. It wasn't a bad job in them days. You started at six, and the longest day we ever had was till noon. You

worked hard but the time wasn't bad, even if it was with the barrels. Me and another guy would ride on the back of a truck and jump off when we hit the alleys where the trash was. You were young then and you had the rest of the day to yourself. You could go out and play ball in the afternoons and you weren't tired. I think in those days I must have been making, for five and a half days, sixty or sixty-five bucks a week. It was good pay, and my father wasn't working, so that more or less kept the family fed. There was my parents and two sisters and me. I was the only boy. I shook barrels for another company for a while, and then I went into the service. It was 1950 and I was eighteen—just young and foolish enough to go gung-ho into the Marine Corps. Korea broke out and I enlisted. I wanted to get over there real bad. I came home a sergeant after three years in the Corps, with two meritorious decorations. I thought I owed the country something.

"When I got back I felt like a pretty big shot. I began driving a truck this time, dumping at construction sites. Dumping was still all I wanted to do. Eventually I went to work for Digby. I could have worked for him sooner, but in about '62 I had wanted to get out of trash and get into the police force. I was on the waiting list, and Mayor Collins was runnin' at the time. They just took, say, the top ten guys and used them. I was fifteenth at the time, but there was colored on my list and they didn't want to make them policemen, so they ripped up the list I was on, and I suffered. They just took, say, the top ten guys. I really wanted the job at the time."

**M**urdock dodges the black spots on the ground as he walks over to the trucks and steps up onto the fender of his to unlatch the hood covering the massive power plant. Then, removing the four-foot-long dipstick and holding it out of the shadows and in the light of big arc lamps above the garage, he reads the oil level. Company mechanics maintain and feed the trucks with high-octane gas, but it is up to each driver to see that his vehicle is well oiled. Murdock climbs six feet to get into his cab, which is a small compartment in relation to the entire rig. There is just enough room for a passenger's seat next to the driver's cockpit. When he's not pitching, he's piloting; and he views this rig, less than a few months old, more as an airplane than a garbage truck.

Actually, it's a Brockway Huskey dumper-compressor with a Leach body and two sets of gears. One stick controls the double-H pattern of five forward speeds and a single reverse; an auxiliary transmission moves in phase with the first, for difficult grades, with HI, LO, and INTERMEDIATE gears. Through the shatterproof windshield Murdock looks out over a four-foot hood fronted with a chrome statuette of the Huskey dog. On Mack trucks, it would be a Bulldog. Steel rods, for perspective on difficult steering

maneuvers, rise from each fender near the headlights. On the dash inside there is a series of safety switches, among them a solenoid toggle to power the hydraulic compressing mechanism which squashes waste material into the truck's huge stomach. A two-way radio sits on top of the dashboard, waiting for any last-minute call-in jobs. The seat is springy, upholstered in dark brown vinyl.

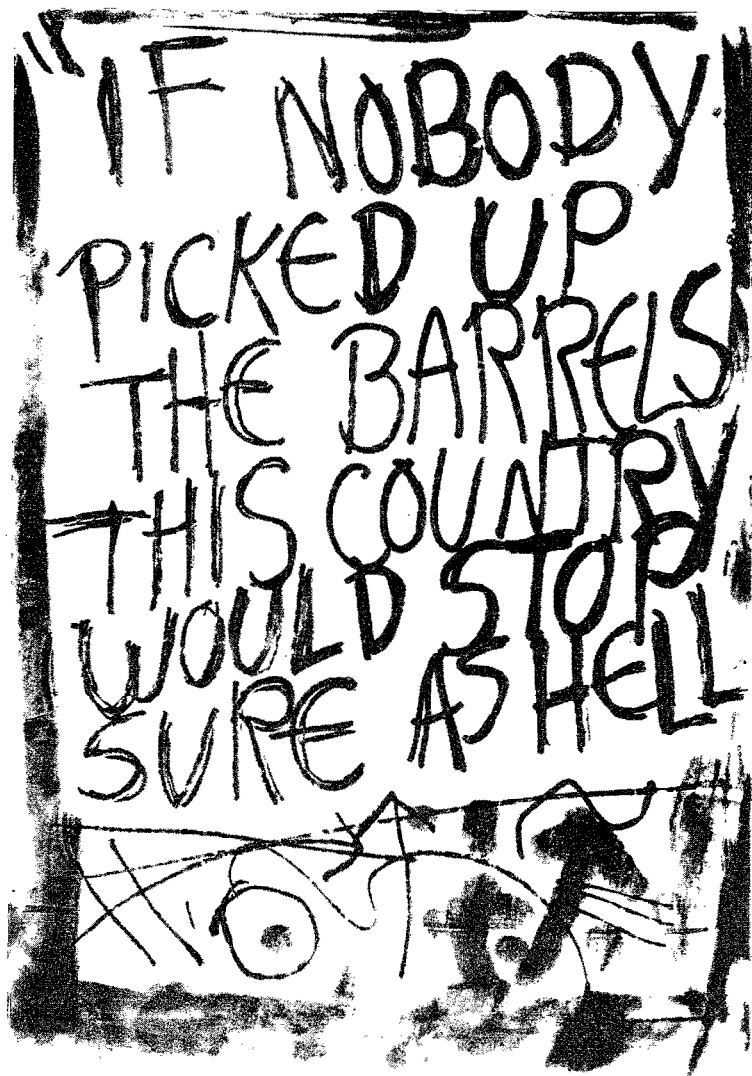
Murdock switches on the ignition. It takes a full minute for the air pressure in the brakes to build up to sixty pounds; Brockway Huskeys do not move until the sixty mark shows on the pressure gauge. Then he turns on his headlamps, releases the hand brakes, and lets the big gray elephant roll slowly out of its place toward the gate.

Ray Murdock drives solo on his daily runs. He has graduated from cans to containers—huge trapezoidal dumpsters rented and filled by large industrial concerns. In addition to a monthly service charge, it costs \$1.40 for each cubic yard of trash removed, and the size of each dumpster and the frequency of collection vary according to the needs of individual firms.

Murdock rolls out of the Digby yard and turns toward the expressway and his payloads. The massive grasshopper-like arms behind his cab reach to steel lips above the back fender, which bite the edges of the dumpster-container and lift it up with the help of a winch-driven hook and wire. The driver must position his truck and flick a switch, and then the winch pulls and raises the rear of the container skyward. The garbage is momentarily displayed to the heavens, as the dumpster teeters for an instant on the rear lip of the truck, and a mass of sticky garbage spills out into the hopper. All the while during the dumpster's rise, the driver must work the controls that set off the hydraulic compressor, so that his truck can eat up the rubbish as the container is feeding it. The job is simple, and dangerous.

"Dumpsters have become money-makers for the refuse collectors because it takes only one man to run a route, and you can pick up more yardage than if you were messing around with barrels. On a barrel setup the driver carries his lumpers with him, usually young guys who ride the back of the truck and dump the barrels by hand into the hopper. That's the way I started. Even though lumpers get paid the same hourly rate as I do, they hardly ever get overtime, and overtime is what makes this job for me. Lumping's all right for a young guy. You don't mind riding outside in the cold or rain. You don't mind the danger of maybe falling off. But when you get older you like to be able to ride inside.

"With these jobs you can lose a finger if you're not watching and the lid of the container slams down. But if you're careful the danger part of it doesn't scare you. The tough part is working the containers in cold weather. These trucks can be bitches to handle. You have to back up to the container just right, and in the winter, with the snow, you're un-



even. Sometimes you dump and you miss the hopper with some of the shit, which you have to pick up by hand. And you can never get warm. You're in the cab three minutes, then you're out again. If you think it's cold at noon in the winter, try driving at four in the morning. Then you have to watch out for the frozen container tops. I feel it in the ears first, the cold. Then after seven or eight hours, I get the pain in the groin. Thank God I don't smoke, because it's easy to get short of breath on the very cold days."

At 4:15 in the morning Ray Murdock, alone and riding high in the Brockway rig, feels like a king of the road. The noise in the cab while his truck moves is deafening—if Murdock could talk to someone he'd have to shout. Murdock pilots the big rig out over the expressway that cuts off South Boston from the city proper. Howard Johnson's restaurant in Dorchester is his first stop. Two containers. Murdock dumps one on Tuesdays and the other on his heavy days—Mondays, Thursdays, and Fridays. He checks to see if the other dumpster might not have filled up on him, which happens sometimes on an off day, and sees that it is only half full. He fits his truck around the lip

of the second container. Riding the curves of the expressway, changing speeds on and off the ramps, passing through the causeway tunnels and over the bridges requires one kind of perception. But Murdock's skills must be applied just as carefully in order to negotiate the parking lots, back alleys, and construction sites of industry, or to maneuver his ten-ton loader into the cloisters where men hide their garbage.

Murdock takes off his black baseball cap to wipe his forehead. He has begun to sweat, and the sun isn't yet in the sky. He is of medium build, solid and slender, weighing maybe one hundred eighty pounds for his six feet. Years of moving barrels have given him a weight lifter's arms. The job requires that he have a half dozen pairs of gray coveralls, each of which his wife must launder after one wearing, or the smell of stale perspiration will stay in the material. On his black cap, there's an orange Teamsters pin.

"The unions have helped a lot. When I first came on, the pension was only \$150 a month for retirement. Now it's up to \$330, if you went out with full time in service. We've got the dental benefits now. That just started. They pay for every dentist's bill, say, over ten dollars. If you went to the dentist and he said you got about \$300 worth of work there, I think it would only cost you ten dollars. I've got Blue Cross, too. A lot of these benefits came through our negotiations. Instead of giving us a one-dollar raise they would give us fifty cents on benefits and fifty cents on the check.

"When I was young I couldn't see the benefits; I just wanted the money. Now I can see the importance. Hell, I retire at forty-eight. I'll still be young enough to work at something else, and I'll have a thirty-years' pension. When my first kid came, we had nothin'. Now, with the union benefits, we get help on that kind of thing."

**W**hen he rolls into the rear parking lot of Carney Hospital in Dorchester, at 4:40 in the morning, the sky is still dark. He brakes carefully to let the big rig rumble slowly down the earth road, around the new hospital wing under construction, to the dumpster in the rear.

"The air pollution stuff has increased my work. When they used to burn here, I would dump a five-yard container twice a week. Now that the state has come down on them about burning trash, I dump a ten-yarder twice a day. I'm not complaining though. This pollution shit is real bad."

On the loading platform near the container, there are three dozen large corrugated medicine boxes, which Murdock pitches into the hopper. He leaves Carney and heads out through Dorchester onto Route 138 extended, the same road he came in on this morning. At 5:50 A.M. he enters the Howard Johnson's in suburban Milton, with its six-yard dumpster. The load is light today. On other morn-



ings, the container overflows with half-chewed chicken bones and fly-infested fishfry bags.

Five fifty-five. The sky is lightening to a pale orange-gray as Murdock pulls into the driveway of Nimstron Electronics, one of the sixty or so government contract plants that have sprung up in the industrial settlements sprawling along Route 128. He dumps one of the company's two containers, half full. Business must be bad. He used to empty two full dumpsters daily.

Out onto the beltway again. Murdock floors the gas pedal, but the rig won't go any faster than fifty-seven miles an hour. He takes the exit toward Interstate Route 95, switching headlights on and off in silent greeting to the freight trucks passing opposite. By the time he lumbers off the Wrentham exit, fifteen miles from Boston, the sky has gray-angled to the point where he can tell that it will be a good day. The truck pulls into the driveway of a chain pancake house which, with the Foxboro Raceway open, has been busy enough for Murdock to check three times a week. Its container is in the rear, hidden by a grove of evergreens. The stench of rotten garbage makes Murdock breathe through his mouth.

"I been working around garbage all my life and it still makes me puke. If I have too much of it on a hot day, with the bouncing in the truck, I puke my guts out sure as hell by noontime."

He clips on the dumpster, and spoiled food slides slowly into his truck. The loose mass is dotted with throwaway colors: banana-peel yellow, watermelon-rind green-and-red, apple-core brown. Garbage here has not been packed in plastic bags, and some of it sticks to the bottom of the container. As it is squeezed into the truck, a puddle spills out of the loading section and forms on the ground. The big vehicle is not watertight, and excess liquid squishes onto the fenders and drips alongside the capless hubs. Murdock grabs the hose off the side of the truck and switches on the compressor to flush wet paper and peels out of the container. He knows that if he leaves any offal sticking, it will be swarming with flies on his next trip.

"The younger fellas today, I've found, shy away from our kind of work. I guess they figure, why should I do that stuff when I can work in a factory for the same pay? 'Course somebody's got to do it—it's vital for the people. What would happen if nobody picked up the barrels? This country would stop sure as hell. I'm glad to be working containers. You've got your low points, like winter and dumping garbage on hot days, but if we didn't do it, who would? It's crucial."

Now the sun is visible through the haze. Murdock heads back down Route 95 to the beltway, taking the Walpole exit to the Spring Valley Country Club, and rolls in past the dew-covered fairways. The course is deserted. Many mornings here, Ray Murdock becomes Walter Mitty. Some hot mornings he tells himself he'll strip and take a quick swim in the green

oval pool. But he knows there's no time. He has another twenty-four stops to make, and if he wants to beat the commuter traffic he has to keep hustling.

**M**oving past a large suburban shopping center, Murdock drives the truck over to the side of the road, shifts to neutral, pulls the handbrake, and goes into a paper store. He nods hello to the man behind the counter as he hands him a dime for the Boston *Record American*, and a small package. It is a piece of paper folded around some coins. On the inside of the paper there are three numbers. The man behind the counter chaws into his cigar, reads the numbers, and writes them on a small pad. He also jots down Murdock's name and the amount of money inside the paper.

Murdock began playing the numbers as a young man. Now, every morning, he lays out a quarter or a half-dollar—depending on his mood that day—and plays a different combination of three digits. He chooses his numbers from everywhere: business addresses, phone listings, the date, his children's birthdays. Last year he played three dollars on his phone number and almost won \$3000. The money would have financed two weeks for his son at a basketball camp and a vacation for the family next year. Murdock doesn't smoke, drinks sparingly, and turns over his entire paycheck to his wife. He considers the numbers game a modest vice.

"Working, say, sixty-five hours a week, I make about \$275, but I take home just over \$200 after union dues, taxes, social security, and Blue Cross. I take out \$50 for food right away, so that's \$150 left. Then I can start figuring other expenses, like city taxes. Last year the taxes for the house were about \$750. We pay \$134 a month for the rent, including the mortgage and the interest and taxes. The life insurance for the kids and me plus the insurance for the house mounts up, close to three hundred a year. Electricity, the phone, water, oil—it all adds up pretty quick. I try to save something every week to pay off the bills, like for the two cars and the car insurance. But look at clothes for the kids. It costs my wife like \$100 each just to get the two girls set for high school. The two boys are still in grammar school, but they have to wear something decent too. Five years ago on the same job we were a lot better off. We could save like \$40 a week for the bills. Now things are bad as far as money goes."

Murdock makes no stops between his number writer's place and the Boston College High School in Dorchester, off the expressway. The school cafeteria uses a big eight-yard container, and there's another the same size for general waste. In the summer, only a handful of Jesuit priests live on campus.

When the container is clean, he turns off the engine and goes into the cafeteria. He has been dumping BC High for six years now and has become friendly with the white-shirted cooks. Back in 1965, he started

trading ball scores with them, and before long they were serving him breakfast. Murdock pauses just long enough over his ham and eggs to check the headlines in the *Record American*.

It's eight twenty A.M. Murdock scrapes off his dishes, sets them in the stainless steel washer, and says good-bye to the cook. His toughest haul of the day is coming up, and if he wants to stay on schedule he's got to move. He cuts back across the expressway, makes one wide sweeping turn, and after about two more miles, drives into the rear lot of the D. H. Thoreau Company. Murdock dumps Thoreau twice a week. Each time, in addition to an eight-yard container, he empties fifteen or twenty barrels filled with damaged labels and rolls of paper. The container is easy, but the printing work is done on the second floor of a warehouse. Once Murdock empties the dumpster, a routine job, he backs the truck up to the rear of the warehouse. He then signals to two men upstairs on the second floor, and they begin to drop big galvanized aluminum cans from an open loft fifteen feet above the ground. After the barrels are turned over and dumped, Murdock must toss them back to the men in the loft. He feels his back wrench when he hurls the cans up. He grits his teeth and lets the pain subside. Things could be worse—he's only got to do this twice a week now. It's a living.

Eight forty-five. Murdock looks back from the driver's seat and sees that his truck is full, with a good hundred yards. He sets out for Quincy Dump.

Quincy is a suburban town filled with old quarries which, years after the seams of stone became exhausted, the city fathers, in their wisdom, decided to use for landfill refuse dumps. The pits have a natural lining of granite, and they fill up slowly with metropolitan waste. Until last year, Quincy let the collectors dump for free. Now the town charges twenty-six dollars to vent the contents of a full one-hundred-yard truck. At nine A.M. Murdock passes through the dump's black iron gates, hands the guard a credit slip, and takes a receipt of payment.

The burial ground at Quincy greets the eyes and nose with a stomach-turning kind of moveable feast. It is a placid enough setting, in a natural amphitheater of granite around whose walls are spray-painted fraternity letters and lovers' initials—remembrances of a time past, when the quarry's clean water basin was a gathering place for teeny-boppers. Squadrons of seagulls line the rocks, gobbling down scraps of garbage pillaged from the rubble. The dumpster trucks have to back in slowly to the area being filled. The drivers trip switches that open rear doors, and the trucks moving forward, they spill the offal onto the ground. Almost immediately bulldozers smooth a thick layer of topsoil over the garbage. Meanwhile other trucks idle their engines, waiting their turns to excrete the waste of Greater Boston.

With his hopper empty at nine fifteen, he still has seven more stops to make. Before two P.M., when he retires for the day, he will drive another twenty-five miles in and around metropolitan Boston.

Murdock begins to feel the effects of the hours of driving and dumping. After riding in the noisy cab he finds it difficult to talk without shouting. His ears start to throb and his stomach feels queasy. At twelve noon the truck is three-quarters full, and he has one more stop.

Carney Hospital, first visited in the dead of morning, has by now served two more meals. This time Murdock holds his breath while he dumps the leftover food and washes out the container. As he heads out of the parking lot, he turns the truck away from Boston toward Quincy, and the second big dumping of the day.

At the iron gate he picks up another receipt and spills out another load. It is one twenty-five in the afternoon. So far today the Digby Company has collected \$280 worth of refuse on this run, and Quincy's municipal deficit has been reduced by \$52. Murdock turns the truck back toward Boston.

Two in the afternoon. Murdock returns to his own car after he punches out, and for the first few moments at the smaller wheel he finds the driving difficult. A Biscayne feels like a kiddie-car after ten hours in a Brockway Huskey. When he gets home a half hour later, he is ready for a beer. The heat has turned into humidity. He takes a king-sized can of Narragansett Lager from the refrigerator and drinks it. Then, slowly, he peels off his clothes and shuffles into the shower. His wife has left reminders about the work around the house. She is out shopping with the kids. Front and rear steps need scraping and painting. There is a broken window in one of the bedrooms, and the oil filter should be changed in the car. After showering, Murdock slips into bermudas and a jersey and flops into the kitchen for another beer. The pace of things is a lot slower at home. The work can wait. Murdock's wife is embarrassed about her husband's job, or at least what other people think of it. (The kids sometimes have trouble filling in the school-registration card blank which asks for "Father's Occupation.") But she knows how hard he works. She is used to his putting off the household chores.

After a meat loaf dinner with the family, Murdock pours himself a shot of rye and sits in front of the TV to watch the news. Halfway through the first situation comedy, his eyes close and he is asleep. He stays on the couch until his wife wakes him. It is eleven P.M. He talks briefly with her, mostly about the bills and the kids, and checks in with each of them, the two boys and two girls, then goes to bed.

Before falling off to sleep again, he reaches over to the table next to the bed and sets the alarm clock that will buzz him awake, four hours later. □