



FLOYD SKLOOT

## NUMBERS

It was all in the numbers. The doctor had just said our daughter would be born around September fifteenth. That gave us seven-point-five months to get serious.

Everything suddenly seemed expectant to me. A new life was developing. I felt that the future had just been announced, that preparations had to be made, decisions reached, actions taken. The year, 1972, still less than thirty days old, became charged with anticipation.

My then-wife and I had been married for seventeen months. We were graduate students and teaching assistants in the English department at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale. Living in an old farmhouse at the eastern edge of town and raising Matthew, my wife's son from her first marriage, we'd been a typical academic couple on the slow track toward doctorates and college teaching, for whom the future wouldn't have to start until we completed our studies.

But over the last three months, we'd been considering alternative plans. She was thirty, five years older than I, and felt that if we were going to have a child together, a sibling for Matthew, now was the time. And if now was the time, then we needed to figure out realistically how to make a life for our family, because we were earning about five thousand dollars a year, provided I taught summer school classes. We had two, maybe four, years to go, living on five grand a year, before our degrees would be conferred and we'd look for jobs. Then, with nearly identical areas of professional concentration, we would compete against each other in a market for teachers that might offer one spot for every five hundred applicants at some remote institution. One of us was likely to end up doing something else, like several of our former colleagues: driving a cab or substitute teaching in a high school or waiting tables on the night shift. This didn't seem like the best way to support a family of four.



Besides, I already knew that I didn't want to be a college teacher. All I wanted to do was write, and having studied with the Irish poet Thomas Kinsella—who for years had combined a career in his country's ministry of finance with his vocation as a poet—I'd come to believe the best way for me to proceed as a writer was in a job that engaged me with the world outside academia.

My Vietnam War draft lottery number was 327, giving us a flexibility we might not have had if I'd been born on a less fortunate date than July 6. Clearly, the time had come for me to enter the real world, to see if I could find someone who would hire a bearded would-be writer with an M.A. in English who had so far published one poem in *Epoch* and another in *Concerning Poetry*, who had taught composition for two years, and whose professional resumé otherwise included parking lot attendant, busboy, baseball counselor at a summer camp, produce man in a grocery store, butcher's assistant, short-order cook at an oceanside grill, occasional bill collector for my uncle's factoring firm, and day-laborer for a gardener.

The university placement office posted lists of recruiters coming to interview prospective employees. I began visiting the office daily, looking for advertisements that might interest me, and noticed that few employers mentioned degrees in English as being a suitable qualification. Business administration, accounting, public administration, economics, yes; English, even liberal arts, no. Just what my family had warned me about. *Who hires an English major? Study something useful!*

In the first month, I was able to get one ten-minute session with a man from an insurance company who spent most of our time together wondering if the fishing in Crab Orchard Lake was any good. I couldn't help him. None of the other recruiters would even schedule an appointment with me.

Then one morning in early March, I saw an announcement for the Office of the Governor of Illinois in which the requirements didn't exactly rule out English majors. There would be two recruiters on campus from the governor's Bureau of the Budget. They would meet with the first fifty people who registered and had master's degrees. No academic field





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was specified. All I can assume is that they never imagined an English major would bother to sign up, that any idiot could tell they wanted people with fiscal backgrounds. Well, I could compute baseball batting averages in my head, convert centigrade to Fahrenheit, and reconcile the family checkbook, so I put my name on their list. Candidate number forty-nine. My time slot would be 4:00 P.M. on the following Tuesday, after they'd interviewed four dozen other people. I knew I had little hope of getting this job, but figured that going through the process might be instructive.

It never occurred to me that I should go to the library and figure out what a governor actually did or who the current one was. That it might help to know why he needed a budget bureau. Governors waved from cars, gave speeches, pardoned death row inmates, dug holes at groundbreaking ceremonies. They had meetings. Good enough! I was ready.

By the time the two recruiters greeted me, they were bleary with fatigue. Jackets off, ties loosened, cuffs rolled, they led me into a room and closed the door. One, I remember, put his foot up on a chair, rested his elbow on his knee and his head in his hand, and spoke to me while standing up and looking at the carpet. He said his name was Wes, or maybe Les. The other paced and told me to call him George unless I got to know him better. I sat on a hard chair in the middle of the room, which had been pushed away from the desk, promised myself not to use their names at all, and tried to figure out who I was supposed to watch.

"We wanted to do this one together," George said.

"An English major?" Wes said, addressing George. "What, memos that rhyme?"

"No," I said, figuring *what the hell*, "memos that people can read."

They looked at each other, smiled, nodded, and started to talk to me. I'd expected them to ask why they should hire someone like me, had thought through how to answer that, and was ready for them.

But they surprised me. George said, "So why would someone like you want to work for an outfit like ours?"

After the interview, I drove to our farmhouse and took a shower. We decided to go out for pizza and talk about what to do next, since I was sure my interview had been a mess and





there were so few opportunities showing up at the placement office. Halfway through dinner, Matthew began crying, then screaming, and could not be consoled. I wasn't hungry anyway, so I walked outside with him, crossed the street to the railway station, and sat down with him by the tracks. We tossed pebbles and talked, and he began to calm down.

"Hey," someone said from behind us. "Nicely done."

It was George, who sat beside me as Wes moved next to Matthew and challenged him to a pebble-tossing contest. Both men said they were married. George had a stepson; Wes had a daughter from a former marriage, and an infant son. We talked for a few minutes about the long day they'd had, about living in the state capital of Springfield, about the budget bureau's staff. Most of the staff, they said, were from east coast business schools, Harvard or Penn or the Maxwell School of Public Administration at Syracuse, and the Illinois legislature had been criticizing the governor for not hiring in-state staff. That explained why George and Wes were in Carbondale recruiting from a local university. They told me that the Republican governor, Richard Ogilvie, was involved in a nasty re-election campaign against a populist Democratic candidate named Dan Walker, who had walked the length of the state gathering up votes. Then, getting back to the subject of the day's interviews, they said they could recommend only two people, out of the fifty they'd spoken to, for follow-up interviews in Springfield with the bureau's senior staff.

I nodded. Okay, so I wouldn't have a career in budget analysis.

George watched my expression and said, "Listen, anyone who can talk sense to a two-year-old can talk sense to a governor."

Matthew walked over and pulled my hand. "Go home now," he said.

Later in the month, I received a letter inviting me to Springfield. The Bureau of the Budget would reimburse my expenses and put me up in the State House Inn, across from the Capitol building. Drive up from Carbondale on Monday, the letter advised, and show up at the office 9:00 sharp on Tuesday morning.

I still felt little hope of getting this job. Probably my invi-





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tation was a lark, a way for George and Wes to suggest that they'd found few genuine prospects during their day on an in-state campus. But I wanted to follow through on the interview process.

I got out my one suit, which I hadn't worn since beginning graduate school more than two years earlier, and tried it on. It was a souvenir of my travels through Europe during the summer of 1969, purchased in London during the Beatles' waning psychedelic phase and looked like something from the cover of their *Yellow Submarine* album. The suit had been stylish that year, a yellowish-mustard and brown check with oddly tapered lapels that looked serrated, and I had my doubts about how management at the Illinois Bureau of the Budget might respond to it. Especially worn in conjunction with the fuchsia shirt and paisley tie that always completed the outfit. But it was all I had and we weren't about to buy a new suit for such a long-shot interview. The pants were spotted on one thigh with, I thought, olive oil and red wine vinegar from a dinner in Rome the night Neil Armstrong walked on the moon. But the jacket was fine. So I took the pants to the dry cleaner, got a haircut, trimmed my beard, and set about preparing myself for the upcoming ordeal.

The budget director, John McCarter, had sent along a packet of information. *Prospective candidates should familiarize themselves with the enclosed documents prior to their interviews.* Documents! I was already out of my league. But wait, weren't "prospective" and "candidates" redundant in that sentence?

I learned that "the Governor of Illinois is the chief executive for the state and is responsible for the administration of most areas of the Executive Branch of Government." Oh. "His Bureau of the Budget offers the Governor the professional budgeting and fiscal analysis tools he needs to manage State Government." An analyst's job was to review state agency requests for funds and advise the governor on the allocation of resources to agency programs. Sounded to me like a subplot from a Charles Dickens novel, but I decided not to mention that observation during the interviews. In fact, I decided not to mention books at all, if I could help it. No casual references to authors, no discussion of themes, no quotations. Though it might be tempting, at some point, to demonstrate





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the connection between literature and budget analysis by referring to this observation from *David Copperfield*: “Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure nineteen six, result happiness. Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure twenty pound ought and six, result misery.”

For the three-and-a-half-hour drive to Springfield, I wore my turquoise suede jeans, a faded burgundy SIU sweatshirt, and black high-top sneakers, and tried not to worry about how I’d answer any technical budgeting questions. My mantra had become *Don’t pretend to know*. Though I now had a vague idea of what the executive structure of Illinois government was, the size of the state budget, and which agencies got the most money, I knew almost nothing about how funding decisions were made at that level, or what a budget analyst might do while sitting at his desk every day. Better to play to the strengths I thought I might have—facility with language, imagination, a new perspective—and hope that they didn’t sound like weaknesses to my interviewers.

I turned on the radio. It seemed as though every station in southern Illinois was continuously playing Don McLean’s “American Pie.” But as I entered Sangamon County, where Springfield is located, the local station broadcast Elvis singing “I Just Can’t Help Believing.” The title and timing seemed so absurdly fortuitous that I had to laugh. *Just believe, Floyd*. It was a sign from The King!

That night, I had the standard, predictable showing-up-naked-at-a-meeting dream. Walked into the White House for my meeting with the president, saw Richard Nixon heading my way with his hand outstretched. He suddenly stopped and pointed at me, leaning over to talk with his sidekicks, Haldeman and Ehrlichman. That’s when I realized I wasn’t wearing any clothes. A helicopter gunship approached, the rotor noise deafening as it hovered, and I knew it was about to fire a missile at me.

After my shower the next morning, I discovered what I must already have known: I’d forgotten to pack my suit pants. From my room at the State House Inn, I could picture them hanging in the bedroom closet at home, concealed in their own separate plastic bag from the dry cleaners. Had I simply not noticed them when packing because they were next to





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my jacket instead of hung inside it as usual? Or had I forgotten them on purpose to sabotage any chance to succeed in this alien world of public finance? Either way, I was about to show up garbed as a Republican's worst nightmare. So much for Elvis and his signs.

I sat down on the bed and thought about my options. I could try to buy a new suit, but realized that no clothing store would be open early enough. I could ask if the hotel had a wheelchair I could borrow, and use a blanket from the bed as a lap robe. I could cancel the interview and drive home. Or I could wear my turquoise jeans with my yellowish-mustard and brown checked suit jacket, fuchsia shirt, and paisley tie, and show up for the interviews looking so outlandish that even if I weren't totally unqualified for the job, they'd still never hire me.

Let it be. I wore what I had with me and decided not to apologize. To not even mention my packing error or my clothes while I was also not mentioning books or authors or themes and not quoting from great literature. I'd wing it. At this point, I had nothing to lose.

What struck me upon entering the Capitol building was how much noise my footsteps made on the marble floors. I wanted to be invisible, but here I was making a racket as I headed toward the rotunda and turned left to the director's office. A dozen other candidates clustered in his waiting room. They wore quiet suits, taciturn white or light blue button-down shirts, soft solid-colored ties, and stood whispering together as I walked into the room in a clamor of clashing colors and racketing heel-tips.

Throughout the morning we shuttled from room to room, each candidate meeting with a senior staff member for thirty minutes, performing a neatly coordinated minuet that required us to pass one another in the rotunda as we changed places. Our hands were shaken and interview room doors closed behind us with echoing thuds. The interviews were intense and focused, but friendly enough.

*Crime is up in the six counties around Chicago. Would you advise the governor to expand the Stateville prison at a cost of ten million dollars or spend the ten million on improved education?*





*State revenues have fallen short of expectations. Would you recommend that the governor raise tuition at all the universities or close one university and keep tuition at last year's level?*

Sometimes I had to answer questions orally, and I remember being asked twice to explain what's meant by the phrase *Time is money*, and to say whether I believed that was true. Some interviewers gave me twenty minutes to write my analysis of a problem in the form of a memorandum to the governor. One interviewer, noticing that I'd played baseball in college, wanted to talk about what my position was and whether I could hit a curve ball; another wanted to talk about the pros and cons of raising taxes, especially during an election year; a third, who clearly saw no use for an English major, listened to a high school basketball tournament and asked, simply, "What other jobs have you applied for?"

I went to lunch with a group that included Robert Taft, now governor of Ohio, and John Cotton, a former physicist who was the bureau's deputy director. By this point, I'd seen where *Why should we hire you?* came together with *Why do you want to work here?* and tried to explain myself while everyone ate their French dip sandwiches.

They should hire me because I could write. Not fancy, not flowery, as they assumed poets might write, but concise and accurate prose. They should hire me because I was trained to analyze and communicate my findings, which is what they were after in an analyst, and though my subject may have been works of literature, my approach was organized to untangle complexity and find clarity. They should hire me because state agency directors, to convince me of anything, would have to stop using technical jargon and be clear, lucid. And I could help them do that. Taking a risk, mentioning a work of literature, I said that if I could read and decode T. S. Eliot, I should be able to read and decode proposed legislation, and write about it.

I wanted to work there because I wanted to be engaged with the world beyond academia. And outside myself. Because I was not drawn to teach literature or writing, but to do something practical with my training and to broaden my experience. Because my perspective would be fresh to them and their requirements would be a fresh challenge to me. Be-





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cause my mentor had worked in public finance and shown me the possibilities for balancing a life of fact with a life of imagination. I wanted to break away from the path I was on: I'd analyzed my family's budgetary requirements, forecast our future revenues as teachers in an overcrowded marketplace, and recommended to myself that I get a job outside my field if I wanted to make a living. No, I didn't know how to do regression analysis, but how often was that technique really used to sort out policy problems?

In Cotton's office afterward, I saw a copy of *The Hobbit* on his desk and thought, *It's a trap! Don't say anything about Tolkien or Frodo, or he'll think all you care about is literature. He'll think your memos will be written in iambic pentameter.*

But he wouldn't let me get away with that. After we talked about the history of the bureau, which was still only three years old, he pointed at the book that lay between us and said, "What did you think of it?"

"Never read it."

He looked away from me, gazing for a moment at the trimmed grass of the Capitol lawn. Then he leaned back in his chair, put his arms behind his head, turned toward me, shook his head, and started to laugh.

We moved to Springfield in June. I'd been offered a three-month trial appointment, at a junior analyst's salary, with the promise that during the first week in September John McCarter would sit down with me and we'd decide whether to continue together.

When I told the chairman of the English department that I was leaving, he warned me that I would hate the new job, that we'd dislike being in Springfield, that he couldn't hold our places as teachers or graduate students if we wanted to come back in September. For reasons that defied rational explanation, I was confident that wouldn't happen. I'd convinced myself, with my own rhetoric, even more fully than I'd convinced the Bureau of the Budget, that I belonged among them. They might be hiring me on a trial basis, but I was going to work for them thinking *permanent*. We bought a house on the northern edge of Springfield. I was sent two suits that my uncle no longer wore, and supplemented them





by buying a black pinstriped suit, some shirts and ties, a pair of shoes. We signed up for Lamaze training classes. I was planning to be there still, come September fifteenth.

I was assigned to the education unit and would start by working on a small team analyzing the programs and budget of the superintendent of public instruction. Elementary and high school education was the costliest item in the state budget, and the governor had appointed a task force to recommend changes in how it was financed. I was staff to that task force; in this pre-computer era, my first assignment was to gather, organize, and analyze information about property tax rates and assessed values in each of Illinois's 102 counties.

I drew up an enormous chart and brought it home with me after work, spreading the thing on our living room floor, entering numbers, making calculations. It reminded me of my childhood games of dice baseball, played on my bedroom floor, and the endless statistical information I kept about each player's performance. At the same time I was working on my assignment, my wife was assembling a quilt for our daughter-to-be, making calculations beside me as she planned her design.

Some days, I would sit down with Vern Shontz, an elderly man in the office across the hall from mine, and talk about the history of property tax rates and assessed values as they affected school finance. Whenever I approached, he would cap his pen and lay it carefully across his desk blotter, then crook a finger at me and point to the chair beside his desk.

"You need any numbers?" Vern would ask solemnly. Then he would open an empty humidior on his desktop and pretend to fish some out for me. "I've got every number you could need in here."

He was, I knew, assuring me that he didn't mind my questions. After a while, I think it even amused him to see me marching across the hall with an expanded sheaf of papers in my hand, confused about what it meant to equalize assessments when assessments were never equal.

"You know what your problem is?" he'd say. "You want this stuff to add up. If it added up, I'd be retired and living in Arizona by now. That's why I've got all these extra numbers here, you know."

By July I was writing papers on how other states financed





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pupil transportation programs or the history of special education funding in Illinois. I was keeping track of two U.S. Supreme Court cases on the subject of state aid to schools. And I was playing center field for the bureau's softball team in a city league. We'd moved into first place, and the man who had asked me during my interviews what position I played was delighted to have moved from center field to short-stop, where he'd wanted to play all along. I was also part of a four-man bread-making cooperative at the office, one of us providing the others a week's worth of freshly baked bread every Monday morning.

On the first Monday in September, I walked into John McCarter's office and sat down with a two-page memo outlining why I should be hired on a permanent basis and given a full program analyst's salary. McCarter read the memo in silence. Then he turned it over and looked at me.

"There's something wrong with this memo, you know."

I was speechless. I'd been sure they'd want me to keep working there. All I could manage was to shake my head.

"By now you should know I like one-page memos." He smiled. Then he stood and took my hand. "We already did the paperwork, Floyd."

As I left his office, McCarter called me back. "Know what I keep waiting for?"

"A Shakespeare quote in my weekly report?"

"Nah, I keep waiting for you to show up for a meeting in that outfit you wore to the interviews. I was out of the office that day and I've got to see it for myself."

Rebecca was born on September nineteenth. We arrived at the hospital at 11:40 on the eighteenth, but since labor didn't seem too advanced, we decided to borrow a wheelchair and remain just outside the emergency room doors until 12:01 A.M. on the nineteenth. Savings: one day's hospital cost.

Rebecca was born shortly after 3:00 A.M. Savings: circumcision fee.

I was clearly thinking as a budget analyst. I felt more and more certain of my work as 1973 began, and I was drafting the school finance task force report. I was meeting regularly with the staff of the superintendent of public instruction to understand and comment on the budget they were proposing





for the new fiscal year. And I loved being a father to my infant daughter and four-year-old stepson.

But I wasn't writing anything unrelated to my work at the bureau. No notes for poems, no lines, no drafts, nothing; I wasn't reading much poetry either. I read David Halberstam's *Best and the Brightest*, I read Michael Herr's *Dispatches*, and a study of Chicago politics, books my colleagues were talking about, but for the first eighteen months after leaving graduate school, I was completely silent as a poet.

In that time, two of the poems I'd written at SIU appeared in magazines. I remember receiving a contributor's copy of *Wisconsin Review* and setting it aside for a few weeks, saddened by what it represented: the chasm that seemed to be opening between my creative life and my work life. When I did finally open the issue and read my poem, I saw that the final stanza was missing. It seemed an apt error. More and more, I worried that at twenty-five I was finished as a poet, that I would never find the way to balance the disparate elements of my life and be able to write again. That if I waited much longer, I would lose my voice and craft altogether. I felt that I *should* write, and that pressure made writing even more impossible.

When poetry finally came again, in late 1973, it came with a great rush. After the children were in bed, I found myself writing poems about my father at his work in the live poultry market he owned when I was a boy, or about my grandparents encased in their very private world, playing gin rummy and teasing each other. Unlike the poems written before my year-and-a-half silence, these had a voice that sounded recognizably my own. And they felt urgent, especially when I began to write about my own life as a father.

I can remember the moment when feeling that I *should* write became feeling that I *must* write. Over the course of my writing silence, I had gained almost fifty pounds. At five feet four, weighing nearly two hundred pounds, I'd outgrown my clothes and turned into a dense mass. A colleague who worked for the Bureau of the Budget when I was hired but left shortly afterward had returned for a visit and stopped me in the hall. He said nothing, just puffed out his cheeks and drew a large circle in the air. That was the triggering moment for me. I





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began to diet, and as the accumulated fat dwindled, the poems emerged.

For the next five years, I lost my way as a poet yet again. Setting aside an hour or so nightly, and more time on weekend mornings while the children watched cartoons, I approached my writing as a program: it was essential to finish a poem quickly, then to treat it as inventory and see it published, in order to justify the time allocated from my schedule as a budget analyst and father. Soon, the goal became one acceptance per month, a goal I met for fifty-one months before finally realizing the mess I'd made. A few of these early poems of mine were successful and eventually included in my first collection, *Music Appreciation*, which was published in 1994. But most of them failed to go deeply enough, to discover what they were really about, to find their right forms rather than be crammed into forms I'd predetermined for them. I published a lot of poised, deft poetry in the 1970s, but even I knew, as the decade went along, that it wasn't enough just to be publishing. I needed to slow down, to treat my art as something integral to my life rather than as a separate project that had to earn its place.

Working on my own as a poet, then as a fiction writer and essayist, I had to learn that time was not money. That my greatest weakness as a writer was the rush to completion. I had to learn to love doing the work, not finishing the work. It was not, in the end, all in the numbers.