

Taking The Bottles Back

‘IF THE CONDUCTOR asks how old you are, tell him you’re four,’ I instructed my five-year-old son. We were waiting at the bus stop. All I had in my purse was eleven pence. Enough for my fare into town but not for his half-fare.

Throughout the journey he asked in a voice that could cut through limestone, ‘Am I four or five?’

‘Four’ I mumbled, looking at the conductor. We were on our way to the Town Hall. Our party consisted of me, the five-year-old boy, the two-year-old boy and my baby daughter. For a treat we sat upstairs on the bus. When we passed Leicester prison my eldest son shouted, ‘Daddy lives there, doesn’t he, Mummy?’ His podgy finger pointed at the forbidding building. I was now tired of this family joke. My ex-husband was not and has never been in prison, but naturally the other passengers on the bus were not to know this.

The five-year-old is now twenty-four and has (in my opinion) an unhealthy obsession with Kafka. I blame this on his earlier, obsessive interest in Leicester prison – which looks like a sinister Ruritanian castle.

The four of us were on our way to collect our

weekly maintenance. I was expecting nine pounds. It wasn't there. The woman behind the grille looked through a large ledger.

'No,' she said. 'No money has been paid in.'

I didn't know what to do. I asked her advice.

'You must go to the Social Security office,' she said. She gave me the address. I ran across the town pushing the little ones in the push-chair and urging the five-year-old to pretend he was in a running race. We got there at about a quarter to four. The office was up three flights of filthy stairs. The lift was out of order. Precious time passed getting the children up the stairs. We were given a number and told to wait. It was an awful room: the walls and the seats were institutional orange, the floor consisted of fag holes, and there were no ashtrays, although most of the claimants were smoking. The receptionist sat behind a glass screen. I had to bellow to be heard.

'I've got no money.'

I gave my name and address. She frowned. 'You're in the wrong office.'

The office I wanted was on the other side of town, it closed at 5.30. It was now five o'clock, the children were hungry, the baby was crying. I was near to tears myself. We reached the other office at 5.20 pm. This new waiting-room was worse than the earlier one. It was an older building and was the one where the winos and tramps were registered.

There was an air of panic in the room, and a pool of vomit in the corner. I had ten minutes in which to state my case and leave – with money in my pocket. I needed the bus fare and money to buy food. As before, I was given a number and told to wait. I explained I couldn't wait, I needed 50p in cash. An emergency payment.

'We'll send it to you,' I was told.

'When?'

'In a few days, when we've looked into your case. We need your birth certificate, marriage certificate, and a copy of your legal separation documents.'

I agreed to bring these documents in the next day. But in the meantime I had no bus fare – how would I get home, and, how would I feed my children?

'Haven't you got any relatives who'll lend you some money?' said the young man behind the desk.

It is impossible to convey to somebody who has money and no children the nightmare of having children and no money. I knew nobody who was on the telephone at that time. I couldn't even reverse the charges and ask for help.

I couldn't face walking the five miles home. I begged the young man for 50p, but he wouldn't relent. The staff in the back office started to put their coats on and tidy their desks. Half-past five arrived. Most of the people in the waiting-room

were ushered out. Others, desperate like me, stayed – explaining – some in tears, others shouting, that they hadn't eaten, had nowhere to stay. It was bedlam. My children were hot and thirsty. Could I give them a glass of water?

'No,' the office was now closed.

'You lend me 50p – as a person, you'll get it back,' I said.

'No,' he said. 'Where would it end if I started to do that?'

I wanted to tell him that I was a literate and intelligent person, not just the young mother of these crying children – for Christ's sake I had read every page of *War and Peace*. When I could afford it I read the *Guardian*. I was a Bessie Smith fan. I had won several prizes for verse speaking. I could read a menu in French. A poet had been in love with me. I knew how to spell and pronounce Dostoevsky. I had worked hard since I was fifteen. I had paid my taxes and my national insurance. I had never broken the law and all I wanted from the Welfare State was a stinking lousy sodding 50p.

I didn't get it.

It is a terrible thing to see your mother crying. I tried very hard, I contorted my face this way and that but eventually, when we were out on the street, the tears came. The four of us walked along – a quartet of cry-babies.

I was too proud to stop passers-by and ask for

help. I scanned the pavements looking for money. Instead I found lemonade bottles, 'Corona' brand. There was a returnable deposit of 4p on each bottle.

My eldest son cheered up, he knew that these bottles represented hard cash. My pride vanished, I looked in litter bins, I looked over walls and behind fences. Soon we had enough for my bus fare, and then we had enough for four ice lollies – don't anybody dare to even *think* that those children should have been given something *healthy* to eat.

When we got home I bathed the children, and, when they were clean and shining in their pyjamas, I said we were going to have a special treat for dinner. I emptied the food cupboard of its contents. It didn't take long. There was a packet of beef suet, a tin of golden syrup, a tin of peas and one Oxo cube. For dinner we had pea soup (put another pea in the soup, Mother) and golden roly-poly. My eldest child still remembers this meal. We laid a tablecloth on the living room floor and ate in picnic fashion. Late that night I put a note out for the milkman asking him to leave bread, butter and eggs, and in the morning our breakfast was waiting on the doorstep. Milkmen are a good source of credit. God bless them every one.

Later that day I rang the Town Hall. There was still no money so I went back to the Social Security Office. My family lent me five pounds. My friend looked after the children. I took my documents, but

most important of all I put a copy of that day's *Guardian* on the counter between me and the young counter clerk. He talked to me with considerably more respect than he had done the day before. A fat lot of good it did me; my Social Security payment took nine days to arrive, but by then I had taken three part-time jobs and employed two young girls as baby-sitters, and the system had beaten me. I became a working mother.

I would like to report that the DSS conducts itself with more humanity today, but I can't because it doesn't.

In early January 1989 I read a report in the local paper. It said that a man had gone berserk in a DSS office. He'd broken the office Christmas tree and stamped on the glass baubles. My second son was in the waiting-room with a friend, he'd already told me about this unhappy scene. Apparently the man had been waiting two weeks for a promised Giro. He was married with children, he'd been sacked from his job as a hosiery mechanic and like all sacked people, he was refused dole. He was desperate for money, it was two days before Christmas. The counter staff told him it was in the Christmas post; they had been telling him this for eight days. The man had tried telephoning but the DSS phone lines were permanently engaged. Finally, in high bad temper, knowing there were only two shopping days before Christmas, he

had got on a bus and come in person for his money.

In court he was described as being 'of previous good character'. But in the DSS office he turned into Mr Jekyll, he started to shout. The police were sent for. When they arrived he tried to explain his case. They wouldn't listen, they started to push him out. He refused to leave without his money, they pushed harder. The Christmas tree was knocked over, the man then stumbled and fell amongst the glass baubles which had fallen with the tree. Soon wild confusion reigned, the man, the policeman, the DSS staff and a few disgruntled DSS petitioners fought amongst the pine needles. Quite soon the man was overcome, arrested, and taken to the police station.

He was charged with assaulting the police, resisting arrest, and criminal damage to a Christmas tree and decorations.

It would be funny if it wasn't so tragic.

I don't know how much it cost the state to prosecute the poor man and lock him up and sentence him, but I'm sure, absolutely positive, that it would have cost at least a hundred times more than his paltry, delayed, Giro.

The DSS offices are not given enough funding, their staff are poorly paid and are driven to distraction by the amount of work they have to do. The regulations which govern their decisions are

incredibly complicated. There is frequent turnover of staff. Morale is extremely low. Working with desperate people all day (on both sides of the counter) is very dispiriting; their unhappiness rubs off on you. For the sake of self-preservation you develop a thicker skin, you come to regard the claimants as the enemy. Because they are inarticulate in the presence of articulate officialdom, you do not respect them and habitually talk to them as though they are of lower intelligence than yourself. You are frightened of them, and all your communication takes place behind a glass screen. The furniture they sit on is screwed down because, in the past, this furniture has been thrown *at* you. They offend you in their poverty, you despise their clothes and shoes. Some of them smell and have disgusting personal habits. That is why it is impossible to allow them free access to the lavatory; why they must queue up and ask for the key. They question your decisions. You know that most of these disputes when taken in front of a tribunal are won by the claimants. You work in dingy and sometimes sordid surroundings, there is very little – apart from the babies and children in the waiting-room – to delight the eye. But you are tired of the children, and don't give them a second glance after a while. You've been on strike – not just for better pay and conditions for yourself, but for a better deal for the claimants. So you are not without hope of redemption. You feel

helpless in the face of such massive bureaucratic machinery. You are forced to rush each interview, to appear detached, as the painful circumstances are related to you – death, dismissal, separation, divorce, chronic illness.

Nobody goes to a DSS office to ask for state benefits if they are well and happy and employed. Nobody needs to. There is no need to have vile surroundings and seemingly uncaring staff as a disincentive. People down on their luck deserve the best: beautiful surroundings and well-paid professional staff to help them out of their difficulties.

Why not train thousands more social workers and let them sit in on claimants' interviews? Most social problems could be helped or prevented if people had more money and practical advice. The present benefits system is unfair, inefficient, and totally unprofessional; which is why millions of people do not claim the benefits to which they are legally entitled. There is hysterical emphasis today on preventing the abuse of the system by a tiny proportion of fraudsters (known as scroungers). But the abuse lies elsewhere; in the Department of Social Security. They do not aid their staff or their clients' health, and they undermine *everyone's* security.