

# You Don't Have To Answer My Questions

John Videogames

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*To every person who took the time to answer my many questions.*

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What you are about to read are a collection of miniature personal essays and memoirs that center around my time as a census employee as written for NaNoWriMo 2022. I worked for the census for two summers, 2020 was in Minneapolis and 2021 was in the greater South-Central Wisconsin area, and in those two years I went through a lot of major life changes and met a lot of different people. In this time I kept a journal and a photo diary, and as such, I feel that I have an accurate recording of my daily events while on the job, enough content to write at least 50,000 words, mind you. What you are about to read is mainly the truth.

As a census employee, I swore an oath to not reveal any person identifying information, and as such, I have made sure to not include any names in this collection including any and all respondents, my bosses, names of apartment complexes, names of streets, names of whole towns even. Heck, I've even changed my own name. What, did you think John Videogames was anything besides a pseudonym?

I am reporting these conversations as accurately and honestly as I can. Some words do not match the exact words spoken in the conversation; however, many of these interactions involved folks whose language I personally would not

use. I have left these conversations as close to accurate as possible for the sake of honest reporting.

If you enjoy this collection of stories, then let me know, that is if you can find me (not that it is hard to do so).

# Chapter 1

## Day One

“Hi, my name is John Videogames, I’m with the United States Census. I’m just here to ask you a couple questions about where you were located on April 1st 2020. Your answers will be confidential, and you can refuse to answer any question at any time. Between you and me, if I repeat any of the answers that you give me I could go to jail and have to pay up to five-hundred thousand dollars, so I’m not going to do that.”

My words are thrown at the man standing in the door-frame like an unexpected football. He doesn’t have his hands out in front of him to catch the pigskin of a paragraph I’ve hurled his way. He takes a step back to catch himself and assess the fast-talking twenty-something that stands on his doorstep. He can’t see my mouth moving underneath my mask, which may be even more off-putting as the barrage of sentences are sprayed across his front stoop.

“What?”

“I’m just with the census doing follow-up, can I ask you a few questions?”

His eyes dart past my over-straightened stance, perhaps looking for the hidden camera. He’s been punked. Found out. Ashton Kutcher is hiding just around the corner to throw a bucket of glitter on his lawn.

“Uh, yeah sure.”

At his response, I look down at my government issued iPhone, complete with the app that I am to read, verbatim, to the “target”.

“Is this 4361 Vincent Ave. N, Apartment 1?”

He nods, his pencil-thin mustache arching with his lip at the mention of the apartment number.

“And can I get your name please?”

“Jeff.” He looks down to the corner of the sidewalk again, and then past me again to the rest of the walk opposite the corner. “Jeff Caraway.”

“And Mr. Caraway, were you here at 4361 Vincent Ave. N, Apartment 1 on April 2020?”

“Uh, yeah, I mean,” he scratches the back of his head, “there isn’t a second apartment.”

*Oh shit. There’s not? That’s not good. I’ll have to make note of that somehow, if the app will let me.*

“That’s not a problem Mr. Caraway, thank you. At this point I am going to ask you a series of questions regarding the people who stayed here on April 1st, 2020. I will ask about their name, age, date of birth, gender, race and ethnicity.”

My eyes become unglued from my sandpaper-y dry script and look up to see that Jeff appears to be fidgeting with his



fingers. He's picking at a hangnail on his index finger, clearly not looking at me looking at him. We have some common ground, though I don't deviate from the script. I continue all the same.

"And again, you're free to refuse to answer any questions you're not comfortable with. We'll start with you, Jeff."

At my mention of his name, he snaps back to a nervous attention, though still picking at his nail.

"Were you, Jeff Caraway here on April 1st, 2020?"

"Yes."

"What is your age?"

"I'm thirty-five."

"What is your date of birth?"

"Uh, May 3rd, 1985."

"And are you, Jeff, male or female?"

Jeff gives me a look, the look my father gave me when I was six, asking if I could have a giant bowl of ice cream for dinner. He continues to stare at me as I stand there. I am not allowed to assume anything.

"I just need you to tell me if you're male or female."

"Male."

"What is your family's country of origin?"

"Listen, I don't think that's really necessary."

This is one of the responses I have prepared for. One of those answers that the average American may expect a census person to pursue further. "You have to tell me where your great grandparents emigrated from! You *have* to! It's the *LAW!*" they might expect the census person to shout, an intimidating presence on their persons doorstep at 2 PM on a Thursday in the middle of August. But the average American

is wrong, I don't have to pursue this line of questioning any further than it needs to go.

"Sure, we can skip that one."

For a moment, he purses his lips and raises his eyebrows.

"And are you, Jeff, African American, Asian American, Caucasian, Hispanic, Native American, Pacific Islander, or another race not listed here?"

"I'm White."

"So... you... are..." I mumble as I click the "Caucasian" dot on the iPhone. The phone vibrates and I move onto the next script.

"Next I'm going to ask you, Jeff, about anyone else living here at 4361 Vincent St. N, Apartment 1 on April 1st, 2020."

"Yeah, there's only this apartment, no Apartment 2."

"Right," I respond, seeing his eyes sunken and cold. I observe his features a bit more carefully now as I give him a second look. His black mess of hair and his whiskered face coupled with the faded band tee-shirt and flannel pajama pants are a dead giveaway of why he didn't immediately open the door when I first rang the doorbell. "Just reading the script, sorry."

"Right, yeah, of course you are. No one else was living here. Just me."

"And to confirm, there were non-relatives staying here either, including friends, roommates, or any other guests?"

"Like I said," he says with a sigh, shoulders shrugging and hands slowly moving lower on his thighs from his slouch, "just me."

"Alright, then that makes it easy for me! This concludes this interview, thank you so much for your time!" I'm upbeat,

but aware of the annoyance I present to one, Jeff Caraway.

“Great, thanks, make sure you put a note in there so that they don’t come asking for Apartment 2, there isn’t one.”

“Sure thing, thanks again.” The last word is met with the door knocker as I pivot on my heel and make my way down the concrete steps towards the sidewalk. As I tap in the last bubble to mark the assignment as complete, I hear the window blinds close from the large living room window I not which I could previously see a chewed up couch and a pile of cardboard beer boxes.

*Not to bad for my first ever house. I suppose that could’ve gone waaaaay worse.*

I then scroll down to the next house on Vincent Street N. I’m to visit this afternoon: “4361 Vincent Ave. N, Apartment 2”.

*Shit.*

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Being a census worker is not all that difficult of a job. I just have to go door to door and ask people questions. If the people don’t want to answer these questions, that’s fine, they don’t have to. It’s no difference to me whether or not they choose to answer the questions. They can question the invasiveness of the questions about gender, ethnicity, race, age of the people who live in the house, et cetera, and I can agree with them. We can both agree that the questions are not questions either of us would like to discuss with our own families, let alone complete strangers randomly showing up

on our doorsteps. I would not be doing this if they weren't paying me. But they *are* paying me. And I need the money.

My father asked me about my day after returning home that first day. He was curious about how many houses I was able to hit that first day, given that the whole census operation had a very quick turnaround time from training to execution. He turned from the stove where he had a package of hamburger he was beginning to cut open, as I sat on a stool opposite him.

"When you look at the app of the list of houses, do you end up walking to them all?"

"Sometimes, though to start I just parked my car in the general vicinity of a lot of houses and then just walked from assignment to assignment."

"Where'd you visit today?"

"I can't really tell you that, but North Minneapolis."

He nodded at this. We both knew that cases were assigned to people who were local to a specific neighborhood, meaning that, beyond Robbinsdale, I was likely to receive cases in the Cleveland, Camden, Folwell and Near North neighborhoods. Despite their proximity, these were neighborhoods we never visited. We stayed on our side of the parkway, only venturing down Dowling Avenue to get on Highway 94. 6th Street to Upton Ave. N may as well have been the Moon for all I knew. Our family bike rides along the Victory Memorial and Theodore Wirth Parkways were always kept to the Western side of the drive, distancing ourselves from Penn and Lowry, or Plymouth Ave. I never questioned this as a child, I didn't know anyone who lived "over there". Friends of mine lived further down Golden Valley Road in

the opposite direction, or around Crystal Lake. I lived on the literal most Eastern road that still fell into the Robbinsdale 281 School District, so all of my social engagements as a child lay Westward. Even when I attended parties in High School during senior year, visiting musty basements blocks away from High School football stadiums, these events were never in North Minneapolis. They were in St. Louis Park, Hopkins, and Edina, suburbs full of the future business-major fraternity types, Division II Hockey Players, and members of the Young Republican National Federation (sometimes these labels all applied to a singular Edina boy).

“Kind of near the flagpole, kind of near the Loring School.”

“How many house assignments did you complete?”

At this question I smiled to myself, knowing that Dad would more than likely express contempt at the policy I was about to outline.

“So I had a list of about twenty-five residences I had to visit and ask about. I got through the list pretty quickly, honestly.”

“You did the twenty-five interviews in four hours?”

“Well, no. Some people weren’t home.”

“So you didn’t try to go back later when they might be home?”

“No. The app says I have to go in a specific order to each house, and if no one is home then I have to leave a little note saying I visited and that they can fill out the census online, and then I leave.”

My hypothesis was correct. Dad shifted his weight from his right leg to his left. “Will you be going to these houses tomorrow to try again?”

“I honestly don’t know. Maybe? Probably? I think they’ll send me back there in a day or two just in case the residents weren’t home for a certain period of time.”

“You might want to consider going a little later in the day, I don’t know how many people are going to be home between 1 and 4 on a Thursday. You might be able to get more cases done.”

*Oh but you see, the fewer people that answer the door, the easier my job is.*

“Yeah, that’s true, but it doesn’t actually matter if I complete the questionnaire for a case or not.”

He furrowed his brow.

“What do you mean? Don’t you have to finish all of the cases?”

“Well, yeah, I have to go to the places the app tells me, but if they’re not home, then I just have to mark that and then the app tells me to move on. It’s not like I get paid one way or another if they’re home or not.”

“But you should be trying your hardest to do the best job you can. You should be trying to be completing as many cases as you can regardless of pay.”

“Yeah, I know, I’m doing the best I can with this. It’s not like I went up to the doorstep and ding-dong-ditched them.”

This statement was not necessarily the whole truth. One of the later houses I was told to visit was an old triplex, a type of house quite present in North Minneapolis suburbs. With trepidation, I meandered along the cracked and overgrown sidewalk to the entrance. I was hesitant to open the door to get inside and reach the doorbell. The app specified the housing unit as Unit 3, which said to me that it was the top

floor of the building. But despite the numbering, there was only a single doorbell visible from the outside. My training taught me to be aware of my surroundings throughout, and because it was my first day on the job, I was hesitant to grab the faded brass knob and welcome myself into the entryway. So I instead rang the singular doorbell outside the building and then waited. The age of the house implied to me, after about a half-minute of waiting, that the doorbell had long since been retired. Despite this conclusion, I half-heartedly rang the doorbell again and again waited. I was not being paid on commission, but rather by the hour. The longer I waited, the more I was paid.

Perhaps this is an obvious statement in hindsight, but there were many hidden monitoring affects in the census app in order to ensure the accuracy and validity of each census worker's reports. Each questionnaire was timestamped with the completion time of each event, the phone's GPS settings were to be maintained throughout (for us "to be able to reach our destination more easily", we were told), and if the phone were to turn off for any reason, our job would be terminated. This final term amused me. It reminded me of the *Passione Initiation* test from *JoJo's Bizarre Adventure: Golden Wind* by Hirohiko Araki, in which the protagonist had to keep a lighter lit for twenty-four hours; if the lighter were to go out, supposedly something terrible would happen. If this phone's battery were to die, my employment with the one job I was able to find during the Summer of 2020 would be over just like that. So I kept the phone on, day in and day out, it no doubt tracking my every movement as I wandered in and out of the suburban streets and eventually back to my home

base.

“There were some people home at a lot of different houses, and I definitely completed at least ten questionnaires where I could.”

“That’s good. At least you finished a couple cases today. Maybe you should go out tomorrow a little later in the day, you might be able to spend more time out there and make a few more bucks.”

“Yeah, that sounds like it might be a good idea.”

“Did you have to wear a mask?”

“Yeah, I wore the Twins one,”

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the two-layered cloth mask Mom had made for the family back in April. One side of the mask was a pale blue fabric, stitched in such a way to mimic the folds of a surgical mask. The other side featured Minnesota Twins logos, which I wore outwardly to familiarize myself with my assignments. “I’m from here too! You can trust me! I’m just a friendly, baseball-loving census person who only wants to know the name, age, sex, race, and ethnicity of your newborn baby!”. On the sides of the masks were elastic straps that wrapped around my ears, which forced me to wear my contacts any days I wanted to go outside. How naive we were, thinking that a double-layered mask made of tee-shirt cotton would be enough to prevent transmitting a respiratory illness like COVID-19.

“we have to wear one while working.”

“That’s good at least. You just let us know if you’re stating to not feel well.”

“For sure, for sure.”



“Dinner should be ready in about fifteen minutes, would you mind setting the table?”

“Let me quick change, then yeah, sure.”

At these words, Dad nodded and returned to browning the hamburger meat that he had in the cast-iron pan, and I made my way for the basement.

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With haste, I opened and closed the basement door, careful not to set off the especially sensitive smoke alarm, and made my way to my makeshift bedroom, the basement guest room. What had once been Grandma and Grandpa’s room whenever they came to visit had become my new living space. I had lost my old childhood bedroom to my father who had annexed the space even before the work-from-home order came out. Of course, I hadn’t used the space in almost four years by that point, and how could anyone have predicted an event bigger than college graduation (or even my hypothetical dropping out), that would force a twenty-one year old to go live back with their parents?

Yet here I was: a college senior living in his parents’ basement.

When my brother and I returned home from Madison for “Spring Break”, our intention was to stay for a couple of days before eventually returning back to campus to finish out the semester, the events of the day eventually passing by mid-April. My parents coerced me to live in their basement, promising a Queen-sized bed, my own space far from their and my brother’s bedrooms where I could stay up as late

as I wanted, and the promise of not asking me to pay rent (this last bit was said jokingly by my mother, and only half-jokingly by my father). This schedule, however, elongated rapidly, forcing my brother out of the dorms halfway through his second semester as a college student. I decided to stay home as well, hearing that one of my housemates apparently caught some sort of illness and that my other housemates were starting to show symptoms as well. And, hey, as a college student, any circumstances that allowed me “free” food were circumstances I could abide with, especially when seeing my friends was more or less out of the picture. As March came and went, and anxieties related to the global state of affairs increased, I found myself waking up in the dry, sterile environment of the guest bedroom. I was a permanent guest in my parents’ home.

By the final week of a hellish eighteen-credit, senior design-laden, examination while home-surveilling semester, I was worn out. My time was spent sitting in an uncomfortable chair, writing notes and papers on nuclear energy trends, studying the GMRES algorithm, running PDE simulations in MATLAB on my overwhelmed and underpowered laptop to model the plume of an aerosol, learning how to use vim to conduct image segmentation via a watershed algorithm, and attempting to assemble a patchwork MCNP code to design a system that could produce Molybdenum-99 from a target based system using Low Enriched Uranium-235. Yes, I really was designing a nuclear reactor in my parents’ basement. The only net positive I can present from the Spring 2020 semester was that, because of the extraneous circumstances, the University of Wisconsin offered opt-in Pass/Fail grading on any

course that one wanted. Upon learning this fact, I did not choose to slack off in my courses, hoping to ride things out with a C and then take the “Pass” option. Rather, I continued at the pace I had been working at, desperately hoping to obtain as many “As” as possible, with hopes to boost my GPA as much as possible in one of the most critical semesters of my undergrad. Did I learn anything from any of the courses I took that semester? Yes, though I reckon not everything I learned was on the syllabus.

The Spring of 2020 all blurred together into a kind of lethargic malaise, broken up only by my long-distance running habit. Days began with my obnoxious alarm sounding at 7:30 AM and ended after midnight with my brain struggling to form sentences beyond “I’m fine, I’m just tired.” Sometimes if I hadn’t worked as hard that day, I might be able to throw two extra words, “a little”, into that sentence.

“So have you found a job for the summer?” asked my father during dinner, one of the few periods of time I would emerge from my cavernous dwellings.

I blinked at him, confused. “What?”

“Do you have a job for the summer? The semester is almost over, do you have any plans for the summer?”

I did not have plans for the summer. I once had some plans for the summer to intern with a National Lab, but those plans had been dashed by the end of March. The window for an alternative was long closed by the first week of May, where I found myself during this line of questioning.

I looked back down at my bowl of noodles. “No, I don’t have a job right now. Er, I don’t have any jobs lined up for the summer.”

“Are you looking?”

“I’m just trying to get through this semester.”

“Well, jobs are going fast, I know there’s a lot of young people home right now so there might not be many openings at some local places. I can grab you some job applications from the gym downtown, they’re looking for managers.”

“Sure.” I kept my eyes on the penne noodles in my bowl.

“If you’re not serious about finding work, we’re going to make you start paying rent.”

“Honey,” responded my Mom who clearly had not signed off on this discussion, “let’s talk about this a little.” At these words, Dad backed off, aware of his faux pas.

No one really spoke at the table after that.

“I will say,” I started, after what felt like an eternity (but was really only two forkfuls of noodles), “I have been updating my resume to a new system and I think it looks really good. I still have some connections with the school district and City of New Hope, so I can email them both and see if they have any openings. And, if nothing else, I saw that the Holiday on 42nd is hiring, so maybe I can get something there.”

That evening I drafted emails to my previous bosses, noting my circumstances of how I was home for the summer and that if they had any temporary jobs, I was interested in applying. These emails yielded no responses, a fact that I relayed to my parents the next day.

“Y’know, you spend a lot of time running when you could be filling out applications for work at, say, Home Depot.” Dad had clearly been thinking about other options. “I drove

past it on my way home from work and they're offering \$11.00 per hour. You'd probably be a perfect fit there."

His words frustrated me. I was running every other day, for, on average, ninety minutes, traversing between eight and eleven miles per run. It was my singular justification for leaving the house and doing something beyond school. In the house, I did nothing but school. The basement where I had once played football as a young child, enjoyed games on our Wii as a youth, and had not paid attention to movies with a partner as a teenager, had now taken on a new meaning. The basement was my stress-powered workplace, and the outdoors were an escape from that stress. I cherished the spring breeze, the slowly increasing temperatures, even the unexpected deep puddles, as I ran. I was a houseplant. I needed fresh air and sunlight to thrive, to survive, to function. And after those runs, I would shower and then return to the basement, where I would lay motionless on my bed until my muscles allowed my body to move back to my work setup and continue along with my assignments. "Waking, working, running, resting, working, sleeping", in that order.

"Running is my exercise. This is what I'd do on campus."

"Would you also look for jobs on campus too?"

"I didn't need one, I had one at the Cancer Center."

"Are you able to do remote work for the Cancer Center this summer?"

"They haven't been responding to my emails, but maybe."

I would not work for the Cancer Center again after returning home for Spring Break.

"Well, send them another email maybe."

"I will, I will."

I sent my boss Cancer Center a third email in five days, touching base. My boss, a mother with two elementary school-aged child, swamped with her own concerns could only respond with an understandable apathy. “I don’t know much, my boss hasn’t sent me any information about this whole deal.” I relayed this email to Dad the next day.

“Then it sounds like you’ve gotta find a job. Have you been applying to any others?”

I hadn’t applied to any jobs in the stretch of those three days. I was preparing to spend the following day and evening pulling an all-nighter to hit the deadline for my final senior design report.

“No, I’m trying to finish this senior design report. And then T and I are going to the cabin for the weekend to take a break at the end of the semester.”

Dad sat back in his chair. My brother, cousin, and I had planned this travel to the cabin back in January before the whole world caught fire. He sighed, shrugged and said with a “you’ll be sorry”-cadence, “Jobs are going pretty fast.” I rolled my eyes.

“Just humor me, I saw that the census is still hiring people to go door to door, and I’m happy to forward you that email. You’d be a good fit for it.”

“Door to door in a pandemic?”

My rebuttal struck well, as shown by exasperated look on his face, his eyebrows raised, eyes widened, looking down at the table, head tilting slightly to his right. “Not ideal, is it?”

“I’m surprised they’re not delaying it.” interjected Mom, who had been listening while eating.

“Me too”, added my brother, who sat opposite me.

“Fine, I’ll apply. No guarantees I’ll get it, but I promise I’ll apply to it.” I surrendered. “I’ll even do it before we leave for the cabin.”

The afternoon after my all-nighter, the day after the semester ended, and the day before T and I left for the cabin (a Thursday), I sat down and opened the URL in Dad’s email to census.gov. The application process was no different from most of my other job applications. The website-based application asked for a resume upload and then that I re-enter the exact same information in a set of similar HTML textboxes. The application asked for previous references, to which I listed my busy Cancer Center boss and my connections with the School District and New Hope Parks and Rec. The application asked me if I had previously worked for the census, how I had heard of the census, and if I would be interested in various positions including Supervisor and / or Enumerator. I had no idea what the responsibilities of either role entailed, so I selected both, assuming my options would be better if I left as many doors open as possible.

The application then asked for a brief cover letter asking me why I wanted to be an enumerator. I paused on this screen, contemplating uploading a .pdf file that simply read “I need a job.”, before I went and spewed 498 words of bullshit on the page about how I was “excited to contribute to American history through the noble act of working for the United States census”. I listed my language capabilities, fluent English and conversational Spanish and French, and my lack of drug-use history, my selective service number, and my place of birth. The application then asked me many questions about my history as a government employee,

but given the fact that I had never been a government employee, I simply answered “no” to every single question. The weariness crept into my fingers with each click. That is until I happened across Question 22: “Indicate the type(s) of transportation available for your use – Mark (X) ALL that apply.”, which included: Automobile (with the option to specific if the car had Four-Wheel Drive), Airplane, Boat, ATV “(All Terrain Vehicle)”, other (which I listed as “Bicycle”) and None. The fourth option, ATV, amused me and I allowed my mind to wander, imagining a census worker showing up to an abandoned shack in the middle of the woods on a Bobcat Four-Wheeler, and knocking on the door to ask the potential resident if anyone was living there on April 1, 2020. And then I stopped, refocused myself, and continued plodding along. I concluded the otherwise mind-numbingly redundant application by catching a typo in the phone number I had listed before I confirmed the rest of my information, and clicked “Submit”. To celebrate the event, I took a photo of the “THANK YOU FOR APPLYING TO WORK FOR THE 2020 UNITED STATES CENSUS” screen and sent it to Dad. His response was a single thumbs up emoji.

It wasn’t until July 1st that I finally heard from the census again. Thursday, May 14th had long since passed in the “felt time” of people living in Minneapolis, Minnesota during the late Spring and early Summer of 2020. After the murder of George Floyd by Officer Derek Chauvin around Memorial Day, the city had hosted the second largest set of demonstrations and protests against Police Brutality (second only to the L.A. riots). Many young people took to the streets of Downtown Minneapolis to protest the injustice and to com-



mit themselves to public service in light of the destruction from any rioting. In this time, my brother and I took ourselves over to the Longfellow neighborhood and cleaned up the local neighborhood while also engaging in some moderately distasteful disaster tourism. We all wore masks for the pandemic, but identifiable ones as to not be taken for the rare ne'er-do-well Boogaloo Boy who attempted to incite violence to kick off the next Civil War here in my hometown.

Despite this chaos, the specter of joblessness loomed over my household. While I was still not expected to pay rent, likely as a result of Mom convincing Dad that these were unprecedented times and that “our son is just trying to do his best and is planning to apply to grad school, so we should give him some grace.” (this fact I learned from Mom a couple months later as I prepared to go back to single apartment back in Madison after my Virtual Graduation Ceremony, now without a job and preparing my Graduate School applications), I was still regularly being asked if I had a plan. I did not have an immediate plan. There was a long-term plan in place, sure: I wanted to go to graduate school and get a Ph.D. from some institution that would allow me to do work with radiation measurement, dosimetry, or something similar. But that would likely not start until the Fall of 2021, given that my plan was to graduate with my degrees in Nuclear Engineering and Applied Math in the winter.

So I needed a job. And wouldn't you know, one came knocking.

## Chapter 2

### 2020

My alarm went off at 7:25, playing Kirby Super Star Ultra's "Candy Mountain" theme as it always did. I had that time set for my average weekday. Any and all workdays began with that Jovial Ascent tune, with its manic trumpets and synths, all compressed to play out of a Nintendo DS's speakers. I swiped my phone's locking combination four times before I managed to unlock it, noisy music blaring as I did. As I finally silenced wretched tune, I looked up at the ceiling, my body spread like the Vitruvian Man. I curled my right arm upward so that my phone could hang maybe three inches from my face and squinted to make the letters on Twitter come into clearer focus as I scrolled without focus nor care. It was the same as usual: clips of hyperactive streamers, little tiny comics about something mundane made amusingly cute, cosplay starlets; variations on a daily theme. I let my mind wander, when I realized I had no idea what day of the week

it was. The weather had been the same, clear and sunny for a couple weeks now, only getting moderately overcast every so often. No rain since late July.

*What day is it today?*

I didn't have to pause my perusal of the space. The next item I scrolled upon was a Twitter user who posted a mashup of the audio from Hall & Oates's 'Out of Touch' and the visual opening of 'Lucky Star'.

*Oh, it's Thursday.*

The gimmick account posted the same minute an a half-long video every Thursday morning, perhaps as a gag, perhaps as something more. This was one of many such Twitter feeds, others included Wii Shop Wednesday (a two minute long clip of a section from the comedy duo "Nirvana the Band", where the duo come up with a song for their show by adding lyrics to the Wii Shop Menu music theme), Sturgeon Saturday (a manic compilation of clips of sturgeons set to the tune of *Kickstart My Heart* by Motley Crue), and Flat Fuck Friday (in which people post images of overly flat alligators). These were my calendar as I counted down the end of the week while still under the comfort of the cloud-like comforter of the Guest Bed.

Scooching myself up further on the bed so my lower back had the lumbar support of a pillow, I began to read other places of note. I checked my Discord servers, my Snapchat, my Tinder matches, and then, finally my emails (in that order). By 7:50 I had made it through my routine, but couldn't convince myself to remove myself from my warm and comfortable haven. The world outside was only going to be filled with an airborne disease emitted by anyone, and my job was

to go out and meet these people. No, the would could wait like five more minutes. As long as I was upstairs by 8, showered by 8:30 and ready to leave the house to start cases by 9, I was fine.

This mentality is why I had selected 7:25 as the alarm time. Waking up after 7:30 felt like I was always on a timer, no time to enjoy the feeling of waking up and practicing my preferred method of doom-scrolling. Waking up any earlier than 7:15 was a mistake, too much time could be spent waiting around which invited the dark, clammy hands of drowsiness to grab at my face, desperately yearning to see the outer sides of my eyelids. 7:25, however, is an excellent time to rise. 35 minutes to wake up and figure out if you're willing to put with something that day is the perfect amount of time to weigh all the options. You can say that you had a whole half-hour to yourself with no one bothering you. You can make a To-Do list in that time. You can relive evenings in your freshman dorm in that time. Thirty-five minutes of pure, unbothered, invited isolation. This period of time was how I was able to then convince myself to plod up the stairs, shower, smash a 300 mg energy drink, get dressed in a navy polo and khaki shorts, and get myself to my car.

When you work for the census as a twenty-two and then also a twenty-three year old, the idea of being paid per mile of driving is a foreign concept. You may understand that there are people, like your Uncle, who drive semi-trucks all day, making deliveries to agriculture industry plants. You may understand that there are free-lance delivery drivers, who will pick things up and drop things off, the 'thing' varying from people, to food, to marijuana. The former get paid

to drive, sure, but the latter only get paid for the delivery process of the item where they only act as a middleman. So when you learn that the census will pay the federal mileage rate of \$0.58 per mile you drive while on duty is an absolute game-changer. They won't pay for your gas, this is supposed to cover the cost, and will do so with change to spare as gas is currently less than \$2.00 per gallon. With this reimbursement, coupled with the fact that your self-reported hours begin the moment you turn on your car in your drive way, you can easily game the system to get that last little crumb from the government's three-tiered layer cake. Part of the training involved in the censusing process related to this issue notes that you're supposed to keep track of the times you take any breaks not involved driving to the next assignment, which include lunch breaks (which honestly make perfect sense from an employer's perspective) and trips to, and time spent at gas stations. You're not allowed to have the United States pay for your trip to the Holiday where you'll fill up on gasoline, go inside, use the restroom, come out and buy a handful of energy drinks, and yet they will have to pay you for all that anyway when you leave their phone in the car and you take less than seven minutes to do all of that. Since time is logged per fifteen minutes on the census phone app, so long as you were working for at least eight of those minutes you can include that segment of fifteen minutes in your hours worked. And it goes without saying that strategic lunch break timing to maximize paid hours is also a given. You will commit time theft, and it's going to be one of the easiest things to do on an already easy job.

My car's out front, parked along the parkway. I know the

walk around my parent's house like the back of my hand, so I decide it's worth being a little proactive. As open the app and look down at the list of addresses I have to visit today, I can actually see one of the houses I will have to visit later that day, should I make it through thirty-some other houses. As I slide into the front seat, turn on the car, and note the time and mileage of my vehicle (9:05 AM and 63,569 miles respectively), I see that there are two significant clusters of addresses that I must visit, one in North Minneapolis and one in Downtown Robbinsdale. The addresses give the nature of these residential fortresses I will have to conquer, I will have to enter two different apartment complexes somehow. I look at the ones in Robbinsdale, the place I'm much more familiar with, they're the older ones around Hubbard and Broadway, apartment complexes we'd drive past and drop kids off at on the late bus home from after-school activities. Every single kid getting off there, I remember, was Black. I suppose I will just have to act as confident, but open as possible, and make it absolutely clear that if they do not want me there, I will leave. There are a couple houses to do in that area as well that are listed to do before the apartments, so I'll do my "warm up" attempts out of the way before I make my attempt at breaching their security locks. It shouldn't be too hard, I've got practice with things like this.

I learned a lot of things in college, though I can't put them all on my resume. When I was deciding my classes at Freshman year orientation to attend the University of Wisconsin-Madison, I opted to start with MATH 221, Calculus I, rather than opt into MATH 234, Calculus III. In High School I had taken AP Calc in Sophomore year, and then had spent the

last two years of High School in IB HL2 Math, a course that taught me the beauty and intricacies of patterns in Math, and how to think more rigorously. HL Math, however, did not allow me to refresh my differentiation and integration skills, and I cared first and foremost about my grades in college. It was better to start at the base again to rebuild the strong foundation, if it was within the timely means of doing so.

I coasted through that Calc I class. I was able to work on a number of group projects with a set of three other Freshman guys who also clearly knew their stuff. We were all the overachieving “just-nerdy-enough” type, who shared a common work-ethic of getting everything homework related done by Friday afternoon so that all of Saturday could be a day to play. After working together on related rates problems, we would post addresses of parties we had accumulated from any and all sources. A neighbor’s older brother was having a house party, a friend living at College Court was having a party in their courtyard, 200 South Langdon was having a thing where girls got in free and they might also be able to get guys in (which never happened, of course). We shared these amongst ourselves and then relayed them to our respective freshman dormitory floors.

Some of these addresses were located at luxury apartment complexes near the capitol building, far nicer than what was necessary for the typical college experience. These complexes had names like “The Hub”, had amenities like a full gym and rooftop pool, and were generally more than twice the price anyone that wasn’t using their parents as a credit card was willing to pay per month for rent. I never felt like I

was a villain inviting my friends (who would in turn invite their entire floor) to parties at these complexes. The night of the parties, the process of getting to the correct door was a tricky one. These were the types of apartments that had a concierge and security “police officer” in the lobby, designed to keep hooligans like eighteen-year-old me from getting in after 9 PM. So I had to learn how to be crafty despite having downed at least five shots of vodka in the past hour. The trick I learned that always seemed to fare well was to always underdress for parties that didn’t have themes, and find a way to follow someone else inside the complex. I would walk slightly ahead of the floor-pack, and waited until I could find someone else making their way towards the entrance door, and I’d jog slightly up to them, giving the impression that I also lived there, so that the actual occupant would hold the door for me out of politeness. Once inside, I’d sit in whatever lobby furniture was present on my phone, waiting for the text that the rest of the group was outdoors wanted to be let in. We would worry about the elevators or stairs later, what matters is that we had a way in.

When at training for the census, a nice old lady spoke upon the church basement stage with a microphone in hand.

“Now you might be thinking that you’re only going to do houses here, and that’s not always the case. Sometimes you’ll have to do NRFU assignments in apartment complexes and assisted living facilities. If that happens, you have a couple of different ways you might be able to approach this problem. The easiest way to accomplish each case is to try to find the property manager or landlord on site, and go through the usual survey and list them as a proxy. If the landlord isn’t



willing to give you the answers, then that's fine. Thank them for their time and leave."

This spiel was all standard procedure I had expected, sitting at the round, cloth-covered table. The plastic chair I found myself shifting in was like many others one would find at in a church basement, cheap, white, beat up. In the ridge of the seat, the plastic looked scuffed, as it had been dragged across the blacktop parking lot just outside.

"... and if you can't locate a landlord, you should try to enter the building if you're comfortable with it."

I snapped back to attention.

"There are a couple different ways you might be able to do this. You can approach someone in or around the building identifying yourself and then asking if they can grant you access to the premises. You can follow someone in as they enter the building. Or again, if you're not comfortable with this practice, you can mark in the app the 'Unable to Complete' option, and choose the option 'Unable to Access Address' option. You are encouraged to use your own discretion, whether or not you feel that it is worth calling your manager about obtaining access. We just want you to complete as many cases as reasonably possible, and if it means that this address is a wash, then you can move on."

I stifled a laugh. The way the woman said "wash" tickled me, sticking into the corkboard of my brain like a pin. Like the word "war" with a whistle in her teeth. I had only heard it "warsh" in old cartoons, so to hear it coming from a tiny old lady was both surprising and amusing to me.

What had struck me was the *laissez-faire* recommendation this lady had just given the room of people between the

ages of 18 and 65. Follow someone into the apartment, do your business, and then leave. We were supposed to identify yourself, but honestly, who would actually do that when they're dressed like a census person, complete with shoulder-strap bag, identification lanyard and badge, and fancy government iPhone? I assumed the mindset of those drunken Friday nights, talking to people who lived there when you didn't was a recipe for disaster. But here she was, the old lady unintentionally confirming that I was one of the most qualified people in the room to do this job.

After four straight houses of knocking, ringing doorbells, being seen on RING cameras, and leaving tiny little "Hi, I visited at 10:30 AM on a Thursday, but you weren't home" slips, it was time to lay siege on the Birdhouse apartment complex. This apartment complex was a set of four rectangular prism buildings build upon a hill, two buildings higher and two building lower, and with the orientation of the hill, each building corresponded to one of the cardinal directions. Between each build were small picnic tables and a small little greens pace. Entrances to the building were all facing each other, both towards the middle hill stairs. I was to attempt the the North and East buildings on this journey, the two lower buildings. I parked my car two blocks away to walk to the site (for free parking in place of the metered parking, and, of course to extend the "preparation period"), and made my way to the central courtyard to find the two buildings. Naturally, upon lightly pulling the handles on each door, I was met with a subtle, yet firm resistance. Locked, as expected. Attempting to contact an on-site any kind of on-site landlord was also impossible as the landlord office was locked

in the West building, with a piece of paper taped over the buzzer, “BUZZER NOT WORKING, CONTACT LEASING COMPANY FOR EMERGENCIES”, with the phone number scrawled across the bottom. The warped edges of the paper and traces of dripping ink implied that this paper had been here for a while, so I was going to have to use my own devices.

But I’d find a way. I was resourceful. I was efficient.

## Chapter 3

# Doors

One of the most difficult things in the world to do is knock on a person's door and actually get its owner to answer. You have no idea what might be on the other side of that single hinged barrier. When you get to someone's door, numerous mechanics contribute to the probability that someone might actually respond to your knock.

The first is whether or not anyone is actually home. Odds are that there might be at least a single person home between the hours of 6 PM and 6 AM, but the likelihood of anyone answering the door with hospitality later than 3 hours into that window is infinitesimally small. Horror stories are often centered around the concept of a knock at the door in the dead of night. So while the odds of someone being home are good, the odds that they'll actually answer the door are slim-to-none, lest they take their chances with the axe murderer standing on their door step, asking them who lives there.

Between 6 AM and 6 PM, you're exponentially more likely to have someone confusedly answer the door, but that's if they're home in the first place. The probability of door answering also grows quite rapidly as we progress towards 6 PM, or so one might think. Anecdotally, I always had my best luck knocking on doors between the hours of 2 and 5 PM, often catching people as they entered their driveways, which I suppose means that I was never really knocking on their doors in the first place.

The day of the week also plays an obvious role in calculating these probabilities. While weekdays offer consistent, yet diminishing, returns, weekends are a variable nightmare. I found that Saturdays were almost just as difficult to reach people via my knocks during the day. I could only assume that the people occupying these houses were either at work, or out for the day, completing personal tasks that they otherwise had little time for during the week. Sundays are the best days for marks, people are always home on Sundays, usually in the afternoons. They're always around doing housework, chores, day drinking, sitting by their pools, watching their kids play in the backyard, having guests over for Sunday Lunch. People might be more frustrated with the census enumerator on Sundays, but they're around. Sundays are also especially lucrative days because they're the days where I got paid the overtime rate, an extra 25% compared to the usual rate. Sundays to me, therefore, were gold. The pragmatic person I am, I explained to my parents that I had plans to work on that first Sunday, which initially threw them for a bit of a loop. But with the little 25% detail, Dad was immediately for it, and expressed his support the most characteristically Mid-

western way possible.

“Sounds like a pretty good plan.”

When approaching a door to prepare to knock, it's imperative to first consider if you're expecting any response in the first place. I always walked up to a door with a cool aura of confidence and calm, scouting out windows with my peripheral vision to potentially catch any movement. Something I had remembered from my days of aimlessly browsing Wikipedia pages at the Cancer Center, it was better to catch movement without looking at a target dead on, apparently this was how soldiers managed to track down enemies hiding in the surroundings. I was not on the look out for any Charlie by any means, but I always tried to see whether or not Charlene might be sitting in the living room, watching the Maury Show as she rocked in her chair.

I also watched for any pets that might be watching from the windows. If I could see a dog from the sidewalk, without fail they would make a raucous wail long before I ever reached the door, and then I wouldn't even have to knock. I would know from the dogs in the living space if anyone was home. I'd stand on the front stoop, listening to the repeated barks, yips, squeals, and roars from the other side of the door, hearing their scratches desperate to know who this new potential threat was that was approaching their property. If their barks continued on even after I knocked, it was a 99.9% certainty that no one was home. Now is the part of the story where I tell you, the audience, that I am not a dog person. I can appreciate a good looking dog, but I'm allergic to them and they have far too much uncontrollable energy for my tastes. They yip and romp around, invading spaces

where they shouldn't be, and are generally wild cards, especially when considering how they react to random strangers approaching them.

"If there's a dog and you don't feel safe, just mark it as 'Unable to Complete' and communicate that there is an animal that made you feel unsafe. This is very unlikely, but every year we do have one NRFU enumerator who gets into some kind of altercation with an animal on the premises. We had a census enumerator in 2010 who had to go to the hospital as a result of a Pit Bull at a house. If you think that something similar may happen to you, just move onto the next house. Though, if you can, leave one of your 'Notice of Visit' (NoV) forms."

The training lady's anecdote was enough to confirm my suspicions. You can't trust a dog that isn't yours to act in your best interests. Assume the worst.

There were exceptions to the rule of barking dogs, of course. A man in his thirties hadn't heard the dog barking, but did hear me ring the doorbell. He was lanky, unshaven, wearing a white tank undershirt, and had eyes redder than the devil. His hair, long and black pulled into a pony tail that drooped over his right shoulder.

"Can I help you?"

I responded with my standard script.

"Yeah, I gotcha, I gotcha. Gimme a sec, I'm gonna let the dog out to the back and get a chair."

He closed the door on me, and I could hear the back door to the property creak open, and then closed.

As the man opened the door again, only so far that the latch and chain would allow, I could see on his table a ceramic

dish and a table covered in clutter, rolling papers, multi-colored BIC lighters, and some hastily hidden flower.

“Sorry about that, I don’t mind answering some questions, I’ve been in your shoes before.”

“Going door to door?”

“Yeah man, I getcha. Gotta make a buck somehow.”

“Yeah, you know how it is.” I said with a shrug and a sigh, attempting to relate to the stoner.

We made it through the interview with few hitches, the respondent calmly and carefully answering the questions I asked. When I reached the end of the script and moved to put my iPhone away, he had a question for me.

“You’re alright man. You got time? Want a hit?”

Not every homeowner was as calm in responding as the ponytailed stoner. The next residence I went to that day housed an especially ornery late 30’s women, who shouted, quote:

“Did you read the fucking sign? No solicitors!”

Training for the census always reminded us that we were not solicitors, “so don’t get discouraged if you see a ‘No Solicitations’ sign. If they don’t want you there, you try to get as much information as you can, and leave if you feel unsafe.”

“I am not answering your fucking questions, get the fuck off my property!”

“Of course ma’am, thank you for your time, have a nice day.”

“Go fuck yourse-”

Her words were cut off by the slam of her front door.

As I turned around and walked away while selecting the “Did Not Complete -Hostile Resident” option, I could hear



screams from behind the glass windowpane. The woman was still staring at me, yelling with passionate fury. Noticing this, I hastened my pace, and immediately turned back the way I came, despite having a third house on that block. I would go around the block and approach from the other end, ensuring that I wouldn't have to walk past this house again. As I made my, now anxious, retreat to the corner, I walked past the stoner's house again, and casually looked through the window pane, waving regardless of whether he was there or not. He was, as I saw, lighting another joint, and slowly filling the space with fumes. I couldn't tell if he waved back or not, but I like to imagine that he saw me wave towards him, a friendly face reminding him of previous days and maybe now eliciting a new feeling of calmness. "At least I'm not doing *that* job."

Another interesting facet to consider when approaching people's houses is the new consideration of normalized personal security cameras. Every so often, I'd come across a house with one of the new "RING" doorbell technologies that had a very obvious camera watching my every move. I, with my face for radio, am not a natural in front of a camera, and so whenever I was made clear of these security features, I found myself standing especially awkwardly. I'd fidget with the dead skin around my fingernails, look around at the neighboring yards, anything to distract myself from the painfully awkward idea of someone watching me from their phone while they sat at their bullshit white collar job, working with a spreadsheet designed to keep track of other spreadsheets. I'd rock back and forth on my heels before ringing the ring doorbell again and just ride out the painful

fifteen second wait I allotted myself with these houses. No RING doors ever spoke back to me, I'm not sure if they could. If they did though, I imagine they would open with "and who are you supposed to be?". I never brought my knuckles to these houses' doors. I always half-expected the RING doorbell to alert the owner of the house, to which they'd then call the police on account of some miscreant vandalizing their home. These were the types of people who would call the police for a kid selling candy bars to fund his youth sports team without a second thought. I at least had a badge.

## Chapter 4

# PES

NRFU stands for Non-Response Follow Up, pronounced “Nar-Foo”. These assignments are applied to the residences that didn’t follow out the census forms on or around April 1, 2020, mainly online. Of course, with the tumultuous year, is it any wonder that there were plenty of cases? I filled out my census forms stating that I was living in Madison with my four housemates, and alerted my parents to not include me in our Minneapolis home so that I wasn’t double counted. My roommates also did the same with their parents up in Green Bay. We had the foresight that many people our age lacked, though I suppose that a decennial census isn’t something that many people think about on a regular basis. The last time the census happened, we were maybe 12 years old, making our way through the house of horrors that was Middle School. Regardless, the concept of double counting people is one that the census was well aware of, which is why after

the 2020 NRFU Decennial Census Process, the most effective enumerators were asked back the following year to complete a second operation, the Post-Enumeration Survey, or PES.

Whereas the NRFU operation involved going to a series of assigned cases via smart phone on a daily basis, and required enumerators to get as much information as they felt was possible, the PES operation focused more on getting the error bounds on the count, correcting mistakes in the count like double counts and missing people via disorderly packets of large sheaves of paper. The NRFU operation, despite its messiness in organization, was comparatively well organized in terms of executing cases compared to the shit show that was the Post-Enumeration Survey Process. Cases were provided to me via a supervisor, Sherri who I met a regular basis to exchange completed cases for new ones, and were comprised of a series of five-to-fifteen stapled sheets of A3 paper in their own, ill-fitting plastic bag. These circumstances starkly contrasted the smooth efficiency of comprising all cases in a single mobile device, assigned automatically by some kind of artificial intelligence case distributor. Every case I completed as a PES enumerators featured me fumbling to get the giant pieces of paper out of their bags, praying the staples held as I lifted and flipped the comically large pages and attempting to use a pencil on the stack of pages without a provided clipboard. When I had the iPhone, I looked professional, composed and cool. With the bundles of paper, I looked like a sweaty buffoon, barely passing for a legitimate worker.

While I did the NRFU Enumeration in Minneapolis, I conducted the PES survey in and around Madison, Wiscon-

sin. As the summer of 2020 came and went, I struggled to coordinate with the census office to explain that I had to move back to school before the end of the operation but that if they transferred me to a supervisor in Chicago that I could continue cases in Madison. This was easier said than done. All the while, I had taken up residence in a small 1-bedroom apartment in Madison to finish my undergraduate degree. As the year rolled to a close and 2021 rounded the corner, I once again found myself looking for work beyond doing simple voice-over out of my living-room recording space. It was all I could hope to find as a student during the pandemic.

I received a call from the census in March while visiting my cousin in Denver for a skiing trip. This trip, my singular means of celebrating my undergraduate degree was primarily funded by this cousin, her partner and whatever I could contribute from my dwindling funds. Like many phone calls offering work, I was not expecting it, but welcomed its presence. The caller, a chipper-sounding woman, was calling from the Chicago Regional Census Office.

“We wanted to know if you would be interested in conducting the Post-Enumeration Survey Process in the Minneapolis area.”

When I had told her that I was now living Madison she remarked “not a problem!”. I could hear her smile on the other side of the line.

“If and when you start work in Madison, you’ll be paid a slightly lower rate to the previous year’s NRFU operation, but the overall pay will be comparable given how many cases there are.”

My brain paused as I remembered last summer’s pay-

checks. I made \$27.50 per hour, plus the mileage reimbursement and the bonus of the extra 25% on Sundays and after business hours. This was a game changer. I was scraping by, being underpaid by my voiceover clients in India, living with no more than \$300 to spend per month, which had to cover gas, utilities, and groceries. I apparently hadn't qualified for Pandemic Unemployment Assistance, or at least was initially told that my twelve weeks worth of claims between finishing the semester and starting with on the NRFU operation didn't qualify me for \$600 a month. The State of Wisconsin had initially decided that I, as a student, didn't qualify for unemployment benefits as a result of not being able to work for the cancer center during the semester. When it came to the weeks after the semester ended, and when I, in theory, could have worked for the cancer center from home, but was not able to, they were opaque with details. My parents had listed me as a dependent on their most recent tax forms, so I received exactly \$0.00 from the first multiple stimulus checks that were distributed to Americans as a result of the CARES Act and the American Rescue Plan. While my parents were kind enough to cover the rent of the apartment, I was left to cover my costs. The ski trip was something I had been planning well in advance, as early as February 2020, and had been putting away a fraction of the money I made to eventually fund my travel there. The trip was the only thing I could afford to save for at that time. The trip was my motivator, beyond hunger. I was three days away from calling my cousin at the time, telling her that unfortunately I wasn't going to be able to cover the costs of the skiing trip, but I would still be interested in flying out to Denver to spend time with ev-

everyone when I got the news. On Valentine's Day 2021 that I finally received the funds from my unemployment filings and received nearly \$6,000 dollars in my savings all at once, taxes already removed from the final deposit. As I drove down the hill on County Road M in Middleton on that dry February day, on my way home from my partner's apartment, I remember thinking,

*It's going to be okay. I'm going to be okay.*

"Does that rate sound good to you?"

"Yeah that works for me. I'm not at my current residence, but I'd be happy to fill out any emails you might need."

"Oh that's not necessary right now! This is just the first step, we're just gauging interest. I'll mark you down as a yes with your current information on hand." There was a pause in her words, I could hear keys on a keyboard clacking away. "I also marked that you moved to Madison, Wisconsin, and that you'd like to do cases in that area instead of in Minnesota."

"That's perfect, thank you!"

"Of course! we're excited to hear that you're interested in assisting with the census again, Mr. Videogames."

It took a lot of restraint not to say the cliched line, "Mr. Videogames is my father, call me John.", but I held strong.

"Thank you so much, I'm excited to help out again!"

"Perfect! You have a good day now!"

"You too, mmmm, buh-bye."

As I hung up the phone, I looked at the sofa upon which my cousin's dog, Kit lay curled upon next to a pillow, worn out, but comfortable after coming back from her walk. I was going to be feeling the same way in a couple months.

This is how my census life came to be: one year in Minneapolis, and one year around Madison. I say, “around” Madison, because my cases as a PES enumerator were not necessarily limited to the single city area. The PES enumeration process involved a lot more travel, which excited me as I was still being paid per mile driven and my clock started on the hour. The first batch of cases I had involved traveling to two small little towns in rural Wisconsin, which from my apartment required at least 45 minute drives each. I was going to be paid a free hour and a half every single time I attempted even one case. It was brilliant.

The first time I met her, I told my supervisor, Sherri, one June morning that I didn’t mind driving long distances for work.

“It’s all I have to do during my days otherwise.”

“Well, aren’t you just something else!” remarked Sherri. “you’ve already finished all your training AND you have your badge and materials? Hot dog! Why, I wish the other PES enumerators were as excited about this as you are. Some of them, y’know, they’re just not as enthusiastic about it, and they’re not as sharp as you are about this whole thing. They don’t even know when they’re getting their materials in the mail even though Central says that they shipped the enumerators their bags.”

I nodded, I had gotten my materials a week prior and had decided to meet up with Sherri at the parking lot of Olbrich Park one windy Thursday morning.

Sherri was a small old lady in her late 60’s, maybe even her early 70’s. She had previously been a school bus driver, but had lost work at the start of the pandemic, and found



work with the census as a regional supervisor. Her gray hair curled upward, common for hairstyles of the 1960's, but appeared to fray near her many split ends. Given my significant height difference, I at 5'10" and her at maybe 5 feet exactly, I had the perfect angle to get a good view of her lower set of teeth anytime she spoke. While her top lines of teeth were straight, orderly and well-maintained, the same could not be said for her lower teeth. Like a dilapidated picket fence on an abandoned beach, her bottom teeth were a sight to behold. Crooked and yellow, her gums browning near their base. When Sherri smiled, she was able to hide the kitty-wompus affair, but when she spoke all that was visible were those spires that emanated from her gums.

"So we're gonna give you a couple cases, and these cases, they're a little out of the ways. I would given them to one of my guys who lives out in Delafield, but he says he hasn't gotten his badge yet, so he can't do 'em. And this lady who lives out near Middleton was gonna get these other cases but she hasn't gotten her badge yet either, it's just crazy, can you believe it?"

"That's really strange."

"It sure is! how are they expecting people to do cases if they aren't shipping everyone their materials on time? I'll have you know that they were originally gonna mail people the cases that they were assigned too! Isn't that just crazy talk? How can they think that's a good idea with how slow their mailing process is?"

"That's really crazy."

"It sure is! I went to Kent, have you met Kent? He's kinda my boss, kinda not, really tall lanky fella, mustaches,

kind of has a beard, have you met him?"

"I haven't."

"Oh well it's no matter. Anyways, I went to Kent and I said to him 'How the heck can you expect mailing cases to be the right way to go here? I'm happy to give my enumerators cases by hand, that's probably easier' and he said to me 'Y'know Sherri, that's a good idea. Why don't you take these cases and distribute them how you see fit' and so I did and that's what I'm doing now. So you've got a couple cases here in Madison, shouldn't be too hard you seem like a smart guy, going to school here and all. I didn't go to UW, I just went to a community college in McFarland, wish I could've gone to UW though, I *love* that campus. Anyways, so there's the Madison cases, and then there some cases out in Tomohawk and Oconomowoc, and those are kinda far, you're sure you're OK with driving out there?"

"Yeah, that's fine, I don't mind."

"Oh good, that's what I like about you, always willing to take the heavy load. And then there's a couple cases out near the Wisconsin Dells. Again I wouldn't normally give you these, but the lady in Middleton, she hasn't gotten her stuff yet. So that's gonna be about twenty cases in total to start, and TAKE YOUR TIME WITH 'EM. Do what you can, don't rush, and if you don't feel comfortable doing any of them, just mark them as 'Incomplete' and give 'em back to me. I won't ask any questions. We just want what you can give us."

These last words were given with a wink.

"And Sherri," I asked, interjecting, "am I technically on the clock with these meetings with you?"

“Well I don’t see why not? You’re meeting with your boss, aren’t you? I think that counts as work.”

If standing in a windy parking lot chatting while listening to my supervisor ramble on about her gripes with her boss was working, I was going to listen to every word of it.

What was supposed to be a five minute meeting to obtain my cases, and touch base with my supervisor turned into an almost hour long discussion about Sherri’s gardening, life as a bus driver, and frustrations with the Central Regional Office in Chicago.

“I mean can you believe it? They wanted me to drive all the way to Chicago by 8 AM yesterday morning after telling me at 6 PM the night before. I said ‘No Way Jose’ and I joined them over Zoom. Besides the long drive to Chicago, I didn’t want to have to deal with any of the COVID stuff. I’ll wear a mask and you should wear one too while you’re working if you think it’s appropriate, but I don’t want to go to Chicago, I think it’s a whole hotbed of COVID right now.”

“Yeah, I can imagine so.”

I put that I had worked an hour and a half on my timesheet that day, and Sherri signed off on it later that week.

## Chapter 5

# Father's Day

When it comes to being a PES enumerator, you have to be persistent. You become a fixture of the community that you're visiting for a period of about a week or two, and in that time, people might start to see you and ask questions. They may wonder, "just who is this strange guy going door to door, knocking on specific doors? Wasn't the census last year?" They're right to ask. The communities I visited in my time as a PES enumerator were far smaller and tight knit than the ones I visited as a NRFU enumerator. However, I have to admit that I was well-suited to finish the job at hand just based on my appearance. At 5'10", I, a Caucasian male who did not outwardly present any kind of deviations from the average white guy, was the perfect person to randomly wander through a random rural Wisconsin town. As I returned every other day for two weeks to the crossroads of Mist Lake, Wisconsin, people began to notice my presence.

"I saw you the other day going down the road there," an old fellow remarked, one Sunday afternoon. "I was doin' some yard work, must've not heard you knocking. Got your flier though."

He was an older white man in his sixties, celebrating Father's Day with his children and new grandchildren. He was like the other old white citizens of a rural town I knew from my own family, large, white hair, probably wrestled back in high school. The only true difference I knew was that he proudly sported a Green Bay Packers polo, in contrast to the Iowan University polo shirts I was used to on Dad's side of the family. The work jeans and boots, whoever, were nearly identical. I knew how to talk with this man.

I had arrived in Mist Lake that afternoon, and his place was the first house I was visiting in my chosen order that day.

"You get a lot of success on weekends?" He asked, as he invited me up on his deck to chat about my work.

"Yeah, Sundays are just days when everyone happens to be home."

"You got the right idea there."

"And I apologize for interrupting your Father's Day celebrations."

"Oh it's no problem. The kids were just done in the pool just now, heading inside." He gestured to the big concrete creation sitting in his backyard. Around it stood an old rickety fence, half-heartedly constructed of cheap looking wood.

"Not the greatest day for swimming huh?" The sky was gray and overcast, and light droplets of rain had begun to fall as I was beginning to park. As we sat under the umbrella

at the man's high table, I could hear the occasional tap of a raindrop.

"No, I don't suppose it is. They were lookin' forward to it too. Not every day you get to swim and grandma and grandpa's pool." He smiled, wistfully. He large red nose seemed to rise on his face with a slight sadness, his eyes squinting and cheeks rosy. He brushed away some of his white hair that had fallen onto his forehead as head continued.

"You see that fence?"

"Yeah, hard to miss it."

"You're tellin' me. We had to put that fence up about a year or two ago, city ordinance."

"Oh really?"

"Yep. They said it was a potential hazard for people coming home from the bar just up the way." He made a motion with his thumb pointing just north of his house, towards the singular bar in town where my car was parked. "A guy left there one night too drunk to know that he was walkin' into our yard and nearly fell right into the pool. Can you believe it?"

"That's concerning, was he alright?"

The old man raised his arms to a slight shrug, "Ahh, I dunno. I was sleeping, I only heard about it the next day when the sheriff came to my door."

"The sheriff?"

"Yes sir. He said to me that a guy nearly fell into my pool last night and that I'd have to build a fence around it or pay a fee. And I'm a good law abiding citizen, I respect the sheriff, he's just trying to do his job. So I had my son-in-law come over and we had a nice bonding experience." The old

man again smiled, staring off to the side of the pool, just beyond the fence. "It's a shame though. Those kids really loved running around in the grass and then jumping in the pool. Now they gotta get their parents to open the gate since they can't reach it."

"That *is* too bad."

"I know it. But again, can't have those drunk folks having any problems on my property." He slapped his hands on his thighs and smiled, "Want a drink? You've probably been hard at work."

"No, I'm afraid I have to decline. I have other houses I gotta hit today yet."

"Good answer," he chuckled, "that was a test. Had to make sure you weren't gonna be a problem, y'know?" I laughed with him, still unsure if he was actually serious. His seriousness was confirmed however, as he rose from his seat. "I'm gonna run inside real quick to let the rest of the family know that I'll be a moment, and grab myself something to drink. You sure you don't want anything?"

The words from training echoed in my ears, "You shouldn't take anything that's offered to you. You can accept, but it's better if you avoid any and all risks whenever possible."

"Just a water is fine."

"Sure thing."

He lumbered inside, favoring his right leg as he walked. As the screen door smacked shut behind him, I twiddled my thumbs and looked out the rest the property from the deck where I sat. The rain was still barely spitting, but I knew that accomplishing other houses in this weather would be a fiasco, given the paper forms I would have to fumble with.

It was probably better to maximize my time here while still making myself appear as though I had work to do and was merely building rapport with the old Packer fan. After all, as Sherri had told me in one of her spiels, "If you gotta talk with some people for a while in order to get answers out of them, that's fine. You're a handsome young man, I'm sure people would love to tell you about themselves. Don't be afraid to just sit and chat for a while, I'll understand. We just want you to finish cases by whatever means necessary."

I picked at my fingernails, putting the corner of the packet of paper under my thumbnail to scrape out a dark patch I found obnoxious. Anything to pass the time here as I anxiously awaited the man's return.

The man slowly came back with two containers in hand. One glass of water for me, and a Miller Highlife for him. "It's Father's Day after all."

"That it is, cheers to that."

We toasted to the holiday and I pursed my lips, careful to not actually drink any off the water provided to me. With a refreshed sigh, the old man gestured over to the dilapidated shed just behind his garage.

"You see that old garage that's falling apart?"

"Yeah."

"that garage was the original garage here on the property when my dad bought the property in the early 1920's. That's the bonafide original one. About two years ago the sheriff told me that we'd have to tear it down since it was a hazard for all the drunk people coming home from the bar, but I didn't want to do that. So I filed it as a historical site last year since it had been there for a century, and now they can't do



anything about it.” He laughed to himself, smug and proud of the loophole he had discovered. “I just couldn’t do that to my dad, y’know? He raised me and my brothers and sister to respect authority, yeah, but I’ve always been a bit of a rebel at heart, know what I mean?”

“I mean, I’ve bent a few rules or two in my day.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah, I’ve been able to follow the rules when I need to, but only the ones I think are really important.”

“That’s good, just don’t be causing too much trouble.”

“Well I probably wouldn’t be doing this job if I were *that* much trouble.”

The man nodded, understanding the point I had just made.

“But that shed. I just can’t tear it down. It’s all I’ve got left of dad. When storms come through it gets a little more worn down. Some of the wood we used on the fence actually came from that shed,” he paused to take a long swig of beer, “so maybe I oughta find other uses for some of that wood. It’s still good y’know. Not rotting or anything.”

“You think that’s what your dad would’ve wanted?”

The old man sighed, and looked back towards the pool.

“I think he would’ve wanted to make sure his family was enjoying the place he had built.” He scratched the bits of white hair on the back of his head as he took another long swig. “At least, I think that’s what he would’ve wanted. Can’t ask him anymore, of course.”

“I think you’re right, seems like you’ve got a good use of the property, kids still enjoying themselves. Seems alright to me.”

“Yeah, I suppose you’re right.” He didn’t turn back to me. He just stared at the shed for a while. I knew that cadence that his voice had taken on, having heard it used by Dad and his two older brothers whenever they were asked about my Grandfather. Like them, this old Packer fan quietly held onto the moment for only as long as he could, perhaps lost in the memory of previous days, sharing them only with a neutral party who he may never speak with again. After this moment, he would only see me wander down the paved county road, once again knocking on random doors and leaving small bits of paper in their doorjams. “Anyways, I think you’ve got some questions for me.”

“Yes, I do. I won’t do the whole introduction spiel, I’ll just get right into them. It’ll be pretty quick, I don’t want to keep you from your family much longer.”

“No, no. Take your time. Do your job properly.”

“Of course, sir.”

## Chapter 6

# Man of the House

Attempting apartments in Minneapolis to do the NRFU operation was a tricky game when it came to getting someone who could answer my questions. I could follow behind some people and get in, but then when I was in the complex, it was a whole different ballpark just based on who might be home.

In general, I'm unlikely to open my door if I hear any kind of unexpected knocking. As a child, whenever someone rang our front door's doorbell, my brother and I would hide in our parent's upstairs room, peering downward from behind the curtains to catch a glimpse of our unanticipated visitor. Our front door would only open if: 1. We could see the person, and then 2. We knew the person. If the first check wasn't passed, then the second check wasn't even attempted. This has somewhat continued into my adult life, where I'll only answer the door for strangers who are delivering food. So I can only imagine what it must've been like for the various

children who answered my knocks at apartment doors during the day, seeing a strange, new person without a place to hide.

In one of my ventures to an apartment complex, I found myself knocking on a door that had a very loud TV playing behind it. I recognized the audio as an episode of Total Drama Island, a Canadian animated Survivor parody aired on Cartoon Network here in the states. I had watched the show a couple times as it aired, so I could recognize the title theme, “I Wanna Be Famous”, even when it was muffled from behind a door. As I knocked, I heard the theme music immediately pause, and some light thumping behind the door. I waited for a while, heard nothing, and knocked again. It was clear that people were home, so I was obligated to at least try knocking a second time, but I knew that door wasn’t going to open. I knocked again, about the same level of intensity as the previous time as to not elicit fear, but still no one answered the door. I could only hypothesize that behind this apartment door were some kids who were home alone on summer break, mindlessly watching their show and waiting for something, anything, to happen. They were probably told to not answer the door for anyone but their parents, and likely weren’t offered a contingency plan for when someone actually came to their apartment. They weren’t prepared for things to potentially go wrong.

The census can be completed by anyone fifteen years old or older. Our training in the church’s basement and in the online portal heavily emphasized that “a valid respondent can be as young as fifteen years of age. If someone answers the door who looks like they might not be of age, you can ask if there’s someone fifteen years old or older who can answer the

questions. Of course, if their parents are there, they're welcome to oversee." I thought about how, when I was fifteen, I wouldn't have the guts to open the door and tell people that my family was definitely in our house on the night of April 1st, but I suppose I never had to. Even still, the training highlighted the significance of this age range. "Anyone fifteen years of age, or older can complete the census NRFU interview."

I recall that, in response to learning this fact, a middle-aged man raised his hand.

"Suppose we meet a child and their parents tell them to not answer the questions. Should we still try to get the child to answer?"

The old lady running the training responded after a slight consideration. "If the parent is blocking the child from answering questions, you can treat it like it's an uncooperative respondent. You can try asking if the adult might be willing to answer the questions, but, of course, if they're not willing, don't press it too hard."

"But if the child is willing, then that feels wrong to leave without getting the answers." The man looked to be in his late 40s or early 50s. His raised cheek bones and taut expression seemed a little too perfect to be natural. As he spoke, I listened as his voice's cadence slowly shifted from questioning to argumentative.

"If the respondent is uncooperative, you can mark as such on the app."

"But you have a perfectly good respondent right there with the kid. Shouldn't you ask the parent to leave?"

"If the parent is preventing the child from answering, use

your best judgment. You're smart, you've made it here, and we've been saying it all morning: 'Use your judgment, and only do what you can'."

The man wiped his head with a handkerchief, a sight I thought only existed in movies, and continued.

"I just don't see how I'm doing my job properly if I'm leaving despite there being someone who can fill out the survey."

Despite his rising voice, his facial expression never budged. His visage remained locked in a vaguely neutral expression, lips slightly pursed, eyebrows slightly raised. The training lady shook her head, her own lips pursed, eyes locked on this combative individual.

"If you'd like, we can continue this discussion at the first breakout session."

"No, no, it's fine. It's fine. I understand."

I only ever had to interview someone under the age of 21 once. It was at a duplex just a few blocks East of my parent's place, a duplex we had driven past plenty of times as we began our trips driving to Highway-94. The case was one of my last ones of the day, the sky was darkening with an oncoming thunderstorm which would eventually hit as I attempted my final case about thirty minutes later. I climbed the concrete steps to the porch as the thunder rumbled. With a buzz of the doorbell, I was quickly met by a young black man about a year or two younger than myself.

"Can I help you?"

"Hi, my name is John Videogames, I'm with the U.S. Census." I gave my usual spiel quickly but clearly, asking him to confirm his address.

“Yeah this is it.”

“And just to confirm, you’re above fifteen years of age?”

“Yeah, I’m nineteen.”

Behind him I could see two pairs of eyes peeking from behind a small sofa that occupied the living room. I waved at them and their heads quickly vanished behind the off-white piece of furniture. The two girls looked to be no older than seven.

“C’mon you two, what did I say about being there while I answer the door? Go upstairs and set the table.”

The young man was firm in his demeanor. Not angry with these children, but spoke in a way similar to how I knew parents chastised their children. It felt unfamiliar to see someone younger than me take on a manner of speech I had only heard from people almost twice my age. Inquiring about the people that lived there, I learned that this unit of the duplex was rented by the man’s mother, who was presently living with her boyfriend in Kansas City. She paid the rent from there, but couldn’t house her children with her new boyfriend, so she was renting the property so that her kids could finish their schooling. The young man was the oldest of the six siblings living in the house, keeping track of his five younger brothers and sisters.

“So you’re the man of the house then?”

“Yes, sir.”

I broke script.

“Is it difficult keeping track of everything and everyone?”

“I mean,” he responded, “It’s hard. You know what I’m saying? They’re kids, right? They wanna do everything and I gotta be the bad guy. But I’m not their daddy. I don’t want

to be their daddy. But I gotta be something like a parent I guess.”

“Do you end up taking care of them, like for school and stuff? And like, this is just between you and me, I’m not gonna tell anyone about who’s living here beyond this app, and I’m not gonna share your names or circumstances or anything either.”

“It’s all good. It’s fine. My next sister’s sixteen, so she gets it. She’s helpful too.”

“That definitely helps.”

“Sure does. She and I, we got jobs and help pay rent to Mom.”

“You just send it to her?”

“Yeah through CashApp.”

“Seems like it’s working out alright.”

“Yeah, we’ve been doing this for about nine months now. I finished school and I’m working and that’s cool with me.”

I didn’t want to get any more of the specifics as I started to hear the drops of rain starting to hit the roof of the porch. The interview continued as usual, and the young man was very open with the necessary information, though very clearly only providing as much as absolutely necessary.

“Yeah, I’m the man of the house. I suppose you could say that, huh?”

“Yeah, I think you can.”

“And how old are you?”

“I’m twenty-two, so not much older than you.”

“Yeah, that’s cool... that’s cool.”

It was hard to gauge exactly why he had asked me that question. That evening, I hypothesized with the power of



hindsight that he was perhaps lamenting his circumstances, but even then that didn't feel quite right. We were three years apart in age, but in vastly different roles in our respective family units.

I looked the man of the house in the eye. "That's all my questions. Thanks for your time, and I hope you have a good dinner."

"Thanks man, you too."

"You have a good one."

"You too."

The rain was now coming down at a reasonable rate as I walked back to my car, which was parked just up the road. I had one last house on the list, and it was just after 5 PM. I figured that if I wanted to really maximize my hours I could report, I'd linger in my spot for a bit and see if I could wait out the rain. As I threw my bag passenger seat, and turned on my car, I thought about the man of the house again.

*Nineteen. Head of the household at nineteen.*

At nineteen I was off at college, studying with the funding provided to me from my parents and grandparents. I was getting drunk on the weekends, going to football games on Saturday mornings, and doing homework on Sunday evenings, all while staying in a dormitory that had its own cleaning staff.

At nineteen, the man of the house taking care of his five siblings, some fully related and some half-siblings. He was cooking for those kids, cleaning their clothes, walking them to their bus stops, teaching them how to do their own chores. On Saturdays he worked night shifts and then took his siblings to the nearby church the following morning (this

I learned when he talked about how his youngest sibling was baptized no more than a year ago).

The windshield wipers pushed away the rain as I stared outside. And then, after what felt like enough time, I marked the little portion of the case summary in the app as “Complete”, checked the next address on my list, and drove off toward my next case.

## Chapter 7

# El Censo

The census app has a lot of information that is readily available to enumerators, but only for a limited amount of time. Cases were assigned to me on a daily basis, but were consistently reshuffled such that I never had the same residence two days in a row. Often, I would get the a repeat residence every other day, if I wasn't able to complete a case on Tuesday, I would be again get it in my new case list on Thursday. Wednesday, however, I would receive an entirely new set of cases. I always assumed that these cases were ones that were attempted by other census takers the day before that hadn't been completed for whatever reason.

One of my mornings, as I scrolled through my new cases, halfheartedly looking at details related to certain cases, I noticed that towards the end of my list there were a number of cases that were marked "Incomplete - Language Barrier, Spanish.". As it happens, despite the opinions of many vo-

cal conservative pundits, not everyone in the United States speaks English. At my just-outside-of-Minneapolis High School, students spoke English, Spanish, Swahili, Hmong Daw, and Danashan among others. I am able to speak the first two languages on this list, having learned Spanish at the Robbinsdale Spanish Immersion School (RSI), present in my district. I spent the first six years of my academic life learning Spanish alongside English, with First Grade through Fifth Grade consisting of my entire elementary school days being taught in Spanish.

While my Spanish writing skills have since degraded, my Spanish reading, speaking, and listening skills are all but a few beers and a couple minutes of warmup away. When I studied abroad in China and traveled with a peer who was from Argentina, if we wanted to communicate without mainlanders understanding us, we'd speak in Spanish. We didn't trust the guy trying to convince us he was a taxi driver using broken English, so we communicated in public privacy using her native speaking skills, and my less-refined learned skills from my youth. The census application featured a section requesting the applicant list their language skills, specifically asking for any and all languages. English was obvious for most applicants, but I also immediately included "Spanish-Conversational" (and French as well, but that never really was ever relevant) as well. Robbinsdale Spanish immersion had prepared me for this exact opportunity and "I was about to make the RSI Comunidad proud" I remember thinking to myself.

Sure enough, on that morning, the sign "Incomplete - Language Barrier, Spanish" was a signal to show my worth

as an enumerator. This case was behind twenty or so cases, which was fine, a heavy case-load day was over forty cases. I was confident I would be able to reach this case before too long.

When attempting the cases, the census training provided a guide for language barrier situations. In the event that the enumerator is unable to complete a case because they don't speak the same language as the person at the residence, they are to hand the resident a card that has a sentence in over ten different languages, which asks the resident to show the enumerator which language they speak. The enumerator is to then record that language in the app, and mark the case as incomplete. While this next bit is an assumption, I predicted that the case distribution algorithm specifically looked for people who claimed to have language skills, and then prioritized those cases for those worldly people who had proven their skills (more on this later). In addition to English, the phone and census papers, fliers and other documents all had scripts in Spanish, just in case the home respondent didn't speak English but did, in fact, speak Spanish. I knew how to read Spanish (and still do too), so therefore, as long as I could understand the respondent, I could complete these cases.

It was late in the day when I finally attempted the case. The sun was at the perfect angle in the sky, creating a golden hue over the suburban houses in North Minneapolis. This warm color implied the extremely hot and humid weather that had caused my professional appearance to melt into a messy caricature of a door-to-door salesman. The house was up on an incline, its steps well-maintained, lawn mowed. I

looked at the case notes again, “Incomplete - Language Barrier, Spanish.” There were more notes too that I hadn’t initially noticed: “House appears to house 4 working age men. I couldn’t understand them, they speak Spanish.”.

*Sure, okay, I can do that. Shouldn’t be too hard.*

After a quick knock, a man, likely in his late 20’s answered the door. He was short, his hair slick and black from sweat, and his eyes wide. He looked at me, expectantly, to which I began.

“Hola. Me llamo John Videogames, y soy con else censo del E.E.U.U., y tengo algunas preguntas para ti. Tambien, tus respuestas seran confidenciales.”

The man’s tension didn’t cease, but he responded with a quiet and quick, “Si, yo puedo. Venga.”

He stepped out of the door and motioned for me to follow him to sit on the top step with him to answer answer my questions. I continued with the script in Spanish.

“How many people were living at your address on April 1, 2020?”

“Me and four others.”

“Ok, we’ll start with you, I am going to ask you some questions about yourself. These questions will remain confidential and you are at liberty to refuse any answer you don’t want to answer.”

“Ok.”

He was polite and cooperative, if not soft-spoken. The sun had fallen behind the tree in the house’s front yard creating a cool patch of shade on the top step, which alleviated the stressful heat that we had previously felt. I continued my questions per the script, as I always did.

“I’m 29. I’m not a citizen, I’m from Guatemala. I’m here for work.”

“And do you mind answering some questions about your housemates?”

“Of course, they’re like me, from Guatemala, not citizens. They’re here for work too.”

The questions were straightforward, all answered clearly and concisely. We chatted about life too, I told him I was trying my best to find work in the pandemic. He laughed at that, “Aren’t we all?”

Conversation went in and out between the script, though he never revealed more about his family or background than what I had asked for in the script. We talked about the Twins (thanks to my mask), and the Vikings, and how the summer was in its hottest days. The shade was nice, and I thanked him for choosing a spot to answer my questions where we both were comfortable.

When everything ended, I thanked him for his time and went on my way, stepping back out into the sunlight. I waved as I walked back along the block back to my car, parked just outside of a small church. There wasn’t any question regarding the legality of his stay, and yet he had volunteered it to someone like me. I wondered about that for a bit, whether or not he would’ve told me had I been speaking broken English or required some kind of translation app. My mind wandered to a previous day doing cases, and imagined an older white woman attempting the case.

“Hola. Me lamo Patricia, and soy con el ses- el censo. Habla ingles?”

I chuckled as I idled in the car, wrapping up the last few case details about how I had completed the case.

“All in house speak Spanish only, 5 residents, all men, working age.”

At that point it was 4:50, so I planned my drive home, which took three minutes maximum, so that I would arrive home at a time that I could round to 5 PM.

Completing this case must've been a pretty big deal to the algorithm because the next morning, when I reviewed the number of cases I was given, I was stunned to see that I only had ten, a number that would be completable in maybe an hour and a half at most. However, upon closer inspection, I saw that the addresses were nowhere close to any of the previous cases I had done. They were in Brooklyn Center, Brooklyn Park, Crystal, and even close to Golden Valley. It was then I realized what was the situation.

Every single house had a language barrier issue, all in Spanish.

The first house I visited was one in a neighborhood I was quite familiar with, I had friends who lived a few blocks away. A small, Hispanic woman answered the door.

“Oh the census was here yesterday and last week, but they didn't get very far. The old guys didn't understand me very well.”

She spoke with a thick Spanish accent, her “ll”s sounded more like a soft “g” sound than a “y” sound. (It's hard to communicate this difference via text to those who don't speak Spanish).

“That's alright ma'am, I'm just here to confirm some of the details he took.”



“Of course, of course.”

“First, is there an Ernesto Rohadio living here?” I broke one of the rules of the census and showed her the name that had been previously put into the phone.

“Oh no no, it’s Ernesto Rosario. Rosario is our last name, not Rohadio.”

“Of course, sorry about that mistake madam.” I corrected the mistake while breaking a second rule, “Is your family from Spain?”

“Yes, just outside of Barcelona. How did you know?”

“Ellos.” I let myself smirk.

“You’re pretty quick to know that difference. . . Did you go to RSI?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“Oh that’s wonderful, my kids went there too!”

We continued,

“My form says that there are five people who live here, but you said there’s only four?”

“That’s right, what’s the fifth person’s name?”

“Is there a Bicho Rosario living here? Or who lived here on April 1, 2020?” I corrected the erroneous “Rohadio” as I spoke.

The woman laughed. “Oh no, no that was a joke. Bicho is the dog.”

“Bicho is the dog?” I repeated, “How did that get in there?”

“I have no idea,” she replied, stifling a giggle. “But you’re much better at this than that guy was. He left all confused.”

“Bicho is the dog. How ridiculous.” I made a note in the app to reflect this correction. “I don’t know how you make

that kind of mistake. But either way, that's all the questions I have for you today. Thanks for your cooperation."

"Of course, I'm glad I could help."

"You have a great day now!"

"You too" and with that she closed the door, as I heard a bark in the background.

*Bicho is the dog. Amazing.*

## Chapter 8

# Proxy

One sunny morning I was making my way from an absentee case in North Minneapolis. I was searching for a proxy, someone who was willing to answer questions about their neighbors, for the house, when I happened upon a man exiting his car just one house away from the assignment. The man was black, much like his neighbors, and wore a loose-fitting black, Metallica tee-shirt and some relatively loose fitting gray jeans. He wore a black baseball cap with the Twins logo on it, much like the mask I was wearing myself. I have to assume he was in

“Excuse me sir, you have a sec?”

“Oh yeah, man, what’s up?” He turned to look at me, quickly, a little jerkily in his pivot, like he was dancing to some catchy beat in his head.

“Yeah, I’m with the U.S. Census and I’m trying to reach your neighbors, but they don’t seem to be home. Part of the

job means that I have to locate a proxy, or someone who's willing to answer to answer some questions about them."

"You want what?"

"Just trying to get some information about your neighbors. All the answers are confidential. Here's my badge." I lifted the lanyard from my chest to him. He grabbed the little tag, brought it to his face, peering over his sunglasses.

"You're trying to ask me if I'm gonna talk about my neighbors to someone I don't know?"

"Yeah."

"Do you hear yourself?"

When attempting a NRFU assignment, if no one answers the door, the enumerator is expected to search for up to three proxies who would be willing to answer almost the exact same script. They are asked to answer questions about the name, age, sex, race, and ethnicity (among other questions) about every single person they knew who was living in their neighboring house on April 1st, and the proxy, like the actual resident is allowed to refuse to answer at any time. The tricky thing about the proxy response, beyond convincing people to disclose person facts about their neighbors, is the fact that the proxy may not be very confident about their answers. Despite this, the enumerators are supposed to act as if this proxy were truly knowledgeable of everything going on in the house, down to when the baby is put to bed each night.

"What if we don't feel comfortable finding a proxy?" a lady asked during training in that church basement. She was white and slightly overweight, her face soft and smooth like a baby's.

“Well. . .” the kind of training lady answered, “you should really try as hard as you can. The proxies are very important people in getting the most accurate count possible. I don’t remember the stat, but I can tell you that a lot of the counts in the census from 2010 were from proxies.”

“Right,” the short, stout woman continued, “but what if we don’t feel safe doing so?”

“If you don’t feel safe, use your best judgment. Your safety.”

“So then we don’t have to find a proxy?”

The old training lady paused, likely figuring out the proper way to communicate the policy without drawing attention to the obvious loophole she had just presented.

“For all assignments, if you cannot reach a resident at the assigned case address, you should look for a proxy. If you cannot find a proxy, or do not feel safe doing so, then you should mark it as such. Specifically, there’s an option in the app for ‘cannot find a proxy’. But again, only choose that after actually looking for three potential proxies if you can. If you can’t find any after three attempts, then you can mark it as such.”

“But how will you know if we do that?” asked a different older man, also white, wearing a ‘Vietnam Veteran’ cap.

“We place a lot of trust in you, and we expect and hope that you take your job as seriously as we take it.”

The power of hindsight allows me to laugh at this final statement. No one was taking this job as seriously as they could have, whether they were the lowly enumerator, or the admins in charge of distributing the materials and managing everyone.

“Yeah, I know it sounds sketchy, but it’s part of my job. Honestly though, you can just refuse to answer questions and I’ll leave you alone.” I responded to the man on the sidewalk.

“So I don’t gotta do nothing, and you’ll just leave?”

“Yeah.”

“And you can just be ok with that?”

“Mhmm.”

“Damn, that’s kinda nice. You said you’re working for the census?”

“That’s right.”

“How do I get a job there? That sounds easy as hell.”

“The window for applying passed, and the next one won’t be for another nine years or so, I applied a while back in, like, May.”

“Ah damn, that’s shit.”

“Yeah, I got kinda lucky.” I laughed, knowing the history of the teeth-pulling experience that eventually led to my hiring.

“Have you had any luck out here?”

I put my phone in my pocket. “Yeah, I’ve finished a few cases.”

“Damn, that’s something. People actually talk with you?”

I thought back to the cases earlier that day. The first few had been no shows where I “couldn’t find a proxy”, and the last two cases were at a single-story duplex, one case per unit. The first housed an old black man in his eighties who was wearing nothing but a white tank top and a pair of boxers. He sat on his bed which faced the door as he spoke. He was soft-spoken with his responses. His neighbor was his

son, who wore only a pair of shorts, the waistband of which was covered by his large, round belly.

“You visit my dad just a bit ago?”

“Technically, I can’t answer that question.”

At my answer, the man opened the door between the two units.

“Dad, did you talk with this guy?”

“Yessir.”

“Aight.” He closed the door. “Sure, I’ll talk with you.”

“Yeah,” I said to the sunglasses-clad proxy target, “they spoke with me. Only after some general explanation though. I went to some other houses, but there were a lot of places where no one answered the door, so that’s how it goes sometimes.”

“You look like someone who they gotta answer questions for.”

“Sorry?”

“No, I mean, look at yourself. You look all official-like.” I looked down at myself, he wasn’t wrong. I was a preppy-looking, white, early-twenties something wearing a navy polo, khaki shorts, clean walking shoes, and carrying an over-the-shoulder tote bag. My hair was done up with a kind of hair gel to give myself a professional air, which would ultimately begin to melt in the combination of sweat and summer sun.

“They gotta get people like me working in this part of town y’know?”

I nodded.

“I bet like half the houses you go to, they see someone like you coming up to the door and they get all suspicious, like ‘who’s this guy coming up to my door’ type of thing.”

I again nodded.

“If a nigga like me came up to their door, I bet you the money you made today that I’d get twice as many answers as you.”

I nodded a third time. He was right. I would’ve lost the 55 dollars I had barely worked for that day.

“See like, how do I wanna say this...” he brought his hand to his whiskered chin.

“People here, they ain’t gonna trust you, but they ain’t gonna fuck with you neither.”

I thought back to every apartment and home where a person of color had opened the door. I remembered every concerned look I was met with, every guarded answer, every set of crossed arms that yelled loud and clear “I do not want you to be here”. Even the father and son duo that I had met earlier that day shared this sentiment. The son only answering my questions because his father had done so himself. I had to imagine that the door would’ve been closed in my face had the neighboring father not answered my questions either.

I then thought back to the chubby white lady at training asking about her own safety. Maybe it was only just in that moment in the church basement, but I realized that she wasn’t considering the actual people she would be attempting to talk with, or perhaps to. She was more concerned about her own safety and the “dangerous people” she might have to interact with as she asked the questions that were given to her. She was not considering the invasiveness and suspiciously detailed questions that she would be asking the people whose privacy she’d be invading. She would be walking up to their steps and their homes and asking them questions about



private matters of their lives, and the people there had to decide in that moment whether or not they would trust her.

“At least you ain’t like an old white lady. Like a Karen or some shit.”

“At least I’m not one of those kinds of people. You know, like the type to be like ‘I want to speak with your manager’.”

“Bro, I fuckin’ hate those bitches. Y’know, like with that shitty bleach blonde hair and like brown underneath.”

“Oh dude yeah. They’re awful”

We both laughed at our mutual resentment for a while. The sun now hung high in the sky, well above us both. A tornado had blown through this area about three years prior, meaning that all the trees on this part of the street had been wiped out, and were replaced with small saplings, which offered little shade.

“Well man, you’re alright, but I’m still not snitching on those people.”

“Totally get it man, and it’s no skin off my back. I get paid by the hour.”

“Damn, that’s such a good gig. I gotta get in that next time.”

“Ten years man, 2030. See if you’re still interested in that May.”

“Bet.” He made his way to open the house gate. “Oh and it’s not like I’m tryin’ to be a unhelpful or whatever, but I actually don’t know anyone living there either. But again, even if I did, I don’t think I’d have told you about them.” He rubbed his hands, and then squeezed them together. “Nothin’ on you though. You’re alright, it just ain’t none of my business.”

“I get you man, I get you. You’re not the only person who feels that way. I probably wouldn’t answer for my neighbor either.”

“Yeah, just kinda sketchy.”

“Absolutely. It’s just part of my job. Honestly, I technically don’t even have to succeed in finding a proxy. I’m honestly just gonna put down ‘Couldn’t find a proxy’ and move on.”

“Then why did you talk with me?”

That one I couldn’t parry.

“You know? I guess I’m just trying to make sure I don’t get reprimanded.” I remarked, omitting the fact that my NRFU supervisor, whom I had never met in person, had no way of knowing if this conversation had even happened.

“Fair enough man. Fair enough. You have a good one.” The neighbor then entered his house, closed the door.

“Couldn’t find a proxy.” I marked in the app, before moving onto the next assignment.

## Chapter 9

# Training

I think a lot about the first training I went to in the Twin Cities, where I learned the skills to be an enumerator. It was at a church in Southwest Minneapolis, near Minneapolis Southwest High School, just West of the Lake Harriet neighborhoods, and two blocks south of Pershing Park where I met up with my friend to play tennis afterwards. The training was at a Catholic church with a large parking lot, large enough for thirty people to stand in a circle, raise their hands and pledge their loyalty to the census, promising to not share any of the information that they would eventually come to learn.

There were a wide variety of people present in that church basement that day. I was one of the youngest, but not the absolute youngest, I had to assume. There was a young black woman there who looked to be fresh out of high school. Next to her at the table sat a larger older white woman, who po-

lately smiled as she took the seat immediately next to her. I recall that the older lady tried to make small talk with this younger woman, but the younger woman clearly had no interest in chatter. She stared vacantly, occasionally nodding, before eventually looking down at her phone until the training began. The older lady took the hint, likely having experienced plenty of interactions similar to this, and promptly gave up her attempts to also browse her phone.

There were a couple people at my table that also tried to converse with each other. I, being the nervous conversationalist I am, only engaged my tablemates if they engaged me first. As a result, I found myself locked in conversation with a man in his sixties, thin and composed. His voice was deep but had some vocal fry to it, which reminded me of a rabbi I had once heard when attending a family friend's daughter's Bat Mitzvah way back in the day, and can say now sounded like a nasally Ben Stein impression. We conversed about what we did during the pandemic and how this was the first job that we had had in a little while. I had shared that, since finishing the semester, I had been doing some freelance voiceover work, which I was getting paid for (a lie, I wasn't being paid). He was surprised and expressed a genuine interest as he was a retired advertising executive.

"You know those commercials for Hefty Trash Bags?"

"I think so?"

"Stinky, stinky, stinky, Hefty, Hefty, Hefty?"

"Oh yeah those, I know those."

"I pitched that way back in the day."

I had no reason not to believe him, but I had a hard time doing so all the same. He gave me his contact information,

offering that if I was interested in doing some commercial work, to send him some samples and some references and we'd be in touch. I lacked a piece of paper to take this email address, so I ended up writing the email on my arm with a ballpoint pen. Of course, I never did follow up with the retired advertising man. I had no samples to speak of, having only done fandubs of obscure manga chapters, and partaking in the occasional Danganronpa abridged series. I also lost his email, as the temporary tattoo would eventually fade as I sweated while hitting forehands on the tennis court later. The photo I took halfway through our match, having realized my mistake, showed my arm covered in faded ballpoint pen ink, with fading remnants of my Census ID number, the confirmation code to log onto the website, and the email, among other things.

The PES training was similar to the NRFU training, though this training took place in a hotel's conference room at a hotel in Middleton, Wisconsin. Sherri was present, but she sat silently behind the table, her face covered by a mask. I sat in the third row of tables as to not draw attention to myself, given the much smaller group of people. Six people were present by the time training was supposed to get started, but seven people were supposed to be there, and so we sat and waited a full extra fifteen minutes before we finally began.

The training itself was nearly identical to the one in the church basement, touching on how to approach an address, what to do if you felt threatened, who to contact if you had an issue, and other standard issues. One of the new training aspects, however, involved how to properly fill out the packets for the operation. As the training leader continued about

how each bundle of A3 paper would be distributed via the enumerator's supervisor, and that you would have to return these also via supervisor, a white man in his mid-50's piped up.

"Why do we have to do it that way?"

I looked up from my papers.

"I'm sorry?" The training leader asked, surprised that he had been so abruptly interrupted.

"Isn't it easier if we do it the way we did last year with phones?"

"This year we are not providing you phones, you'll have to use the packets."

"But that's so inconvenient, you're expecting us to carry these packets all around with us?"

"That's right."

"Well, why not have them be on smaller paper?"

"I- I'm not sure I foll-"

"Why not just print them out on smaller paper?"

"Sir, I'm not the one printing them this way, this is how the entire country is operating this year."

"But why did they decide to do it this way? Didn't the phones work better last year?" I began to pick at the skin around my fingernails. "I mean, the phones last year were way easier than what you're asking us to do this year."

"Sir, I understand your concern, but I can't do anything about this situation." There was a flap of dead skin near my thumb on my right hand that had small brown flecks that was the perfect target for my fingers.

The man sighed, reclined in his chair and motioned for the speaker to carry on, while muttering under his breath.

“Well, that just doesn’t make sense.”

The training continued as expected until the topic of paysheets came up.

“You need to fill out a paysheet for every day you work, and you’ll email this paysheet to your supervisor, who will then approve it each day. If you miss a day with your paysheet, just make sure you get it to your supervisor before the end of the pay period. Additionally, please make sure you don’t send your paysheets all at once, this will make it easier for all involved.”

“Hang on.” The man spoke up again. “Every single day?”

“Yes, that’s what I said.”

“Why not have a weekly paysheet?”

I had successfully peeled away the flap of dead skin, leaving a red, concave divot in the previously occupied space.

“Well sir, you have to take account how many miles you’ve driven per day, what kind of work you were doing, and-”

“Right, I get that, but why can we not just send you them on a weekly basis?” I started working on a hangnail on my middle finger.

A lanky man in the back of the room spoke up. “This is so that supervisors don’t get overwhelmed when filing the paysheets.” His dark curly hair transitioned perfectly into a well kept dark facial hair, giving him a subtle air of authority and presence in the room.

“Yes,” said the instructor, “What Kent said is right. You’re only one enumerator, but I have to manage about ten of you, and I want to make sure that everyone is paid on time.”

“But what about the enumerator? I’m going to be honest, doing a daily paysheet and sending it to the supervisor is a lot

to ask for us to remember. I think it would be a lot better if we were able to just submit a weekly timesheet. That works really we-”

“Sir,” interjected Kent, “if you have an issue with the way we do things, we can discuss alternative methods for you after training. We still have quite a bit to get through and some people are on tight schedules.”

“Yes, let’s definitely talk.”

We broke halfway through the prescribed two hour period for people to get water or go to the bathroom. I, having consumed my daily 300 mg of caffeine three hours ago was desperate for an escape, so I made my way to the Men’s room. Standing at the rightmost urinal of five and alleviating the pressure on my bladder, the difficult man entered the bathroom. He hastily walked over to the urinal next to mine, not adhering to the commonly accepted Pauli-Exclusion principle-like practice of urinal-filling, and undid his belt. The man then broke the second unspoken law of using a urinal as he began to speak.

“These guys doing this training have no idea what they’re doing.” My eyes were locked to the linoleum tiles and stainless steel handle of the urinal in front of me. I recognized his voice and I didn’t dare move my head or speak. “This is so complicated, it wasn’t this complicated last year. You know what I mean?”

“Mmm.”

“They should really take suggestions seriously, I feel like they’re just not listening to the people who are doing the hardest jobs. You feel me?”

It was just unfair. The man, whether he knew it or not,



had found the perfect pressure point to get the exact response he was looking for.

“Yeah.”

*Please for the love of God, stop talking to me.*

“Thank you! I’m glad I’m not alone here, you should really bring it up too so we can see if we can make a difference here.”

I had already disliked this man from his repeated interruptions, dragging out the training to nearly a half hour longer than initially anticipated. I had already disliked this man for trying to engage a conversation while at the urinal, a space with the unspoken vow of silence. But forcing my hand in a vulnerable state and now holding an expectation of me was a new low. I hated him. I loathed him. I hadn’t felt feelings of this much frustration and intensity in a real-world space in a very long time. “Who does that?” I asked my friend on stream later that evening. “I mean who goes goes up to the closest fucking urinal, and tries to start a conversation?” As I spaced out, entering freeze mode rather than fight or flight, I contemplated my next words very carefully. I finished peeing, and zipped my pants up, only to turn around and see that the man had vanished. I hadn’t even heard the water run. “He didn’t even wash his hands!”

I returned to the training room and sat, minding my own business as before. The man sat there patiently waiting for training to end.

“The last thing about paysheets,” spoke the supervisor doing the training, “this is training, which means you’re working right now, and can fill out your first paysheet the moment you get home to be compensated for your time here.

and because of this gentleman,” he gestured to the obnoxious man in the front row, ” you get to count the additional time involved here. Since we were a half hour late finishing, you can include that here, not just the prescribed two hours. Just like last time, your hours end when you turn off your car at your house.”

Even with the extra half hour of pay, I loathed that man. I quickly exited the space as the training ended, taking care to avoid him as I walked down the hall to the lobby. As I did, a hefty older white man came down the hallway. Curious about him, I stopped just outside the room to get a drink of water from the drinking fountain, attempting to overhear the conversation.

“I’m here for the training?”

“That started at 9,” I heard the supervisor say.

“My email said 11 and I had an accident at home.”

“I’m sorry sir, you’ll have to sign up for a different training period.”

I then heard the loathesome man’s voice from behind me, “Don’t worry, you didn’t miss much.”

*What an asshole. Shut the fuck up. You’re a fucking asshole. They’re just doing their job and what they’re being told. You are not helping, you were not helpful.*

I was not going to let this douchebag grill me on why I hadn’t spoken up, why I hadn’t backed him up in his stance. I left, keeping my eyes on the hexagonal pattern on the carpeted floor of the hotel lobby. I faced the floor and sped off to my car.

This man was a person who would eventually be going door to door to ask people about themselves and who they

were. If he couldn't listen to this supervisors without immediately suggesting his own unsolicited ideas and improvements, I could only imagine with horror how he might engage an inhospitable resident. The way he had found the perfect situation and language to coax the words out of me that he wanted to hear both frightened me and intrigued me. I hated this man for so many reasons, but I couldn't tell if it was intentional on his end, or just a lucky set of circumstances that led to my utter resentment. As I pulled into the garage at my apartment complex, I weighed the likelihood of his actions being intentional in my head.

*He probably meant well, but wow he did a horrible job at expressing himself.*

I picked at another finger as I waited for my apartment's elevator. I needed a shower.

## Chapter 10

# Efficient

Sherri told me, one windy afternoon that I was one of the best, most efficient census enumerators she had ever met. We were in our usual spot at Olbrich Park, (which makes me think that that parking lot is just especially windy regardless of the weather) later into the summer.

“You’re just so willing to do whatever it takes! You’re so persistent! You went five different times to find no one home and not give up? That’s amazing!”

I had just handed her seven packets of paper that had been filled out as a result of driving to the Wisconsin Dells every other day over the course of a week and a half. These visits to the neighborhoods surrounding the Water Parks that populated the area surrounding the manmade Lake Delton (which was otherwise just flat Wisconsin farmland and forests) required an hour and a half of driving just to get there and back from my apartment in downtown Madison.

“I’m going to be honest with you,” she continued in her Wisconsin squawk, “some of these enumerators, y’know I just don’t know why they got asked back to do the census again this year.”

“What do you mean?”

“Oh well, they just go to the doors of the places, and then they don’t do anything! They’ll call me and say that ‘no one’s home, what do I do, Sherri?’ and I have to tell them that they should attempt the residence another time. And then they’ll tell me ‘Well I don’t think that’s gonna work’, and then a week later they’ll give me the case and it’s marked incomplete!”

“Well, I’m not much better. I never seem to be there when they’re home.”

“No but see you go back and you give it your all! That’s what matters! You’re really good at this one, and honestly, you’re probably more competent than the people over at Central.” She was referring to the Census’s central offices in Chicago. “Those guys down there, they’re USELESS. I’m serious! they don’t know two things about what these enumerators are doing out here.”

“Did something happen?”

“Well there was this one girl who was doing a case who had the police called on her! It was a whole thing y’know, and they’re telling me not to tell my enumerators I supervise about it, but how can I not?”

I was intrigued.

“I’m intrigued, tell me more.”

“I don’t mind telling you, you’re smart, this wouldn’t happen to you. And I wouldn’t even send you there in the

first place because technically it's out of my range mostly anyways." She folded her arms and assumed a scowl.

"It was over in Waukesha, this one girl, a sweet girl I met at training when we first did everything y'know, early 30's, very sweet, she was given a case at this family's house and the wife answered the door at first. And the girl begins the usual process when the wife cuts her off and says that she isn't answering any questions being asked of her by the government. The girl got flustered or something and they got into a small spat or something, and that's what the husband came out. I dunno who he thought he was but I can only assume that he wasn't very happy to see someone like the girl on his doorstep. And he started calling her names, and telling her horrible things, and then, and THEN, he took the packet from her! Can you believe that?"

I winced. Taking the packet, or any materials from a census enumerator was actually a felony. Census enumerators are not to share or show any of the materials that have to anyone beyond themselves and their supervisors as a means of maintaining privacy and preventing the spread of personally identifiable information. During the NRFU process, the phone was easy enough to hold onto and lock, preventing and prying eyes from seeing the details about each house, and the people living there. The PES survey however, with its clumsily large packets of paper all tucked into plastic bags, just barely too small to easily remove said packets, presented a different story.

"He took the packet? Isn't that like, a crime?"

"It is! And so she told him that it's against the law to take it and he didn't believe her and he told her to get off

the property before he called the police on her. But she didn't leave because, well, y'know, she didn't want to leave the census materials since she was worried she'd lose her job. So she called her supervisor, and the supervisor told her to put him on the line with the husband, but the husband didn't bother, and called the police on her. And y'know, she's this tiny Asian lady, so she has no presence against this big burly white guy, y'know when she was at training she was very quiet, a little meek, very sweet though, meant no harm. But then the police showed up and told her to leave, and when she explained that it was a crime that he took the packet, the police didn't believe her either!"

"What?!"

"Yeah! And she put her supervisor on the line with the police, and the officer that spoke with him basically said that the homeowner said she was trespassing and that she hadn't left the property when he asked, but if she left now there would be no harm or foul. And also the supervisor apparently also told him that he, y'know, he needed that packet since it contained information that only we should know, and the police officer told the supervisor that he should come in and discuss the situation. And you'll never believe what happened when he went there."

"Did they not get the packet?"

"You're sharp. Not only did they not get the packet from that crazy, raging husband, but they told him that their force would be making no attempts to recover the packet either, so now central's getting involved."

"Holy crap, that's a whole . . . process."

"It sure is."

I thought about the husband, likely in his home with high ceilings, shoving his wife out of the way to yell at a woman who had just shown up on his doorstep, before angrily yanking the comically large packet out of her flimsy grip. It seemed a little too stereotypical to be true.

“That’s horrible is what it is. Some people, huh?”

“Some people.”

“Has anything like that ever happened to you while you’ve been doing cases? I know you’re a good looking young man, so it’s probably easier for you to get around and all.”

The warm wind from the lake blew my hair in front of my eyes, momentarily allowing my brain to focus less on what I saw, and more on what I remembered happening to me only a few days prior in Mist Lake.

I had been to Mist Lake almost seven different times at this point, parking at the bar at the central crossroads down town, a couple days after Father’s Day. Houses in Mist Lake, Wisconsin looked like what one might expect of a rural Wisconsin community in the summer of 2021. They were modest, weathered houses that proudly proclaimed their love for America well before the 4th of July. One house along the main drag had three different signs: “Comrade Biden for CCP!” arranged like the Chinese flag, “Biden for Jail!”, and the ever present “Trump 2020: Keep America Great!”, which was especially excessive in my opinion. One flag would be enough to express the fact that this person was dissatisfied by the results of the previous year’s election, why did they need three? The people in these houses were also the types of people one would expect in a rural Wisconsin town with houses proudly sporting their support for the former Repub-



lican President. They were white, lower-middle class working folks or military veterans trying to get by, and were skeptical about the government and its actions. These suspicions extended to those who were involved going door-to-door for the census.

I recall knocking on the door of one house, where a short old white lady answered the door with a soft expression. I repeated my spiel, and as I concluded I saw that her face had hardened into a stiff scowl.

“One moment please.”

She turned away from the door, closing it enough to where I could only hear the conversation. She called out to her husband, a person who I would later observe to be a bulky older farmer-type who wore a Korea-veteran cap, getting ready to take their dog on a walk.

“It’s the census, they’re here to ask some questions about people who were here last year.”

“I’m not answering any questions from the government.” came a grumble from a voice riddled from years of smoking.

“Should I?” There was some silence, maybe some whispering that I couldn’t hear. “I mean he looked nice enough.” whispered the woman.

“Only answer what you think is worth answering. You don’t have to tell him nothin’ you don’t want to. If he tries to make you do anything, you just tell me and I’ll make sure he doesn’t stick around.”

“Ok, honey, I will.” I leaned away from the door as I heard the woman move to open the door again, now revealing her conversation partner and his obnoxiously yippy-looking dog. “I will, but only what I want to answer.”

“That’s alright ma’am, you’re welcome to refuse any and all questions for any reason you like.”

“Of course, thank you.” She sighed a little, perhaps unaware that I had heard her entire exchange. When I told her that I was here to inquire about someone whose name I hadn’t already heard in the conversation, she relayed to me that it was her grandson, and then the questioning flowed as smoothly as expected, the conversation eventually morphing into how I also was a college student who had been displaced. He had been double counted by his parents and this group, his grandparents.

After considering this event, my mind then journeyed to another house in Mist Lake, this one right next to the bar. The gravel parking lot from the bar infringed upon the driveway space of this residence, which combined to create a layer of silty dust on the garage door. This door remained closed all but one time I visited, and had a few different dents in it. There was no clear “front door” at this residence, so I often found myself knocking on a side door that appeared to have last been opened before I was born. I attempted this house four times to no avail, even on a Sunday. Ironically, it was my planned final time to visit Mist Lake when I actually made contact with this house’s resident.

As I drove along Highway 151 listening to the Trash Taste Podcast, I told myself that “this was it”, that after this last trip to Mist Lake, whatever cases I didn’t complete I would mark as “Unable to complete”, and Sherri would take them either way. I was getting tired of going there, and for some reason, I wasn’t being paid as much as I was expecting I should be, given the distance I was travelling. With this

exhaustion in my head and wallet, I pulled into the bar's parking lot for the final time.

I stepped out of my car, case bag over my shoulder and packet in hand, I noticed that the dented garage was now open. The space was full of tools and landscaping machines. A four-Wheeler sat parked on the right side of the space, its blue paint chipped and well used. I saw an old rifle on the wall between the studs of the garage, probably not operational, but I knew the first law of gun safety still absolutely applied. Approaching the entrance, I heard a dog barking in the backyard, it was big, tied up, and clearly not happy about it. When I encroached further, the resident of the house came into view also in the backyard. He wore a plain white t-shirt and gym shorts, clearly doing some kind of yard work which required his pet to be restricted. The ruckus drew the resident's view from the dog to me, to which he quickly stopped what he was doing and made his way over in my direction.

"Look, buddy," he began with a tired growl, "I've gotten four of your fliers and I'm not answering your questions."

"I understand your frustration sir, but I'm just trying to do my job."

"And you're doing a great job at it, and I respect you for it." He scratched his white beard with resentment, a way to do something with his hands, I assumed. "But I'm not going to answer any of your questions, you understand?"

"Are you Frederik Janson, and were you here April 1, 2020?"

"Yes, and yes, and I won't ask you again, get off my property before I make you get off my property." He took

his hand from his beard and brought it down to his waist. Regardless of whether there was actually something there, or if it was just muscle memory, I got the hint.

I continued to face him as I began to walk back toward my car. "That's all I needed, you have a good rest of your day now."

"You too," I maintained eye contact until he turned around. I could've sworn I heard him say "-and don't come back, asshole."

Ironically, by getting this hostile response, I had managed to get every piece of information I needed to complete the case, which I eventually filled out in the car, breaking the rules of assumed knowledge. I only marked what I had been given, the man's name and that he was living at this address on Census Day, and then marked "Refusal" everywhere else, concluding the packet with "Incomplete - Hostile Resident" option.

"I've had a case or two where things got a little ugly," I remarked to Sherri, "but nothing I couldn't handle. I'm here now, so, I think it worked out okay."

"That's good, that's good. But if you ever feel threatened at all, you just get outta there. I would hate if something happened to you. You're the most efficient guy I've got, and I dunno what I'd do if something happened to you."

"Well, I like to think I'm pretty resourceful..." Sherri laughed at this remark. "There was, though, this one time in Minneapolis last year where I got a door slammed in my face though, that was a little anxiety-inducing."

## Chapter 11

### Blend In

I don't want to date this writing too much, but I think it's imperative to consider the circumstances in which I write these stories. I am two years (edging ever-closer to three) removed from working with the census. My last contact with anyone working with the census was Kent calling me to confirm that I did not, in fact, have three cases with me still, and that Sherri had lost them somewhere. I told him in that exchange that, yes, I had returned all of my materials provided to me for the census back to Sherri before I moved from Madison to Ann Arbor, and that I was on-hundred percent certain of this fact as I had conducted an inventory of literally everything I owned only a day and a half prior. He thanked me for my time, and that was that, my time with the census was done.

Today, I spent my morning walking from my hotel in downtown Milan to the Bovisa Campus of the Politecnico di Milano, which took about an hour in total. It was about

four kilometers away, but I had grown weary of spending my mornings and afternoons sitting in the back rows of dimly lit conference rooms listening to presentation after presentation that required me to squint to simply read the slide's title. My flight from Detroit to Montreal had been delayed due to "weather" and as a result, my colleagues and I missed our connection from Montreal to Milan, thus sapping my one day I had previously planned to use to simply explore the place I would be staying for the next week. So instead, I spent my morning today, the day that I presently write this section wandering up and down the streets of Milan, eventually arriving an hour later on campus.

My goal this morning was to procure a Politecnico di Milano sweatshirt of some variety (ideally a crew neck though I would settle for a hoodie if it were easier), but I had no idea of where to go once I finally arrived on campus. Getting to the campus itself required little thought as I had downloaded directions ahead of time, but once on campus, I found myself confused by the lack of signage. I, being twenty-four years old, happened to more or less blend in with the students on campus, though I was sporting a "University of Michigan" Sweatshirt, which I believe could elicit two simultaneous reactions of both confusion and acceptance. Wearing another school's merchandise on a university campus is not uncommon in the United States, though I lack the knowledge to know this practice's acceptance in Italy. Regardless of this fact, I entered the B1 building's common study lounge and sat down two chairs away from a couple students and began doing some research. I quickly realized that the University's merchandise store was three buildings away, and without a

word, left my spot and walked over to the space.

Acquiring the sweatshirt was easy enough despite the language barrier, and then I boarded the train from the campus back to my hotel. The process wasn't overly complicated, I followed the appropriate instructions and signage using contextual clues, and made my way through the ticket purchasing process and down to where I expected the train would be based on my ticket. However, as the minutes ticked by and no train came into view I consulted the board, only barely realizing my mistake in time. I methodically climbed the stairs back to the central area of the station and down a different flight of steps, this time correctly confirming that the platform was the one that would bring me where I wanted to go. Boarding the train was also easy, I simply waited in line, followed the lady in front of me, and sat down without a word, and waited for the train to depart southbound.

I share this little anecdote because I feel that without my work at the census, my ability to confidently enter places I don't normally belong would not exist. While I have experience traveling by myself, I am a tried and true docile Midwestern American who does not enjoy talking to random strangers to ask for advice or help. I do not derive pleasure in speaking to people, asking if they speak English, and becoming especially flustered when they don't. I like to blend in as much as possible, to not stand out, to not appear like a tourist or a visitor or a guest. I want my presence in a space that I visit, which is home to another, to be invisible, or at least be camouflaged. But sometimes I have be in that space all the same. I make great efforts to appear as though I belong in order to not stand out, because I have observed

and experienced what standing out looks like.

Walking along the streets of North Minneapolis, census bag over my shoulder, I happened upon another census worker making her own rounds across the street. It was maybe 11 AM at this point, I had been working for about two hours and had completed enough cases to feel justified in taking my time as I got to the next house. I saw her as I walked comfortably, yet confidently towards the next address. Frankly it was hard to miss her. She was quite old, quite pale, and sported a white blouse and short khaki capris, as well as a distinct, bright pink visor. This must not have been enough to block the brightness of the sun because she also wore a gaudy pair of sunglasses that appeared to be connected to some kind of string, likely so that she could remove the shades when necessary. I later would realize that these were not, in fact, ordinary sunglasses, but were instead bifocals with a sunglasses feature, and that she likely switched out multiple pairs of lenses depending on the circumstances.

As it happened, we both ended up on the same block, where she eventually saw my bag and made her way over to me.

“Hi! Are you with the census too?”

She called out from about four sidewalk squares away, enough to make both of our presences known to people in our surroundings. I nodded, and waited to respond until she was within two squares.

“I am, yeah.”

“Oh that’s so exciting! I’ve never met another enumerator out in the field before!”



“Neither have I. I thought that maybe, just maybe, I was the only one out here.”

She laughed at this remark, her glasses sliding down her nose. As she pushed them back up her face, she responded with a smile. “Well, I’ve been at it myself too y’know.”

“Oh? And how’s your day going?”

She looked down around and then scrunched up her face, causing her glasses to once again fall to the tip of her nose. “I’ll be honest, I haven’t been having much luck to day. I thought that more people might be home on Fridays, but no one answers when I knock.”

“Have you managed to catch anyone in their yard?”

“No, sadly.”

“Proxies?”

She sighed, “No, no one wants to talk with me when I call out to them.” I fell thirty seconds back into the past, and imagined myself as a resident of one of these houses, minding my own business as an overexcited librarian wearing a pink visor screamed at me from across the road. I probably wouldn’t have even engaged her, had she not first engaged me. It would’ve been my little moment, spotting another one of us out in the wild, like trains passing in the night.

“That’s a shame,” I said as I redirected my brain, “I haven’t had much luck today either. I guess that makes two of us, huh?” It actually only made one of us, my day had been going just fine. But in the moment I felt like I had to commiserate with the lady.

“That’s how it is I guess. That’s what they said during training, to expect a lot of unanswered doors.” She put her hands on her hips. “So where have you been so far?”

“Oh, just around Upton and Vincent, between 39th and 44th mainly.”

“Interesting, I’ve been more around Penn. That’s closer to where I live by, near Patrick Henry. Just a block or two north of it, on the Parkway!” She was brazenly referring to the High School nearby. The neighborhood in that area was on the edge of Camden, a space I didn’t know very well beyond the locations along 42nd Avenue.

“Can’t say I’m too familiar with the area around that school, I went to Robbinsdale.”

“Really? That’s a little far from here.”

“Well I’m not necessarily close to home.” I had grown adept at lying to people I had only just met. “I think my next case is just at the end of the block, yours?”

“I’m up another block yet, but I just wanted to say hi!”

“Oh for sure, for sure.” I nodded, attempting to move the conversation along so that I didn’t have to engage with loud librarian lady.

“I’ll let you get to it then,” she said with a smile, “good luck!” She looked both ways, and then walked as quickly as she could across the asphalt to the other side of the road, where she continued in the opposite direction.

As I walked down the cracked sidewalk, I had to ask myself if I had been completely fair to the woman. She was ultimately very kind and supportive to me, but from the small interactions I had had with her, she demonstrated a severe lack of self-awareness. Her boisterous greeting, her blinding whiteness, her over-the-top wave; all traits and actions were enough to make me cringe. She hadn’t even looked both ways before her initial jaywalk. It came to me as no surprise that

this was someone with which the people of this community had no intention of engaging. They would see her bright pink visor on their doorstep, and hear her loud knocks and a “Is anyone home?”, before recoiling back to a private room. I had to assume she meant well in her actions, but she was a square peg trying to fit into a round hole. My octagonalness was only marginally better, but I promised myself that I would do better to smooth my corners just enough to be less like her. I would do better to be more approachable but low-key, and to express myself only when people showed a willingness to cooperate.

I thought of that woman as I boarded the train back from PoliMi to my hotel, wondering what she might be like under these circumstances. She’d probably loudly ask someone for assistance with finding the proper platform and then say, with the most American accent, “Gratzee”. She’d then fold up her train pass and put it into her front facing fanny pack as she stepped over the gap. “Miscoozee” she’d say as she paused right before the train’s step, eventually sitting in a window seat. She would get to the same place and have roughly the same experience as I had, but she would’ve had to engage the people around her, standing out. I couldn’t do that even if I wanted to.

Even now, two (and a half) years after working the census, I still think about my presence in new and unfamiliar spaces. I do my best to blend in as much as I can, and to not draw attention to myself wherever possible. I still think about the only other enumerator I ever saw, her bifocal sunglasses frames sliding all over her nose, and wonder if she ever ended up finding a proxy for a case. I doubt it. But maybe I’m just

being a pessimist.

## Chapter 12

# Efficient

After the NRFU operation ended, I went back to school for my final semester of my undergraduate degree. Of course, that meant that I only actually went into the campus's facilities maybe once a week to watch a bunch of reactor operators very slowly insert control rods into the UW research reactor, and then record the readouts of the reactivity. This lasted for about four months, and during that time, the only time I would leave the house would be for that singular lab course, to run, and to go get groceries. In that time I would also go visit my new partner every Wednesday evening and we would make dinner together and spend some time with each other watching *Survivor* and playing with her cat. Given that I was only in nine credits, and that two of the courses were at the graduate level (meaning that the course structure, material, and grading were not designed to flunk you), this final semester was an easy, albeit boring cool down as I prepared

for the Grad School application circuit.

And then I graduated. I walked across my living room at my parent's house and watched my name scroll along on a PowerPoint Presentation on YouTube. I took my graduation photos on the parkway as the snow slowly fell, making the sky look as excited as I felt. I suppose you could say that I did end up celebrating my academics in a place where some of the hardest work had been done, but that's like trying to convince someone that a nine inch plastic replica of Michelangelo's David captures the same artistic energy as the actually majestic sculpture. While the specifics of my graduation experience are best saved for another occasion, I think it's important for me to share that I was at least surrounded by loved ones (as evidenced by my central portrait over Zoom).

Then I went back to the one-bedroom apartment in Madison, and existed. I was doing voiceover work for a Medical University based out of Hyderabad, India that woefully underpaid me for my work. This work was done out of my living room as I lacked the effort to gather my recording items and construct my makeshift closet booth every single day for work such as this, and was before I knew what "compressing audio" meant. The doctors in Hyderabad didn't care. The work was simple, but solitary. I read about sickle cell anemia, bones present in the forearm, and cell necrosis (which they helpfully provided plenty of corresponding images that were absolutely relevant to my readings) to the ghosts that haunted my apartment. I'd finish reading for the day, and then go down the road to the 7/11, grab some caffeinated drink and then prepare for my stream of Breath of the Wild or

Xenogears depending on the day. These were streams where I would converse with my friends I had made online from voice acting which allowed for some interpersonal interaction, but to the outside observer I appeared as if I were were thanking imaginary friends for their continued amicability. I maintained my evenings with my partner, providing me at least one guaranteed human interaction per week. But often these nights were the only time I spoke more than one sentence to any other physical human being. The Spring of 2021 was much like the Spring of 2020, except that instead of being trapped in the dungeon, I was trapped in the tower.

I share all this to express just how big of a pivot my days would take as I began the PES position. What started as maybe two meaningful, face-to-face conversations a week turned into daily interactions with people of all different origins. I excitedly took the PES enumerator position because of the money, yes, but I also needed a reason to leave the house. I needed a reason to get in my car and go somewhere beyond the Hildale Pick'n'Save.

I told Sherri that I didn't mind driving all the way to Fond Du Lac because I really needed any reason to get out of the apartment during the day. Yes, the money was very nice and I enjoyed taking my time on my drives, but I also benefited mentally from the ability to escape the confines of my 5th floor apartment. Like the previous spring, I found myself feeling much like a houseplant, needing sunlight and fresh air to thrive, and a little conversation never hurt either. The long drives between places were especially meditative for me as I thought about various voiceover projects, stream topics, and the successes my friends were working towards. One drive

back from the Dells as I drove past Devil's Lake, I remember hopping in a Discord call via Bluetooth and chatting about the people I had once again missed during my day of knocking on doors of empty houses. They were discussing applying for voices dot com accounts where they could break into commercial work remotely, hoping to eventually get enough gig experience so that they could get more gigs, as was the norm of gig work during the COVID-19 Pandemic. I knew by this point, as I drove through Sauk City, that I was going to graduate school, so when I was asked "Hey [John], when are you planning to move out to L.A?". I had to laugh awkwardly and fumble with my words.

"Uh, not for a long while, I'm starting my Ph.D. in the fall."

"Oh shit, my bad. And congrats too!"

Near the end of my tenure of the PES enumeration process, as I prepared my move to Ann Arbor, I had to drop off the last cases to Sherri, so I gave her a call to wrap up my work day.

"Oh that's wonderful John, you're always so good at this stuff, even doing work as you're getting ready to go off to bigger and better things! But listen, I can't meet at Olbrich tomorrow, the supervisors are all meeting in Fort Atkinson to do some business, hard to explain over the phone. If you want to bring me more cases, and the rest of your material then I can take 'em from you and then you'll be good to go off into the rest of the world."

Fort Atkinson, while not as far as Mist Lake or the Wisconsin Dells, was a significant drive to drop off the remainder of my materials and conclude the working time with the cen-



sus, but I allowed myself to consider it as a final hurrah, long drive to cap everything off. And, of course, it was about an hour and a half round-trip event. I listened to David Sedaris's "Theft By Finding", a re-listen if only because the first time I had listened to the reading I was a teenager, and I was now encroaching on the same age as Sedaris in the opening chapters. While he hitchhiked across the country, getting work in Oregon, I was driving myself to a library in a small town in Wisconsin.

The library in Fort Atkinson is quite nice. There's a lovely children's section complete with a giant sculpture play area where kids can sit and read. There's plenty of chairs for patrons to sit and read, and amuse themselves in the quiet space. There's a number of conference rooms on the upper floor, which all overlook the aforementioned children's section. It was in one of these spaces where I found Sherri, Kent and the rest of the supervisors up to their necks in cases.

"There he is!" called out Sherri from the room, "that's my guy, John!"

The other supervisors looked up at me, expectantly. I think Kent must have recognized me from training, I recognized his long dark curly hair, and lankiness.

"He gets so many cases done, you wouldn't believe it."

"Well wouldn't ya know, I have a couple more for you too, Sherri." I handed her the cases, "And, if you don't mind, when you have a second, I wanted to talk with you about the 'you know'." I whispered to her. She nodded and took the cases from me.

On the way back, I listened to Sedaris recount his days as an English teacher, showing his students episodes of "One

Life To Live” as a way to mask the fact that he had no idea what he was doing. I suppose that rang true for me too in a sense. I had been a person who had to maintain a presence of authority on a daily basis for this work, despite the fact that I had no idea what I was doing, and that this sense of “authority” was little more than a badge and a confident persona. I reflected about how all I had done this whole time was ask people about themselves in the least interesting way people, and how I had been able to accomplish this task solely by pretending to be important. I could have simply lied about the places I went to when working the PES survey. I could’ve stayed home, playing video games and consuming 1:1 THC+CBD tincture, hibernating from responsibility, and lying about my actions. And yet, there I had been, adhering to the rules placed before me, which allowed me to assume a persona of authority. Had I acted because I feared the effects of lying to my employer and violating the trust I had been provided? Or had I done my duties because I enjoyed being that person who, for better or for worse, required unassuming residents to tell me extremely personal details about themselves?

I pulled into the garage that last time, and returned to my messy apartment. The move was halfway completed, all that remained was to actually bring everything to Ann Arbor. What hadn’t been packed were only a few miscellaneous items that would make the journey on my second trip and a small IKEA futon I had bought for my Freshman year dormitory almost five years prior. I ordered a Topper’s Pizza and ate it on the futon in my underwear while playing the *The Great Ace Attorney Chronicles*. This was my last night in the tower.

I was going to enjoy myself.

## Chapter 13

# COVID

A good fraction of the movie “Contagion” takes place in the Twin Cities, as it is where Gwyneth Paltrow’s character, Beth Emhoff, lives and subsequently ends up succumbing to the illness, and thus becoming Patient Zero of the MEV-1 virus. My parents watched the movie when it first came out and had their “Leo in Tarantino’s ‘Once Upon a Time in Hollywood’ meme” moment when they heard that School District 281 had closed for student safety. Nine years later, the same announcement that schools closed yielded less amusement, even after both of their sons had long since graduated. Minneapolis was one of the many cities in the United States at the time that strictly enforced mask mandates and quarantining restrictions in order to ensure that the virus would eventually pass and “people could return to their normal daily lives”. Except, the issue arose that people didn’t want to give up their old normal for a temporary new normal and rejected

the mask requirement, thus extending the conditions they so intensely despised.

Masks, in the year 2020, were something that said a lot about who a person was. To me a person who chose not to wear a mask beyond the confines of their own home and property were people who were part of the problem. I didn't care if these people were even out on a walk in the various parks around Bde Maka Ska, if they didn't have some sort of protective facial covering I instantly considered them part of the problem. I adhered to the polarization of thought that was rampant during this period of time, given the politics in the United States.

"Why are you wearing that?" I was asked when a resident had responded to my knock. I was wearing the Twins mask that mom had sewed for the whole family. It was double layered with common cotton fabric, with little elastic straps that went around my ears (which created a lot of strain on long days) "They don't work."

"I'm just wearing it because my brother has the flu, not COVID, and I don't want to get anyone else sick."

"OK, fine. But I'm not going to wear one." The woman was stout and missing her top canines.

"That's fine ma'am, I'll be sure to stay right where I am."

I didn't make small talk with the woman, I just did my job, thanked her for her time, and left. I did not ask her why she felt that masks didn't work, but I wish I had. I wish I had had the gumption to simply continue the conversation with a, "Oh what makes you say that?"

The best analogy I had for the consideration of sporting a facial covering was the idea of two people having a conver-

sation, and one participant starts to urinate and, naturally, the other participant wants to avoid the oncoming stream. Without pants, both are likely to get drenched with urine. If the non-urinator happens to be wearing pants, yes they'll be wet, but they can eventually take their pants off and likely not be entirely covered in the yellow stuff. If the urinator is wearing pants, it's pretty unlikely that the secondary party will get splashed. If both are wearing pants, then it means the urinator should have their bladder checked out. Based on this analogy, the vaccine was an adult diaper.

Of course, I couldn't give this analogy to the toothless lady while I was on the clock, let alone under most circumstances. I'm a risk-averse individual when it comes to situations that are out of my control. I did everything I could to avoid getting COVID-19 for the longest time. I stayed home, I wore a mask, I wore two masks, I didn't go to in person classes, I didn't go out to bars in Madison after graduating from college, I didn't go to recreational gatherings. I didn't get COVID until the spring of 2022, likely the BA.5 Omicron variant and that was after two rounds of vaccines and a booster shot, after going to a conference in Champaign, Illinois. Really, it should've been obvious that I would probably get the sickness from that event; masks were not required for participants at this point, and I was naïve enough to think that because of my three vaccinations that I would be able to manage given the new variant sweeping through the state of Illinois.

It started as nothing more than a scratchy throat that cropped up on my drive home from the conference. I called my mom and I noticed that I was seriously losing my voice,

something I had acute awareness of given my voice acting responsibilities. After I hung up with her, I chose to not speak for the remainder of the drive just in case. I had been at a bar the night before and had to yell to have my opposite conversationalist hear me, so I figured there was an outside chance it was just that. I was, of course, wrong. I developed a pretty powerful headache after returning home. The next day I had energy, but a pounding headache that only got worse as the day went on. My partner, who also had COVID and was the reason I drove home from the conference early, had exhibited similar symptoms when I had gotten home and was now incredibly lethargic. This lethargy eventually crept into my system as well as I slept on the futon in our living room, watching the Robert Downey Jr. Sherlock Holmes movies. The following day I slept for almost sixteen hours, generating a puddle sweat which outlined my maintained prone pose. The next four days were much easier than the first two, but I didn't fully test negative for a full six days after my symptoms went away.

I am eternally gratefully that I never got COVID from doing the census either year. There were close cases, I'm sure, but I am glad that I came away unscathed. One assignment in a basement apartment in Robbinsdale I think was an especially close case given the circumstances. I confirmed on my phone that this door had the correct number on it and then proceeded to lift my hand in preparation to knock, but what happened next stepped me dead still. From the other side of the door I began to hear the resident begin to have a coughing fit. He coughed for about ten seconds of what sounded like tortuous agony, like the iron in his blood had been extracted

and turned into a pair of scissors that he was now attempting to expel from his throat. I brought my hand back down to my side and took a beat. Did I really want to even interact with someone who was showing what I assumed to be the hallmark symptoms of this new virus? I didn't have to consider long because a second fit flared up from behind the door. I heard the man moan and wheeze, out of breath from the tumultuous exercise, and didn't waste another breath of my own. One of the rare times I actively lied about when someone was home, I marked the corresponding option on the app and left an NoV form underneath the door. I have to imagine the person in the apartment saw it slide under the door and understand why someone might not want to conduct a face-to-face meeting. As far as I know, that resident actually responded to the message because the next time I had cases in that apartment, their door was no longer one of the ones listed.

I didn't wear a mask for most of my PES enumeration, especially when I was in rural Wisconsin. The practice of gaining people's trust varies from community to community, and from my experience with rural farming communities in the Midwest (or perhaps in general), a mask would only elicit a negative response. The census did not ask if anyone was vaccinated, so I did not ask if anyone was vaccinated and no one asked me if I was vaccinated. The whole idea that there was any kind of pandemic went more or less unacknowledged by these rural communities, but by that point I had received the two stages of the initial COVID-19 vaccine, so I was far less concerned with the risks. When in Madison, I still masked when speaking with people, mainly because I



was concerned that if I didn't mask that one of the other PES people might see me operating without a mask and I would get into trouble. By that point most people in Madison were beyond masks, and despite the census mandating that we wear masks while working, I don't think I met anyone with the PES process that actually followed that rule. Even my supervisor, Sherri thought that it was nothing more than posturing. I wouldn't wear a mask as I went from house to house, but before I knocked I'd make sure to at least have something covering my face just in case. I did not want to be the vector.

The census never shared any additional details about the people we visited, and that included whether or not there were reported cases of COVID in and around where we were to work. I have to assume it's only because they themselves had no information that they could give us. I cannot imagine the amounts of shit they'd be if it was found that they had access to reported COVID cases in the communities and withheld it from their enumerators. When it came to keeping track of the well-being of their enumerators, enumerators were required to input their availability by the end of the previous night. They were told they were not allowed to work for the CDC mandated 5-10 days after a positive test, so in theory the enumerator would just say that they're unavailable and leave it at that. We, as enumerators, were not required to disclose if we had COVID. For the NRFU operation we only had to tell the algorithm that disbursed cases whether or not we'd be available to work cases the following day, while for the PES operation we literally had to do nothing, aside from maybe let our supervisor know. They didn't care if we

had COVID or not.

## Chapter 14

# Nowhere

Conducting the census in Madison, Wisconsin was a very strange experience for me. After four and a half years of living there solely for the purposes of getting a college education, I now found myself living and working there as an actual familiar neighborhood resident. The invisible shift in function that the place had undergone in my brain was one I had not previously experienced. I had lived in Minneapolis long enough to understand that the world in that space was bigger than myself, and that the space housed many varying communities, including ones I rarely, if ever, saw. Madison was different in that I knew it to be half-college town, half metropolitan-lite city, but this sentiment did not necessarily change as I did the census work. It was just that by that point in life, I had only exclusively used the former collegiate space, that the latter residential space had never truly registered in my brain. It was like exploring the first floor of

my aunt and uncle's duplex in South Minneapolis. I knew that it had existed, and that they regularly rented it out to people, but I had never been able to actually explore the unit until my cousin and his wife actually moved into the space. The floor plan was almost identical to the unit above that I had known from growing up, but the lighting entered the space differently, creating a remarkably different, yet still very comfortable, living experience.

When I lived near the zoo, I went on runs that allowed me to pass through neighborhoods near Lake Wingra. I recall that in the process of moving from my place there to the new one-bed apartment, I went on a run to clear my head. Passing by these apartments and town homes, I recall thinking in my running-brain mode that "these look like houses I would do the census for if I had to do it in Madison instead of Minneapolis." Imagine my amusement then, almost a year later, when I was assigned a case at one of the exact houses I had seen on that run. I parked on the street on a gray, rainy day, and stepped out of my car. I paused and considered the view from where I was, and how I had a perfect view of the Wingra Parkway and the exact spot I had been when, while listening to a Dungeons and Dragons podcast and kicking off the second mile of my run, I had thought about the census. Maybe I was psychic, like I had been able to connect with my past self from the future via a kind of morphogenetic field resonance or some other science fiction plot device. It amused me in the moment, but even now, multiple years later, I still consider this moment and wonder if there really was something higher in play.

There were other bizarre instances that happened during

my operations in Madison. One of my first days doing cases in the city of Madison, I was tasked with finding an address on the isthmus, just off of East Washington. This space was on the opposite side of the “city” portion that I was accustomed to when it came to exploring. I went on a lot of runs in undergrad, which allowed me to have a justifiable reason to get to this part of town on my own, but these moments were in passing, never lasting longer than the time it took me to run the length of the sidewalk. The walk from the parking garage to the actual destination was relatively simple, though when I turned onto the street where my destination was located, I was met with an obstruction: road construction. The address number was a single-digit odd number, five, so I began to note the house numbers from the provided walkway. Fifteen, thirteen, eleven, nine, seven, and then nothing. I walked past the chain link fence after the seven house to see that there was no five house. I looked again to make sure I hadn’t missed it, as if it were some kind of duplex, but my second search again yielded no house with a five on it. In its place was an enormous sandy pit that extended from the small pathway to the back yard of the seven house all the way to the main Washington Drive.

\*Holy shit there’s no- the house is fucking gone. . .

I was flabbergasted, and then checked the numbers across the street to ensure I wasn’t dreaming. The even numbers confirmed my bewildered thought. There was no five house. The sandy hole was apparently for an expansion project for the nearby church, if I understood the construction sign properly, and the construction foreman I was able to briefly chat with make sure I had it right, that the rental properties on

this street had been sold to some party so that this project could commence. It was impossible to complete this case as it was presented to me.

“Hi, Sherri, it’s John. It’s about 11:30 on Tuesday, and I’m calling you just to get your opinion on an issue I have with one of my cases. The residence no longer exists, it was torn down for a major construction project. I just wanted to confirm that I can therefore mark it as ‘unable to complete’ since I was unable to find a proxy. Again, it’s John calling on 11:30-ish on Tuesday, thanks!”

This wasn’t the first time I had been assigned cases to houses that just didn’t exist. A house in Minneapolis that had been assigned to me as “2A” was reportedly at the end of a cul de sac just before the Humboldt Industrial Center space. Like the experience in Madison, I followed the house numbers before I reached the final house on the block, “3”. There was a lady sitting on the front stoop who had been eyeing me as I slowly walked down the street, counting the house numbers.

“What are you looking for?”

“Oh, hi, I’m looking for house 2A on this street?”

“There’s no such house, what do you mean 2A?”

“I ju- the list of houses I have says that there’s supposed to be a house with the number 2A? A duplex I think?”

“There’s no 2A, my house is the last one.”

“And there hasn’t ever been any houses with the number 2A?”

“No.”

“Your house wasn’t 2A at any point was, it?” I was veering off script.

“No, sorry.”

He arms had not moved from their folded position, and her nostrils flared with suspicion. The woman’s body language suggested that I would do well to avoid asking her any further questions about herself.

“Well, then that’s all I needed to know, thank you so much for your help.”

“You’re welcome.” The words were flat, their meaning ringing hollow. I opened the app and began to complete the app’s request, “Could not complete, address does not exist”.

This was the practice for when residences didn’t exist. The enumerators were supposed to find a proxy who could confirm that the specific address did not exist and perhaps had not existed during the 2020 census date. These residences likely existed back in 2010 to some extent, but had changed in the ten years leading up to the next census day. Even at my first census operation the resident informed me that the house he had living in no longer had an “Apartment 2”, that he was the only one living in the space and that the space had been made into a single unit a long time ago, despite the two doorbells.

I thought a lot about the people who were living in these houses that no longer existed. The family that had been living in the Madison apartment that had since become I giant hole in the ground apparently had more than six people in it on census day. Their first and last names matched that of what one might consider to be an extended nuclear family. I was laughing in disbelief as I walked back towards the parking garage, but I had to wonder whatever became of that group of people. Where were they living, now that their former home

had been sold and reduced to negative space? I pondered the thought as I walked up the hill towards the garage, and eventually came to the conclusion that I could feel bad for this group of people, but that there was nothing I could do beyond acknowledge their existences in the first place. Their home may have vanished, but they likely still remained.

Sherri later confirmed with me that I had done everything I could for that missing address and that she would sort it out with the other supervisors.

“That’s just so interesting, wow! Isn’t that something?” He voice carried just as much energy over the phone as it did in person. I paced back and forth in my underwear in my apartment as she called at the end of the day; I was just about to fill out my pay sheet when she called.

“It sure is. I just thought it was so, just, like- y’know, holy... moly there’s nothing here!” I caught myself to maintain an air of professionalism despite my physical presence.

“No kidding! But hey, you just give me that packet next time we meet up and it’ll be fine. That’ll be a fun one to explain. I’ve had to explain a lot worse y’know.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Ohhh yeah, I had to explain to them one time that an enumerator once just saw a dog on the property that was all drooling and looked angry, and they just decided that the resident was hostile. This was over in Stoughton and I couldn’t help but think to myself ‘Really? That’s it?’ but you really can’t trust a dog when you see one and what am I supposed to say? Well I didn’t give this guy that many cases after that. And between you and me? This guy’s a bit of a simple guy. He asks me a lot of questions, sometimes they’re



the same ones day after day. I just give him the cases I think will be enough for him and when I don't hear from him, I just assume he got them done."

"No kidding."

"Yeah, really! He's not like you, so independent and hard working. No wonder they asked you to come back from last year."

"I guess I just have a way with sorting out problems as they come up."

"I'll say so, you make my job a lot easier. Well anyway you just bring me that packet tomorrow and I'll tell them all about what you just told me."

"Sounds good. See you tomorrow Sherri."

## Chapter 15

### Dense

On one of the hottest days of the summer of 2020, I was assigned a case at a house near the intersection of Penn and Lowry in North Minneapolis. I had been anticipating a case like this, given that the previous day many of my cases had edged closer and closer to the North Minneapolis proper suburbs and further from the Robbinsdale and Victory neighborhoods. One of these houses that I was to attempt was very close to Cleveland Park, which made for an easily accessible public place to park in the event that I needed to get to my car as quickly as possible. I quickly scoped out the house as I drove, looking for the proper numbers that would allow me to get in and out as efficiently as possible. While I didn't see the numbers of the house, I did notice a couple people on the porch of one particular house. In front of the two people was a blue plastic barrel like the ones found at baseball fields at local parks overflowing with some kind of trash.

*This'll be fun*

The walk to the house was tenser than usual, the shade from the trees overhead offered little assistance. In addition to my standard khaki shorts, had chosen to wear a black cotton polo, which I realized about two cases into the day was a mistake. Doing my best to not appear entirely like a nervous wreck drenched with perspiration, I wiped the salty fluid from my brow, and threw my hand back through my hair, pushing the dangling strands of my unwanted bangs back upwards. I spotted one of the two people from the porch, a woman no older than thirty get up and walk inside the premises, while the other person, a man who also appeared to be in his late-twenties remained seated. They were, of course, at the house I would have to query.

The man saw me approaching and took a big swig of what I saw to be a dented can of Bud Lite. Its color and shape matched the countless number of other beer cans in the bin that sat just off the porch within tossing distance. At the man's feet sat an entire case of the beer, the beer he was polishing off was the first can of the pack. The man himself was a small, unassuming, likely of some kind of Latino or Hispanic descent. He had a thin mustache on his upper lip, hairs sparse and wispy, characteristic of middle-school boys who had not learned how to properly use a razor. His blue shirt was, upon inspection, littered with tiny little droplets of spilled beer and sweat, no doubt from sitting there all morning in the humidity of the Wednesday morning. It was only going to get more humid.

The man didn't stand up from his chair when I got to the second of four steps on his balcony.

“Hello my name is John Videogames, I’m with the U.S. Census, here’s my badge.” I lifted my lanyard just enough to verify my identify. The man reached out to grab the lanyard to hold the badge in his hands and inspect it for himself. He squinted, looked, up and me and then back down at the badge.

“Okay. How are you?” His accent was thick, ending with a sharp “ee” sound at the end of the “y” in “Okay”, but I could parse it well enough. He was no doubt a native Spanish speaker.

“I’m well, thank you. I am here today to ask you a few questions about the people living here on April 1st, 2020. Y tambien, yo puedo hablar Español si es mas facil para ti.”

The man looked at me, leaning forward in his chair, his eyes still squinting from his inebriation. He took another drink and then continued.

“No no, we can do English. . . I don’t worry about it.” He then switched to Spanish “But if it’s easier for you to do Spanish, we can talk in Spanish, it’s not important to me.”

I maintained the English script, but was ready to switch at the crush of another beer can.

“Ok sir, thank you. First, what is your name?” He responded accordingly with a soft smile. “And [name], were you living here [at this address] on April 1st, 2020?”

“I was not here.”

“So you didn’t live here?”

“No I live here but I was not here then.”

“To confirm then, you were not living or staying here on April 1, 2020.”

“No, I live here.”

I switched to Spanish.

“You currently live here, but did you specifically stay at this address on April 1st, 2020?”

He responded in Spanish with a small giggle.

“Yes, I was not here on that night, but I live here now.”

“Ok, now I’m going to ask you some questions about yourself. You can choose to refuse to answer any questions you don’t want to.” My eyes had been locked to the phone to make sure I read the script verbatim and used the proper word for “refuse”. As I looked up, I saw the man squeeze his empty can in his hand and reach for another. His eyes were locked on my legs. I continued with the survey. “What is your name?”, “What is your race?”, “What is your sex?”. His head perked up more and more with each question, while I ever so slightly moved my feet directly away from the man.

“Ok, I will answer your questions,” he interrupted me in English, “but first, you have to answer my questions too.”

By this point I had positioned myself such that I was just out of arm’s reach of this tiny little man. He was still sitting but he was leaning forward in the chair, interested in this strange new person who had shown up on his doorstep and was asking him questions about himself.

“What is, is your name?”

“My name’s John, and I work for the census.”

“Do you want one?” He motioned to the blue box at his feet.

“No sorry, I’m currently working.”

“You’re working?”

“Yeah, I’m on the clock right now in fact.”

“So you’re working and you- you just get to ask people questions?”

“I suppose you could put it that way. And speaking of, do you know of anyone else who was living or staying here on April 1st, 2020?”

“I do no- I do but I don’t know them.” He tilted his head with a mischievous little smile. “But you, I get to ask a question.”

When it comes to someone flirting with me, I am am a hopelessly dense goblin of a man. In my Senior Year of High School, in my quest to locate a prom date (as I been single all year in contrast to junior year where I attended with my girlfriend at the time) I was engaged by a sophomore girl I had met at a school dance earlier in the year. She had been drunk at the dance and I helped her find her way to the bathroom and then to the front without alerting any suspicion from the Football Coach bouncers. I gave her my contact over Snapchat and told her to message me when she got home safely. This interaction was how we had gotten to talking over various hours of the day, about classes, people, plans for the weekend and other super basic high school topics. There was, obviously, some flirting involved on both ends as well, I attest that I am not totally oblivious to the concept of sending and receiving suggestive messages. Then one day, we happened upon the topic of the upcoming major social event.

“Do you have any plans for prom?”

“I dunno, honestly. I’ve considered asking a few people, but I haven’t made any promposals or anything. You?”

“idk haha”

“Well definitely let me know if you find someone to go with!”

I confide in you, dear reader, that at the age of seventeen, I may have been academically successful, but boy was I really stupid sometimes. This stupidity eventually carried over into the early months of college, until I started to understand the subtle cues of body language. An interested party might cock their head slightly, open their shoulders, lean in and show intentioned listening, and ask questions of the other party.

“Now I get to ask you a question,” asked the beer-guzzling resident. “You, uh, where do you- where do you live?”

“Sorry?”

“You ask me where I lived, where do you live?”, the pupils in his eyes taking on a heart shape.

I paused, my mind racing, my face hot. *Oh shit, oh shit he's hitting on me. Wait shit he's been flirting with me this whole time. He thinks I've been hitting on him. He thinks I'm interested in him, oh God.* My multiple years of improv training had come flooding back to me in that moment? *Where would a white boy like me live that was far enough away from this guy that he wouldn't get any ideas?*

“Me? I live in Edina.”

Edina, of course. I was a cake-eater from Edina. I lived in the single red blip in the sea of Blue in the Twin Cities. I was the rich white boy who was wandering into the wrong side of town some fifteen miles away. Edina. It was brilliant.

“Edina?”

“Yeah, Edina.”

“That's far... but,” another swig, “its good.” At this point, at my response, he looked down to the intersection

visible from his porch, and then proceeded to very obviously check me out, him practically drooling over my person. He burped.

“Alright sir, I think that’s the end of my questions.”

“Is it? No but I have more questions for you.”

“You can ask me one more question” I relayed as I inched down the porch steps.

“Can I, can I, uh, can I have your phone number?”

“No sir, but if you’d like to contact the census with additional questions you can find the phone number to the regional office online.” I backed down the stairs, still facing the respondent as he initially made a move to stand, but then rolled back in his seat with a sigh. Life was not going to serve him a partner on a silver platter.

I didn’t turn my back until I was on the sidewalk once again, making my way to the car fraught with repeated glances over my shoulder to see if the guy was following me. The speedwalk to my car was faster than most of my previous exercises and I forced the ignition with such a force I worried that I’d snap the key in the turn. While it was effectively quicker to drive past the drunkard’s home to return to my house (not the fake one in Edina, but the real one just seven blocks away), I took a long way around, choosing to make some additional turns for safety’s sake.

In all the process of this evacuation, I had yet to finish filling out the app’s questionnaire. Tapping through the buttons of the app, my mind was brought back to a time when I went to a restaurant with a friend after a football game in Madison. A young waitress was taking our order before moving to the table next to us where a couple of seedy, slightly



inebriated men were sitting. She took their order much like ours, with a polite smile and a charming cadence.

“And how are you folks doing? Did you go to the game?” and “Gosh, I wish I could’ve been there. You all look like you had a lot of fun!”

She was likely working for a larger tip, but the men at the other table seemed to think otherwise.

“She’s into you dude” said one of the guys after she left. “Did you see the way she looked at you? She was totally into you.”

“Yeah man, she was into me and definitely not you.”

“Shut the fuck up.” They both laughed. “I’m gonna get her number.”

The conversation was cliché, yet still concerning. The guys flirted with the waitress, asking multiple times for the girl’s number and “what [she] was doing after this because [they were] throwing a huge party later tonight and [she] should come.”

I remember glancing over my shoulder to see the scene play out, the waitress’s cheeks, once taut, now slightly slack, held only by the necessary muscles.

As my mind stopped wandering, I returned to the half-finished questionnaire.

“Incomplete”

Today, I had been in that girl’s shoes. But unlike that girl, I could make sure that this kind of interaction didn’t happen again. At least, not at this address.

“Hostile Resident, Do Not Attempt Again.”

## Chapter 16

# Bottom of the Hill

Usually, my NRFU operations were a significant distance away from my parents' house, more than seven or eight blocks away. However, there were days when this number shrank to maybe two blocks away at most. When I'd get cases that were nearby, I'd still drive to them, park my car, and proceed normally as to not draw attention to myself. I think it would've been a generally bad idea if, after asking people a variety of questions about themselves, I let those perhaps hostile people know exactly where I lived. I never had anyone follow me after I did cases, as far as I could tell at least. Even still, the thought of some stalker deciding that they weren't happy about someone coming and knocking on their doorstep had crossed my mind more than a couple times.

When I was in Elementary School, I would wait for the bus on the corner of a very specific intersection, standing on a neighbor's lawn at the top of a hill. I'd hear the grumbling

of the bus's engine seemingly lurking at the bottom. It was likely picking up some students, but I always was tense in those moments. I was waiting for it, I didn't want to be late and the bus was coming, right? That was the bus, right? Before I could start to hyperventilate, I would see the school bus turn and make its way up the hill, and I would be able to breathe a sigh of relief, releasing the pent up anticipation I had developed in the previous twenty seconds.

The bus would rattle its way up the incline, and then stop at the corner, and I would hop on where, in my later years, I'd be greeted by two kids. These two kids were brothers, one a year older than me, one a year younger. The older brother, Jeremy, sat in the back of the bus where the "cool kids" and the older middle schoolers sat, while the younger brother sat closer to the front of the bus. Jeremy and I eventually ended up at the same high school, but I fell out of touch with the younger brother, Jake, as he opted to go to the other High School in our district. I was never close with either of these two brothers, but I had interacted with them enough to recognize their names and faces easily enough.

In one of my last days of working the census I was sent down the hill to visit the house on the corner, where the bus used to lurk and indirectly increase my cortisol levels. The house was a single story, blue, and had an interesting sculpture in its front yard. I had passed this house plenty of times prior to that day, but during this assignment was when I really noticed it. It was a metal bar that had been manufactured in such a way to create a bulging spiral which housed a glassy blue orb. It stood out of the ground, leaning to one side.

*When did that get there? Has this always been here?*

In the driveway of the house sat a blue minicooper with an object my dad always called “a topper”. Three boys, perhaps a year or two younger than myself was loading the car for a camping trip, as I would learn later.

“Excuse me,” I called to one of the boys loading the trunk, “My name’s John Videogames, I’m with the U.S. Census, do you live here?”

The boy turned to look at me, his visage sweaty from a hard day of packing. “No, I don’t but my buddy does. He’ll be out in just a sec, I think.”

“Awesome, thanks.” I paused and inspected the vehicle. “Camping?”

“Yeah, once our buddy wraps up work, we’re picking him up and headed north for the weekend.”

“Very nice, this weekend’s a good weekend for it.”

The shortest of the three boys then came towards me, curious about what I was doing there.

“Do you live here?” I asked again.

“Yeah, can I help you?” He wasn’t hostile with me the way that other houses had been that day, rather confused.

“Yeah, my name’s John Videogames, I’m with the U.S. Census.” I spewed the spiel as I did with all the cases, the three boys now all standing in a semicircle around me. They listened, curious about the whole operation as I wrapped up the introductory section. “. . . and since you’ve already said that you live here, can I get your name please?”

“Jake Powalczyk.”

There was a name I hadn’t heard in a while. The last distinct memory I had of this person was him in the fourth

grade, pretending his fingers were scissors and saying so in a high-pitched squeal. Now he was twenty, in college.

“Powalczyk? Spelled like this?” I spelled out his long and complicated last name with relative ease.

His face gave away his surprise and confusion. I’m sure his next line would’ve been “How did you know how to spell that?”. He clearly had not recognized me by name from my introduction.

“I went to Cooper.”

“Oh, then you probably know my brother!” I wanted to tell Jake that I knew him as well, but I kept my mouth closed.

“Yeah, he was in the year above me. That’s kind of a funny coincidence, isn’t it?”

I had known these brothers since Elementary School. We had mutual friends who talked about going over to the “Powalczyk House” to hang out after school, and that “[I] lived pretty close to them, right?”. But I was never close enough with Jeremy to go there, not that I really cared to. It was just that in that moment, I finally realized that this house, the place just down the hill from my old bus stop was their house. I finally had the missing dots that allowed me to connect the whole picture together.

“You might have some cases where you’re going to be interviewing people you already know too. You might have an assignment at a house that’s not too far from where you live. In that case, do as you always do. Be professional, be timely, get as much information as they’re willing to provide and, of course, thank them for their time.” The training lady seemed to have so many contingency plans for every little thing. “I know you might want to chat away about the job,

and you can if it'll help get the answers you need, but you should hold off on, y'know, making dinner plans with them. And also, this goes without saying, but I'll say it anyways, don't talk about other houses you've been that day."

"What if they talk about you visiting their house to people later?"

"If they're bringing it up, you may confirm it, but I cannot talk about any of the specific details. They have to be the ones to bring it up in a social setting, and even then you should divulge as little information as possible."

At my additional questions about Jake and Jeremy's family the other two boys, who I had assumed to be friends of Jake's, quit the semicircle and picked up with their packing.

"So this is like, your job?" asked Jake.

"Yeah, though it's seasonal. I just go to the places they tell me to go and ask people a bunch of questions."

"That sounds super easy." one of the packing friends pondered aloud, having overheard this last bit of the exchange.

"Honestly? you'd be surprised at how complicated it can be at times." I lied, if only to make myself appear a little more professional and to not devalue myself.

"How much do you make?" asked the other friend. I paused for a second, picking at my thumb with my index finger. "Like, per hour? Or is it a salary thing, or a commission thing?"

"I make \$27.50 an hour". The reaction I elicited here was akin to a bomb going off.

"Damn dude, can I get in on this?" The three of us who hadn't asked the question all laughed.

“No, sorry, the applications for this were back in May. And I think there’s only about a week left in the whole operation so it’s not going to be forever.”

“But dude, that’s so much money, honestly like, good on you for finding something like that.”

“Haha, thank man, it’s been nice to have something after having all my previous plans go out the window.”

I left that house and wished the boys well on their camping trip. I had to wonder whether or not Jake would share the fact that I had been there, representing the census to his parents, who knew my parents. It would’ve been an interesting anecdote that, legally I wasn’t sure whether I could confirm or deny to my own parents. I hope it wouldn’t have to come to that, since I don’t know what I would have done in that situation.

As I walked up the hill, I made it back to that old bus stop of mine and took a moment for myself. I stood on the corner once again, peering down the hill as I had some fifteen years prior. There was absolutely no way that six year old me could fathom what I was doing on a daily basis. There was no way that six year old me could imagine that I would still be learning new things about a space I had considered so familiar. It was a curious feeling I felt while standing there. Nostalgic with an acknowledgment that I was always going to be able to learn more and more about where I was in the world. The spaces would continue to recontextualize themselves in new ways long after I left them, every time I return having a new meaning. But now as I remember that moment, remembering another moment, I’m struck with another consideration. These spaces also won’t remember

me, and won't care if I return or not.



## Chapter 17

# The Dells

“Let’s say, for example, you have to use the bathroom when you’re out on the trail so to speak.” A friend of mind was inquiring about my journeys from the past few days, driving to and from cases. “What do you do? Ask the person if you can come into their house and do your business?”

“No,” I chuckled, “you shouldn’t enter their house, even if you’re about to barf.”

“But what if you’re about to drop a big one right on their doorstep?”

“Well I would hope I would’ve had the foresight to know in advance that it was coming. And also, it’s not like these interviews are taking hours and hours. I think the longest one I’ve had was maybe fifteen minutes. If I had to go, I’d just hold the next case until I was done.”

“But where would you go?”

“I mean, in Minneapolis, I’d just go home. I could and

there was no one stopping me from going back into my own home and then going back out there. Hell, I would even still count the hours so long as I was in and out in seven minutes.” I paused to catch my breath and consider how to phrase the next part of my answer. “When I was doing the long Wisconsin runs though, those I had to like, find a good gas station. I don’t even want to imagine having to go when I was out in Lake Delton.”

In defiance of my words, my mind wandered back to the time I had to find the collection of summer homes, trailers and other miscellaneous temporary livings spaces just outside of the Wisconsin Dells. The collection of residences were all just off the highway hidden behind a thin, but still obscuring, line of pine trees. These glorified campgrounds had streets named “Sugar Maple Circle”, and “Spring Brook Lane”, which ultimately failed in their attempts to convince visitors (me) that these places were meant to be resorts. In fact, if one were to miss their turn towards the roads that eventually led to “Misty Pines Drive”, one would find themselves lost in the randomly present woods of rural Wisconsin. And perhaps, if this individual hadn’t upgraded their phone in a while such that their data plan was far outdated and provided them little directional assistance, they might have to consider pulling off on the side of the road and committing their efforts to fertilizing the local farmland. Luckily, I never had to do any kind of action so crass as that, but I don’t imagine that I could have been much closer to acting this way than one of the first days I was trying to find “Gravy Lane”.

The Wisconsin Dells, as I recently learned, was named after the gorge along the Wisconsin River, “The Dells of the

Wisconsin”, and not after the manmade lake, Lake Delton. Of course, people, like my family, didn’t end up traveling to the space to see this marvel of nature, but rather to visit the Great Wolf Lodge waterpark. The town received a lot of tourism from a traveling performer from Chicago named Tommy Bartlett, whose namesake “Thrill Show” was eventually permanently stationed in the Wisconsin Dells back in 1952. The show was advertised via bumper stickers and like all other forms of advertising only seen when one drives over four hours through the middle of the American Midwest, (like the various Gentlemen’s Clubs, Pro-Life Advertisements and Trump 2020 and later Trump 2024 advertisements I would later see making these drives myself), people began to take notice. The space eventually modernized to the form it carries today in 2022, hosting various waterparks and shopping centers as its primary contributors to the city’s economy.

The City of the Wisconsin Dells was always a wonderful spot for the various branches of my family to all meet in one space for a weekend. My family would come from Minneapolis on I-94, my aunts and uncles from outside of Decorah, Iowa would travel on I-90 via Lacrosse, and my family in Maquoketa, Iowa would travel through Madison on Highway 151. We would stay at the waterparks before visiting the Midwestern Ski Hill (heavy emphasis on the “hill”) Christmas Mountain. Later, as I grew older and began to attend the University of Wisconsin-Madison, the Dells acted as one of the many landmarks on my drive that informed me of just how close to Madison I was getting. These drives were a little over four hours on a clear day with no extra hazards, and the Dells were a sign that I had almost exactly an hour left

before I was pulling into my residence in Madison.

Despite my time spent in these waterparks, in the neighboring tourist attractions and driving along past the whole city, I never really explored the surrounding township. I knew there had to be people who just, y'know, lived there, but I never had considered where they High School in town may be, or who payed taxes to fund the road construction. I also couldn't have told you where town hall was, where the regular supermarket was, or where the post office was. I had no idea where the majority of the temporary residents residents lived, let alone the permanent ones. To me, up until the 2021 PES operation, the Wisconsin Dells was little more than a tourism landmark that I regularly drove past and rarely visited.

Many of the houses in the Lake Delton and Wisconsin Dells area may have had people staying in them on census day who may have been living somewhere else, like, for example, a couple from Milwaukee who were staying there because they had planned to go to the waterparks before being stuck in their vacation home in lockdown mode. The PES operation was designed to explicitly catch these kinds of cases, where somehow these people had been counted twice. The husband remarked with a sheepish grin,

“Yeah, I suppose I filled it out saying that we were living in Milwaukee. But of course, we also answered the door when they came by here. Sorry about that.”

“It's not a problem, my my job to fix this small mistakes, just to get a better error bound on the count.”

“Sure thing man.”

The property was more or less a trailer home, but all the patio furniture arranged to emulate Margaritaville on the

dewy grass and slippery blacktop. While I was less-than-entranced by the space, I had to concede that it was specifically special, as proven by the plastic, clock-shaped lawn ornament that blew in the lazy drizzling wind. I had found it; this was the singular “somewhere” on Earth when people remarked that “It’s 5 o’clock somewhere”.

*Holy shit, does that mean I can drive home?*

The husband had come out from the covered awning of the home, which presented the entire carpeted living room interior through a large sliding glass door. The door, I can only presume presented a better view inwards than outwards, given the location. The wife was sitting what looked like a pleather couch, reading some kind of book, sporting little more than a spaghetti strap tank top and a pair of short shorts, a view I had seen while knocking.

“So you come to the Dells every season then?”

“Every year, even last year.”

“Sounds like a nice escape from Milwaukee.”

“Yeah, y’know, it does the job.” The man scratched his mustache. “It’s nicer when it’s not raining.”

“I bet it is.”

Other residences in the area were closer to permanent houses, designed to look like log cabins and winter retreats. The trick with these houses was that they all looked exactly the same, in terms of layout, varying only by the color of the wood used to construct them. These were houses that I would attempt during the day and then pretend to act surprised when no one responded to my light raps on their sliding glass door panes. In my defense with the choice of door, there were no other visible doors to knock on, and heaven forbid I

actually attempted to search the property for a “main door” around back in rural Wisconsin. It didn’t matter if I had a badge and a bag, I felt awkward enough standing on a porch knocking on glass.

On one similarly rainy afternoon, I was actually able to catch one of the residents of one of these houses. He was a short, older guy, likely in his mid-fifties. A father of some kind I had to image as he stepped out of a beat up old Honda Odyssey. he was initially caught off guard by me, but he quickly caught onto the little game of answering questions. He was amicable and easy to chat with, happily responding that, when it came to his daughter, “Yes, she lived her and stayed at my house on April 1, 2020”

I continued to the next person in my packet. “Next I want to ask you about Mark”. His face dropped as quickly as his tone changed.

“He’s not here anymore.”

“I’m sorry?”

“I don’t know where he is but he definitely isn’t here anymore if I had anything to say about it.”

“Well sir, that’s helpful. Do you know if he lived or stayed here or around here on April 1st, 2020?”

“He used to live in town, but I ran him out real quick.”

I furrowed my brow, not sure how to mark this down in the packet.

“Was he there about a year ago?”

“Yeah, I’d say so.”

“And do you know where he currently lives?”

“No and I don’t care to find out, but he sure as hell won’t be back here.”

I pursed my lips into a satisfied frown. “Works for me, that’s all the question I have. Sorry for bringing up a bit of a sore topic.”

“No, it’s alright,” he remarked, his face easing back into the kinder visage that I had seen a few moments prior, “you’re just doing your job. I make sure I do mine well enough too.”

## Chapter 18

# Stench

The second basement apartment in the Birdhouse apartment complex that I attempted yielded an actual response. I had attempted about five apartments before this one, all either on the second or third floor, all of them ending with NoV forms slipped under people's doors. I was expecting a roughly similar outcome wherein I would knock on the door three or four times, not too loudly, but seriously enough to be heard, wait about thirty seconds and then knock again. This was the general procedure for me. Knock too loudly and other residents will hear and that you've drawn attention to yourself. Knock for too long and you're likely to piss the resident off, should they be home. Knock too quietly and no one will hear you. I suppose this last option would've made for a reasonable way to operate almost every single time if I wanted to shirk my work. I could say that "Oh I tried, but man, just no one came to the door! It's just so crazy how no one feels



like answering their doors at noon on a Tuesday.”, and that would be that.

Like with everything else in the census operation, I didn't mind it if my knocks yielded no meaningful results. In truth, I'd rather that no one answer a door that had a “Throw out your trash you fucking pig” taped to the corner of the door frame. I can only imagine how awful it would have smelled had someone actually decided to open that door from the inside. I crinkled my nose in agony as I was able to catch a whiff of the space surrounding this door, their passive aggressive neighbor had a point. This was the third of the five previous addresses I had attempted up to this point, and I was quickly beginning to suspect that I was going to have little to no luck with any cases here, whether it be from the resident's choice, or my own.

The space had an odor that I couldn't describe in the moment but it was foul. It was only two years later when I was in Athens with my friend, walking in and around the narrow suburban streets that I had my answer. The odor had returned in its full infamy, and I again shuddered in contempt. It was the smell of something bodily, but old and stale that had been left out for hours and hours. It wasn't anything fecal-matter related, but it smelled worse than burnt hair, Chinese cigarettes, and rotten milk all together.

“What's that smell?” I asked my Greek friend.

“Oh that?” he looked down sheepishly, “That's piss. There are people who pee in corners all the time and it gets old and bad, it's whatever, sorry.” We picked up the pace to go beyond the stagnant pool of urine.

With the power of hindsight, I can confidently say that I

will never need to go back and try and confirm that smell now, even if I already had no plans to do so in the first place. Old urine that had marinated in the hot Greek sun had somehow reminded me of the stained patches that seemed to creep from under this apartment door, like disgusting tendrils looking to reach across the hall. How those little seeping streams leaked under the door, I'll never know for certain. The habits of those who choose to spend their days cooped up in their own nests, choosing comfort over cleanliness, is a trend I try to avoid for myself and to encourage my loved ones to avoid as well. Maybe it was a leaking bottle? Or perhaps a trash bag?

The sixth apartment of the building, was treated to the same routine as the other five: four light yet audible raps, and then a quick wait. I lifted my hand to do a second knock when I heard the twist and slide of the latch being undone, the lock being turned and the door being opened. Behind the door was a larger mixed race woman in her late 40's.

"What?"

"Hi, I'm John Videogames with the U.S. Census," and away I went as I always did at people's front doors. The raggedy-pink-shirt wearing woman frowned and begrudgingly responded.

"Uh-huh." She took a breath, rolled her eyes and then continued. "It's just me here."

"Then this will be really quick, likely no more than five minutes tops." This was always my go-to reassurance. People liked hearing that these questions wouldn't take more than five minutes, though they never bothered to check their watches if they had nowhere else to be. I could always tell who was lying by the fact that they would lazily answer my

questions end on end adding unneeded details, long after they had stated with agitation the ever so easy excuse: “I’m busy.”

I got the woman’s name, and that she had been living in the apartment on April 1st, 2020, all the simple things that really could’ve been enough.

“And are you male or female?”

“Well, *obviously* I’m a woman.”

“So female?”

“That’s right, ain’t no dick between these legs, I’m a real fuckin’ woman, none of this transgender shit.”

I selected female in the app, and glanced at a new hangnail that I could start picking at the moment the door had closed.

“I’m sorry if I offended you ma’am, I’m just following this script.”

“Yeah, you said that. But you can clearly tell I’m a woman, can’t you? I don’t look like a tranny do I? I don’t think so.” I did my best to maintain a neutral expression as the woman began her tirade. I had clearly thrown gasoline onto this transphobic fire. “I was talking to my son about this too. He says he’s been going to all these bars where he’s been doing all this gay shit, dressing up like a woman.” She slammed her hand against the door frame to lean, perhaps to catch her breath. “He’s no woman, he’s a boy, a man, he has a penis, and that shit with this whole transgender thing, it’s a disgusting sexual deviant cabal. There’ll be hell if any of that fag shit comes into my door.”

I nodded, masking my disgust for this woman. I was there for business, and business only.

“Well ma’am I’ve marked down in the app that you are the female sex.”

“Good. Thank you.”

*You wouldn’t even know if I had marked you down as a man.*

The interview continued until we reached the point of her son (or perhaps daughter?) who had been staying with her on census day.

“He’s a man. No matter what he says. A twenty-five year old man. Despite how spends his faggot weekends doing those faggotty little things with his faggot little male friends like dressing up as woman. He is a man. Not a woman. I don’t get why I gotta even respect people like that, people who want to pretend to be someone they’re not. It’s just... ooh it’s not right. It’s wrong and disgusting.”

I scrolled down in the app, inputting the dead name of this woman’s child, marking the sex option as “male”. The app lacked an input for the gender identity of each resident, though I believe that it was likely for the best given the nuances of gender in 2020. While I could tell you the different between sex, the biological traits and genitalia that one is born with, and gender, the societal presentations and roles one prefers to present as, I doubt that the older and more conservative enumerators would have been able to navigate this question well. And I have to expect an extreme amount of friction would be generated from respondents like the lady I was engaging with at this point in time.

“Alright, thank you so much for your time ma’am.”

“Have a good day.” Her words were dry, the fluidity of her words had been entirely absorbed by her vitriol.

“You too, ma’am.” I didn’t finish my response before she closed the door. “Just kidding, I hope your day is shit.”

I wish there had been a place in the response to list “transphobe, do not reattempt with anyone who may visibly appear to fall under the LGBTQ+ umbrella”, but alas, there was no such box. I present outwardly as male, and identify as such. Between my white skin, 5’10”, sandy blonde hair, and male presentation, I efficiently fill the role of “average straight white man”. Once again, my inherent privilege was paying dividends for the census.

But what if it hadn’t been me knocking on that door that day? What if, instead, one of my transgender peers, or even non-binary peers had knocked on that door? Would they have been safe? Would they have gotten answers from that raggedy woman and her foul, slur-laced verbiage?, or would they have been chased away, threatened, or even attacked? I don’t recall seeing any people at the training who outwardly presented as non-binary or transgender, though really, how can you honestly tell? So many transgender people who have not acted to conform with their gender identities exist in the world, many living normal lives indistinguishable from their cisgender peers. It’s not like I would’ve been able to know just by looking at a person whether they were trans or not. In truth, no one can truly ever tell.

And what about that woman’s child? Were they alright? The woman seemed like a horrid mother who was so set in her own ways that she couldn’t accept her child’s world view. Maybe it was the way she had been raised, or maybe it was because this woman considered herself a failure by raising a child who didn’t identify with the gender they were as-

signed at birth. Or maybe the child was just really into drag shows and not actually transgender? This speculation seems unlikely given the woman's repeated use of the word "transgender" and not "drag queen", she very clearly knew the difference between the two but chosen hatred all the same. It was detestable, and I left that basement hallway for the next case, slowly and carefully, making sure that I was able to wash away the passionate disgust I had for this woman before the next set of knocks (and also to elongate my worked hours because anyone having to put up with that person deserves more money). I brought my index finger to my thumb and again began to scrape away at the flap of skin next to the fingernail, a fine distraction for the occasion.

The stench in that basement was unbearable.

## Chapter 19

# Hot

The summers in Minnesota got hot. They get hotter now that the climate's down the drain, but they also got hot in the summer of 2020. What I was told when I was young was that the the warm air from the Gulf of Mexico would come up the middle of America, North through Oklahoma, Missouri and Iowa before settling right over the Twin Cities. I don't know if this is exactly the case, but I can confirm that on most days I did the census in Minneapolis, the temperatures in the morning started at around 70 degrees Fahrenheit, and only got warmer from there. I would get into my car, and the styling cream I had put into my hair to give off the approachable, yet professional appearance would have already begun to drop, a couple strands of my bangs would fall over my forehead. The sweaty palm I used to push back the strands would only contribute to the droopiness of each little blade generating a negative feedback loop that would only get my

hands stickier and my hair messier. My focus on my hair was from the naive perception that it was specifically my front-facing appears that generated my true air of professionalism, and not the clothes I wore, the bag I carried, or the badge I presented. The heat in the summer, therefore, counteracted my perceived single presence. Some days during my lunch period of roughly a half hour, I would go home to fix my hair by adding more of the forming cream to the follicles. This would work from time to time, but also left me even greasier by the end of the day, prompting a long and drawn-out shower.

The warm days at the end of August were some of the hottest that I can remember experiencing, though I suppose that may be because I was much more of an “indoor kid” growing up. I lived in the suburbs, yes, but many of my friends from school lived all over the school district, an unfortunate result of attending the magnet Spanish Immersion elementary school rather than the local school, meaning that it wasn’t as convenient for a young child such as myself to go hang out with friends at the park, for example. I attended regular summer daycare at the School District’s program, “Adventure Club” which would have the afternoon recess period take place right during the golden hour, roasting the children of any remaining energy so that they would be tired enough to be manageable for when their parents came to pick them up. I had been accustomed to this kind of afternoon summer heat, though there was always some immediate relief resting just behind the doors of Neill Elementary school when the recess period ended.

It’s easy to say that the summer of 2020 was the hottest summer I ever experienced, therefore, simply because of my



low sample size of summer days spent entirely outdoors. I'm sure that if I had spent my summers detasseling corn much like how all my parents, aunts, uncles and cousins all had in one point in their lives, I might speak differently on the matter. But alas, I grew up in the suburbs of a major metropolitan area. I speak about this heat because there would be days while I was working the census where I would feel as though I were being roasted alive. I brought water with me to all of my assignments, which I kept in the car for convenience sake. This initially chilly water would be in a relatively insulated water bottle, but by the end of the day, the temperature of the water would be warm enough in which to comfortably bathe. I knew that warm water was technically better at quenching one's thirst, but it did little to alleviate the unfriendly heat that shone down upon me at 4:30 PM. Even as I made my way from a case to my car, I would lament the lack of convenient shade as I made my way along sidewalk, nearly crumple in the heat of my own car, careful not to touch the metal seatbelt lest I care to brand myself with a sign of safety.

There, of course, is a census case that stood out in my mind as the most unbearably hot attempt I ever had to conduct. I had been on a roll of cases earlier that day, having completed all but one last case from my entire list. I had managed to get through every single one, and I had the opportunity to clear my assignment list for the first time in the days that I had been employed with the operation. The house sat atop a hill, facing Westward, which allowed my presence to act as a convenient thermal absorber for the resident, should they choose to open the door that day at 4:40 PM. I could feel each individual photon hitting the back of my neck, and

being absorbed by the inconveniently black cotton polo I had incorrectly chosen to wear that day. With my back, already moist from the entire day's work, and four strands of bangs hanging over my forehead, I knocked at the wooden door. I then proceeded to wait, counting the seconds in my head as I always did. No response, but I could've sworn that I had heard the thump of feet marching to right behind the door. The door did have a peephole and I was no stranger to having spied on people knocking at my own door back in the day.

Looking around the stoop, I saw the a small, artistic thermometer. It was a semicircle with pictures of birds, and single lever arm showing the temperature: 105 degrees Fahrenheit. Those who exist in this kind of temperature may admonish my weakness in the face of summer heat, but this feeling had slowly ramped up over the course of the day, making my legs wobbly and crampy. I knocked again, the four raps weaker as I struggled to lift my arms. I then waited again. The scorching rays now beginning to solidly burn the backs of my ears and neck. I could feel the blisters forming around my collar, each one soft and squishy, full of a clear fluid that would make the evening's sleep uncomfortably moist.

The worst part about waiting for someone to answer the door, in any circumstance, is that my mind will often wander to before being abruptly pulled back into reality by a resident. I was often caught fumbling over nothing as I watched the door in front of me swing open as if I had watched the reverse of a door being slammed shut. I would quickly attempt to compose myself from the previous invasive thought I had had, wondering if I would've had better luck at drop-kicking the door open with a running start, for example. On this hot day,

however, all I could do was count, wishing for my opportunity to fumble, thinking only of finishing this case and then going home.

“one. . .”

“two. . .”

“three. . .”

“four. . .”

I pulled the back of my shirt from my lower back, entirely untucking it from my khaki shorts. I didn’t care anymore. I was going home after this. It was like being stuck in a broiler.

“five. . .”

*Oh shit am I saying these aloud?*

*six. . .*

\*There really aren’t any trees around here, huh? This sucks man this really sucks. I hate this so much, I’m not being paid enough for this and I’m so thirsty and man why the hell is no one answering the door, this is ridiculous. There’s probably someone behind the door watching me, isn’t there. . . shit.

*nine. . .*

*if there’s someone behind this door I’m gonna lose my mind. Stupid fucking house people not answering their doors. I don’t even care, I don’t even care, I don’t even care, if they don’t answer it would be better because then I won’t have to stand here longer! Why do I even want them to open the door? What am I even thinking? I swear to god this fucking heat. . .*

*eleven. . .*

*but I don’t want to stand here at all. . .*

I looked down at my phone. 4:47.

*fuck it*

I reached into my bag and began to write the NoV. I scribbled the numbers and letter, and began to walk away as I left the slip on their doorstep. About three houses away, I suddenly heard the turn of the knob at the door, and saw what looked to be a thirteen year old boy open the door. He looked down at the mat and then turned toward me, matching my gaze. I didn't turn around and try to interview him. I didn't even stop walking. I just waved with a grimace plastered on my face and made my way to my car. I was done for the day.

It's not that kid's fault that I was the way I was, but I still hated that kid all the same. His presence and opening of the door confirmed my suspicions. I hated the fact that I was, in fact, right. The heat multiplied my disdain for the innocent teenager and had I had the energy, I no doubt would've gone back to the doorstep and passive aggressively asked him if his parents were home, and that if they weren't that he should tell them to fill out the census online so that I would've have to come back here again and knock on the door and scare him half to death and have to be subjected to this tremendously uncomfortable heat. I wouldn't care that I'd prolong my trip home to the comfort of my basement lair, I had something negative that needed to be expunged from my being and that thirteen year old, or fourteen year old, who the fuck knows, was going to have a piece of my fucking mind.

But of course, I had no energy. None to spare. Just enough to get to my car, turn it on, and drive home. I did not hit my 100% completion, and I didn't care.

## Chapter 20

# Hero

I've always seen Madison as a pretty safe city. I lived in the part of city dominated by college students and as a result, I never really interacted with the part of the city that supposedly had "higher crime rates", as dictated by my old roommates. These roommates were the types of people who lived in the outermost suburb of a major city, but still claimed to be from said city despite also being incredibly scared to enter the main metropolitan area of the city because of the "crime problem". They would not do well conducting the census. They referenced places along South Park street and into the Bram's Addition neighborhoods, talking about how "there's always people stealing bikes and breaking into cars down over there." These roommates weren't entirely wrong, I had known Madison to be a city where poorly-locked bikes were often pried from bike racks, to be sold for various nefarious purposes. In my freshman year of college, one of the

guys on my floor , a product of a small rural town where people never locked their front doors or car doors, had his bike stolen because he hadn't bothered to lock it up properly. After this incident I made sure to double-lock my bike at all times when not using it, as all through college I used my bike on an extremely frequent basis.

I never had to attempt cases in those "crime infested" suburbs, rather, I was tasked with doing many different cases in Madison around the capitol square area on older rental properties and apartment complexes. Many of the apartments that were assigned to me were home to college students and young professionals who were never quite in the same space for long enough to get an accurate measure of who actually lived there. It amused me at how now, after graduating from undergrad, I was now attempting to get into apartments during the day for work, rather than at night for play. These rental properties were especially complicated for census takers as the people who were living there in 2020 were likely one to two generations of renters removed from the current residents in early July of 2021. Knocking on the doors of apartments and asking if a certain person lived there led to me asking the resident if they knew the people who lived there before them, which more often than not led to a confused, but apologetic "No, sorry, they moved out before I moved in", which of course meant that getting any kind of information on the residence was a wash.

The single time that one of the residents of one of these rental properties actually knew of the people who were there on census day happened at a house on Bassett Street. I had a thick packet of questions ready to attempt, complete with

failing staples, making for the attempt even more burdensome than usual. When I had first arrived at the house, a car had been pulling into the driveway, the driver likely a resident. I gave it a minute before actually knocking on the door to maximize the likelihood of the resident actually answering the door. She was a small, college-age woman, a year or two behind me in school. Her hair was short, covered by a backwards baseball cap, which accentuated her eyebrow and nose piercings.

“Thanks for answering these, I realize there’s a lot of these questions and you probably just got back from work.” I said as the staple gave way causing one of the five packets to fly all over the porch. “Ah crap, sorry one sec.”

“No dude, you’re good, you’re good.”

“Basically,” I said, picking at the paper on the wood, “I just gotta know first and foremost if you know who was living here in 2020. If you don’t that’s okay, I’ll just mark it that you don’t know.”

“Actually, I lived here so I should be able to answer them.”

That response caught me in two different emotions. On the one hand, it meant that I would actually have to go through all seven of these cumbersome sets of questions, asking the same questions over and over on the hot summer afternoon. But on the other hand, I wouldn’t have to lie about filling out the timesheets, and would be able to make a couple extra bucks from the extent of these questions. Returning these seven packets to Sherri would also get me a free hour of pay from Sherri as well, so really there would be extra money involved.

“But first,” the respondent continued, “can you give me a sec? I just gotta change out of my work clothes.”

“Yeah, sure, no problem”

She closed the door and I could hear the stairs creak from behind the door.

I once again let my mind wander as I wanted for the woman to return, staring off at a biker biking around the corner of the street a couple blocks away. There were plenty of bikers around Madison, so I thought nothing for the lanky, scraggly guy who was slowly approaching on the undersized bike. But then I saw two younger kids turn the same corner the biker had, raising a scene and shouting incoherently.

“Stop him! He took our bike!”

Had I heard that right? The biker continued down the side walk lumbering along on the bike now much more visibly too big for him. The guy was attempting to pedal as quickly as he could, but with the size of the chain being much smaller than the average bike, as the bike was most-likely made for children, the guy was going no faster than most people walking at a brisk pace.

I put my bag on the bench on the porch and stepped out in front of the guy as he approached, seeing now that he too was also not much older than I was. The distance provided this blonde fellow an extra couple of inches, the lankiness I perceived had come from an incorrect assumption of the size of the bike. In reality, the guy’s overall size was almost the same size as me, perhaps even smaller. He looked at me with a scowl, attempting to get around me. When he realized that circumventing me wasn’t possible without potentially being hit by a car, he got off the bike, his hands still on the handle



bars. As he hopped off, the kids continued to run in our general direction, continuing their shouting.

“He stole our bike!”

I looked at the guy, his face gaunt and unshaven.

“Did you take this bike from those kids?” My heart was racing, but my voice held firm.

His eyes squinted and brow furrowed. Without a word, he threw his hands off the handle bars forcing the bike into the concrete sidewalk and walked around me, attempting to body check me in the process. I did not get word of response. The kids caught up by the time the thief was at the corner of the road. But something in the man clicked and he turned around back towards the kids.

“You knows, you were asking for it leaving your bike on the ground like that!” His crooked index finger pointed at the two of them, as if it was his duty in life to teach these kids a lesson about how world was full of bad guys and it was his job to fill the requisite role of ‘bad guy’. “You really should’ve locked it up.”

“Buddy,” I said, standing in front of the bicycle, “just let it go.”

“You’re a bitch.” he spat back at me. He still refused to use the words “steal” as he continued to shout at the kids.

“Let it go.”

“Shut up, bitch.”

“Have a nice day!”

“Fuck you.”

Seeing that this battle was not one he would win, he turned around again and lit a cigarette. He rolled up his sleeves and huffed off in a puff of smoke. The kids, recouped

their bike and sped off just as quickly as they had appeared, not a word of thanks was shared. No one is ever truly owed a bout of thanks, but I think I rightfully deserved even a small nod. I hadn't stopped the thief because I expected any kid of reward from these kids, I stopped the guy because I had the intuition that it was the right and just thing to do. I had no idea of the circumstances of the theft; the kids could have been lying for all I knew. All I did was make quick inferences that happened to be right and all of these little moments culminated into essentially nothing.

I debated calling the police as I brought two fingers to my neck, curious of the impact the entire scene had had on me. There was a rush of energy that had quickly dissolved, yielding a sense of dizziness. I struggled to gather myself, wondering to myself, *did that really just happen?*

As I stepped back up the steps, the door to the house once again opened, the woman was now wearing a looser tank top and athletics shorts. She saw me sitting on the bench, sweatier than I had been five minutes prior.

"You good? Need some water?"

"I'm fine, just," I scratched in between my fingers, "like, did you hear any commotion just now?"

She furrowed her brow, "No, why did something happen?"

"Some guy just tried stealing these kids' bike, like right out there on the sidewalk just now." I motioned to where the events had taken place, a space that had kept no trace of my heroics.

"Oh huh, that's kinda crazy."

"I know right? Like, I guess I've just never seen it actually happen before."

“Yeah,” said the woman, her voice higher and uncertain, “me neither.” The last of her words were elongated with a tone that reminded me that she had better things to do with her time.

“Right, anyways, thanks for coming back, there’s a lot of things to get through but basically, I can go a little fast here to start. I’ll give you the names I’ve got and you just tell me if you don’t recognize any of them.”

I told Sherri about the incident over the phone later that afternoon. I could imagine the words she’d say (*Well aren’t you some kind of hero, stopping that thief!*) as I dialed her number to discuss whether or not this was something that was worth reporting to the police or other census people. The phone rang for a little while before Sherri picked up and I began to explain the situation. I told her about how I had finished the seven cases for her, and that in the process of doing so, I actually managed to stop a bike theft in progress. I heard her chuckle on the other end of the line.

“Well aren’t you just some kind of hero, stopping that thief!”

It was too easy.

## Chapter 21

# Moving

Moving. It's complicated. It's hard. It's tedious. It's impossible to do alone. And all of its difficulties are multiplied during a pandemic. I had signed a lease with my roommates on Orchard Street to wrap on August 14th, 2020, long before I knew that I'd be spending my final summer renting that house, but not living in it. As the month of July reared its head, I started making weekly trips back and forth between Minneapolis and Madison, slowly moving everything in that house that I owned into a single rented storage locker across town. Every week it was the same. Monday through Thursday I would be in the Twin Cities, and then I would leave for Madison first thing Friday morning. I'd arrive on Friday evening, sleep in my old room and eventually on the couch after moving my bed, and then spend my Saturday doing things around town before hitting the road Sunday around noon. This pilgrimage extended up through the first few

days of my census training and enumeration process. During these trips I was conscious of my absences and I made it very clear in the app, “I HAVE NO AVAILABILITY THIS WEEKEND, DO NOT SEND ME CASES.”

When it came to move myself into the new apartment the following few weeks, the NRFU operation was in full swing, meaning that now I was putting obscene miles on my vehicle to make sure I was moving in at a reasonable pace in advance of the fall semester, while still completing cases on a daily basis. To say that I was becoming burnt out on the long repeated drives was an understatement. I’d pass Eau Claire while listening to an album, having a flashback to the previous week where I had chosen to instead listen to a podcast. I’d reach Tomah and stop at the same gas station and same Culver’s and eat the same Team Scoopie Meal. I’d drive past the Dells and wonder what it might be like to conduct the census operation in that part of town. And then I’d eventually reach Madison, where I would proceed to sleep in my bare bones apartment, furniture barely unpacked let alone built.

“Have you thought about seeing if they’ll transfer you to Madison?” asked my brother on one of our moving drives. “To do cases there instead of back home?” The question itself had been preceded by an exasperated rant about how I was tired of this being my sixth drive to Madison in the span of seven weeks.

“I hadn’t thought of that, actually.”

“You hadn’t?”

“No, I guess not. I was too caught up in, like, moving?”

“Hmm.” He turned his head away from me to look out

the window.

I turned my head back towards the road, shifting lanes to pass one of the countless number of semis, picking at the dead skin on my thumb.

“Yeah, that sounds like a good idea. Thanks.”

“Mhmm.”

It was another boring car ride, after all. I stared ahead, watching the “I had a Heartbeat after 19 days!” billboard fly by, contemplating the question. He had a point, at least as far as I could tell. Surely it wouldn’t have been that hard to transfer a single employee from one working region to another.

I called my Minneapolis Supervisor that evening to explain the situation, but had to leave a voice mail.

“Hey, this is John Videogames, I’m one of your NRFU enumerators. I had a question about potentially transferring me to someone in Madison since I have to move back there for school. If you get this message, can you give me a call back? Thanks!”

A couple days later I got a phone call on my census telephone from a phone number I didn’t recognize, the area code implied a Duluth number. I answered it and was met by the voice of a grumpy old man.

“Hi, this is [name] with the census office, am I speaking with John?”

“This is him.”

“Hi John, we’ve noticed that you haven’t been submitting your availability or completing any cases, and we wanted to touch base with you about that to make sure everything was okay.”

“Sorry, I think you have a mistake? I’ve been posting in the app that I’m not available since I’ve been in the process of moving.”

“That’s strange,” he paused to cough, “well where are you moving to?”

“Madison, I had asked my supervisor to potentially transfer me here if possible.”

“Well,” he coughed again, “just keep putting in your availability if you’re able to, and let us know if and when you’re able to do cases again.”

“Sure thing. I’ll make sure to put in my availability right after this call.” And with that I hung up.

The next morning I woke up to a new voice mail on the census phone, again with a Duluth Area Code. I, still in Madison for the weekend, proceeded to listen to the voicemail while still in my half-made bed.

“Hi this is the Duluth Region Census office calling for John, we’re specifically concerned that you haven’t been putting in your availability. Please call us back as soon as you’re reasonably able to.”

Calling them back yielded a different scratchy male voice. I again explained the situation that I had received a call the day prior about this exact issue and that how I was moving to Madison and had asked to be transferred.

“And you’ve been putting in your availability?”

“Yes sir, I literally did it right after I got off the call with the other guy in your office.”

“Well, I’m sorry to say that it’s not showing up in our system, so we can’t assign you cases.”

“That’s fine, I’m not in Minneapolis anyway.”

“Minneapolis?”

“Yes, is there a problem with that?”

“Well I don’t really know why they’d have you working cases in Minneapolis.”

I scrunched my face in confusion, not that the other end of the call could tell.

“I live in Minneapolis? Or lived there I guess. Where does it say I’m supposed to be working cases?”

“It says here that you’re supposed to be working in the Greater Duluth Area”

I have been to Duluth all of two times in my entire life. The first trip was when I was four years old to stay with a family friend at their cabin on the North Shore. The second trip was when I was in High School Orchestra and we were visiting the University of Minnesota-Duluth for a shortcourse with the orchestra director.

“I’m sorry sir, but I haven’t ever lived in Duluth, nor am I living there now.”

“Well this region actually extends as far south as Northfield, so maybe you’re doing cases out there?”

“No, sorry, I’ve only been doing cases in Minneapolis up until last Thursday. I’m in Madison right now moving into my apartment for the fall semester.”

“Then why did they transfer you this region?”

*Dude you tell me*

“I- I don’t know why I was transferred to this region”

“Well, who’s your supervisor? Maybe they might know something about this.”

“I think his name was Chris.”

I could hear a few clicks on the opposite end of the line.



“That’s not what I’ve got here. It says you’re under this woman Elizabeth? Have you spoken with her?”

“I’ve never heard of this person before.”

The old man on the other end of the line set the phone down at that moment and left the line on dead air. The silence was so bizarre to me, that no one had any idea how or why I had been transferred from my hometown to a city that I had never even remotely lived in. How instead of being transferred to somewhere in Madison, I had somehow ended up in Duluth. And even with that, that my phone app no longer was giving me any kind of regular access to information beyond my voicemail, and it was no longer transmitting any information I was entering. Somehow in the span of forty-eight hours, everything had gone to complete shit.

“You still there John?”

“Yes sir, I’m still here.”

“Ok here’s what we’re gonna do. right now, all we can do is go on the word that you say you’ve been submitting your availability. You said you’re in Madison right now?”

“That’s right.”

“Ok, and are you planning on going back to Minneapolis?”

“The end of this weekend.”

“Ok, why don’t you try putting in your availability when you get back to Minneapolis and see if this problem fixes itself. It could just be that the phone senses that you’re too far away from your specific region and thinks you’re doing something bad or something like that.”

“I mean, sure, though I haven’t had any problems with it the previous times I’ve brought it here.”

“Well, I don’t know what else to tell you.”

“Sure thing sir, I’ll give it my availability tomorrow evening when I’m back in the Twin Cities and hopefully this will all be sorted out.”

The following Monday I received another call from a Duluth phone number. Upon answering I was met with a woman’s voice.

“Hi this is [name] with the United States Census, I’m calling for John Vid- Videogames?”

“This is him.”

“Hi John, I’m calling about an issue we’re having. It seems you’ve not been putting in your availability. We can’t give you cases if you’re not doing that so it’s important that you put in your hours you can work.”

I sighed.

“Hi, yes, I’m sorry that this issue is persisting. I have spoken with [name] and [name] about this issue since they called earlier this weekend.”

“They have?”

“Yes, and it’s a whole story,” which I then proceeded to recount in explicit detail about where my parents lived, the cases I had done, and how I had requested to be transferred and how I had been transferred somehow but it was to the wrong place and now the app wasn’t working and that this lady was the third person to call me about this.

“Huh. That’s definitely confusing. Neither of them are in today, but I’ll send them some emails and see if we can’t get this sorted out so that you can get to work again.”

“Thank you, I hope this issue gets solved soon too.”

I did not get to attempt another NRFU case after that day. This was the effective end of my NRFU operation.

## Chapter 22

# Deep Dive

The twenty-fourth decennial census took place during the early days of panic of the COVID-19 pandemic. These days were when people were much more afraid of the comparably low contagiousness of the first wave of COVID compared to the significantly more contagious delta and omicron variants. It was a period of fear and uncertainty, both for the general public and for myself, and I would have hoped for the United States Census Bureau as well. I went about my business with the understanding that the Census Bureau had my well-being, one of their many NRFU enumerators, at heart as they deployed me and my peers out into a world full of a contagious virus.

“All remaining ACOs (Area Census Offices) were scheduled to begin August 11, but will begin operations by August 9:”

Because of the COVID-19 Pandemic, the timing of the

census was compressed significantly. The first NRFU operations were initially planned for May 2020, but were obviously delayed to the end of the summer to allow for some kind of public health response. This enumeration thus began on August 11 and was designed to run for three months until October 31. Of course, because of the compressed schedule, the Census Bureau decided that the best course of strategy would be to begin operations earlier.

” - 53 ACOs - Will start August 3 - 7 - 109 ACOs (all remaining) - August 9 ”

They made this deployment, as I learned long after finishing my census duties, with the goal of getting the count, no matter what.

” - These ACOs will have to deploy staff regardless of the COVID-19 risk in those areas to open on these dates ”

These words sting me. They burn me. They are a slap in the face.

I think back to the apartment complex I entered that had coughs behind every locked door. I think about all the concerned families that refused to open their doors because of the risk of the virus. I think to the repeated tests I had to take to verify to myself that my runny nose was just seasonal allergies.

I think about how once I clearly conducted a case with a man who clearly had COVID. He was a Native American man who only cracked open the door enough to answer the specific questions I asked and nothing more. His eyes had deep dark bags, his brow covered in sweat, and his black hoodie sleeve covered in spittle. His answers were weak and wheezy.

“I’m Ojibwe, but my girlfriend,” he wheezed, “she’s Ho Chunk, not from here.”

“From around Madison?”

“Yea-ah.” he said, ending the last sentence with another dry cough. “Sorry.”

“It’s ok sir, please don’t forget, you don’t have to answer any questions if you’re not feeling well enough.”

“That... that might be for the best.”

He then proceeded to close the door without another word.

I think about that man a lot, especially when I think about the true conditions of the ins and out of a “traditional census day”. I think about this man especially when I learned that on September 8, 2020 the Principal Assistant Inspector General for Audit and Evaluation published an alert that stated that the number of COVID-19 related safety concerns presented by a national hotline through the Department of Commerce Office tripled between the start of July and August 21.

It is a miracle that I didn’t get COVID, especially when I think about how the entire United States Census Bureau knew about the risk that they put all of their enumerators at, myself included. It is infuriating that they knew and did nothing. The elderly enumerators present at the training in the Twin Cities were likely just as exposed as I was. They had the years of personal experience, but I had the immune system. I don’t know if any of my NRFU enumerator peers actually stayed healthy throughout the entire process. But the census knew the risk and they sent these people out anyway.

I was on a Wikipedia deep dive when I first saw this leaked internal document. It was my first year of graduate school in Ann Arbor, where the vaccine was mandated for all students. The world was in a similar yet significantly different state, we were back to a new normal. I was sharing my experiences with my lab mates on a lunch break, talking about the crazy time I was offered a joint while doing my cases. I was scrolling through the Wikipedia pages after the conversation and consulted the “COVID-19 pandemic emergency” section out of a morbid curiosity. Maybe I expected to see the statistics on the number of enumerators who walked off the case because of the pandemic, but instead I saw that telltale passage.

“These ACOs will have to deploy staff regardless of the COVID-19 risk in those areas to open on these dates.”

Confusion came first. They knew the whole time? That couldn’t be right. No, that couldn’t be right at all because, well, we had to wear masks. And they told us that we had to wear masks. But no, that wasn’t enough.

Then, a searing sensation flared into my ears. They knew the whole time? That couldn’t be right. They knew about the high-risk neighborhoods that we needed to visit and they sent us out anyways. They knew about the dangers of the virus, its hospitalization rate, and the lack of hospital space for new cases and they sent us anyways. They knew it all and sent us out anyways. My clammy palms covered in dead skin, felt my the heat emanating from my ears. They massaged the flaps of cartilage as I read the other aspects of the PowerPoint presentation that had been cited. And it was real too, it was hosted by the House Committee on Oversight and Reform.

*I can't be here right now.*

It was 1:30 PM, and I was throwing on my Winter jacket and rushing to my car to go home. “Yeah sure, whatever it’s a Friday”, was the later justification I told my peers. They would’ve understood, and yet, I couldn’t tell them about how hurt I felt. How manipulated I felt. How ultimately and unequivocally betrayed I felt. Even now, I struggle to put into words the true frustration I felt in that moment as I rushed back to my apartment. I needed a shower, I needed a shit, I needed to get so stoned to turn the rest of my brain off for the rest of the day.

I stripped down and turned on the shower, doing my best to take deep breaths, and focus on the moment now. I was OK, I had made it through both enumeration processes and I was OK. I had been threatened by things both visible and invisible and I turned out OK in the end. But there was so much all at once in that moment. The water wasn’t getting hot, so I couldn’t go into the basin and dissolve. So I sat on the carpet, cold and naked, truly vulnerable. I was stuck here in this frigid limbo, with nothing but my thoughts and the dead patches of dermis on my hands.

I grabbed my cuticle cutters and proceeded to clip at the skin around my fingers and toes. I dug at the toenails on my big toes, attempting to scrape away an imaginary ingrown toenail. Blood popped out from underneath the nail, greeting me and introducing its accompanying sharp pain. I wrapped a tissue around this toe and then focused my attention elsewhere. Anywhere else. The balls of my feet seemed like a reasonable alternative. I began peeling large slabs of dead skin from the callouses there. The strands were long and



thick, and smelled stale, and they left behind long patches of sensitive red skin. Each clip left a flap of skin which presented a new peeling opportunity, and after a couple attempts I was left with two sensitive, but bloodless, red pads.

The water was now only lukewarm, but by then I didn't care. I removed the makeshift bandage from my left toe and got in the shower. I didn't cry, I let the falling water make the tears for me. Rather, I just stared straight ahead at the white tiles, head empty.

Even now as I write about this whole experience, I struggle with the right words. I am not a wordsmith, I am an amateur writer who is only trying to be as true as I can be. I wish I had the vocabulary to paint the colorful picture of the swarming sense of dread that circled me as I sat in that shower. I even struggle with the retelling of the event and the day in which I learned that my employers were willing to subject me to the novel virus that had taken the lives of countless people, including old friends and their family members.

Fuck.

I had to call the Central Regional Census Bureau Headquarters to discuss matters related to my 2021 taxes (more on this later), and it was the last time I would be able to share my true feelings with the office. But of course, I was calling for business, not to complain so I remained cordial, until the end of the call.

"Well that should settle everything for the taxes" said the lady on the opposite end of the call, "I hope that this will be easier for you to sort out for the next decennial census!"

"All due respect ma'am, but I have no plans to work for the census ever again."

“Oh, well rats. We really do need people like you. I hope you reconsider for 2030.”

“Ma’am, all due respect, but after the way the census handled us in the pandemic, I have no intention of working for a service that doesn’t value me or my well-being.”

“Well, you have to understand that this was difficult for everyone since the pandemic was unexpected. We were just doing the best we can.”

“I’m sure you were and I was doing my best too, and I hope to have a job in eight years from now that will support me well enough so that I don’t have to return next time. Thank you for your assistance, have a nice day.”

“You too, sir.”

## Chapter 23

# Taxes

Filing taxes with on work I did with the census wasn't much harder or easier than any other job I've had. The NRFU operation mailed W-2s to my parent's address in a timely fashion and I was able to file the appropriate forms just as easily. I sat around my computer in that lonely apartment filling out the necessary details on TurboTax by myself, amused with how I had reached the point in my life where I was now fully capable of doing these duties on my own. I had to be careful of course as I had worked in both Minnesota and Wisconsin during the year 2020, and it was crucial that I made sure that these payments were taxed in the appropriate states.

Yes, I know, taxes. It's riveting content to write about when I talk about my time with the census, next I'm going to tell you about the time I got a rock in my shoe as I walked along the hot sidewalk and how I then considered how other people probably have gotten rocks in their shoes too. But I

need you to understand that the process of filing my taxes with the PES enumeration was one of the most ridiculous things I've had to work with in my life so far.

The first issue came from the fact that I moved from Madison to Ann Arbor in the time between the end of the PES operation and Tax Day 2022. I had sent the post office a "forward request" for all mail addressed to me. This was fine for general junk mail, but because of the six month time limit on this notice that I had filed in August, I had to hope and pray that the census send me my W2s by the end of February.

Because of this potential for error, I first tried calling Sherri to see if she could make sure that the Area Census Office had the proper address for later. Unfortunately, this call was met with about fifteen minutes of talking that amounted to "no, sorry, I can't make sure you contact the ACO yourself.". Calling the headquarters seemed easy enough, but as sure as I was that it would be simple, I was also convinced that there would be some ridiculous extra hoops I'd have to jump through. Near the end of January, I gave them a call.

"You did the PES operation in Madison?"

"That's right."

"But you moved to Ann Arbor?"

"Yes."

"Did you do any cases in Ann Arbor? Or was your move after the operation concluded?"

"I moved during the operation, during, uh," *no, damn it, keep it simple* "I moved at the start of August last year, so August 2021."

"Right, ok. So you moved in August to Ann Arbor?"

“That’s right.”

“So then the address we have on hand is not correct?” She repeated the address of that one bedroom apartment in Madison.

“Yes, I no longer live at that address.”

“Ok, let me juuuuuust... do one thing here...” A flurry of clicks could be heard on the other end of the call. “Alright Mr. Videogames, could you please send me your updated address?”

I told her the address in a methodical manner, pausing between the street, and the apartment number. She read it back to me with a similar precision, and I heaved a sigh of relief. I would not go to prison because someone misheard me over the phone.

About five weeks later, near the start of March, a thick envelope with the appropriate tax forms had arrived in my mailbox. It was time to do my taxes.

In 2021 I had worked a variety of jobs in at least two different states. I had worked freelance doing voice over work which made me enough money that required me to report it on my taxes, these I reported for in Wisconsin. I had also started my Ph.D. program in Michigan which provided me a monthly stipend that would need to be taxed under Michigan’s tax code. The census documents, I assumed, would also be taxed under the state of Wisconsin given the fact that during the PES process I lived in Wisconsin, worked solely in Wisconsin, and was paid the Wisconsin rate of pay.

I pulled the papers out of the envelope and glanced over them just to verify everything appeared correct. My name was spelled right, the place I had lived was spelled correctly,

but I noticed something peculiar. My parent's home address, the one where I had spent my days living in Minnesota had also been listed as "Primary Address". This was especially strange to me as I distinctly remember filling out the information during the PES training that I now lived in Madison, and that any and all information about my Minneapolis lodgings shouldn't have been relevant. But then I thought back to the call I had received in Denver.

"I'll mark you down as a yes with your current information on hand. I also marked that you moved to Madison, Wisconsin, and that you'd like to do cases in that area instead of in Minnesota."

Had that actually happened exactly the way that woman had described? Clearly I had been working cases in Wisconsin but had she updated my personal information in the right way? The discrepancy alarmed me since now it wasn't especially clear if I had to file these forms in Minnesota or Wisconsin. I wanted to verify whether or not this information was accurate to my profile on the census website, so I attempted to log onto the employee portal. The screen I was met with, however, was sparse with just the words "The 2020 Decennial Census operation has concluded. Thank you for your participation!". I would have to call instead. As an aside, the fact that the census operation closed the entire employee portal before tax day in 2022 is absolutely bonkers to me since it effectively locked me out of my own profile, preventing me from accessing my own data, and making sure that it was accurate. Would it have been too much trouble to leave it up for at least a couple more months to ensure that everyone doing the PES operation, which had clearly been

an afterthought for a majority of the census operations, had their information for at least one year post-process? There was no phone number listed either, so I had to resort to calling the Chicago Area Census Office, and pray that I could reach someone who could help me.

I started the call and waited on the welcome line as the automated voice proceeded to list a variety of irrelevant options. “If you’d like to apply to work for the 2030 Decennial Census, please consult our website.”

“Operator.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t catch that. Could you repeat your last message?”

“Operator.”

“It sounds like you would like to speak with an operator. Please listen to all the menu options and choose the most appropriate for your needs.”

“Operator.”

“It sounds like you would like to speak with an operator. Please listen to all the menu options and choose the most appropriate for your needs.”

*Are you kidding me?*

None of the options listed by the automated menu voice had any relevance to the task at hand, so I ended up selecting the option that provided me the best chance to actually speak with a human that could ideally transfer my call to someone useful.

“Hello, this is the Chicago Area Census Office, with whom am I speaking?”

“Hi, my name is John Videogames, I was an employee with the census for both the NRFU and PES process and

I'm trying to file my taxes."

"Ok sir, thank you for your call, though I cannot help you with that really. Have you been able to reach anyone in our finances department?"

"No, the menu only gave me a couple options and I wasn't able to reach a general operator."

"Not a problem, let me transfer your call to the Finances office so that you can get this all sorted out."

"Thank you."

Vivaldi's "Spring" played over the phone. The majesty of the piece's composition was lost through the crackled tone, its middle frequency tones being the only ones transmittable. This disappointing remix of the movement played for about five agonizing minutes before another person answered the line.

"Finances with the US Census, how can I help you?"

"Hi, my name is John Videogames, I was an employee with the census for both the NRFU and PES process and I'm trying to file my taxes. I was just transferred here because they thought that someone here might be able to help me with a question I had."

There was a small but very noticeable pause on the other line before the man spoke up. "Ok, can you give me a minute to find my supervisor? They might know more about this."

"Sure, I have time." I was a graduate student, I made my own hours. I had time to sit and wait for the proper person.

The line was silent; not even a clicking noise from the line could be heard. I sat there, minding my own business in my oversized hoodie and baggy pair of shorts that Friday morning.



And so I sat.  
And I waited.  
I waited for a voice,  
or a sound,  
that would imply that someone,  
anyone,  
would be on the other end of the call.

But no one answered the call. Minutes had passed with no response. I checked to make sure that the call was still operational. It was. The Finance department was just absent.

“Mr. Videogames?”

“Hi! Yes!”

“Thanks for your patience, I’m going to transfer you to my boss.”

“Oh.” I pinched the bridge of my nose, “Sure. Thank you.”

“Of course, I hope you can sort your problem out.” *Yeah, the problem you gave me.*

The line went back to the Spring movement of the Four Seasons, as I again waited. Thankfully, the movement barely made it to the second “verse” before a new voice spoke up.

“Hello, this is [name], am I speaking with Mr. John Videogames?”

“That’s me, yes.”

“Hi John, how can I be of assistance?”

“Well, I was an employee with the census for both the NRFU and PES process and I’m trying to file my taxes. I was just transferred here because they thought that someone here might be able to help me with a question I had, and then someone sent me to you.”

“Of course, of course. Can you give me your Employee ID?”

“DAEQ,” I started, repeating the numbers afterwards, as I hastily looked them up on an old paysheet.

“Thank you. Now what seems to be the problem?”

“Well,” I pulled the tax papers out in front of me, “So I worked in Wisconsin for the PES process, and I also lived in Wisconsin for the PES process, and I was paid the Wisconsin rate for my work, but my tax forms have my permanent address as the address I used in Minnesota during the NRFU process.”

“So you lived in Minnesota for the NRFU process and that was where you were initially hired?”

“That’s correct.”

“Ok, let’s see here.” I had to assume she also had my employment information in front of her in this moment. “So you don’t live at your Madison residence?”

“That’s right, I moved from there to Ann Arbor to start graduate school in August of 2021.”

“Ok. but they mailed your information there, right?”

“Yes, but I haven’t worked for the census in Michigan.”

“Ok, so you worked with the NRFU operation in Minnesota and the PES operation in Wisconsin.”

“Yes, that’s correct.”

“And on your tax forms in has in the primary address which address?”

“Um, the... Minnesota one.”

“Ok then, you should be filing these in Minnesota then.”

*What?*

“Excuse me?”

“You’ll file these as Minnesota earning.”

“I’ll file these for the state of Minnesota despite the fact that I lived only in Wisconsin, worked only in Wisconsin, and was paid the Wisconsin rate which was 10 dollars less per hour? Despite the fact that I haven’t lived at that address since 2020?”

“It’s likely that they just hastily copied and pasted the information you had from your time with the NRFU survey.”

I looked down at the floor eyes at an angle, much like Father made. “I see. I see.”

“Do you have any other questions?”

“No, I’ll have to file these in Minnesota I guess. Thank you for your help.”

“Well that should settle everything for the taxes” said the lady on the opposite end of the call, “I hope that this will be easier for you to sort out for the next decennial census!”

“All due respect ma’am, but I have no plans to work for the census ever again.”

“Oh, well rats. We really do need people like you. I hope you reconsider for 2030.”

“Ma’am, all due respect, but after the way the census handled us in the pandemic, I have no intention of working for a service that doesn’t value me or my well-being.”

“Well, you have to understand that this was difficult for everyone since the pandemic was unexpected. We were just doing the best we can.”

“I’m sure you were and I was doing my best too, and I hope to have a job in eight years from now that will support me well enough so that I don’t have to return next time. Thank you for your assistance, have a nice day.”

“You too, sir.”

And with that, I hung up.

In a way, this tri-state tax filing ended up being for the better since I ended up receiving a significant reimbursement from the state of Minnesota as a result, whereas with the state of Wisconsin, I actually still owed about \$37 in taxes. But all the same, this interaction was the final straw.

What had once started as an optimistic opportunity to earn some extra money in the pandemic had become one of the most frustrating and stress-inducing experiences in my life. The census had exhibited little-to-no care about their employees, focused more on results at the risk of the well-being of the people who obtained those results. I suppose it seems naive to be frustrated at this kind of practice which is far too common in many different workplaces, but as an early-20s person working through the pandemic, it forced me to acknowledge that, to the census, I was just another cog in the machine to make the process work. Sure, they wanted me back for the 2030 census, but to do what? Be another enumerator? Sure, the circumstances may be significantly different in 2030, but those were circumstances I was not going to consider. I would not subject myself to this kind of work at the age of 32. I will not subject myself to this kind of work at the age of 32, where I will ideally have a doctoral degree, a well-sustained job and a supportive family. That Friday in February confirmed that sentiment.

## Chapter 24

# What Did You Learn?

“What did you learn?”

The question has permeated through my life thanks to my father’s side of the family. When recounting a trip to the bar before my cousin’s wedding to talk about the family “events” that my cousins and I had learned in the previous year, my uncle asked us “So what did you learn?”. These were, of course, facts that I couldn’t share with him that I knew. These were things like how great grandpa was so mentally ill that he convinced himself that eating cow shit was the best thing for him, and then, despite protests from the rest of his family, he actually went and ate cow shit.

“Oh, nothing terribly worth repeating.”

“I bet.”

I think that sentiment is the best way to describe the way I feel about the census, with the power of hindsight. I’ve learned a lot of things that have since bothered me, amused

me, or have otherwise stuck with me in the two years that it has been since I first took the job. In many ways, my grappling with my work for the census aligns with my fears surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on my life. I cannot think about the day I drove out to Crystal to do a Spanish-only without also remembering how languid I felt each morning, waking up in the basement which had become my semi-permanent living space. I cannot sleep in the guest room anymore without the heavy feeling of numbness creeping across my limbs, fingers filled with both apathy and dread.

Spaces I once considered to be familiar no longer fill this niche. I cannot make the drive from I-94 to my parent's house without remembering the days of going to 6th street and conducting a case while having a woman clearly sick with the early stages of COVID tell me that "masks don't work". This was the drive we would take every single time we wanted to go to Grandma and Grandpa's house, and when we turned onto I-94 heading Southbound, we'd go over the "big hill", which would make my insides flutter. I now know who lives in that house just before we turn, and how disheveled their face looked at 12:30 PM on a Thursday. These once-recognizable spaces are now recontextualized in my brain with the unfortunate truths of the world. Spaces don't remember us, they'll change whether we want them to or not. I thought I knew the stretch of road between Lakeview Terrace and Downtown Robbinsdale when I was fifteen, but I know now that I was wrong. I still don't know that stretch of road, and likely never will.

I had one house that I had to knock on, maybe four doors

down from an old neighbor friend's house. Upon knocking on the door, I found myself face to face with a medium-sized man, with a thick black mustache.

"We've got no really permanent residents."

"I'm sorry?"

The man smiled and chewed on something small in his mouth

"This is a halfway house." The man phrased this sentence like he was Norm Macdonald doing the weekend update. Snappy, to the point, like he was in on a joke.

"Ah, I see." I looked a couple doors down to the other house, whose door I had knocked on hundreds of times before. Did they know about their rotating neighbors? They had to have known, right? "then I'll have to leave it at that. Census says we can't operate on halfway houses. Thanks for your time, sir."

Still chewing, the man nodded. "No problem."

He closed the door and I was left on the indoor patio space left to consider where I now was. I was still in Robbinsdale, but I was not in a place I recognized.

Two days later I had another case on a road just two and a half blocks from my parents place. The issue was simple, much like any other NRFU case was, the house was in a space of town I knew to be safe and well-maintained. As I walked up the driveway, I noticed some singing on the side of the house, but thought little of it. A knock at the door yielded no results and the doorbell didn't seem to work, so I decided to peer in through one of the visible windows near the walkway. The space inside was liminal at best, not empty, but not lived in. Pieces of furniture lay scattered about in a sepia-colored

space. A tattered rug lay on the floor, its sides frayed and also somewhat singed. The walls seemed a little darker with black marks lining furthest wall. No one lived here. The sign on the garage door confirmed this notion, “Do not enter” being the only words barring people’s entrance.

“No one’s been in that house since last year.” the neighbor informed me. “There was a fire, maybe you could tell.”

“That makes a lot of sense.”

“Yeah, we were all a little worried that it would hit other houses, but it was just a real shame what happened.”

“Do you know if anyone was in there on April 1?”

“No, the fire was about, uh, well it was last summer or fall or so actually, no one’s been in there for about ten months or so now.”

“That’s terrible. Was it a storm or something?”

“No, though there was that house that got struck by lightning a couple years ago too.”

“I remember that, I think I knew the family that lived there.”

“Yeah, terrible accident. This I think was just some kinda electrical accident.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah, though I don’t know too much more. Family there moved away, haven’t heard much from them since. I could tell you about them if you do still need that information.”

“No, I just need to know that the house was empty on census day. Can I get your name please just in case there’s any future follow up questions?”

“Yeah, sure.”



I had been on runs all around the neighborhood for my regular race training and had run past this house all through 2020, completely unaware of the vacancy. It was a small perception change, but one that surprised me far more than most houses I queried. A family had been displaced and this house had simply and slowly fallen into the early stages of disarray. No one was living there, and no one showed any indication of attempting to maintain the property. This house would be reclaimed by nature sooner than its owners, and I would've been none the wiser as I ran up that hill. Even like the time I learned of my classmates' old houses, the spaces I lived in around my neighborhood were consistently taking on a new meaning to me as I grew with age. The parkway was no longer a bright open space that spanned a huge distance, but rather was a two block wide pause in the consistent suburban housing developments in North Minneapolis.

But these new experiences have yielded one new learning experience I can share.

The most disorienting example of this flipped world view, yet the one I feel like I can share, came when I had a case at the house directly opposite my parents' on the parkway. I climbed the stoop, and completed the initial survey with the lady and her two dogs easily enough, but as I left, I took a moment to look across the way at my own front yard. Twenty-two years of my life had been spent looking directly over to this spot where I presently stood, and now, for the first time I was looking back. This lady had been at her front door watching the tiny figures running across the front yard, raking leaves, shoveling snow, setting up little yard sales. She had seen my entire life up to that point as a casual, inactive

observer, and now I saw that view as well. Of course, she could have moved into the home long after 1998, but even then, she was still the owner of a perspective so familiar, yet so new to me. I wonder what she thought when she saw the tree in my neighbor's front yard fall down after that tornado we had earlier in the summer. I wonder if she was annoyed or amused by Dad's vibrant display of Christmas lights each year. I wonder what she thought when she saw that a new car out in front of our house, or if she even noticed at all. Had my family been so present to her that we had become a blind spot in the way that her residence had become one in my own? It was like watching a video of myself, where I saw all my strange, manic arm movements I made as I spoke, and becoming self-conscious of every little thing that made me myself. I often spend so much time within myself that I am rarely afforded the opportunity to look at myself from another, outside, perspective. On that front stoop, lingering, I saw that shady front facade obscured by trees and saw myself.

When I am asked "what have you learned?" about my time with the census, I think about the bad times only because they seemed all-encompassing. People were hostile, I got lost, I felt unsafe, I was underpaid at times, and I was at a general risk for all things going wrong; no one wants to hear small anecdotes about those times when they ask about what working the census is like. Very few people involuntarily want to learn about the harder parts about doing the census. I will not run up to someone and say "I worked for the census during the pandemic and was nearly shot by a hostile resident."

However, I learned a few other things. Things I don't share as liberally or as laced with venom.

I learned about myself. I learned can only know my own life and my own experiences. I understand how cautious we all must be when we get unexpected inquisitors knock on our doors, begging to know every last personal detail. I learned what it means to be a stranger to someone. I learned what it means to be a threat to someone based on nothing more than my own presence. I learned what it meant to even have my kind of presence. I learned what it means to be a stand-in for an entire country, a blonde-haired, blue-eyed, barely-tanned twenty-two and then twenty-three year old, heterosexual cisgender man. They didn't know the things I knew about myself, and I didn't know anything about them. At least not until they gave it to me.

I learned what it means to occupy a space and appreciate what a space can mean to a person. A space may be commonplace to outside observers, but to a single occupant the space can have special meanings. A space can take on a whole new meaning with time and knowledge. My childhood home may have just been a fixture of the scenery to someone else, but I was able to experience that perspective and see what my life was as the role of a background character in another person's life. It reminds me that every single person has their own stories and struggles, their own worlds with tiny ensemble casts performing despite no one asking them to do so, or inquiring into what it is, exactly, they are doing. It's a humbling experience. I can call it a learned appreciation for the world around me, and the people that occupy it.

But that's all too sincere for my average conversation.

"What did you learn?"

"I learned what I probably looked like when I ran across the front lawn naked when I was a kid. That's probably the most interesting thing."

That usually gets the laughs.

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My time with the census has provided me with many new life experiences that I will hold both consciously and subconsciously until I inevitably succumb to the microplastics that permeate my blood-brain barrier. I have many more minor notes and anecdotes recorded in journals and twitch stream recordings that were not shared here as I felt that they were too minuscule to write anything meaningful. These included learning that they had installed roundabouts in only one distinct part of the suburb, a woman who repeated the phrase "too many questions" when asked about her two year old niece, and eventually closed the door in my face, and the time Sherri offered me heirloom tomatoes, among others. These stories are small and have little to no interesting bits to develop beyond just repeating the conversation, and the exact words are already lost in my brain. I've already made up enough details to fill in tiny little gaps here and there, and I'd rather not write autofiction pieces if I can help it. I want to tell the truth, mainly.

The 2030 census will come and go. I imagine that by then the need for enumerators will be necessary still, but on a much smaller scale than before. I don't expect there to be

talking robots or drones that knock on people's doors conducting the script that I read countless numbers of times, but that the process will no doubt be even more streamlined. I'll find out as a citizen, and not as an enumerator. I'll fill out the 2030 census with the honesty it deserves. They will not come knocking on my door. But for those fringe cases where a household doesn't complete the census, they'll still need someone to go door to door to get the information. They'll need someone more trustworthy than a robot, who needs money to support themselves in a turbulent part of their lives. They'll get their enumerators, I'm sure of it. But I will not be one of them.