

Andrew Kass

Short Story
Approximately 3500 words
First North American Rights

The Census Taker

by

Andrew Kass

April is all anticipation, isn't it? Blossoms, crocus, the teasing kick in the air. And tax time, of course. Wonderful time of year, the best to start a file.

The college students at the local Bureau office drive. They rush. It shows. Their data reek of caffeine, perspiration, ellipses. Census polling is not to be rushed.

Above all, be patient, be courteous, but be persistent...

And the pleasure of the walk from Route 9: There is a context for the subject, and though this should not inform the survey, it does, it does. For example, if a householder on this block of Longwood, in answer to the question *How much did you spend in the last year on household upkeep*, were to make a glib guess of "a couple hundred bucks," I would politely but firmly ask him or her to review receipts.

Copyright 2000, 2013 Andrew Kass

Without exactitude, the exercise is pointless.

If one wishes to emerge from the cycle of surveys with a profile, one must gather the small details, insignificant in themselves, which jell into measurable trends. To the discerning eye, yes, the discerning eye.

The file here is **KAYE**. Like the actor, *The Inspector General*. The house is a center hall colonial, half brick façade and white shingle.

Observe: Wide, treeless lawn bordered by scruffy hedges. A runner of dirt along the walk, dotted with lavender, white and yellow tulips in no apparent pattern. There is a recent-vintage Chevy Lumina in the driveway, pale blue. Round red pavers from the driveway meet the walk at a low apron before the front door. The storm door is pitted, bare aluminum, old, but the white door behind it is solid and clean. The doorbell, a simple button in the white doorframe, jangles within.

Anticipation.

“Who is it?”

A woman, clear, pleasing alto.

I smile. I proffer my identity card at the peephole.

“Good morning,” I say. “I am from the United States Census Bureau. I am here to do a survey.”

“The who?”

“Census Bureau. You have been selected for interview. I will need a small bit of your time.”

A colloquy within. Not uncommon. A man responds.

“Thanks. We don’t want any.” Baritone, jocular. Dismissive.

“Then I will come back at a more convenient time. Say Monday, after dinner?”

Buzz buzz. I know the next question before it’s asked.

“How ‘bout you just go next door?”

“You have been selected,” I reply. “If it is inconvenient for you to meet today, I will be happy to schedule another time that we can meet.”

Her buzz now. She opens the door. Mrs. Kaye is my height, close-cropped sorrel hair framing an oval face. Objectively handsome.

“Will this take long?” she asks.

“About forty-five minutes,” I inform her.

She looks behind the door. I infer the manly shrug. She slides the lock on the storm door and pushes it open.

“Okay,” she grins uncomfortably. “Come on in.”

The house still smells of pancakes and coffee. She leads me into what might once have been called a front parlor, now a living room. The furnishings are Italianate walnut, articulated rectangles and bevelled curves, with cream upholstery. I am shown to a chair at the short end of a fendered coffee table, at right angles to the couch.

“Your children are older, I take it?” as a bit of opening levity.

“Oh, they’d live at their friends’ houses if they could,” Mrs. Kaye replies. “May I get you something to drink? Coffee?”

“Water would be nice, thank you.” I lay the big survey ledger on the table. The Crew Leader stressed at this morning’s meeting that there is great interest in this Mid-Year Baseline Consumer Survey. The questions are quite detailed, the ranges close. A good working relationship will be extremely important.

I look up, meeting the gaze of Mr. Kaye in the foyer. He is not to be confused with Danny Kaye: thinning sandy hair brushed sideways, thickset in expensive sweats. He is fingering an identification bracelet which from across the room is clearly silver, not steel. I say hello.

“Do you need me for this?” he asks brusquely, more to Mrs. Kaye returning from the kitchen than to me.

Mrs. Kaye deflects the question to me with a look.

“Everyone’s input is valuable,” I say pleasantly, “and there may be some areas in which we will need to refer to your expertise. But you aren’t required to sit in, no.”

“Fine. I’ll be in the office.”

“Oh, that actually is one of the questions,” I note, paging through the ledger leaves, “home office acquisitions. May I call on you when we reach that section?”

He *Yeah, sures* down the center hall and is gone. Mrs. Kaye perches midway down the couch, slender hands clasped before her. Chapped, I notice. Dry skin. I might suggest a lotion later, to make closing conversation.

“Now, then,” I explain the survey, the questions, the timing. “Your responses will be kept in the strictest confidence. The Census is only interested in the data, not in your personal

information. The information you give me for this survey will not be shared with any other agency.”

She nods, shifting slightly toward me.

“Today’s session will take about forty-five minutes. I will make three follow-up visits at two-month intervals to complete this cycle.”

“Uh, can’t we do this all at once? I mean, *three* more visits?”

I smile.

“That is required for this survey. I will of course work with you to arrange for the least obtrusive possible time. Would that be Saturday morning, generally?”

She starts to speak, huffs softly through delicate nostrils, furrows her brow. Says, “Do we have to do this?”

I nod.

“You have been selected. I promise to make this as painless as possible.” The water is cool, thickly textured. I feel it throughout my body as I exchange the glass on a coaster for the survey ledger and sharp #2 pencil. “May we begin?”

That hesitation again.

“Okay.”

The first part of a survey is the establishment of baseline facts: resident individuals, ages, occupations, income, basic residence and ownership information. These run fairly quickly. We establish a rhythm, Mrs. Kaye and I, question and response. It is a quiet business, my murmur, hers, the whisper of my pencil. She uncoils a bit, leaning on the back of the couch

with her legs tucked up neatly to the points of delicate toes. I study her during answers, as her gaze swerves to neutral space. The material in her pale blue sweater is very good, a wool-silk blend that displays her to advantage. Her form-fitting jeans are also pale, stone-washed. We come to clothing.

She estimates annual expenditures at about a thousand dollars.

I peg her and her husband's Saturday morning wardrobe at about a fifth of that amount. To myself. To her, I ask if she would mind briefly reviewing her credit card statements.

"For the sake of accuracy," I add.

That small, compliant huff. She walks delicately, as on a balance beam.

Mr. Kaye wanders in later, just in time for the home office section. To my relief, his knowledge of expenses is exact. He is self-employed, an accountant. She is a homemaker, studying for a real estate license. Their daughters are ten and eight.

We reach the last question, the last response, and close the ledger. I gather my things as she sits in the curve of his arm. Forty-eight minutes from the first question. Then I am returned to April, promising my return in June. I do not mention the hand cream.

*

June should be the last breath of spring. It has instead been summer scalding to date, but upon my return to the Kayes all is grey and damp and chill. I have dressed properly, in layers and rubbers, but feel clammy as I turn up the Longwood walk. Stop. Breathe. Again. Better. I file the index card in my inside breast pocket, and ring the bell. A long beat, punctuated by rain. No car in the driveway. Ring again.

“Who *IS* it?” sung from inside and above. “Suse, please see who it is.”

“Oh, Maaaa--”

“Do it!”

Another long, wet moment. Finally, the white door opens. The girl, Susan Lynn, at ten years old is a slender miniature of her mother.

“Yeah?” she challenges.

“I am from the United States Census Bureau,” proffering identification, “here to continue the survey.” I pause, add, “Is your mother or father at home?”

The girl studies me in a sweep of her eyes, turns and hollers up the stairs.

“Ma! It’s for you!”

“One minute!” Mrs. Kaye, Debra V., descends the foyer stair, in a long robe and towel-turbaned hair. “Who is-- Oh!”

I smile and delicately avert my gaze from the robe clinging to the contours of her body.

“If today is not convenient....”

“I ... uh, oh, might as well. Susie, see the gentleman into the living room while I change.”

The parlor is less tidy than when last seen. Papers, bright cloth, buttons and trim. A note of white glue in the potpourri.

“Ronni’s play,” the elder sister explains. “Her bit part is taking over our lives.”

The anonymous confidante now, I ask, “Your father’s taken refuge, then?”

A queer look.

“He’s working.”

“On Saturday?” I settle at the same seat, arranging my things.

She shrugs.

“What he does on the boat,” she says. “Clients.”

She drifts out to some distant summons from a television. I lay out the survey ledger and pencil, wishing she had offered to bring water. A busy rustling draws my attention to the draperies, where a chubby blonde girl swathed in baubles, tiara and colorful fabric emerges behind a foil wand.

“Are you a good witch or a bad witch?” she affects to ask.

“Oh, I’m not a witch at all,” I reply. “I’m Dorothy Gale, from Kansas.”

“That is very mysterious. The Munchkins told me ... -- Oh, crap! I almost had it.”

I smile.

“I don’t think that was in the movie.”

Debra, Mrs. Kaye, patters downstairs.

“Don’t annoy the man, Ronni,” she chides. To me, “Are you thirsty?”

“Water would be nice.”

“Ronni, could you please bring the man some ice water? Thanks, honey.”

The child retreats, grumbling.

Mrs. Kaye takes her place on the couch.

I inform her that the questions in this set are of a slightly more personal nature -- exercise, recreational and luxury items. She does aerobics twice a week. It shows, but I withhold

comment. The older girl is involved in gymnastics and soccer, the younger in theatre and tee-ball. The entire family bowls.

“And your husband?”

She tucks tighter.

“Bowls.”

We get to the capital cost of recreation. Mrs. Kaye enumerates a new Nordic Trak, a foosball table. I study the choices in the question, one in particular.

“And your husband’s boat?”

She blinks, suddenly shuttered. She begins to say “H--”, stops, huffs.

“That’s his business,” she murmurs.

“Excuse me?”

She fixes me with a glare that sharpens the steadiness of her voice.

“That was purchased through his business. For entertaining clients.”

I want to pursue the last item, but there are no questions about business, and the next set deals with computers and appliances. I check *Motor or sail boat* as the Good Witch of the North brings water.

*

August is my ambulatory perdition. No matter the heat, how my footsteps sink into fresh tarmac, I dress neatly. I was raised to present myself for business in jacket and tie. The years have not diminished this commandment. It is about authority, and respect. Balanced.

I notice a different car in the Kayes’ driveway, a small grey Toyota of undistinguished

vintage. I ring, three times. I feel eyes at the windows, but see only curtains rippling. There is no indication of a move afoot, or of a family vacation.

The door opens as I reach for the final ring. Debra looks disheveled in grey t-shirt and sweatpants.

“Oh,” she says. “Oh. Look, this is really a bad time.”

I ask if Monday would be better. She laughs, but her eyes remain shadowed.

“Better? Any day that doesn’t end with a ‘Y’.”

Be polite, but be persistent.

“I can appreciate that there are important personal matters you have to deal with, but I am required by Federal law to complete this survey. If not today, I will have to insist on another date within the next week.”

I actually have more latitude than that, but it would clearly make no difference.

There. The short hug, shrug, sigh.

“Sure. Why not? Come on in.”

The house is slightly more tatty inside in a barely definable way. Smell. Even with the air conditioning, dust and Chinese take-out. The girls run out of the parlor as we enter, so I cannot ask Ronni about her play. Debra sprawls on the couch. I am not offered water. Even swallowing is difficult. I ask.

“Oh, pardon, where are my manners?” she says, jumping up.

The ledger is open when she returns. As she sets the glass on a coaster, I look up, and see the flesh beneath her t-shirt. She meets my gaze, startled. I feel I must be glowing with

heat.

“Thank you,” I manage to say, concentrating on the water. When I surface, she is at the other end of the couch with an odd expression. I clear my throat. “We’ll start with clothing.”

School clothing is close, but the rest of the numbers are way down from the expected median. Close to zero. I ask for receipts. There’s a smile. She goes across the foyer to the dining room and returns with three crumpled receipts, which she drops fluttering to the ledger. Discount shops. Necessities.

She has thrown herself back on the couch.

“Uhm, how about business attire? In the past two months, did you spend less th--”

“Nothing.”

“Hm?”

Her eyes are burning, melting out tears as she splays unmoving in the far corner of the couch.

“Nothing.”

The words on the page won’t stay still. The profile is changing.

“And ... your husband? ...”

I peek. Debra’s face is a mask, her voice low and strange.

“You’ll have to go ask him now, won’t you?”

“And, where ... would he be?”

She carelessly wipes a dry, reddened hand across her face.

“Go find him,” she says. “Do us all a favor.”

I get us through the rest of the questions. Debra composes herself along the way, and by the end I have control and the proper rhythm. As I close the ledger, I see her eyes close. I make bold.

“There is one more visit,” I say. “In October. I ... will bring some aloe vera lotion. For your hands.”

A new look, soft, open. I like it.

“Thank you,” she says. “That’s something to look forward to.”

*

October is relief. Everything subsides, cools, turns inward. The survey is over.

I leave the Kaye household for last. I wait for a brilliant Saturday morning, halfway through the month. I have my Federal blue jacket cleaned.

The blue Lumina is back in the driveway, next to a scarecrow and a jack o’lantern.

Mr. Kaye opens the door.

“Yeah?” he asks.

I am for a moment unable to speak. I show my card.

“Census,” I say at last.

He cocks an eyebrow, and turns to the stair. His sweatsuit hangs like loose skin, not as full as in April’s visit. He calls upstairs.

“Deb? Census guy?”

“Oh!” Her eager cry from upstairs. My heart lifts as she descends. Soft roll-neck sweater, a beaded choker, peasant skirt in autumnal orange. Her hair is trim, her face composed.

She smiles and comes right past her husband to the door. “Come in!” she welcomes me, “Come in.”

Her grip, surprisingly strong, steers me into the parlor, to my seat. Mr. Kaye stands in the foyer.

“You need me here?” he asks.

“Join us, Harry,” Debra says, something hard and compelling in her voice. “But, be a dear and get the gentleman a glass of water first.”

“Thank you,” I say. The aloe vera hand cream tube lies at the bottom of my portfolio. “I am ... glad this is a more propitious time.”

“It is,” she says, settling back in her mid-couch perch. “Thank you. I just got my real estate license this week. I am assisting at an open house later.”

“Here you go.” Mr. Kaye puts the glass down on the table. A coaster spins to a stop next to it. I sip from the glass, set it down on the coaster. Mr. Kaye wipes the beaded circle with his sleeve.

“Come,” says his wife, patting the couch behind her, “sit. Let’s finish this together.”

He says nothing, moving to her as though on a string. He sits next to her, his near arm across the back of the couch. They do not touch.

“The main emphasis of this last phase of the survey is gift giving. This includes traditional holiday shopping, and special events such as birthdays, weddings and anniversaries.

“The first question is, *Please estimate how much you spent on holiday gifts over the past year?*”

I give the ranges. Harry selects (c), \$2,500 to \$4,999.

“Does that includes your ‘business gifts’?” Debra says over her shoulder.

“That’s different,” he grumbles.

“How much different?”

He changes his answer to (d), \$5,000 to \$7,499.

We move on to a breakout of gift categories and amounts. We establish a flow.

Agreement on toys, clothing, appliances, books and recordings. I want to skip *Jewelry*. I cannot.

“Mm, how about jewelry, Harry? That receipt from Janoff’s a mistake? I never got a platinum and ruby tennis bracelet.”

“Will you let it go? I blew it, I messed up, I’m trying to make it up, but I can’t do this if you keep--”

“Reminding you what you did? What you took away from this family? Oh, I’m *so sorry* I’m hurting your feelings, Harry, I don’t know what’s come over me.”

I drink to the bottom of the glass. I am an enumerator, not a referee. And yet, I wonder, am I changing what I observe in the mere act of witness? I feel the stiffness of an index card in my pocket. I have an idea.

“Excuse me?” I say. He is standing, glowering, leaning toward exit. “I must remind you that I am a federal agent, and may compel answers to my questions at the local Census Office. Please.”

He sits, further down the couch, but the same couch. I check an appropriate range for

the tennis bracelet. The *Gifts Received* section goes better. After going through the categories, I ask, “Anything else?” instead of “Jewelry?” Nothing further is volunteered.

“Last item,” I tell them. “*Sales of Capital Goods.*”

Before I can enumerate categories, she offers, “Nordic Track, three hundred dollars.”

As I write, he coughs.

“A Bayliner,” he croaks. “Thirty-four five.”

I get a distinct warning sense about asking if this were not previously a business item. I record it anyway. It restores consonance to the profile somehow. I close the ledger.

“Thank you,” I tell them. “This concludes the Mid-Year Baseline Consumer Survey. I hope that I have not too greatly inconvenienced you. The data, I assure you, is both strictly confidential and very important to how our government works. I ... hope that you have learned something from it as well.”

An unfortunate but necessary part of the closing formula. I rush into noting the possibility of a post-holiday or anniversary follow-up, but the tension on the couch is palpable from where I sit. Mr. Kaye fixes me with a look of dull rage.

“Are we done?”

I nod. He rises and leaves without another word.

A huff, a sigh. Debra claps her hands on her knees.

“So! That’s it then.” She stands, briskly smoothing her skirt. “I’m glad you were able to finish your survey.”

“I could not have done it without your help.”

I slide the ledger into my portfolio, where the hand cream still waits.

Huff, sigh.

“No offense, but I’m glad it’s over.”

She extends a hand. I take it delicately, receive a firm shake. As she turns to see me out, I reach into my case and set the aloe vera tube on the table next to my glass.

The goodbye is brief. The door closes. Leaves swirl and caper on October’s warning winds. Soon the holiday survey starts. But for now, the file closed, I take the index card labelled KAYE and draw a little star next to Debra’s name.

* * *