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TAKING THE CENSUS IN RURAL ARIZONA

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On one of my most trying days as a census worker, I'm forty miles from home, assigned to work in a summer resort area of northern Arizona. This is a rush job. It needs to be done over the Fourth of July holiday when there's a possibility we can contact residents who might be spending time at their summer homes.

The urgency is due to bureaucratic red tape: the US Postal Service had refused the official federal government 2010 census forms sent to the post office in Munds Park, Arizona. This is because the US Census Bureau had placed physical addresses on their forms. Since there is no home delivery in Munds Park—only delivery to post-office boxes—the US Census Bureau literally has had no response from the entire district.

For me, the hour drive from my home is exhilarating—the scenery changes from mesquites and cactus to lush meadows and pines. Although I have been retired for several years, I don't often visit this lush high country. My hope in this new clime is that there will be people who understand the importance of the census. Since mid-April, I've been working as a census enumerator in a rural area about twenty miles southwest of the tourist community of Sedona, and it's a hotbed of antagonism toward me and the government.

When I was in grade school many years ago, I vividly remember a teacher showing the census form in class, emphasizing its relevance: the federal government must know the population of its people in order to develop public policy to plan and run social services. However, my long-held, naïve assumption about the importance of the census in the eyes of the public has turned into an abysmal uncertainty today. I have sadly discerned that most people don't care or even understand that the constitutionally mandated decennial census determines, among other things, how the seats in the House of Representatives are redistributed among the fifty states.

On the surface, there appear to be plenty of people in Munds Park enjoying the holiday, riding their ATVs and having breakfast at the local restaurant; still, despite the holiday crowd, I find many homes unoccupied. When I do find residents, they're either bored or angry that I've tracked them down.

After a long day—it's now 3 p.m.—I still have eight houses left, all on the same cul-de-sac. I'm hopeful. There's the possibility that most people who had been out for the day might have returned home for an evening barbeque. I park at the end of the street and begin working each house, knocking on doors and leaving notices of my visit. No one answers and all of them look unoccupied.

One address is left. It's a mobile home at the center of the cul-de-sac. There's a truck parked under a detached aluminum carport with a sign on it. Carved into the sign is a difficult Russian name. I barely glance at it, but I have a feeling someone might be around. A Welcome sign sits in the front yard with an arrow pointing toward the back of the mobile home. I follow the path and just as I'm about to enter the backyard, I'm startled by an old lady who charges out of the side gate carrying a large piece of flagstone.

"Get out of my way!" she bellows.

I step back as quickly as I can, but that doesn't stop her from cursing me. "What the hell are you doing here?" Then without stopping, she yells, "If you want to talk to me then you're going to have to follow me. I can't stop what I'm doing! I have to get this done!"

"I . . . I'm with the census and I . . ." I stammer.

"I already talked to the census lady. At my new place. What do you want?"

"I need to know if you lived at this address on April 1st," I say. "If so, then this is where you need to be counted for the 2010 census."

"I can't hear you," she screeches. "What are you saying to me? I'm busy. Can't you see I'm busy? I'm moving tomorrow!"

I take a deep breath. *God, how am I going to get through this?* "Yes, I can see you're busy, but I really need to get this information from you," I yell back. "It will only take about ten minutes."

She glowers at me, placing the flagstone in a pile and brushing past me to return to where she can get another piece. She's file-thin, wears old, baggy sweatpants and a dirty sweatshirt, and her gray hair hangs in stringy wisps about her face. I stare at her.

"I don't have ten minutes. Are you deaf?" she continues to holler. "I told you—I'm busy."

I assume this odious chore is her last-minute cleanup before moving. "Please," I say. "I really need to get this information from you."

"Oh, all right! But I can't stop, so you'll have to follow me!"

I stumble behind her as she moves into the backyard and picks up another flagstone. I have never met anyone so disagreeable. I can't imagine how this woman—she appears to be in her eighties—can even lift the heavy rock. But I doggedly persist because if she is moving the next day, I will never get the information I need. I ask her to confirm the address. She does, roaring at the top of her voice as if I am deaf. I ask her name. She shouts it to me and I can't decipher it. Then she cackles, "I'm not spelling it for you—figure it out!"

Remembering the Russian name on the sign, I figure it's hers, so I leave that question and forge ahead. How many people live in the mobile home, I ask.

"Me! Me! Me! Are you stupid?" she barks. "I have lived alone here for more than twenty years."

Finally, after following her back and forth and listening to her tell me how stupid I am, I get her phone number and ask her about her neighbors.

"No one was here on April 1st. No one! I was here all alone."

I breathe a sigh of relief. She knows about the other seven houses and I can use her as a proxy! I ask if she will consent. She shrugs. "I don't give a damn what you do, just keep out of my way. I need to get this done."

And so, I'm able to get information on the seven other residences. Still, I'm a bit concerned about using her as a proxy for that many houses, so I phone her the following morning to reconfirm what she told me.

"It's you!" she yells, even on the phone. "Yes, I said that. I told you, no one else was here. Are you stupid?"

Yes, probably, for doing this degrading job. Still, I'm not as stupid as she thinks—I got the correct spelling of her Russian name from the carved board above her dilapidated truck.

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Getting a job in 2010 was dicey. While searching fruitlessly through local newspapers, I saw a small advertisement from the US Census Bureau about scheduled exams for potential census workers. Exasperated at my inability to find any kind of meaningful

employment, I called the number in the ad and was assigned a date to take the exam at a place not far from home. The pay was twelve dollars an hour plus mileage if I passed the exam and a background check.

When I mentioned about applying for a census-taker position to friends or family, I usually caught a shocked glance.

One of my dearest friends sat silent for a moment too long when I told her the news. A worried frown rippled her smooth forehead. All she said was, "Are you sure you want to do that?"

I shrugged. Of course, I assured her. Why not? She replied that she just couldn't envision me schlepping from house to house to get information from complete strangers. I smiled, saying I wasn't afraid to meet new and different people. She glanced down, not replying.

My ninety-year-old mother gave me a narrow look, and then she wanted to know why I wanted to do it, implying, of course, that I was unhappy with retired life—or worse yet, living beyond my means.

My husband was equally incredulous. He viewed my looking for a job as some psychological measuring stick regarding his performance as a provider. Even worse, he looked at my prospective job in another light—there were safety issues.

As I progressed through application, testing, and hiring, I wondered why he would be worried. I could understand his concern if I were gathering census information in Los Angeles or Chicago where there is high crime or racial tension. But a census taker works fairly close to home, and the area I would cover was relatively free of crime, a rural area inhabited by people I saw every day in Walmart, Safeway, or the gas station. My mistaken belief was that I would be talking to people who understood the importance of the census as the bedrock of our American republic.

As I moved through the vetting process, I became enamored of the thought of doing what I felt to be an important job. Taking the census meant more to me than a paycheck. It made me hearken back to being fourteen years old, standing alone in a courtroom before a scary judge, saying my Pledge of Allegiance as I became a citizen of the United States. This naturalization ceremony was an exciting and profound moment for me, even though to others, it could have been seen simply as a correction of an earlier oversight on the part of my parents. When I was born in Panama City, Panama, my American parents had failed to register my birth with the US Consulate, believing their citizenship was automatically passed on to me. When

we moved back to the states, the US Immigration and Naturalization Service said otherwise. This rite of passage instilled in me a consciousness of my good fortune to be a citizen, and thus I *wanted* to do my civic duty for my adopted country.

Working the census seemed easy enough after four days of tedious training. However, the mountain of paperwork required by the US Census Bureau wasn't as difficult as actually finding residences. In my rural area, I soon realized my GPS was a godsend as I traveled down dusty, rutted dirt roads just a few miles from my home: hard-to-find roads I never knew existed.

The area first assigned to me was in a valley carved out by Oak Creek, the river that courses from the top of Oak Creek Canyon, where the rise of the Mogollon Rim begins, and meanders through the northern Arizona communities of Sedona, Page Springs, and Cornville, finally hooking up with the Verde River, a major Arizona waterway. Grape vineyards and small wineries dot this valley scene, and many large estates sit amid beautiful pastures. In fact, this is where the late Senator John McCain wooed Sarah Palin to be his vice-presidential running mate in 2008.

There are also places in this glorious setting that could rightfully be called hovels—worn mobile homes surrounded by piles of junk and vicious, bone-thin dogs attacking at fence lines.

On this particular day, I drove to an expensive-looking ranch house on a private road that abutted Oak Creek. The house sat adjacent to a large corral where several men rode horses, working their lassoes on a skittery calf. Hoping I might get information from them, I parked next to the corral. Once inside the property, I found an older man sitting under a shade tree. He grudgingly acknowledged he was the owner, all the while keeping an eye on the men practicing their roping skills.

I couldn't really discern the man's face, for he kept his cowboy hat pulled low on his forehead. When I introduced myself and showed my census identification, he scowled. "Why do you want to know if I lived in my house on April 1st?"

"That's the date of the census count," I said. "On that particular date, we need to know if the house was occupied."

"It's none of the government's goddamned business where I was," he countered, his small eyes bearing down on me. "Maybe I was here and maybe I wasn't." He emphasized the point by spitting his chewing tobacco out in the dirt.

The man's son was nearby, twirling his rope. "Dad," he said, "what's the big deal? Just tell her the information she needs and let's get on with the roping!"

Next was another residence farther down the private road. It was a lavish Tuscan-style home with beautiful landscaping and a large fountain in a front courtyard. As I approached the gate to the courtyard, a man came from around the back of the house.

I introduced myself and went through my routine explanation. He smiled and said, "I know you from somewhere."

Previously I had worked for a large nonprofit in Sedona and replied that perhaps I had met him through that organization.

"Oh, yeah," he said. "My wife and I always attended its fundraisers."

I pulled out the census form and began asking him questions, when his wife drove down the road and parked her Cadillac SUV in the driveway. I recognized her as she got out and came over to where we were standing.

"What are you doing?" she asked her husband in an angry voice.

He ignored her question and introduced us. "You remember Gerry from the fundraisers we attended at Enchantment Resort. We didn't send in our census—I don't know why—so she's here to get the information."

She glared at me, deliberately avoiding our acquaintance. "I threw it away," she said, her voice angrier.

A scrunched look came over her husband's face. "Why would you do that?"

"The government wants information that's none of its business!"

He shook his head as if to ward off her peculiar statement and continued telling me four people lived in the home and yes, they were there on April 1st. She stood tapping her foot, and then when I said I needed the name of each person, the relationship of one to another, date of birth, and race, to my surprise, she viciously yanked the census form out of my hand and began shrieking at her husband, waving it in the air. Thoroughly shocked by her action, I stood completely still while she yelled, "I don't want you to tell them my son's name. It's none of their business that he lives here!"

"Calm down," he said, taking the form from her. His voice had a junkyard-dog growl to it. "You need to back off. I'm handling this."

I tried to shrink into invisibility, but she gave me a murderous look. At her husband's warning, she turned with an arrogant flounce and went back to her car, got in, jammed the gas pedal to the floor while she backed out of the driveway, leaving a trail of dust behind her.

After I got the census information needed, I returned to my car and drove the long private road to the main highway, wondering about the reaction I had seen

from a woman I knew, if only casually. Had her day started badly; was her anger at my presence simply the side effect of that? Or, worse yet, was she really that upset about the census?

The first round of census work took me 32 days and 982 miles, ending on June 3rd. One month later, I was on the job again. Aside from the Fourth of July weekend work in Munds Park, this assignment involved verifying the results of an earlier round of census takers.

This second round took place in the shimmering heat of summer as I searched out people closer to my home base who were definitely unhappy to see another census worker. I could understand their point of view—they had given the information needed, so what did the government want now? In actuality, we were checking on the first census takers, making sure what they had marked as “vacant” housing units were really empty on April 1, 2010. Had those census takers done their job correctly by checking every source possible to determine if a house was really vacant, or had they taken the easy way out and simply marked the housing unit unoccupied in order to finish the job quickly? This second go-around was also to check on residents who refused to answer the census questions during the first attempt.

In one area, the Village of Oak Creek, considered a part of Sedona but not within its city limits, I encountered an angry man who lived in an area of spare-looking condominiums built close together and rather unkempt. This was my fifth visit to this address, having previously left notices on the door, but when I finally caught him at home, he refused to answer any questions. Instead he ranted about illegal immigrants and why the government was providing services to those who paid no taxes. It was one of those instances where I could have marked his property vacant and been done with it—improperly—but I handed the paperwork back to my supervisor who, in turn, passed it back to the local census office in Flagstaff. There, someone higher up the pay scale would be given the task of dealing with his cranky disposition.

My last round with the census lasted twelve days, from July 2nd to July 14th, and I put another 282 miles on my car. Information was harder to get, with fewer people

opening their doors and more of them showing their disregard for the federal government.

On the twelfth day, I still had thirty vacant properties to locate before my job as an enumerator ended. I was about to leave the morning census meeting when I turned on my cell phone. A beep told me I had a message. It was from a man whose mobile home I had visited the day before. I had left a notice of my visit on his door while two vicious dogs jumped at the window that separated us. The man sounded livid, his voice a low snarl.

"I already spoke to one of the census guys doing my area. I've already filled out all my census information. I work for the federal government, I'm only here temporarily . . . this house is listed as vacant, I believe. That's my personal information and I'm getting annoyed with this stuff. Bottom line, the illegal immigrants in this country are getting money that should not be provided. Please do not come again . . . Bye!"

The day only got worse. At an old mobile home sitting amid a pile of junk, my frustration was on overflow. The home owner explained he wouldn't give me census information because it was "spiritually wrong"—whatever the hell that meant, I wasn't sure, but I left shaking my head. When I tried to back out of his rock-strewn driveway, I ran over a small boulder and damaged my car's fender.

At the next stop, I found a decent mobile home surrounded by vacant RVs rusting amid tumbleweeds nearly waist-high. I knocked on the door, but no one answered. Because there were several cars sitting on the property, I felt sure someone was there, so I called out my hellos, positioning my census bag in front of my body to show who I was.

A door opened in one of the ratty RVs. I walked up and an older man in ragged clothes stood resolute in the doorway, a shotgun leaning on the doorjamb. He looked at me and said, "Get the hell off my property!"

I did.

It would be wrong to say everyone acted appallingly when I worked the 2010 census. Many people were cooperative. Many, but not most. I even had one woman who begged me to count her family at their summer home in Munds Park because she wanted that area to receive federal monies based on population count. It was a great disappointment to her that I couldn't do that.

At the other end of the spectrum, a young mother blocked her doorway like a linebacker while her two school-age sons watched her accuse me of lying about the census. According to her, information on the internet confirmed the government was asking more personal information than previously; in fact, a full two pages more. I replied that the decennial census historically consisted of two forms—a long form sent to a small percentage of households and a short form, but the current census was only a short form of ten questions, consisting of six pages. Her response was to slam the door in my face. (The 1990 census short form had fifteen pages; the 2000 short form had six pages.)

And finally, there was the woman who pointedly asked why we used pencils to fill in census paperwork. Was it, she wondered, because the federal government was going to change people's answers? Considering the number of federal employees it would take to do that effectively, her question was beyond my exasperated imagination.

After the gun incident, I went home. My husband's response was to shake his head in disbelief. I quit the next morning, handing in my unfinished work to my crew leader. He didn't seem surprised.

As I walked to my car, empty now of all my census materials, I felt no relief for having quit the job I had wanted to complete. Instead, a profound sorrow settled over me, deep into the marrow of my bones—not unlike when I have seen the American flag flutter at half-mast, wondering what new tragedy has befallen this republic.