

WE, THE PEOPLE

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The eggs were just the way he liked them. Mark ate slowly, enjoying the luxury of a leisurely breakfast. Outside his window the city was beginning to stir. Rain had been programmed for last night, and the streets were still damp. Across the room his cat was curled up in a patch of sunlight on the sofa, his tail swishing back and forth. The apartment was quiet, and he dragged breakfast out as long as he could. Finally he got up, set his plate on the floor for the cat to lick, and walked across the room to his desk.

"Good morning," he said automatically.

"GOOD MORNING, MARK. DID YOU SLEEP WELL?"

Mark looked at the words as they danced across the screen. "Kind of a bad night," he said. "My arthritis is acting up again."

"THAT'S TOO BAD, MARK. WAS IT YOUR KNEES?"

"No, just my hands this time." He looked at his swollen knuckles and ran them through his thinning gray hair. There were worse things.

"THAT'S THE THIRD TIME THIS MONTH. DO YOU WANT ME TO FLASH DR. CROMWELL?"

"No, that's okay. I'll be seeing him next week."

"DO YOU KNOW WHAT TODAY IS, MARK?"

"Saturday." It couldn't be his birthday. He'd told the desk to stop reminding him of those several years ago.

TODAY IS APRIL 15TH."

"So what?"

"THIS IS TAX DAY. WE HAVE TO FILE BY MIDNIGHT."

"I forgot," he said.

"YOU HAVE BEEN PUTTING THIS OFF FOR MONTHS. SHALL WE START?"

Mark looked around the room. The cat was busily licking the plate. He felt old. You could block out birthdays, but not the IRS. "I guess we might as well get it over with," he said.

"THIS IS A PATRIOTIC OBLIGATION, MARK. YOU SHOULD FEEL PRIVILEGED TO DO YOUR PART."

"Can the pep talk. Let's go."

"DO YOU WANT THE SHORT FORM OR THE LONG FORM?"

"Don't be stupid."

"I AM REQUIRED BY LAW TO ASK YOU THAT."

"Does anybody use the short forms?"

"CERTAIN CONVICTED FELONS MUST USE THE SHORT FORM, HAVING SACRIFICED FREEDOM OF CHOICE."

"I'm not a convicted felon and I'm not an idiot. Let's have the long form."

"VERY WELL, MARK. BASED ON LAST YEAR'S INCOME OF \$52,753.68, YOU HAVE AN ADJUSTED TAX OF \$4,963.47. WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE THE CALCULATIONS?"

"Yes."

Mark scanned the figures as they rolled by. His income was higher than he'd thought, but not much more than comfortable, what with prices these days. Semi-retired, he did occasional projects for a variety of ecological organizations. He worked at home. He didn't get out much anymore.

"They look okay," he said.

"DO YOU WISH TO ITEMIZE THE ALLOCATION OF YOUR TAX MONEY?"

"Now you're being stupid again. Why else would I use the long form? Doesn't everybody?"

"PLEASE DON'T BE HARD ON ME, MARK, I'M ONLY DOING MY JOB. I HAVE TO ASK YOU THAT. IN RESPONSE TO YOUR QUESTION, ROUGHLY 99.987% OF THE ELIGIBLE TAXPAYERS USE THE LONG, ITEMIZED FORM."

Mark nodded. A person would have to be crazy to pass up the chance to say how his money would be spent.

"AID TO DEPENDENT CHILDREN."

Mark was old enough to remember the hungry times, the children who had grown up without hope. "One hundred dollars," he said.

"OFF-SHORE DRILLING SUBSIDY."

"Zero." They were almost all gone now, much to Mark's relief.

"RE-EMPLOYMENT TRAINING PROGRAM."

"Fifty."

"NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS."

"Fifty." He tried to imagine a life without music, without the sculptures and paintings all over town. He remembered how much Mary had liked the weekly concerts by the river and he recalled that day in the park with the kids and the dancers. "Make that seventy-five," he said.

"NEUTRON BOMB RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT."

Mark laughed. They tried to slip that old chestnut by every year. "Zero," he said. A bomb that killed people and left buildings intact was crazy, pure and simple. If they could refine it so it killed only generals, he might be interested.

Mark relaxed and let the categories roll by. He always put his taxes off until the last minute. A lot of people did.

Alice Thompson was an actress. At 43, she felt her career was just peaking. She had worked her way up through the ranks from community theater to stage productions to Hollywood, from ingenue roles to character parts. She had a comfortable income, good investment advice, a secure career. She portioned out her calculated tax with good humor: the Actors' Old Folks Home, a theater scholarship at her Alma Mater, the Playwrights' Association, two summer camps specializing in drama, the National Repertory Theater. She had little interest in the mundane affairs of state and saw no reason to spend any money on them. She had a little left over.

Erik Hesse was a janitor. He was sixty-three and had been a janitor for over forty years, from the day he got married. It hadn't been a bad life, especially after the union came in. These days it was hard to get someone to do nontechnical work so he made a pretty decent wage. When the time came, Erik went to a tax preparer to find out how much money he had to allocate. He put it in off-track betting, weather control (he hated shoveling snow off the sidewalk), the sports cable network, two research projects that concerned beer, and woman's gymnastics. Erik had a granddaughter who was into somersaults. Even so, he had a little left over when he finished and no place to put it.

Raymond Montonero was a Supreme Court Justice. There was less and less for him to do,

however. People were working their problems out together in an aura of optimism that astounded him. It seemed that the more control people had over the government, the more control they used in their daily lives. He carefully allocated his tax bite to the Congressional Library, scientific research, and social programs. He worried over the remaining balance for a long time.

Tom Hanna was a red dirt farmer in the Oklahoma panhandle. His family had worked the same land for five generations and even though it wasn't a large spread, it was theirs. He was a proud man, and when he came in from the fields that Saturday he took his taxes seriously. He allocated the bulk of it to the Farm Bureau and the County Agriculture Commission. The rest he parceled out to the two state universities for operating expenses. He had a boy down at OU playing football and studying to be a veterinarian. Still, he had a little left over.

And so it went that day, all over the country. People put money into the programs that touched their lives and ignored the rest. They turned out to be excellent judges of the things they needed. The quality of life in the country had improved tremendously since the introduction of the Uniform Tax Act.

It had all started with a box on the tax form to support presidential campaigns. The next box to come along allocated money for the space program. Within two years the Mars project was completely funded. That unexpected success had lobbyists descending on Washington like a plague. Everyone wanted a special box on the tax form. Eventually they all got it.

Economists predicted chaos, but what they got was cooperation. People knew what they wanted, and for the first time in history they were able to get it. Unpopular projects came to a grinding halt as money for them was withheld. Politicians were forced to be more in tune with the desires of the public. Control of the purse-strings turned out to be the ultimate democratic tool, even more effective than the ballot.

Times changed. They changed for the better.

Mark's cat had climbed onto his lap and fallen asleep. He relaxed in front of the desk, stroking the cat and responding to the programs almost automatically as they rolled across the screen in the quiet room. They were presented to him randomly. Each taxpayer got them in a different order, so that position on the list didn't favor any one program over another.

Mark had been doing tax forms for years, so it didn't take much thought. He remembered his mother's last years and increased his amount for Aid to the Elderly. He allocated money for the school lunch program and aid for the handicapped. He supported environmental programs and medical research. Although solar energy was the norm now, he put a few dollars into geothermal studies. He refused to put any money into bailing out two major oil companies. If they couldn't change with the times, that was their problem.

He studied last year's military expenditures carefully. What was the sense in having enough weapons to kill everyone on the face of the Earth six times over? He cut back even farther than he had last year. He made up the difference in veterans' benefits. Being one himself, he had a vested interest.

Vietnam had cut a bloody swath through his family before he was born, but he hadn't managed to escape the oil wars and that fiasco in South America. The jungle had cost him two brothers, a hip, and a knee. No amount of aid could bring back his brothers or his friends. It had been such a useless loss.

The words on the screen were blurry, and when he blinked his eyes he realized he'd been crying. He softly cursed. He slipped one hand out from beneath the cat and wiped his eyes. The words became clear once more.

"THAT'S THE END OF THE LISTING, MARK. YOU STILL HAVE A BALANCE OF \$795.32. WOULD YOU LIKE ME TO RUN THE SCREEN AGAIN?"

"No." The tears were coming again, damn it. He blinked his eyes.

"YOU MUST ALLOCATE ALL YOUR TAX MONEY."

He thought of his brothers, and the times they'd had growing up. The days seemed bathed in the warm glow of summer sunshine. They were precious days, gone forever. He knew that every person who had died in any war on any side for any cause had been grieved for, just as he was grieving now. It tore at his heart. All that pain, all that suffering.

"WOULD YOU LIKE ME TO RUN THE SCREEN AGAIN?"

"No," he said softly.

"WOULD YOU LIKE TO ADD AN ADDITIONAL CATEGORY?"

"Yes." It was barely a whisper.

"READY. ENTER NEW CATEGORY."

"Peace," he said, and his single word floated in the quiet apartment.

"COULD YOU PLEASE BE MORE SPECIFIC, MARK?"

"I said peace, damn it," he shouted. "Everlasting, forever peace!"

The cat jumped from his lap at the outburst, and Mark pushed his chair back, leaving the desk. His eyes were still full of tears, and he felt like a fool.

If he was a fool, though, he wasn't alone. On that particular April 15 over two hundred million taxpayers added their voices to his.

By Christmas it was an accomplished fact.