

I said hello to Catrina on my way in, and she gave me a smile. She was assuming more and more duties and seemed to be acting nearly as a junior officer to Ms. Bailey. Inside, J.T. and Ms. Bailey were laughing together and greeted me heartily.

"Mr. Professor!" J.T. said. "My mother says you haven't been by in a month! What, you don't like us anymore? You found somebody who cooks better?"

"You better not piss off Ms. Mae," Ms. Bailey said. "You'll never be able to come back in the building again."

"Sorry, all this interviewing has kept me really busy," I said, exasperated. "I just haven't had time to do much of anything else."

"Well, then, sit down, baby," Ms. Bailey said. "We won't keep you long. We just wanted to know who you've been meeting. We're curious about what you've learned."

"Hey, you know what, I could actually use the chance to tell you what I've been finding," I said, taking out my notebooks. "I've been meeting so many people, and I can't be sure whether they're telling me the truth about how much they earn. I suppose I want to know whether I'm really understanding what it's like to hustle around here."

"Sure," J.T. said. "We were just talking about that. You used to ask us to find you people. Now you do it yourself. We feel like you don't need us no more." He started laughing, and so did Ms. Bailey.

"Yeah," Ms. Bailey said. "Don't leave us behind, Mr. Professor, when you start to be successful! Go ahead, tell me who you've been talking to. If you tell us who you met and what they're doing, maybe we can check for you and see if folks are being straight."

For the next three hours, I went through my notebooks and told them what I'd learned about dozens of hustlers, male and female. There was Bird, the guy who sold license plates, Social Security cards, and small appliances out of his van. Doritha the tax preparer.

Candy, one of the only female carpenters in the neighborhood. Prince, the man who could pirate gas and electricity for your apartment. J.T. and Ms. Bailey rarely seemed surprised, although every now and then one of them perked up when I mentioned a particularly enterprising hustler or a woman who had recently started taking in boarders.

I finally left, riding the bus home to my apartment. I was grateful for having had the opportunity to discuss my findings with two of the neighborhood's most formidable power brokers. As I looked out the bus windows, I realized just how much I owed Ms. Bailey and J.T. If it weren't for the two of them, and a few other people like C-Note and Autry, I wouldn't ever have made any progress in learning how things really worked around Robert Taylor.

I spent the next few weeks turning the information in my notebooks into statistical tables and graphs that showed how much different hustlers made. I figured that J.T. would appreciate this data at least as much as my professors would, since he was always talking about the importance of data analysis within his managerial technique. So I headed over to Robert Taylor to show him my research.

In the parking lot, I ran into C-Note, who was in his usual spot with a few other squatters, fixing flat tires and washing cars.

"Hey, what's up, guys?" I shouted out. "Long time—how you been?"

Nobody replied. They looked at me, then turned away. I walked closer and stood a few feet from them. "What's up?" I said. "Everything all right?"

One of the men, Pootie, picked up a tool and started to loosen a tire from the rim. "Man, sometimes you just learn the hard way," he said to no one in particular. "That's life, isn't it? Sometimes you