

the only item of production that didn't fall, but rose and kept on rising—because people had nothing else to do; I guess, and because they didn't have to care, the baby wasn't their burden, it was 'the family's.' In fact, the best chance you had of getting a raise and breathing easier for a while was a 'baby allowance.' Either that or a major disease.

"It didn't take us long to see how it all worked out. Any man who tried to play straight, had to refuse himself everything. He lost his taste for any pleasure, he hated to smoke a nickel's worth of tobacco or chew a stick of gum, worrying whether somebody had more need for that nickel. He felt ashamed of every mouthful of food he swallowed, wondering whose weary night of overtime had paid for it, knowing that his food was not his by right, miserably wishing to be cheated rather than to cheat, to be a sucker, but not a blood-sucker. He wouldn't marry, he wouldn't help his folks back home, he wouldn't put an extra burden on 'the family.' Besides, if he still had some sort of sense of responsibility, he couldn't marry or bring children into the world, when he could plan nothing, promise nothing, count on nothing. But the shiftless and the irresponsible had a field day of it. They bred babies, they got girls into trouble, they dragged in every worthless relative they had from all over the country, every unmarried pregnant sister, for an extra 'disability allowance,' they got more sicknesses than any doctor could disprove, they ruined their clothing, their furniture, their homes—what the hell, 'the family' was paying for it! They found more ways of getting in 'need' than the rest of us could ever imagine—they developed a special skill for it, which was the only ability *they* showed.

"God help us, ma'am! Do you see what we saw? We saw that we'd been given a law to live by, a *moral* law, they called it, which punished those who observed it—for observing it. The more you tried to live up to it, the more you suffered; the more you cheated it, the bigger reward you got. Your honesty was like a tool left at the mercy of the next man's dishonesty. The honest ones paid, the dishonest collected. The honest lost, the dishonest won. How long could men stay good under this sort of a law of goodness? We were a pretty decent bunch of fellows when we started. There weren't many chiselers among us. We knew our jobs and we were proud of it and we worked for the best factory in the country, where old man Starnes hired nothing but the pick of the country's labor. Within one year under the new plan, there wasn't an honest man left among us. *That* was the evil, the sort of hell-horror evil that preachers used to scare you with, but you never thought to see alive. Not that the plan encouraged a few bastards, but that it turned decent people into bastards, and there was nothing else that it could do—and it was called a moral ideal!

"What was it we were supposed to want to work for? For the love of our brothers? What brothers? For the bums, the loafers, the moochers we saw all around us? And whether they were cheating or plain incompetent, whether they were unwilling or unable—what difference did that make to us? If we were tied for life to the level of their unfitness, faked or real, how long could we care to go on?

We had no way of knowing their ability, we had no way of controlling their needs—all we knew was that we were beasts of burden struggling blindly in some sort of place that was half-hospital, half-stockyards—a place geared to nothing but disability, disaster, disease—beasts put there for the relief of whatever whoever chose to say was whichever's need.

"Love of our brothers? That's when we learned to hate our brothers for the first time in our lives. We began to hate them for every meal they swallowed, for every small pleasure they enjoyed, for one man's new shirt, for another's wife's hat, for an outing with their family, for a paint job on their house—it was taken from us, it was paid for by our privations, our denials, our hunger. We began to spy on one another, each hoping to catch the others lying about their needs, so as to cut their 'allowance' at the next meeting. We began to have stool pigeons who informed on people, who reported that somebody had bootlegged a turkey to his family on some Sunday—which he'd paid for by gambling, most likely. We began to meddle into one another's lives. We provoked family quarrels, to get somebody's relatives thrown out. Any time we saw a man starting to go steady with a girl, we made life miserable for him. We broke up many engagements. We didn't want anyone to marry, we didn't want any more dependents to feed.

"In the old days, we used to celebrate if somebody had a baby, we used to chip in and help him out with the hospital bills, if he happened to be hard-pressed for the moment. Now, if a baby was born we didn't speak to the parents for weeks. Babies, to us, had become what locusts were to farmers. In the old days, we used to help a man if he had a bad illness in the family. Now—well, I'll tell you about just one case. It was the mother of a man who had been with us for fifteen years. She was a kindly old lady, cheerful and wise, she knew us all by our first names and we all liked her—we used to like her. One day, she slipped on the cellar stairs and fell and broke her hip. We knew what that meant at her age. The staff doctor said that she'd have to be sent to a hospital in town, for expensive treatments that would take a long time. The old lady died the night before she was to leave for town. They never established the cause of death. No, I don't know whether she was murdered. Nobody said that. Nobody would talk about it at all. All I know is that I—and that's what I can't forget!—I, too, had caught myself wishing that she would die. This—may God forgive us!—was the brotherhood, the security, the abundance that the plan was supposed to achieve for us!

"Was there any reason why this sort of horror would ever be preached by anybody? Was there anybody who got any profit from it? There was. The Starnes heirs. I hope you're not going to remind me that they'd sacrificed a fortune and turned the factory over to us as a gift. We were fooled by that one, too. Yes, they gave up the factory. But profit, ma'am, depends on what it is you're after. And what the Starnes heirs were after, no money on earth could buy. Money is too clean and innocent for that.

"Eric Starnes, the youngest—he was a jellyfish that didn't have