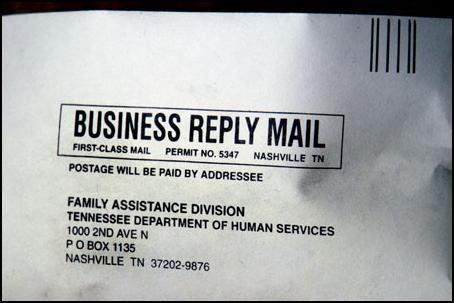
**Pitcherlady - June 15, 2006**  
***For hard times***



Ever spent a day at the food stamp office? Technically, it's the Department of Human Services although I've yet to hear anyone who goes there, call it that. It's something like the Department of Motor Vehicles except at the food stamp office, you have kids. Lots and lots of kids. Sick ones, loud ones, miserable and happy ones, all of them, poor. Same with the adults.   
  
You go there, and you check in with a lady at the front, who is dressed in a security guard's uniform. I assume that means she's a security guard but truthfully, if I were meeting and greeting all those people every day, I'd wear one too. Anyway, she gives you a pencil and a form to fill out and reminds you politely to return her pencil - and you do. Then, she says, *Go stand in section A*.   
  
In another part of the room, there are about two hundred chairs, split evenly into two groups that sit perpendicular to one another. Did I say there were lots of kids? Everything is clearly marked and according to sources, far more streamlined than it used to be. So, we're standing in section A in a line that moves rather quickly. After a short burst of questions, my friend is given an appointment time of one forty-five in the afternoon. It is eleven thirty. He is told to have a seat and asked not to leave because he could be called early.   
  
He turns and goes straight out the door and I follow him. There's a two person smoking station there on the street, in line with the exhaust fumes, along the edge of the driveway. Smokers are invited to stand on the curb or sit on a concrete flower pot, filled with sand and ashes and cigarette butts. It doesn't smell like people have urinated nearby but that's the impression you get sitting there. One that says, *you're the fire plug*, in case you didn't know. A lone, Hispanic hot-dog vendor, yells *¡HOT DOGS!* If you're thirsty, he'll sell you a 12 oz. bottle of water for a dollar and tell you *it's the special price - for beautiful lady* or (presumably) *amigos*, if you happen to be a man.   
  
Once we sat among the throngs of people seeking assistance of some kind, I noticed exactly how many people there were, talking on cell phones. Some were calling everyone in their address book to pass the time. Others made plans to meet each other, hang out, get together, hook up. Of the ten conversations I overheard pieces of, no one reported being at the food stamp office. There were several other conversations, that were incomprehensible. At one point there was an extended Chinese family on the row behind us, an extended Hispanic family in front of us (five kids in tow), and three white, American girls on our left, all dressed in pink, all talking on the phone. More than one toddler was outfitted with a plastic cell phone, into which, they had their own private make-believe shouting matches.   
  
It's amazing the degree to which parents have learned to ignore children who are yelling at the top of their lungs in public. In a lot of cases it was like they were hypnotized. A dad in front of us rewarded such behavior with the playful tapping of a newspaper, after the child had screamed for five minutes. He did this every five minutes. The mom never heard it.   
  
Two hours and forty-five minutes after we arrived, a bitter woman with a clipboard called my friends name. She dismissed me without a glance and proceeded to interrogate him about his work history in her office. She suggested he sign on for a job placement program. He told her he was unable to work due to alcoholism, illness, homelessness and his impending death. She wasn't buying it. In her mind, it translated to lazy. He sat before her, all one hundred twenty pounds of him while she insisted he prove that his situation was dire. As if showing up to ask for food stamps wasn't proof enough.   
  
If this woman, this shining example of insensitive, cookbook social work, had taken a look around the waiting area, she might've noticed that the man in her office was the most desperate person there. He didn't own a cell phone or a car or a pink outfit or a new pair of Nikes. He couldn't afford a hot dog if he wanted one. He was sober, polite and respectful. Yet, there was the badgering, a lecture and a phone call, before she temporarily approved one hundred fifty-two dollars a month in food stamps. That's five dollars a day. She made it clear she was doing him a big favor and he thanked her for it.   
  
One day about a month later, I spotted a stray envelope filled with cigarette butts. Ironically, it was pre-addressed to the Department of Human Services. There's that woman's proof, I thought. Desperation, sickness, poverty, death; all right there in that envelope, as far as I could see.   
  
*Why are you saving these?* I asked him, and you know what he said?

*For hard times.*

