

The Deliverer

The uniform's design hasn't changed notably since the 70s, making me a walking antique. The fabric is worn thin like gossamer from heavy-duty washing and drying cycles. Sometimes I'm still wearing the pale blue thing at the grocery store hoping not to draw attention to myself, but it's unavoidable. I get the most stereotypical, tedious question in public:

"Do you ever get chased by dogs?"

What a strange question to receive while waiting in the check-out line. Do I ever get chased by dogs? How rude. Do I smell like meat?

I can't imagine the life of a banker. I bet they're harassed about robberies similar to those easy blockbusters where four to eight demented men in themed ski masks swinging around weapons of war announce themselves by shooting into the ceiling: "Everyone on the ground! If anyone makes a sound, I'll blow your damn heads off!" It must be deflating to have to admit their lives just aren't that interesting, that they're, in reality, rather boring.

"No, Miss Beverly," I say, in response to her meat question. "That's a myth. Besides, dogs are kept inside in the city. My only interaction with them is on the other side of the mail slot."

Miss B nods her head empathetically. Her tight blond curls cushion her head like a helmet.

"How are things at home, Miss Beverly?" I ask.

The line is stagnant. The cashier calls the manager for assistance over the P.A. system for a stubborn item that refuses to scan before toying with the strings holding together her red smock.

"You know how it is at home," Miss B says. Her mouth is pulled to one side, so I know she's in one of her sassy moods.

"The husband hasn't come home yet?"

"I'm not holding my breath either," she says. "Who's to say he'd be welcome if he ever did?"

I put up my hands in surrender and contemplate buying one of the chocolate bars surrounding me. I think about my pants shrinking around my waist and thighs and decide against it.

"The better question is 'How are things in *your* home?'" she says.

I examine her wet eyes with encroaching puffy skin. "Everything's fine," I say.

She nods empathetically again. We both look hopelessly at the cart brimming to the top with groceries in front of us. It'll take twenty minutes to scan the stacks of frozen TV dinners.

"My life just kept kicking after he left," Miss B says. "Only a boy would run away from his responsibilities to chase tail. I guess he wasn't a fully baked man."

I'm in deeper than I want to be. Miss B is along my mail route, so I know Mr. B hasn't written in months. He just up and left. A month before his disappearance, he received strange correspondence from a pen pal named Tanya Hopper, one baby-blue letter, then the sender's name changed to Carroll Towing, Inc., but in Tanya's cursive all the way from Virginia. God only knows how he hooked up with a woman from Virginia.

"I'm still getting his bills," she says.

"I know—"

“Phone bill, car bill, car insurance. He thinks I’m going to keep paying them.” The line moves and Miss B fills in the empty space in front of her. Her basket has just a few items—tomatoes, potatoes, a jar of olives, and prickly heat powder. “I’m only paying his bills one more month, then I’m done. Finished. Kaput.” She’ll be able to unload her basket onto the conveyer after the line moves another person, which doesn’t seem like a dreadfully long time, but Miss B could talk on and on like a rotating windmill, and I’m feeling uncomfortable.

Suddenly, my collar seems too tight. I itch around it to create space. Damn starch. I wish I had a job I could dump at the door at 5 p.m. like a bag of dirty laundry and not look back until the morning, but my clientele are my neighbors, my fellow grocery-cart pushers, my fellow Mr. and Miss B’s.

“Looks like I forgot something,” I say.

“What’s that?” She’s either genuinely curious or acutely suspicious.

“Capers. Can’t make a sandwich without capers. They’re also a great source of vitamin A.” I edge past the customers in line behind me, but Miss B talks on.

“Be sure to get the reduced-salt kind, or you’ll bloat.”

“Will do,” I say.

“Robertson is a good brand.”

She’s saying something else, but I’m out of reasonable earshot, so it’s socially acceptable to pretend I don’t hear her now. It just so happens I did forget something, not capers, but a sauce for my spaghetti. I’m making dinner for Lola, my wife. She says I don’t surprise her enough. Tonight, I’m proving her wrong.

I find the sauce and oil aisle.

“Hey, postman!” Clive says. I was browsing the jars of red when he startled me. I usually see Clive in well-fitted suits all shades of blue and gray and his hair wet-looking from product. He fits the profile of a sly-talking lawyer perfectly. He’s certainly a man who cares deeply about his looks, but it’s a late Sunday afternoon, so he’s dressed casually.

“Clive,” I say, a bit awkwardly.

Clive’s wife Nanette works a regular nine-to-five; he has more flexibility built into his schedule. Just last Tuesday, as I was delivering on his street around noon, he left his three-story townhouse with a pretty young thing trailing behind dressed to the nines in black stiletto boots, and he was fooling with an obnoxiously bold tie. He gave a friendly honk as he drove past. I waved.

“Nanette says hi. She knew I’d see you here,” he says.

“It’s my usual time. You two normally shop together.”

“Lee caught something nasty from his kindergarten class. She’s at home with him. He’s been puking bright colors—purple and green—everywhere.”

“Sounds like a stomach bug.”

“That’s what the doctor says, says he’ll be back to playing in two to three days.” Clive grabs a green sauce. “Spicy verde,” he says. “Goes great with tacos. I’ve been meaning to ask you, how are things? I mean, how are things at home?”

“Why do you ask?”

“No reason,” he says. He flashes his slick attorney smile. “Making spaghetti?”

“Surprise dinner for Lola.”

“I like that one.” He nods at the sauce jar I’ve been absently eyeing: Dangerously Spicy Death Pepper Sauce. A mouth blows flames across its label.

“I’m not sure Lola would appreciate that,” I say.

“You said surprise dinner.”

He laughs. We say our goodbyes, and he leaves me alone in the aisle. This is the first day the folks I deliver to seem interested in my home life. I decide I’m missing several more items for dinner and keep roaming the aisles, not ready to return home in this progressively surreal mood.

French baguettes are a spaghetti dinner staple. I’m looking one side of a bread display up and down—Kaiser rolls, sourdough, bagels—when an old lady with purple hair materializes from around the corner.

“Mrs. Adelaide!” I say, too loudly. I’m a bit shaken. “That’s a new look.” I’ve been seeing so many older women with purple hair these days.

With unabashed pride, she pushes up the ends of her bob with the heels of her palms. “It’s the new trend, didn’t you know?” she says. She’s wearing fake-diamond-encrusted earrings that elongate her earlobes.

“It’s catching on,” I say.

Every time I deliver her catalogues, Mrs. Adelaide invites me into her living room for a stale sugar cookie in a petite napkin. The cookies are too hard to bite, so I suck on them until she turns her head, distracted by her antiques, and deposit it in my pocket. China cabinets filled with delicate tea cups and plates line her walls. A prim and proper woman if ever I saw one.

“Do you have anything fun planned for the rest of the weekend?” I ask.

“Watching *Walker, Texas Ranger* with one of my girlfriends. Chuck Norris is such an easy man to look at for an hour. For *many* hours.” She laughs.

“I bet.”

“I love that clean brown beard and cowboy hat,” she says. Her eyes go dim. I think she mentally licks her lips here. “Looks like you’re making spaghetti.”

“I’m making dinner for Lola.”

“*Good*. Young people don’t know how hard relationships can be.”

“Things seem to be going well between us.”

“One person can be satisfied while the other is shriveling up inside like a dry leaf.”

“What makes you say that?”

“I’m speaking from experience. You know, Georgie is my second husband, and I can’t wait for him to croak either.”

“Mrs. Adelaide?”

“I’m just having fun. You know how troublesome marriages can be. You cook that wife of yours a good dinner.” Mrs. Adelaide moseys away behind an empty cart. One of the cart wheels shakes violently and lets out an incessant squeal through the bread section. I don’t think I’ve ever seen her buy anything. I think she only comes here to escape Georgie and pass a lazy afternoon.

I decide to trade the ground beef I grabbed earlier for a package of ground lamb. The refrigerated-food section always prickles my skin. I want to get out of here now as quickly as possible to avoid any more encounters, so I hurry down the hygiene aisle, activating audio advertisements and jingles meant to fill the void of self-esteem with consumerism, and step out to see all the registers clear of lines like a godsend. I go to the twelve-items-or-less line although I have at least thirty. The cashier scans them in under two minutes with only a tinge of a frown. I pay with credit and scribble my name on the electronic pad. The automatic doors open for me. I *breathe*.

I parked my red SUV in a sea of red SUVs. I’m sure other car types and colors are bought

and sold across this expansive country, but there's no evidence of it today. I'm clicking the unlock button at them as I scan left to right to left until finally mine lets out a delightful note. I'm transferring items from my cart to the trunk when I see Abe Nunez walking toward me. He's like a truck with a chest two feet deep of muscle and hard fat. Shit. Why did I tell the cashier no bags? Fuck sustainability. I want to run away, but I haven't emptied my cart yet.

"My man," says Abe. He slaps me hard on the back, making me bite my tongue. My left eye fills with tears. "You okay?"

"I think my tongue's bleeding."

"What are you doing biting your tongue for?"

My shoulders raise in the universal symbol for *I don't know*. He nods empathetically.

"I saw you all the way from inside the dollar store and had to check on you," he says.

"Check on me?"

"I care about you, man. You deliver my mail, and you're damn good at it."

"I guess." I have an empty cart and a closed hatchback now. What's the universal symbol for *I want to get the hell out of here?*

"I'll take your cart for you." The cart looks like a child's toy rolling in front of him. I see he finally stopped wearing his gold wedding band. It's been three years since his grisly divorce. If only he'd heeded Mrs. Adelaide's advice.

I feel safer now that I'm in the driver's seat behind locked doors and tinted windows. Had I waited a moment longer, I would have run into the Rosalynn twins, who are now trudging through the hot parking lot engrossed by their phone screens. The jaunt home is uneventful and pleasant: a dozen red and green lights, a handful of pedestrians. Round puffs of leaves quiver on trees that grow from cracked cement. I shake the faces I ran into today out of my head and visualize tonight's cooking steps: mix lamb with breadcrumbs, egg, and spices; roll into balls; fry in pan coated with olive oil; drop in diced tomatoes and sauce; heat until cooked through.

Parking space is a rare commodity in my neighborhood, but after several minutes of circling and idling, I manage to squeeze between two cars on the adjacent block. I pass a few neighbors walking in the opposite direction who wave, and I nod back because my arms are weighed down by food stacked precariously against my chest and neck. I ring the doorbell with an elbow hoping Lola will open and ease my burden. I ring again before putting the food down at my feet and unlocking the door to a hushed and gray interior with the last of the afternoon sun faintly outlining the living room furniture. Hanging on the coatrack is the canvas bag Lola tells me to take to the store but that I habitually forget.

We have a white-painted mantle over an unused fireplace. Pictures of us and the cat sit there in lifeless frames. We don't have any children to display because we don't see eye-to-eye on the composition of a family: she wants kids, I don't, although we decided this wasn't reason enough to end our relationship when it was in its infancy. It's since become one point on a long list of contention.

"Lola?" I call, leaning over the staircase banister. "I went grocery shopping."

She's probably still at the bingo hall with her mother, a longtime Sunday tradition. I unload the food onto the kitchen island and feel something crush underfoot—a fragment of the glass that was broken last night during one of our arguments that didn't quite make it into the trashcan. Aside from the overflowing garbage, gnats angrily circling, there's no sign of life here. No hanging pot and pan rack, no granola and cereal aging in tall containers, no spices lining the head of the stove. In fact, I think it's been a year, maybe more, since Lola and I sat across from one another over a hot meal.

I make the spaghetti and have the whole house smelling of comfort food. I leave it in the pots for an hour until finally scooping single portions into plastic containers. Lola hasn't come home yet. She hates the plastic containers because of the BPA.

"Get the glass containers next time you're out," she says. Glass containers cost more, so I don't. I have a million good excuses. She's since stopped asking.

I put the containers in the fridge and lie on the living room recliner in the dark, quiet except for the occasional passing car. It's the kind of quiet that fills you like deafening noise, until wringing into something menacing and painful and without warning. The streetlight across from our house lets out a honey glow. Hours pass.

The sound of Lola's key turning in the door wakes me, and she comes in smelling of smoke. I haven't confronted her about her new habit yet. I'll use it as leverage in our next fight. She brings life into the house with the plastic bags she's carrying, which are outrageously loud. I know she can see the whites of my eyes, but she says nothing.

"I made dinner," I say. She closes the door and puts the bags down at the foot of the stairs.

"I told you I was having dinner with my friends," she says. "You never listen to me." She goes upstairs without another word.

I hear the upstairs shower turn on and a door shut. The water hitting the plastic stall bottom evokes the sounds of a relentless summer storm. When we first moved into this house, we used to take showers together. I pull the lever on the left side of the recliner to upright myself. I can sense the meaningless words Lola threw around last night still floating in the air like ghosts: *neglect, unfulfilled, separation*. I thought they'd be gone by now. The next time I go to the grocery store, I'll buy her flowers, not expensive roses but a mixed bunch of carnations—they live longer anyway. I'm disappointed I won't see her red-faced reaction to the spicy sauce tonight.

I wonder where the cat is.