

WHEN YOU'RE THE MAILMAN

Today the old coot answers the door in pajamas fit for an infant, sporting whiskers like a gray dust broom. By now he usually tells me he wants to die, that dying would be to his benefit. But he doesn't tell me that story today. Instead he grunts sullenly, nostrils flaring.

He must be on the final slide, I think. I wish I could help. I wish I could hold this man's thin-skinned hand to the lip of the grave, show him where he needs to go, and then give him a little shove into the hole. But I can't do that. I like the old fella too much. I fork over his mail and the cellophane window crinkles under hand:

Mr. Raymond Johansen
4359 Polk St.
Melvindale, MI 48122

"Your mailbox is broke, Mr. Johansen," I say.

This itchy postal uniform is tight. It's hugging my crotch.

"I know that, boy," he says. "The god damn key broke off in the lock yesterday. Everything breaks off in the cold like this."

"Tell me about it." I like to sympathize, my breath blooming out like a fog machine.

"Next thing you know my god damn leg'll break off!" He lifts his brittle leg and gives it a twist and a 'crack!' He then laughs through a jaundiced mouth, a pestilent cough.

"Just the same, I'd look into getting that mailbox fixed."

"Why is that?" The old man is confounded.

"I don't mind coming up to your door and giving you your mail

for a couple of days,” I say. “But I’m really not allowed to do that.”

“Why’s that?”

“U.S. Postal policy. I have to put a ‘stop’ on your mail and report to my supervisor that your mailbox is broken. And she’s a stickler for rules. She’s a real bitch.”

“Your supervisor, eh?” Mr. Johansen grabs his stubbly chin while his face turns a reddish shade of deviant. “What’s she look like?”

“She’s got a good set of tits,” I explain. “Tall. Dark hair. Black.”

“Black?” he says. “Never mind!” Mr. Johansen’s shar-pei-like face scrunches up odiously. Born in a different time this man.

“Come on, Mr. Johansen.”

“What?”

“You never had a hankering for black tail?”

“Get the hell off my property!”

“Ok, ok.” I step off his porch. “But, don’t forget the mailbox.”

“Jesus fucking Christ, I’ll look into it.”

“Have a good day!”

“A good day,” he says calmly and stalls to thumb through the mail. Bills, sweepstakes applications, coupons that he’ll study for half a day before throwing them into a little basket he keeps on his kitchen table. “Good fucking day to die, that’s what it is.” He looks at me again, serious and stern like a petrified tree. “It’s always something, isn’t it George?” he says on the sly.

“Indeed it is, Mr. Johansen.”

The door slams shut. I peek in through the door window and see him set down the mail, a cup of tea steeping on his kitchen table. Mr. Johansen’s been like this since I’ve been on this route. He’s a real bastard and he’s always angry like a nest of wet wasps. He’s too sharp for the asylum, yet too crazy to make a difference in life. We get along very well. We have an understanding. Still, it’d be nice if I could help him find his grave. He says he wants to die but no one’s helping. Why shouldn’t I help? I’m a government employee, aren’t I?

Mr. Johansen catches me peering into his home and then flips me the bird. I smile and wave, then jerk my thumb back and say, "Get that mailbox fixed Mr. Johansen!"

The mail must continue.

Torre's house is as solid as a bar when I'm bored and need a drink after work. He's always got good beer in the fridge, or wine. French. Californian. Red. White. Every week I bring him the junk mail I've either forgotten to deliver or specifically put on the side for him. Mostly credit card applications and bills. Torre fills them out with the recipient's name, scribbles in some information and sends them back. He does his homework and memorizes social security numbers from old bills. He's gotten a few cards and always spends as much as he can the first day, then tosses the card into the Rouge River.

Torre and I have an understanding, too. I bring the applications and bills and he lets me drink his beer and wine. I've known Torre for three years now.

We usually get tipsy and talk about the books on his bookshelf, which is an impressive collection he inherited from his father. From philosophy to classical literature. Schopenhauer. Dostoevski. Vonnegut. Torre's old man was a lit professor in Ann Arbor. I guess he wrote a few science fiction books, too. He kicked the bucket early. Emphysema. Great word: emphysema. But it's a bad disease. His father left him and his mother a fortune. Torre's mother still lives in Ann Arbor. She also teaches at the University of Michigan.

Sometimes Torre and I talk about his old lady, Candice, who abandoned the house one dull summer day and never came back. Just up and left him with an infant child that isn't even his. Torre is white, Candice is white, but the baby is a little black boy. His name is Otis.

Otis usually sits in his crib, which has wooden bars and looks like a topless bird cage. I keep waiting for him to fly out. Sometimes Otis stands and waits there for an hour, always looking out at Torre and I.

Cute as a tater bug that kid. Wide eyes, quiet as hell, and he just stares at you. Not that dumb thick glazed stare, either. It's like Otis knows something you don't.

Torre opens up the door and I hand him a stack of mail.

"What's up, Torre?"

"Nada," he says and slides aside. "You stayin' long, George?" He then spits out onto the snowy ground. Torre is tall and lanky, legs like a scare crow, ruddy cheeks.

"For a beer or two."

"'Cause I gotta get some loot and run errands. Can you watch Otis for a little bit?"

"Sure, what the hell?"

I walk in behind Torre and then make tracks over to Otis, who smells like baby powder and sour milk. I cup Otis' little black head, the curls underneath my hands like a spindle of dark silk. I pull his head gently back and look into his eyes and say:

"Otis, it's me and you tonight punk! You up for that?"

"Gahhh."

"That's right. Gahhhh."

"Gahhh."

"Is the gahhhh in the fridge?" I ask.

"Hmmm?" His eyes are watery, deep blue. Otis shakes the rattle in his hand.

"It is? Great. I'll just help myself to one, eh?"

Otis gives me a questioning look. He is two-years old and must really like that crib because he doesn't leave it much. I pick him up for a minute because I like to pick up kids. Who doesn't? His diaper crinkles and I sniff it to make sure he doesn't need changing.

Meanwhile Torre is rustling around in his bedroom. I hear him faintly over the television, which is tuned to some horrible Lifetime movie. Something about "rape" and stars the girl from Family Ties. Not the hot one either. The dumpy one. Tina Yothers.

"I'll be back in about an hour," Torre says.

"What do I feed this little runt? Burritos or pizza or something?"

I kiss Otis on his warm skull with the brunt of my mouth. Soon, he'll be old like Mr. Johansen, leathery and cold. I wouldn't think Mr. Johansen's head is warm and soft like Otis'.

"He still eats baby food, you know that, George," Torre says, looking for his keys.

"Ok."

"The food's in the cupboard."

Torre then leaves without much adieu. Probably out to look for his wife. Poor sap.

Torre's been tracking down his wife for months now. He thinks she's in Las Vegas. She used to be a stripper here in Detroit, over at the Atlantis on Fort Street. That's where he met Candice, and by his reasoning, Vegas is where all the dancers go when things get really bad. It's like Mecca for desperate, out-of-work strippers.

From what I understand, Las Vegas isn't Candice's kind of town. She's a losable sort and Vegas is full of quacks and miscreants. Americana exhausted. Fleets of old ladies with dark visors covering their pink eyes. Old men with weak tickers, plaid pants. Imagine Candice in the middle of it all, losing her money on a broken roulette wheel, her abusive boyfriend at home snorting cocaine, waiting for her to return with clenched fists.

Next thing I know, I'm drooling on myself and waking up from a fatigued and drunken nap. Re-runs of Tom and Jerry are on the television screen. The ones where you can only see the legs of the black maid, who is swatting a broom at both Tom and Jerry. Otis is on the couch next to me, sleeping in his fuzzy pajamas, curled up like a pill bug. The gleaming cadence of numbers on the VCR says 12:32am.

I put Otis in his crib and fumble through Torre's mail. It's an old habit. I see pamphlets for a round-trip ticket to Las Vegas, a letter from the IRS, a collection agency from Lansing. Address Service Requested.

I've been a mailman for twelve years now. I like it. Always have. It's how I met Torre. I delivered mail to his house while he worked from his home. He's a graphic designer who gave me beer when I needed it most. I've always held him in high regard for this.

Delivering mail gives me time to think, walk through old neighborhoods, and fantasize about the lonely housewives in Detroit. I like the brief interludes with the people, too. You get so much more from people you only see every day for 10 seconds rather than those you spend your whole lifetime knowing, like family or old friends. You know what to expect. The relationship is much more satisfying, less daunting.

Delivering mail has brought me closer to humanity. I even meet women. For a while, I was seeing a lady on a route I had in Dearborn. Her name was Lydia Shortridge, 1256 W. Cherry Hill. I had only seen her from a distance. When I left her porch and got two or three houses down, she would come out and open the lid of her mailbox, always giving me a look. From down the street, she was attractive. She had a thin face, ruffles of dark hair.

As I approached her door one summer afternoon, Lydia opened the door with a vodka and OJ in one hand, the phone in the other, a cigarette dangling from her mouth. She was in skimpy lingerie and talking to her husband, quietly berating him for not coming home that previous night. She stood and waited with her shoulder propping the screen door open, that glint of boredom in her eyes. When I got closer, I noticed she was indeed thin but had an undercarriage like a broken-down Chevy, a dry scalp, and wore a little too much make-up.

When I handed her the mail, she waved me in with it, silently, hastily. I stepped in, dropped my bag and stood while she left the room to refresh her OJ. Feeling very comfortable, I stripped down to my boxers, made myself a drink and watched television while she argued with her husband, Ron. I caught little snippets of conversation while she paced back and forth in her kitchen.

“You rotten bastard, I don't know why I ever—”

“Why don't you go fuck your—”

“Don't bother coming home!”

From that day on it was a brainless love affair. Sex for the sake of sex. We were the same age, 36, but she was years ahead of me in some other life I would never understand. I've never been married and never really knew my parents. I have no concept of family or wife or the dysfunctional life therein. I don't have anybody except for my foster mother, Torre, and a few distant cousins I still keep in touch with.

The act with Lydia went on for months. I would drop by her house for a quick lay and a stiff drink. Sometimes we'd talk about her husband, how lonely she was, how much she wanted a different life. But then fall came and I changed routes. The leaves dropped to the ground, waxy and yellow, the color of burnt yams. I never saw Lydia outside of my route, and I couldn't just show up for no reason. Therefore, I never saw her again, with or without my uniform. It was a simple equation.

Soon thereafter, Randall Feverson was handed the route on a silver fucking platter, and who better to take over with Lydia than Randall Feverson? The guy couldn't get laid in a whorehouse with a fistful of cash. In the locker room after the first day of his new route, while pulling on his thin beaten socks, he told me and everyone else about some bombshell he'd met and how she'd seduced him.

“What's her name?” I asked, though I already knew the answer.

“Some busty brunette named Lydia. I guess she's divorcing her husband, Ron.”

Two months later, Randall told me that he was in love and that Lydia moved in with him. I shook his hand and congratulated him. I never told him about our sex affair. I suppose you could say it was noble of me, but I just didn't care. I didn't want anything to do with Lydia. She was a bit of a basket case.

The door opens as I'm heating up the pizza Otis and I ordered earlier. It's Torre.