Delivering

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DELIVERING

by

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Pizza delivery cars have a unique odor. He had long gotten used to the mixed stench of old pizza crusts, stale beer, and the sterno that reeks from the mouth of the warmer like a wino's breath. The white Pinto, stained grey with dust, is his. Its red interior is darkened to the color of liver. He calls it Jack, after the author of his favorite book, which his hometown library has banned. Jack and he have functioned reasonably well for nearly seventy-five thousand miles. He can not quite imagine, though he often tries, how far that would be in a straight line. He will be sorry to see Jack go, but there will be another with that new-car smell that will vanish all too soon.

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Staring into the glare of oncoming traffic, he intuitively slows down when entering the heavily patrolled section of campus by the married student housing. The campus cops, whose specialty is giving random tickets between naps, make him paranoid. The colors of their Novas change as frequently as chameleons, in a half-hearted attempt to be clever and maintain their quotas. Though he is anesthetized by the hours of driving, the thought of sirens and flashing red lights makes him shudder.

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She quickly opened the door to his bedroom—an ominous silhouette against the light in the hallway. He deftly rolled over onto his stomach and tucked his hands under his pillow. "You lay still in there." He mumbled, feigning sleep. The pressure of his erection pushing against the mattress was painful. Though his eyes were shut, he could feel her staring with those intense eyes—eyes that ate through the bedding like acid. He knew she knew. She knew everything. Slowly she shut the door, leaving it open just a crack for safe measure. After what seemed to be a reasonable amount of time, he silently rolled over onto his back and tried to remember his fantasy.
He comes around just in time to switch lanes and make the yellow before it turns red. When his mind wanders, he doesn’t worry because he knows that Jack will have things under control. “Okay Jack, we’re back on manual.” The moonless sky starts to spit rain in big drops that splat on the windshield. A cold shower of rain-damp air tingles his skin to gooseflesh. “Hang in there, Dean,” he tells himself. His name isn’t Dean Moriarty, but he likes the comparison—it is one of his favorites. He thinks that Dean is a real ladies’ man.

The wipers click, beating the splatters of rain off the windshield. He imagines each sweep ticks off a hundred miles and he is heading west. Click—the creek he crosses is the Missouri. Click—and the natural prairie kept by the local high school becomes the plains. Click—with the steep, pine scattered slope, he is starting up the Rockies.

The blinking red lights at the top of the hill spoil the illusion. “Shoot—caught a train.” He realizes how odd it is for a train to be coming through here at this time of night. They only come at two times—early in the afternoon and early in the morning.

The break in the routine takes on supernatural qualities. Though the three long moans are real, he swears that the engineer looks like Rod Serling—through the grinding rumble of the train, he sees that smirking mouth form the phrase, “For your consideration. . . .” The boxcars drone by him. Boxes that are red, boxes that are white, boxes that are orange, boxes that are green, boxes that are black, boxes filled with corn, boxes filled with pigs, boxes filled with wheat, boxes filled with boxes.

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She flung open the door just as he could feel the tension all the way down to his toes, the contracting muscles close to cramping. "You filthy boy." His hands shot out from under the covers, which he had pulled up around his chin. "Don't try to hide. I can see you and so can God." He imagined the angry face of Charlton Heston glaring down at him. He cringed, thinking God and his mother were probably on a first-name basis. "Do I have to put the red mittens on you?" He quickly shook his head no, remembering the brillo-pad texture of the mittens she had tied onto his older brother's hands. "Go to sleep," she said, "and think nice things." The door shut with a click.

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A horn blares when the red lights stop flashing. "Jee, hold your horses." He puts Jack into gear and the greying Pinto bounces across the tracks on its battered shocks. The rain is coming down harder now and he switches the wipers onto high to pick up the slack. At a stop sign, he turns back to the warmer to check the address of the last delivery on this run. The rancid steam from the warmer momentarily fogs the windows. 1325 Wilson — just a few blocks down.

He pulls up in front of a big, white, two-story house. As usual the people don't have the porch lights on and the address is hard to make out. However, he has delivered here before and remembers the house; mostly he remembers it because it looks a lot like his home, some hundred miles away. It even has a stunted red maple in the front yard.
He sat down at the breakfast nook to the usual fare of oatmeal and steaming hot chocolate that was too hot to drink. "Did you get your homework done last night?" Turning around to say "yes," he noticed the mittens that his mother had placed on the counter as an obvious reminder of last night's threat. She followed his eyes and he imagined an inward smile because her silent ploy had worked. "Hurry home from school today. We have to go to confession. God only knows there'll be a long line." God and you, he thought, scalding his mouth on the hot chocolate and making up an excuse to skip the oatmeal and get to school early. He couldn't decide which would be worse—the red mittens or the smell of old leather and guilt in that dark, airless box.

A disturbing fluorescent glare off the bright orange walls of the Place welcomes him back from his run. It is torturous after coming from the fuzzy green glow that dimly lights Jack's interior. He ignores the smell of someone's sausage pizza burning. By now it is probably a lumpy, black Frisbee.

The walls inside the Pizza Place are papered with maps. There are two large city maps, a map of the campus area, and maps of the trickier trailer courts that are poorly lit and as elaborate as a well-planned excuse. He doesn't use the maps. They are indelible as a scar.

Someone's arm slides a box under the heating coils of the warmer. A condescending voice says, "A delivery to the Meow Club—she said not to bother to slice the pepperoni." He knows which disgusting line will come next. "She wanted extra sauce, too." There is a general uproar which he vaguely understands. Why do I get these runs? It must be a conspiracy. It's embarrassing just pulling into that place. Grabbing the cardboard box, he heads for the back door. A voice pats him on the back, "Go get'em, tiger."

"You know me," he says, "a real animal."
Heavy panting, poor imitations of wolf howls, and other animal noises die behind the thick, milky glass that separates the brilliant orange of the Place from the obsidian of the night. He returns to the dusty parking lot, so familiar that the potholes are named—Bertha, Hattie, Gertrude, Zelda, Mabel—a whole nursing home full of them. Playing one of his favorite games, he swerves, trying to run over as many of the potholes as possible. They're worth ten points apiece. Darn, he thinks, Only forty. I must be slipping.

He has delivered to the Meow Club Massage Studio before. It is a dilapidated house trailer hiding behind an abandoned, weedy nursery, and is strategically located about two feet outside of the city limits and the short arm of the local law. The small, but appropriately gaudy marquee that stands on the shoulder of the highway, marking the tunnel-like gravel road that leads back to the trailer, announces: "MEOW CLUB MASSAGE STUDIO—DAILY SPECIALS." Some of the drivers claim to know what the 'Daily Specials' are, but he tries not to listen to those people. A huge black pimp, who owns the Continental and sits behind a large desk, always dominates the interior of the trailer with his fixed glare. The rest of the decor looks like a recreation room in suburbia. It is furnished with two couches, a cheap portable bar, and a large color TV. A black curtain veils the hallway that leads back to the massage rooms. The girls, dressed in either leotards or swimming suits and lounging on the couches, always look tired. But they smile. By the look of their glassy eyes and raw, red noses, it is easy to tell that their employer knows how to keep them happy. Some of them don't look too bad. More than once, he has seen the same crippled man come hobbling out on crutches. He wonders if the man needed crutches before he went in. The Meow Club is ripe for speculations.
As he drives to the Meow Club, the traffic slows down to the pace of the couples walking from late movies back to their cars. Playing a game he calls 'Spot the Degenerate,' he checks the exit to the Roxie II, the town's only Triple X movie theater. Sometimes he could see someone quickly squeeze out through the door with sheepishly obvious nonchalance. Once he had met the woman who managed the Roxie. She actually seemed nice. The place drew a lot of professors during the noon hour, she had said, but he found that hard to believe.

Now the traffic is stop-and-go, thanks to a busted light. "Jeez Jack, you'd think a town full of engineers could keep the lights working." The red light flashes and the line slowly moves forward.

The Virgin solemnly gazed down at him from her marble pedestal. He felt a real hurt in those eyes that were brought to life by the red flickerings of the votive candles kept alive by old women in worn, woolen coats. A faint smell of old incense, mixed with the must of holy water, hung in the church like layers of a heavy but invisible fog. The light above the confessional flashed again and another guilty-looking sinner, as if apologizing for something, glanced at the line of people waiting for their turn and slunk to a pew to say penance. The line moved forward and he was given a gentle push by his mother. Silently, he rehearsed his list of sins. After confession, he always felt as if a great burden was lifted from him. He didn't know why. The light flashed again and the line shuffled forward. Another entered the dark box and quickly closed the door.
A horn blares behind him as the red light flashes. He sticks his head out the window, yelling, "What's your hurry!" and floors the accelerator. Jack chugs through the busy intersection. Soon the small businesses give way to crumbling old apartment buildings—termite infested houses that have been converted to apartments by slum lords who prey on the overpopulation of students. Memories. There are memories of friends who escaped to something better. Memories better forgotten. He turns up the radio and tries to think of nice things.

Instead, the Meow club girls parade across his mind. He crosses out the one with a dumpy body and the perpetually vacant look of a lobotomized cow. Her greasy, blonde-dyed hair hangs in clumps around her acne-scarred face. There is always the brunette that is really built. But he remembers her smile—that twisted mess is an orthodontist's dream. He cringes at the danger her mouth might involve. The only other regular is the black girl. Now, he thinks, she's something. High, firm breasts and long chocolate legs that she could . . .

He is startled by sirens and looks in the mirror to see flashing red lights. I deserve it, he thinks, without even checking the speedometer, and pulls over onto the shoulder. An ambulance flies by him, the flashing lights fading into the darkness of the rainy night. Darn, there'll be a cop next.
The thick, airless black of the confessional was relieved only by the small square window illuminated from behind by a weak light. The thin black curtain of linen that covered the opening contained the ominous silhouette of the priest and waved with rhythmic, audible breathing. The kneeler creaked as he shifted his weight, and his knees were already beginning to ache from the pressure against the hard oak. Panic. His mind went blank. He couldn't even remember how to start.

"Go ahead, my son," the silhouette sighed.

He started slowly. "Bless me, father, for I have sinned. It has been a month since my last confession and these are my sins." He paused, the list—what was first on the list?

"Yes?" the silhouette sighed impatiently.

"I disobeyed my parents four times. I lied three times. I fought with my brother six times. I cheated twice, and I took the Lord's name in vain once."

Again a long sigh and the curtain fluttered, distorting the silhouette. "Is that all, then?"

"I . . . touched my body in an impure manner . . . six times. For these and all my sins, I am heartily sorry."

The silhouette shifted. And in the same monotone in which he read the mass, the silhouette recited. "You are at the age when these urges will assault you frequently, but you must resist them. You must not let Satan win, for the body is the temple of God and must not be profaned. When you feel these urges, say a prayer to God that you might be strong and resist, for these urges are only a start, a first step down the path of wickedness."

"Yes, Father, I will . . . I don't want to be wicked."

"I know you don't, my son, but you must be strong, for Satan never rests. For your penance, I want to say ten Our Fathers, and say fifteen Hail Marys to the Blessed Virgin that she might give you strength. Now join me in the Act of Contrition."

They mumbled the prayer together and the priest gave him his final blessing. He rose from his aching knees and fumbled for the doorknob in the darkness.
A sharp rap on the window startles him. A policeman peers through the glass. He rolls down the window.

"Any problems?"

"No . . . Just pulled over to check the address on this next delivery."

The uniformed man glances back at the warmer. "A delivery clear out here?"

"We've just expanded our area a few miles outside the city limits."

"Next time you pull off, use your parking lights. This isn't the best place to pull over. Damn, I thought a couple of horny kids were going at it." He sounded disappointed.

"Sorry, officer."

"No real problem. Use your lights next time. Drive safely."

He rolls up the window and watches the policeman walk back to his parked patrol car. Putting Jack in gear, he pulls back onto the dark highway. After about a mile, he sees the only light for miles, save the scattered lights in farmyards. It is the Meow Club's flashing marquee.

He turns onto the muddy, water-filled ruts of the road that circles the abandoned nursery. The parking lot is empty. No Continental, no nothing. A dull blue light barely brightens the path to the trailer. He glances around into the weedy darkness that surrounds the parking lot. Not seeing anything, he quickly opens the door to the warmer, grabs the pizza, and heads down the path to the trailer, hoping no one is home.

A light is on in the trailer; as he stands at the bottom of the three steps, he hears the muffled sound of canned laughter from the TV. He pushes the doorbell, and glances around him.

Her black body is squeezed into tight red leotards, forming a silhouette against the bright lights inside the trailer. From the bottom step, the first thing he focuses on are those long, powerful legs. His eyes caress every detail on their way up to her pouting face.
“Don’ be gawkin’, boy. Come on ‘side.”

The lobotomized blonde and the saw-toothed brunette sit up and dumbly smile. The black girls takes the pizza from his hand and sets it down on the vacant desk. Another burst of laughter comes from the TV. The blonde giggles.

“What I owe ya?”

“Ah, that’ll be six-seventy.”

She bends over the desk and opens a drawer. He watches the thin red material of her leotards climb up her ass. She turns around and hands him a ten.

“You can keep the res’.”

His mouth opens, but nothing comes out.

“Whatsa matter, honey?” she says, still holding out the ten. “A kitty cat done got yo’ tongue?” She glances down at the obvious lump in his pants and shakes her head, “I do believe you’re excited.”

He grabs the ten and hurries out, shutting the door on the laughter that he is not sure is coming from the TV. Tripping down the stairs, he shoves the ten into his change bag. He is nearly running, trying to act nonchalant, though there is no one to see him.

Safely inside Jack’s still steamed interior, he unzips his pants and beats himself, mumbling “Hail Mary, full of grace . . .” — adding one more rancid odor to the blue interior of the car.