

## PIZZA BOY

Work at 4:00, woke at 3:30. Lunch for breakfast. Ate and watched sports in bed clothes, Yankee T and gym shorts. No time to change/shower. Running round house, looking for keys, forgetting medicine, leaving. Hit a little of last night's joint driving, stashed it with bud under seat.

I pulled in at 3:59, 4:02 on the boss' clock, but he wasn't there. His wife had food for me. I pulled out at 4:00.

First stop, truck stop, a chocolate company shipping and receiving mega-factory that stretched about a half-mile, filled with juggernaut-driving heroes, half sleeping in their offices. Most held the same mission: to criss-cross the country and see what the states offered in their search for whatever it was they were looking for.

I had no name or color, but numbers, and I hit a hundred on this wide pavement desert, glimpsing the passing trucks, looking for the right combination until it struck in baby blue digits on a red beast of a semi. I dropped to fifty and looped around to it.

Four knocks, nobody home. The engine roared like a lion. I pounded unlike a puss. And look at that, she emerged from the back of her truck nest, this rusty, red-headed, tooth-missing customer.

"How ya doin," I said, handing her the brown paper bag.

She removed a box from it and checked its insides.

"What're these?"

I looked at the orange balls and the receipt.

"Boneless wings."

"No, no, I didn't order boneless."

She removed the menu from the bag, pointing at the buffalo wings.

"I ordered those, the long kind, with the bones."

"I just deliver."

She took the salad out of the bag, opened the box, and shuffled the lettuce with her dirty fingers.

"What kind of lettuce is this?"

"I don't know. Iceberg."

"Uh uh, no no. This is foul. Do you see this?"

She showed me her lettuce, which was more white than green, and more blocky than leafy, but still edible.

"I want *lettuce* lettuce, not this crap. This is ridiculous. You see this?" she said, tossing it around in its box, failing to change its color. "I want leaves, nice and green."

"Alright."

"And there's gotta be more meat, more ham."

"What should I do?"

"Take it back."

I loved this woman because I loved riding around, especially the fifteen minutes both to and from the factory, even though the more I drove, the more gas I burnt, the less I made. But for making a living driving around in the summer, any amount would do.

In the shop the boss' wife was on the phone with the truck driver.

"No, you ordered boneless. It says right here!"

I plopped the unwanted salad down beside her. She sorted through it.

"What's wrong with it? ... Rotten? It's not rotten!" Her voice seemed plugged into amps, too many to count.

I hid in the bathroom tucked in the quiet far back of the restaurant, sitting on the toilet, debating whether to get some reading done. Trash overflowed from its can. Was I responsible for cleaning it? I couldn't remember. The faucet was broken. The lights flickered. Many bathrooms were better than this.

Fifteen minutes and three Youtube videos later I left the restroom, then the restaurant, a fresh salad in my car and a clear road ahead. What a ride man! Back roads with no speed limits. June's afternoon sun. Kids playing outside. Classic rock on the radio. So normal, simple, and cliché now. So profound later.

"That's better," said the truck lady.

She signed the check.

"I didn't order those wings you know."

"I don't know."

She handed me the check and not even a buck in tips from the change of her scummy cupholders.

"Sorry, this is all I got."

I took it, turned up the radio, and sped back to the pizza shop.

"This one's Hampton Inn. Large pie, diet soda, two liter," said the wife. "Don't forget the soda."

Five minutes and the pizza was ripe, boxed, and in my car. Morrigan Road to the Hampton Inn was a ten minute straight line with one stop sign at the beginning by the graveyard. If your car didn't drift you could take your hands off the wheel and bask in the beams shining through the jumbo trees that made Morrigan more of a tunnel.

I knocked on Hampton's 303 and out came a big Hispanic man with a bald head, full black beard, sharp, angry eyebrows, and a double XL Red Sox T.

"Hey, hey, come on in."

The door locked behind me. I gave him the check and unpacked the pie. The Sox played on his TV... muted. His signature seemed to take a whole inning.

"Here you go."

"Thanks. Have a good one," I said heading for the door.

"Uh, my drink?"

"Uhhh."

I turned. The man looked confused, drained. He didn't speak. Then he figured out what was going on. He was no longer the man who opened the door.

It might be in my car," I lied. "I'll go check."

"Alright."

Back at the car I thought I could go to Wegmans across the street and buy a two-liter soda, but other deliveries were probably waiting. I paced around the lot before returning to 303. I knocked again and the thing inside moaned for the whole floor to hear.

He opened, looking like he could use a soda.

"Uh, I forgot the soda. Do you want me to—?"

He turned and shut the door.

Back in the shop it was dead. No customers, no orders. The TV's weather channel called for rain. The wife was on the phone with her friend, speaking fast, angry Italian, or Bulgarian, or wherever this family came from.

"Dibedeefitsckanagadovooyadeenibaestukabademartidedetraflschesheprastudemano!"

It wasn't a conversation. Her friend was in trouble. The wife was giving it to her. She must've been a swimmer with those lungs. No pauses in between sentences, no spaces between words. Her language was one word made of all words.

I texted some friends, looking for tomorrow's plans, but no one was free. Internships, fellowships, shadowings, yes, but they weren't going to the school I was. A TV commercial told me to "Start a career you'll love at Davis Business Machines!" Another sold life-changing Caribbean getaways.

"Yadeenibademartifleschededetradibedeprastudemanoogadovoofitsckanabaestuka!"

I sat there, failing to tune her out. This was her restaurant, yet I felt like screaming gibberish at her. I went to my car, grabbed the joint from underneath the driver's seat, and sat on the bench under the neon OPEN sign, toking, forgetting.

When dinner came, so did deliveries. I drove down Manes Street. About a hundred feet ahead of me, a deer galloped out of the woods into the path of a pickup in the opposite lane. The Ford leveled it. The windshield shot it at least twenty or thirty feet in the air, the deer waving its legs, trying to grab hold of something. It was up so long I thought it was a reindeer. By the time I reached it, it came down hard, its body empty, unmoving. The Ford drove away.

Arrived at the hotel, I checked for deer on my car, finding nothing. I gave the man his extra sauce pizza. In his driveway I sucked on my joint and exhaled, smoke and deer lingering in the air. Leaving, passing the crash site on the way back, the deer was gone, not brushed off to the side. No red on the road.

When I returned the boss placed a cake in front of his little daughter at the table next to mine. Gathered around was the wife and her friend, possibly the one from the phone call. Walking by, I saw it was a birthday cake. They all started singing. Thinking it rude to ignore, remembering all the pizza boxes that girl had helped me make, I joined and listened as they sang "Happy Birthday" in Italian, or Bulgarian, or wherever these people came from.

“Want some cake Noah?” said the boss after serving his daughter.

“Nah, I’m good. Thanks.”

After cake there was pizza, and I was out. Rain had replaced the sun. When I turned on my wipers, I remembered that the blade on the driver’s side was broken. I drove without it, but the rain hardened. I stuck my head into the storm until it morphed into a near-hurricane. The windshield blurred and the sides of the road rushed rivers.

I pulled off and got out, my shoes submerged. The air had become high-speed water. I swapped the working blade over to the driver’s side, thinking this icy, wet sting was just that, nothing else, and that I’d dry eventually. This helped enough to switch the blade.

With pink skin I stopped at a red light shining over boats sailing the intersection, water halfway up their wheels. I dried my hands and counted the few bills in my pocket. To my right was the Goddard Institute, a private elementary school for kids of good fortune. I wondered about the kind of dough needed to go somewhere like that. Far down I saw a truck on the side of the road. Engine, tires, breaks, who knows? They were stuck. Help was far. The light turned green.

The customer’s house had no roof over the front door. Almost dry, I got out and stood exposed, repeatedly ringing the bell, morse-coding the homeowner to hustle. My rain mantra wasn’t working. I got in my car and checked the receipt. Right house. I dialed.

“Yeah.”

“You home? I got your food here.”

“Yeah, sorry, the bell’s broken. I’m comin’.”

On the ride back, the rain settled and my clothes began to dry in the high heat of the car. Zipping past the Morrigan graveyard, I glanced in my rear-view to see something like a distant cop car. I looked closer. The strip on its roof must’ve been one of those storage racks or something, definitely not a cop. I maintained speed. Then it gained on me and when it was close enough to question whether it really was a cop, its lights sparked and its siren let out a little shout.

By then I was already in the pizza shop lot, pulled over, the boss with a front row seat. I wasn’t worried until I remembered what was beneath me. I sprayed some Febreze. Then the cop was at my window.

“Hi, I’m with the Allentown Police Department, can I see your license and registration?”

“Alright,” I said, popping my glove compartment.

“You deliver?”

“Yeah, right here actually.”

When I spun to give him the registration, he turned away.

“You’re good then,” he said. “Just come to a complete stop next time.”

“Alright... thank you.”

I went into the shop. The wife and kids were gone. The boss kneaded dough.

“What happened?”

“Didn’t come to a complete stop. He asked if I delivered here though, and uh, let me go.”

He laughed. "That's probably Mike."

"Oh."

"He works here."

"What?"

"Yes," he laughed. "On Tuesdays."

"Oh." I didn't work on Tuesdays.

"You should take the sign like I told you, then they don't pull you over."

"Right."

Along with another delivery, I took the pizza sign, plopping it on my roof.

The final fifteen minutes. Trash time. I took the can out back and saw another kid from another restaurant doing the same. Preparing to pass, I wanted to smile, to laugh, to joke about our current predicaments, but he kept his head down. He was a loser, a bore, a bum. He wasn't going anywhere.

"One-fifty two and... seventy-three," Stan said.

I pulled out piles of bills from each of my pockets and sorted them out on the counter in front of Stan. One forty-three.

"Are you sure?" I said.

Stan checked his math. "Yes."

"Hold up."

I went to the car and found more bills in the cup holders and on the floor, but not enough to make it a good day.

"Here."

Stan took the money. I stuffed the little rest in my pocket and packed my bag.

"Take this last delivery. Best Western," he said. "They paid online so you're all set."

I took the pizza and went for the car. "Have a good one."

"Goodnight Noah."

This was a Best Western *Plus*. I asked the concierge where 222 was. She spoke and what I heard was, "go down hall and follow sign up stairs." Down the hall, there was no sign, but a set of stairs. Second floor corridor, still no signs. 244. 246. 248. 250. End of the hall. Dead end. Went back down stairs, no other sign. Went down other hall. 172. 170. Counting down. Spun around. Went further down first hall. Sign. Walked half-mile. 222.

Passed bar going home. Too tired. Ran light turning red. White flash. Worked six. Made zero. Sign still on roof.