

## Pepperoni.

I didn't think he'd talk. But he says, "What kind of food do you like?"

Here I figured he didn't like me: a young black man who appeared in the cone of my headlights. He and what I think is his girlfriend. A freckled, Hispanic gal. They kiss good-bye and up the stairs he comes saying, "I saw you down by the office. But I had to *run* to get to you."

So I figure he's pissed at me for driving past him at this apartment complex and I didn't even see the office. So I say, "This GPS doesn't tell me. You'll have to call in to let us know where to pick you up."

"The last guy knew."

I hear him buckle his seat belt.

And I let it drop there. Not worth arguing. How's he to know what it's like to drive a Metro Mobility bus with its ancient GPS telling you "Turn right at the exit," just as you come up on it. And then "In 800 yards," after making a split-second decision to turn. At the wrong exit.

And at night it's as though the headlights were designed by a guy who turns a beam from his monster truck to spot deer. Can't see a thing off to the sides as I round a corner. Get the sense I'll dream about these turns. Lighting up a ghostly, indifferent human waiting existentially to get run over.

So I figure he's not talking to me. Probably thinking Fuck You to me. And I'm a 63-year-old white guy on top of that.

But he makes conversation. "What kind of food do you like?"

I'm confused. Didn't he just challenge me with *The last guy knew*? Now he's being conversant. And then with this open-ended question.

It opens the door to a wide range of answers. So I figure on ethnicity. "Lately I've been really liking Ethiopian food," I say. I could have also added Thai food, or been more specific with something like I've been to Oaxaca, Mexico, and really liked the wide variety of moles.

"I like hot dogs," he says.

Oh, he wanted me to point out a *specific* food item.

"And pizza."

I say, "Have you ever had a Chicago hot dog?"

"No."

"It's got everything on it. Green relish, onions, hot peppers. But you don't ever put ketchup on it. Mustard. Just. Mustard."

There's a pause. I'm thinking I gave out too much information. Or maybe he thinks I'm judging him because he uses ketchup.

"I like mustard," he says. Like a statement of fact.

I'm thinking What kind? Ground mustard? Yellow? But now figure Keep it to yourself.

"I like pickles, too. Do you like pickles?"

"Oh yeah, pickles are great."

"Yeah, I like pickles. I like ketchup, too. But I don't eat hot dogs too much. Just when there isn't anything else to eat. But it's *good*."

I'm taking it that he probably lives on the edge with scarce income. But I'm not going to the "not having anything else to eat." What good would it do to talk about it? Except to rail at our government, our racism, and this. Nothing to eat.

So I fill the empty space because he doesn't continue. "Was that..." I'm about to say Your girlfriend, but am I being presumptuous? "Was that... a friend you saw back there at the apartments?"

"That's my girlfriend."

"It looks like you live... like really far away."

"Yeah. I just get to stay weekends. I wish we lived closer."

"Does she..." Again presumptuous. "Does she... or maybe it's you that cooks?"

"No. We eat snacks."

Don't know why, but late at night, in the ball of darkness, words lose their meaning. Snacks. Suddenly I'm not completely sure of its meaning. Snacks. Maybe it's because it could mean *snacking*, like what my wife and friends do when eating olives with crackers, or it could mean vending machine snacks.

"I like potato chips."

Oh.

"They're not supposed to be good for you," I say. You know, Gain Weight." And I thought about his girlfriend, rounded evenly, as though slightly ballooned, except that I didn't think about like that, exactly. Because I love the Central American complexion, the skin. I marvel at it. And she had freckles. Beautiful, large freckles, almost like you could count them.

"I like them with sour cream and onions. That's really good."

So he doesn't want to go there: to weight gain. I'm about to say The onion and sour cream flavoring is full of MSG when he asks, "Do you like potato chips?"

No I fucking hate them, I think. Not the potato chips necessarily but the diabolical food manufacturers who put MSG in to fatten up unsuspecting Americans like... And then I think about something I read on the internet. How black folk laugh when a white person brings potato salad to a picnic. Like I hear a black man saying to a white woman, *Girl*, Black folk bring *potato chips*!

I say, "Yeah. Sometimes." And then I'm about to say that when I get potato chips at a restaurant where I already pay way too much for a sandwich that I could make far better at home; in a restaurant, mind

you, they put potato chips on a plate next to the already mediocre sandwich and I'm supposed to pay what you're asking? Fucking *potato chips*?

"Yeah. Potato chips and tomato soup. That's good," he says.

"Ever have sweet potato pie? I mean, did your mom or grandma make it or something?"

After a pause he says, "No."

"Do you like Southern food, soul food? I remember when I lived in Flint... you know I'm from Flint... when I lived in Flint ..." maybe he doesn't know where Flint is? Maybe he's never heard of Flint, the water, all that... "in Michigan, I'd go to parts of town where... well, you know, where even some black friends of mine wouldn't go..." Were they my friends or just acquaintances? No. Not from their side. I think they saw me as a friend... "and I'd get sweet potato pie at this place."

He says nothing. The bus rattles with its loosely hinged, metal, folded-up, wheelchair lift. Maybe I just didn't hear him. No, I'm sure he says nothing. After all I said, which seems like too much. Like words pounded my mouth and became ever emptier.

"Didn't you get greens growing up," I ask?

"I had greens," he says, again like a statement of fact. "They gave me diarrhea. I don't eat them anymore."

Greens? Diarrhea? That's the last thing they'd cause. Maybe it was Swiss Chard. Has lots of magnesium. That'll do it.

"Yeah. I like pizza, too," he says.

Back to pizza. "What kind do you like?" I'm thinking thick crust, wood-fired, thin crust...

"Pepperoni. I like pepperoni on my pizza."