

## Delivered

He needed to get a job that summer. Something. Anything. His father wasn't going to let him goof off with his high school friends, playing backyard Wiffle ball by day and drinking light beer in the woods by night.

"Perry, we're not paying thirty grand a year for you to study liberal arts at some fancy institution so you can screw around all summer," his father admonished. Larry Guck was a house painter who toiled long hours and came home looking like a dappled cow.

"Dad, isn't that a speech you make after someone graduates college, not before they start?"

Perry Guck was short and unmuscular and if he had gone through puberty, it wasn't apparent in his high-pitched voice and cherubic face.

"This isn't a discussion, Perry." And it wasn't. His father had a menacing stare and a stout frame and when he raised his voice, Perry knew it was best to obey. Or at least feign obeying.

Perry handed in a few applications that week – the Stop & Shop, Applebee's, the local ice cream parlor. Under job history, he listed "NOTHING" and under the job for which he was applying he wrote, "ANYTHING (preferably easy)." He delivered his applications to the most accessible front-line service worker and then dashed out as if the place were contagious.

"Any news?" his father asked him at the dinner table a few days later.

"Nothing." Perry shrugged and moved his piles of peas and corn with his fork, creating a vegetable world of hillocks and trails.

"Did you follow-up?"

"Follow-up? Like how?"

“Yeah, follow up. Give them a call. Walk back in there, say hello, ask to talk to a manager. Act like you want the friggin’ job.” His father’s voice was loud and the wrinkles in his forehead converged as he stared across the table at Perry.

“I did nothing of the sort.”

His father shook his head back and forth. “I don’t know about this kid, Gayle.”

Perry’s mother was his co-conspirator. An elementary school teacher, she wasn’t unhappy with the idea of Perry being around more that summer to spend more time with him. In the fall, he’d be 200 miles away in college and lost to them, a veritable adult.

“Oh Larry, would you let the poor kid alone. He applied for several jobs. What else do you expect?”

“He *applied*,” he said with another shake of his head. “This isn’t about just applying, Gayle. We’re not giving out participation trophies here. You can’t expect everything to be just given to you. You have to show some initiative. Act like you want it.”

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Fortunately, Perry didn’t have to test himself against his father’s maxims. A couple days later his mother ran into a friend from the PTO who volunteered for Meals on Wheels. The organization needed delivery drivers.

“It’ll be perfect,” his mother pitched it to him. “You’ll be out and about, meeting interesting people.”

“Interesting people?” Perry scoffed. “Isn’t it, like, all shut-ins? I mean, who gets these meals?”

“You’re going to have to find out. Interesting people. I’m just sure of it.” She was eating baby carrots out of the bag and stretching her quads, the back of her heel up against her butt. She had just finished her daily five mile run.

His mother’s enthusiasm wasn’t what bothered Perry – it was her constant need to spin everything into a positive. A bout of the flu wasn’t a week of misery but a welcome wake-up call for the immune system. Losing wasn’t a sign of inadequacy but an opportunity to show grace and sportsmanship to the winner. The shouting matches between his parents weren’t indications of a crumbling marriage but healthy and productive conversations toward real compromise. “A bunch of new-age nonsense” was his father’s description. It was the one thing on which Perry and his father agreed.

“What, are they going to give me a car?” Perry rubbed his hand through his mop of brown hair, sweeping it up and letting it fall back down on his forehead. “How am I going to get around?”

“You can borrow my car, kiddo,” she said and socked him lightly on the upper arm.

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On his first delivery, Perry found out exactly the kind of interesting people he’d encounter. An elderly man with overgrown eyebrows waited for him on the front sidewalk with a newspaper tucked under his arm and a large coffee stain – or what Perry hoped was just a large coffee stain – on the front of his white undershirt.

“You the new happy meal driver?” the man asked with a toothless smile.

“Happy meal coming up,” Perry said and handed him the plastic tray covered in cellophane. A peek through the plastic revealed a lump that looked suspiciously like horsemeat nestled next to a few wilted leaves of iceberg lettuce.

“Meatloaf again?” the man groaned and Frisbeed the tray into the shrubbery before he waddled back to his house. Before he walked back to his car, Perry noticed several other trays on the ground under the rhododendron.

“Don’t blame you!” Perry called out.

The old man wasn’t the only strange encounter among a mostly appreciative and lonely-looking elderly population. At one home, a female voice bellowed from behind a closed door, “Just leave it on the step, please.” Another man opened the door naked except for a pair of loose-fitting boxer shorts that drooped below his hips. “Oh goody” was all he said when Perry handed him the tray.

With just a few deliveries left on his route, eager to get home and relax, Perry met Elaine. She opened the door with alertness in her eyes and a head of creamy white hair combed over her ears. She was a tiny woman, barely four foot eight, and made Perry look like a basketball center in comparison.

“What is your name, young man?” she asked.

“Perry,” he said, surprised to be asked a personal question. Nobody on his route had asked him anything yet.

“Perry? Like Perry Como?” she said with a chuckle.

“I guess. Who’s Perry Como?”

“Oh, a legendary singer way before your time. He sang ‘It’s Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas.’ Have you heard that song?”

“I think so,” he said, pretty certain he hadn’t.

“You actually look a little like a young Perry Como,” she said.

“Oh really?” he said nonchalantly, suppressing an urge to pull out his phone and search Google Images.

“My name’s Elaine,” she said. “Very nice to meet you, Perry. And where do you live? Are you nearby?”

“I’m in the neighborhood. Just about a mile from here over on Calumet Drive.”

“Oh sure, I know Calumet. And are you going to school, or graduated perhaps?”

Normally, he didn’t like these kinds of personal questions, but the woman had such grandmotherly cheer in her voice, he didn’t mind. He never met any of his grandparents, really. They all had died before he was four.

“I just graduated high school. Off to college in the fall.”

“Congratulations, that’s wonderful. And you’re off to where?”

“Allegheny College,” he said. “About two hours from here.”

“Of course, I know Allegheny. My late husband was from Meadville. That’s a lovely town. Oh you’re going to love it,” she rubbed her hands together. “That’s so exciting. So this is a summer job then for you?”

He nodded.

“We get lots of delivery people rotating in and out. It seems all the good ones leave quickly,” she said with a sigh.

Perry shrugged, unsure what to say and whether he was being deemed “a good one” on his first day. Not prone to easy flattery, he felt a sense of pride in the compliment. He extended his hand and presented the tray to her. “Well, here’s your meal, Elaine.”

“What do we have here?” she asked amiably, taking it from him.

He resisted an impulse to make a joke.

“Meatloaf,” she answered for him with a smile. “That’ll certainly do. Thanks very much, Perry. See you tomorrow I hope?”

“Yes, I’ll be here,” Perry responded and for the first time that morning, he suddenly found himself happy in the job. He had survived the first day and had a nice chat with a friendly woman to end the shift. Perhaps his mother was correct – the job might be pretty decent after all.

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At home that evening his mother delighted in Perry’s anecdotes about the characters he met that day, especially the ones featuring the wasteful curmudgeon and his antitheses: the man who came to the door with a fork in his hand, ready to devour the meal on the spot.

“It takes all types,” she said with a laugh. “You’re doing good *and* making some money. That’s great, Perry. Not a bad job at all, huh?”

His father meanwhile was drinking a bottle of Yuengling and leaning up against the counter. “You call that a job, driving around a few hours, dropping off meals to people? That’s volunteer work, Perry. You can’t live off a few hours a day.”

“Who said anything about that? Perry said. “Who said I was going to get a job to live off?”

“C’mon Larry, don’t be so hard on the kid,” his mother said, raising her voice. “He got a job. It was his first day and he did well.”

“Stop awarding participation trophies, Gayle,” his father barked back.

“Would you stop it with the damn participation trophies? At least come up with something new for the love of God. It’s like I’m married to a Fox News host!”

When his parents began to argue, especially when the argument centered on him, Perry retreated upstairs to his bedroom. These silent retreats happened more this summer than in the past. Perhaps it was his parents about to lose him, their only child, that coming fall that caused the final strain on the marriage. Perry didn’t know it then of course, but it would be the last summer any of the three of them lived together.

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The next morning, Elaine was ready for him. She stood supported by a cane behind the screen door. He was surprised to see the cane only because he hadn’t noticed it the day before. When Perry walked up, she popped open the door with a smile. “You came back for a second day!”

“I did,” he said, happy to see a friendly face. The driving around all morning, the incessant starts and stops, was surprisingly tiresome.

“How many homes are on your route, Perry?”

“About forty.”

“Wow, forty. That’s a lot. Very impressive. Getting the hang of it?”

“I think so,” he said feeling himself swell again with pride. Here was an objective person, not his fawning mother, paying him a compliment. Never mind his browbeating father whose sparse praise was usually backhanded anyway. “Beautiful day today,” he offered.

“It certainly is. I’m going to work on my garden today.” She said this with such gusto, it belied how brittle she appeared with her cane and the tiny dowager’s hump that jutted out adorably from her back.

“Garden?” he said looking around playfully with his hands out, palms up. “I don’t see a garden.”

“Oh it’s out back, silly,” she said and chuckled. “I’m growing rhubarb, radishes, beets, collard greens—and fennel.”

They all sounded like vegetables that Perry wouldn’t touch. “Fennel?”

“You don’t know fennel?” she said joyfully.

“Never heard of it.”

“Oh it’s delicious. Such an underrated vegetable.”

“Vegetables are rated?” Perry said with a smirk.

Elaine chuckled. “I like your sense of humor, Perry. That’s a gift. That’s going to take you places.”

“I’d be more excited if you were growing pizza back there,” he added.

She laughed again, her entire little body shaking.

A week later, Elaine opened the door with a smile. Cupped in her hand was a white bulb with green leaf spears that sprung out of it. To Perry, it resembled a plant that belonged at the bottom of the ocean. Squid food.

“This is fennel, Perry.”

“This is from your garden?” His voice broke in surprise.

“No, the grocery store,” she replied, smiling. “Mine aren’t ripe yet. A friend of mine picks me up a few things on occasion at the store. I don’t drive anymore.” She paused and then said with a



tinge of sadness, “It’s just something I decided on my own. I didn’t feel confident in my ability anymore.”

Perry had assumed most of his customers didn’t drive anymore, but he never really gave it any consideration. Now that he had a car at his disposal and had experienced that freedom, he couldn’t imagine not being able to drive, stuck at home, dependent on others for everything, including basic sustenance.

“Take it Perry. Try it at home,” she offered.

“No thanks,” he said with a shake of his head. “Maybe I’ll wait for yours to be ripe to try,” he added with no intention of following through on it.

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July 4<sup>th</sup> fell on a Tuesday, which meant no meals that day and a double delivery on Monday. Along with the normal hot meal, Perry distributed a box of goodies—mac and cheese, bottled waters, granola beers, apples, cans of beef stew: apocalypse food and enough of it to last a few days. He tucked the box under his left armpit and held the tray in his right hand. He humored himself wondering whether his father would appreciate the dexterity the job suddenly required. Sure, it wasn’t standing on the top rung of a ladder dabbing at impossible crevices with a paint brush teetering on his fingertips, but it was something.

Elaine wasn’t sitting in her front porch as usual, so he pressed his knuckle up against the bell, heard the loud ding, and then waited. Five seconds became ten. When ten became thirty, a sense

of panic crept in. And just when he was about to make a phone call to the office, the inside door opened and Elaine hobbled slowly to the front door.

“Oh dear, Perry, I’m sorry. I overslept this morning. I still haven’t even dressed.” She was clearly rattled, her cheeks flushed. She stood awkwardly before him in her nightgown.

“I was starting to get worried,” Perry said. “Is everything ok?”

“Yes, thank you. Everything is fine. I just slept late. It happens some mornings. Don’t ask me why.” And then she forced a smile and pointed at him. “Don’t ever get old, young man.”

“I’ll try not to,” he said and tossed up his hands. “Do Flintstones vitamins help with that?”

“I think they probably do, Perry,” she laughed and then gestured at what he was holding. “The box must be for tomorrow? July 4<sup>th</sup>, right? I almost lost track of it.”

“Yes, two for one special.”

Elaine extended her right hand to grab the box but Perry realized at once that it was a bad idea.

“Let me help,” Perry said quickly. “Can I drop these inside for you?”

“Aren’t you kind,” she said, turning around and leading him into the screened porch. Perry took in the room in a sweeping glance. A little checkerboard table off to the left was covered with a few pieces of mail, and several potted plants lined the back wall. She gestured to the table.

“You can lay those down right there, Perry. Brush those envelopes aside. It’s just junk mail.”

He laid down the box, tucking the tray next to it, and then turned around to a huge surprise: a three by three canvas sitting on an easel, featuring a stand of Black-Eyed Susans illuminated in sunlight.

“That’s amazing,” Perry said, astonished at the preciseness of the painting, the sheer artistry in display. “You painted that?”

“I did. Those flowers are right outside the window here.”

“How long have you been painting? Are you like a professional?”

“Ha no!” she waved off the idea. “I picked it up when I was in rehab last year. There wasn’t anything to do but sit around watching TV or playing Bingo. I took advantage of the art room.”

“What were you doing in—” Perry caught himself, realizing the question was too forward.

“Sorry.”

“Oh don’t be. I had a bad fall. That’s how most old folks like me end up there.”

“Are you better now?” He found himself fumbling at exactly the right thing to say to express concern. “I mean, recovered from that fall?”

“Well enough to get out of there, which was the important part—but I have to say, it wasn’t all that bad to be there. I had a couple roommates and one of them was a real hoot. They served us three hot meals a day. Family style. It was just nice to be around people.”

“That sounds nice. And you had the art room.”

“Yes, and I had the art room. Where I turned into Monet,” she chuckled and again waved, this time toward herself. “As if!”

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A month in, Perry had settled into the job. He knew it, mastered it. The most efficient routes, shortcuts that avoided traffic lights, the discreet patch of woods to pee. He practically had the line-up of homes memorized. His mother no longer asked him for any stories and updates and his father had accepted with a muted resignation that the job would be the extent of Perry’s summer

employment. A couple of times the office sent Perry updates to incorporate new homes into his delivery schedule, but otherwise things thrummed along in the slow ease of summer.

Elaine's house came near the end of his deliveries and he preferred it that way. It allowed for conversation without holding up everyone else waiting for their meals. One morning, she invited him to walk around to the backyard to see her garden.

As he walked along the side of the house to meet her in the back, Perry marveled at the beautiful landscaping—the grove of hostas, the bushes of white roses, the row of Black-eyed Susans. He had shared the driveway with a landscaping truck on more than one occasion. Her yard contrasted with his home where his father practiced minimalist lawn management—frequently mowed grass and no adornments to keep away any critters.

Elaine stood at the end of the deck like a conductor, pointing out vegetables and announcing when they would be ready to pick. Nothing was quite ripe just yet, but getting close. Any day now, she said.

“This is incredibly arranged,” Perry enthused about the raised beds of wood that housed the vegetables. “When did you set all this up?”

“Years ago, Perry, when I was young and spry.”

A vegetable garden. He certainly didn't like eating vegetables, but the idea of a garden had immediate appeal to Perry. The opportunity to grow something from seed, from the earth. Nature unleashed. Later that day, he introduced the idea of setting up a garden behind his house to his parents. His father quickly dismissed it as a breeding ground for rabbits and raccoons. “We can't have that Perry.” Even his mother didn't support the idea, claiming a garden was a lot of work, too much work, and since the planting would have to be done while he'd be away at college, she wasn't invested enough to do it for him.

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A few days before Elaine's promised harvest, he received a phone call early in the morning from Meals on Wheels. An administrator named Jessica, someone he had never met before, was on the other end. "Perry, I have some sad news to pass on," she said in a tone of professional distance. "Elaine Bascomb passed away last night. I wanted to let you know. So obviously no meal delivery there anymore."

Perry was in shock and couldn't muster a reply.

"Perry, you there?" she asked.

"Yup, got it," he said. "Thanks."

He sleepwalked through his shift that day, absently delivering meals, forcing smiles and false cheer. Toward the end of his route, when he was just a block away from Elaine's street, the pain hit him. He pulled over and felt his throat tighten. And then before he could take control of himself, he was crying, softly at first, and then deep muffled sobs, his whole torso shaking. His reaction was a surprise to himself. He hadn't lost any relatives or friends before, or knew anyone on a personal level who had died. Death was a new enemy and a painful one.

At home that afternoon he told his mother the news, stifling tears, and she wrapped him in a bear hug. His father knocked on his bedroom door later and said, "Bud, sorry to hear about that woman. Sounds like a great lady." He nodded a couple times and then left the room. His father's sympathies were almost more jarring than Elaine's death.

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In the funeral parlor, Perry sat in the back corner in a short-sleeve white dress shirt, and billowy black dress pants, looking more like a caterer than a mourner. He found the clothes at the back of his father's closet.

He was one of only six people in attendance and the youngest by at least forty years. Only six people, he kept asking himself? How could that be for someone as warm and genial as Elaine?

After the service, he walked slowly to the door, not knowing what to say or do. He was about to push the door open and leave when someone addressed him, "Excuse me, young man." He turned around to see a woman of about sixty with cinnamon red hair smiling at him.

"Yes," he said tentatively.

She walked over. "I'm Elaine's niece, Beatrice. You must be Perry?"

"Yes," he said again.

"Oh Perry. I'm so glad you came. Elaine talked a lot about you these last several weeks. She was very fond of you."

He felt himself blush. "I enjoyed talking to her too."

"She said you're going to Allegheny in the fall. I live outside Meadville. I kept inviting Elaine to move back to the area—I have a spare bedroom—but she was wedded to her home."

"She took really good care of it."

"She did, she really did. I was just over there this morning sorting through some things. There are a couple of things she'd like you have, Perry."

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Beatrice greeted him at Elaine's front door. It felt odd and sad for someone other than Elaine to be there waiting for him. Beatrice led him into the porch, which led into a den. The room was orderly but undistinguished. A couple recliners, a beige sofa, a coffee table strewn with magazines, a bookcase against the wall with old, likely out-of-print, books. No television set.

Beatrice walked over to the corner of the room and picked up a painting leaning against the wall and spun it around to show him. He didn't immediately recognize the tidy square lawn bisected by the cobblestone walkway, or the dogwood tree on the strip of lawn between the curb and sidewalk. But there in the painting was his mother's blue Buick parked right behind the tree, and in the foreground a diminutive figure approaching with a miniature tray in his hand.

"Wait, that's—"

"The front yard. And you! Walking up to deliver the meal," she chuckled. "Elaine told me she was painting this scene. She was going to give it to you as a parting gift when you went off to college."

"This is amazing," he said looking the painting over, unable not to smile. "Just amazing." He looked up at her and smiled and then took a step toward the front door. "Well, thank you for giving this to me. Nice to meet you."

"Wait, one more thing, Perry," she interrupted. "Something is finally ready for you." Beatrice left and then came back with a fennel bulb in her outstretched hand. "I know she'd want you to have this."

Perry took it in his hands and brought it up close to his face. It smelled okay. Beatrice laughed. "Try it," she said. "It's right from the garden."

"What part of it?" he fumbled. "I mean, where do I start?"

"It's all edible," she said.

He brought the white bulb to his mouth as he would an apple and took a large bite, his teeth crunching into the heart of it all. There was a pungency to it but also a sweetness. Like licorice. And it was good.