

Mis-delivery

*My nerves are bad tonight. Yes, bad. Stay with me.
Speak to me. Why do you never speak? Speak.*

—T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*

Thursday morning they received a liver and an ear in the mail.

The pieces were bubble-wrapped and packed neatly inside a standard mailing box, which Dolores retrieved from the front porch in the morning and left on the kitchen floor. She did not give the package much thought, sure it was something of Felix's. The return address in the upper corner was slightly smudged, but "Minnesota" was clear. When Felix arrived, he said it must have been the new top for the small coffee table in the living room.

"You wanted it to match the curtains, remember?"

Dolores was cooking dinner. She thought it didn't look like a coffee table top, but she nodded at her husband.

Felix hoisted the package onto the counter next to the cutting board. She continued chopping carrots while he tore open the box. He lifted the topmost item out and stared at the brownish color through the plastic bubbles.

"Damn, Lola, you didn't tell me it'd be 'assembly required.' You know it's not easy for me to find the time to put something together."

"It should be simple," she sighed, setting down her knife. "Only screwing it into the legs." She too reached into the box and pulled out a much smaller piece. "Must be the screws," she said, though her fingers already knew differently. The package was soft and pliable and as she pulled apart the bubble wrap an acrid smell permeated the kitchen.

She screamed when she saw what it was, and the ear fell onto her pile of perfectly chopped carrots.

"Now what the hell's gotten into you?" Felix didn't turn to see. He was still trying to open the first packet, which was proving to be a bit slippery and was clearly not the shape of a coffee table top. She offered no answer and he didn't speak again until he finally managed to unwrap what turned out to be a preserved liver. "What the..."

His wife regained her wits and peeked over his shoulder. "It's a body part. Just like mine." She pointed and for the first time, he saw

the pale ear perched on what would have been his dinner.

They called the police first. A couple of officers came immediately and did not even pretend to have explanations. Husband and wife recounted the unwrapping and the shock, officers snapped on latex gloves and gathered the pieces, and no one said much more. The officers mentioned that they would call the shipping service and shrugged when Dolores asked if she could also call.

“I’ll be honest with you, Felix,” said Deputy Dan Darga. “This is not something that happens a lot and we don’t know what to make of it. You have any cannibalistic enemies?”

It was a joke Felix didn’t get right away, one he brooded about in the following hours. He responded in a serious manner and Dan laughed at him. “It was obvious that the pieces were embalmed,” Dolores said later. “I mean, if someone wanted to send body parts to scare you, he wouldn’t take the time to embalm them, would he?”

They were sitting in the living room, sipping their evening coffees as if they were farther apart than the four feet between their matching armchairs. Felix had bought the chairs as his “ten years to retirement” marker twelve years ago. The television was tuned to a game show with a toasted-faced host and overly exuberant contestants, but neither was watching it.

After every dinner, they sat in those chairs with their coffees—black for Dolores, one teaspoon of sugar and two of creamer for Felix—and waited for the other to begin some kind of “how-was-your-day-dear” conversation. And every night, they came close to drowning in the prolonged silences or the desultory inconsequential words.

Felix set his empty mug on the little table between them and toyed with the lid on the sugar jar.

“We’re almost out of sugar,” he commented.

Dolores looked at the jar. “I’ll put it on the grocery list.”

“Don’t forget.”

“I won’t.”

They watched another quarter hour of television and then went upstairs to bed, where the distance pulled them further still, into dreams of realized solitude and isolated deaths.

* * *

There is no such thing as privacy in small towns, no concept of

it at all in those parts of the country where all inhabitants define themselves as middle-class and use friendly words like “folks” and the old ones whisper gossip over pineapple upside-down cake and the young ones over cigarettes in the school playground after dark.

By the end of the workday Friday, the rumors around town were more bizarre than the package itself. Some said that the Wordens were involved in organ trafficking; others claimed the remains were from the bored mafia who were looking to harass random folks for fun; and the younger crowds joked that the parts actually belonged to Felix and Lola, that they had lost them somewhere along the way.

The tales didn’t bother Dolores, but after Felix fielded three questions while retrieving his mail (watch out, the neighbors said, and hahaha they laughed), he was exasperated.

“I’m already sick of this,” he said over coffee that night.

“Let’s call Jack and Wendy over,” Dolores suggested. “We’ll play cards or something.”

“I don’t want to see anyone,” her husband grunted. She didn’t respond. Other people had routines, she knew, but other people also did things outside of these routines—or so she suspected, as most of the obituaries she read didn’t cite “boredom” as a cause of death. Other people had children or even grandchildren to occupy them; they had hobbies and friends and at least sometimes spent Friday nights in different ways than the rest of the week.

Dolores scratched a stain on the side of her mug. “Why do you really think we got that ear in the mail?”

“Lola, Lola.” Felix used to use the nickname with ardor but it lost its sweet flavor years ago. She had never been able to call him anything, hypocoristically speaking—he rejected Phil and Lix and despised people who went by their initials. She never thought of herself as Lola. “I think we had a box of body parts on our table yesterday because either a stupid postman made a beastly mistake or the sender wrote the address wrong. Did you happen to check the postmark or addresses before they took the box away?”

“Just Minnesota.”

“You didn’t try to read the city?”

She shook her head.

“Would’ve been a smart move,” he reprimanded, forgetting that he hadn’t looked either.

“The addresses were smudged,” she said.

Dolores waited a few minutes for him to ask her why she thought the ear and liver came to them, but he didn't reciprocate the question.

She didn't tell her husband that she had actually called the postal service earlier that day to make a formal complaint and had listened to two recordings of "We can only be responsible for loss, damage, delay, mis-delivery, non-delivery, or misinformation if the sender has paid for delivery insurance," before she finally got through to a human voice. When she did speak to a person, she was unable to provide any information about the package except that it had been delivered to her house, an address that the delivery system obviously did not register as any intended destination for any package.

After another half hour of television, Felix announced, "I'm going to bed."

"I think I'll stay up for a bit."

"Oh," he said, somewhere between disappointed and disgruntled. "Going to finish the movie?"

"Maybe. Maybe I'll read."

"Okay. Good night."

Dolores waited until he went upstairs to stretch out her legs and mute the television. She wasn't interested in the program, nor did she think she could focus her attention on a book. She heard her husband upstairs, the creak of the floor indicating his walk from the bathroom to the bedroom and the noise of settling telling her that he was certainly in bed. Alone: and what was she to do? She flexed her toes and thought of getting a snack out of the refrigerator. But what to eat? They were watching their diets together. They never really bought cookies and packaged things. She was ashamed that she wanted a packaged cookie or something sweet to stick in the toaster. That was the kind of snack sought by someone fifty years younger when she's alone near the kitchen.

She couldn't eat carrots without thinking of severed ears and a pear would only remind her of her husband. It was his favorite fruit and he ate the whole piece, down to the stem. When he finished chomping the seeds and the bitter core, he would roll the stub between his lips, from one side of his mouth to the other. Dolores used to think it was cute but after thirty-some years of marriage, it had become repulsive.

She wasn't going to get a snack.

She wasn't going to read.

Even twenty years ago she would have gone up the stairs, dropping her clothes as she went, and interrupted her husband's initial stage of sleep. They used to make love, really make in all senses of the word but one: they never had any children.

"Unable to," the doctors told her. They didn't say why, but she had suspected that they told Felix, that he knew some secret about her body. Back in the days she might have had the courage to ask him, she didn't bother on the assumption that if it was something she needed to know, he would have mentioned it. And now, when she wanted all of herself for her own, he would refuse to give it to her or pretend he didn't remember. Early in their marriage, they talked about having children, three or four (as long as most of them would be boys, Felix smiled, and she wasn't sure he was kidding). Back then, at the doctor's office, he had patted her arm: "Lola, you suffer from a silent womb." He laughed, she didn't, and they moved on with their lives.

Dolores heard his soft snoring through the ceiling; he was surely asleep.

She looked around twice, ascertaining her solitude, and then jammed her forefinger in her right nostril and picked zealously.

* * *

It was that time in the Midwest when summer is surely gone but winter hasn't arrived furiously yet—Dolores spent the day digging up weeds around where the marigolds bloomed in the backyard; she didn't pay attention at all to how her husband passed the time. In the late afternoon, they took a walk around town.

"Wish people wouldn't stare," he mumbled.

She put her hand in his and both were aware how awkward it was—an awkwardness that was reminiscent of teenage years and sweaty palms, except it was strange precisely because it was missing that charming ineptitude. Both hands were dry and cold. "You'd be curious, too," she said.

"Why are you defending them?"

Don't defend the pointless, he would say. She might have said she was defending the defenseless without really knowing what she meant.

They walked hand in hand, each unwilling to be the first to let go. Lola thought that if she'd have seen such a scene forty years ago,

she would have been thrilled with hope and jealousy, expecting to have the same closeness in her advanced age.

“Lo, did you get the groceries yet?” he asked as he scraped the bottom of the sugar jar with his spoon that evening.

“No, I always go on Mondays. Anyway, there’s enough in there to last till then.”

“You could go tomorrow.”

“I promised Shirley I’d have lunch with her.”

“On your way back.”

“No, I’ll go Monday.”

It was almost midnight when Felix started hearing the shrieking.

“Lola,” he nudged her awake. “Did you leave the TV on?”

“No,” she murmured.

“Are you sure?” he paused, listened intently. Nothing. “Maybe it was the neighbors.”

Now his wife was more alert. “What did you hear?”

“Sounded like a soft scream.”

She lifted her head and concentrated on the silence.

They fell asleep again and the next time Felix woke up, three hours later, he didn’t bother to ask Lola if she heard it too.

* * *

He brooded around the house Sunday while his wife passed the afternoon at her friend’s house. He could have gone too and chatted with Shirley’s husband about the weather and the state’s poor economy and increasing unemployment rate; they could have made golfing plans that neither would have intended to keep. But Felix preferred to sit on the back porch and scratch the skin off his left elbow and go through all of the reasons he had to sue whoever sent him the liver and the ear. Trauma. Embarrassment. Cause of slander.

He scratched his arm until he bled and as soon the droplets formed scabs, he picked them off and put them in his mouth. He didn’t think about it. He just did it. If he had thought about it, he would have been terribly ashamed. It was a habit left over from childhood; he would have known it was socially unwelcome but he liked the crunch and the metallic taste of the blood. At the least, he only did it when he was sure no one was watching.

He thought about calling Dan Darga to ask about the ear and liver. The man probably had gotten an explanation by now, Felix

thought. But it was Sunday, and for most people Sundays weren't made to be interrupted with those kinds of calls, and even if Felix wasn't one of those people, he didn't want to hear the shuffling as Dan Darga said "Oh, just a minute" and moved away from the living room where his kids were hollering, building some kind of blanket fort, to the kitchen where he could hear Felix better.

His wife returned in the evening; Felix had already made the coffee and had dumped the last bits of sugar into his mug.

"Well?" he asked as they settled into their chairs.

"Shirley's son got a job at State."

"He's a professor?"

"Sure is."

"Of what?"

"Medieval history, I think."

"Which son? The one with the nose like a hawk or the one who married that Korean girl?"

She scratched her own nose. She longed to pick it again but refrained. "The older one."

"Which one is that?"

"Hawk nose."

"Medieval history, what the hell kind of job is that?"

Dolores wrinkled her forehead. "Shirley's proud. And she should be."

"Well, he could be doing something useful."

Felix didn't notice the tears in his Lola's eyes when she got up; he started to suspect their existence when he heard her climb into bed upstairs, but he didn't go after her. Crying over someone else's son is ridiculous, he defended himself. He scratched the scabs on his elbow again. When he upstairs himself, his wife was asleep. He wasn't able to sleep more than three consecutive hours because the shrieking was ringing in his ears, almost convincing him that its origin was his own head—but, no, it was more bodily, more extraneous, completely inaccessible despite its desperation. He rolled over and put a pillow on his head. Perhaps shrieking wasn't the right word; it was wailing, howling. It would not leave him alone.

* * *

Monday morning, the phone rang. Dolores answered and as soon as she suspected it was about the liver and the ear, she handed the

phone to Felix. He'd want to talk. After he introduced himself, she left the kitchen and picked up the other line and muffled the receiver with her hand. She wouldn't wait for a second-hand version of the story.

"Mr. Felix Worden?"

"Yes?"

"How are you, sir?"

"How the hell am I? Who is this? What do you want?" Felix wrinkled his forehead and looked back at the living room, where he was sure his wife had gone to listen in. He could not tell if the man on the line had questions or answers.

"Excuse me, sir. My name is Jonathon Holzer. I'm calling about the package you erroneously received last week."

"Well, what about it?"

"Sir, I'm calling from Richards Medical Research. The package was meant to be delivered to our facilities. I want to offer you an apology on behalf of our parent company and of all our staff here for the mistake last week."

"Well?"

"Well... The mix-up was unfortunate but we want to assure you that there was no health hazard involved in opening the package in your house."

"How did it happen?"

"Sir?"

"Haven't you talked to the damned shipping company? What was it, postal service? Why did it come to us?"

Jonathon Steward paused; Felix pressed the receiver harder to his ear and waited to hear about incorrectly spelled cities while Dolores grasped the other phone and prayed for the word *fate* or *chance* to reverberate into the telephone.

"I can't answer that question exactly," Mr. Holzer ventured instead. "The shipment was from a facility in China and was meant to come to us for research. The... um, cargo, was repacked before we received it so I didn't have a chance to review the packaging information. We've never had such an incident before. We have spoken to the delivery service and, as I'm sure you know, mis-delivery occasionally happens. Usually when the addresses are similar. In our case, though, from what the police say, ours aren't much alike. Not the numbers, not even the letters of the street. The only thing that

could have been reasonably mixed up were the states: Minnesota's not so different from Michigan."

The man chuckled a little. Felix was silent. The Mr. Holzer cleared his throat, clearly having gone off of his rehearsed speech. "As I said, Mr. Worden, we've never had such a thing happen before."

All Felix could muster was "Neither have we" before Jonathon Holzer flowed into another apology and all of the right end-of-conversation signals. Felix couldn't even argue; all of the bases for a lawsuit flew from his mind.

Dolores shrugged when they both hung up their phones. "Well, we couldn't have expected more."

But both had.

She started preparing their dinner and he sat at the kitchen table with his head in his hands. The blade of the knife thwacked against the cutting board (she had not bought any carrots that afternoon) and a now more familiar sound crept through Felix's ears and washed over his entire body.

"Do you hear it?" he whispered. The answer was obvious.

She slammed the knife on the counter and the wailing ceased. "I don't hear anything."

But while they ate, Dolores again brought up Professor Hawk Nose and his brother and his brother's pregnant wife, and Felix could hardly listen to her through the constant wail. He stood over the coffee-maker while it brewed and as she rifled through the cupboards, he pinpointed exactly the source of the sound.

He was hearing her womb. That was where the screaming came from.

Felix dropped his mug and it crashed to the floor without breaking. He stooped quickly to pick it up, standing up even more quickly when he realized his ear was closer to the shrieks. The coffee pot trembled in his hand as he poured out two servings.

He put his mug on the table. "And the sugar?"

His wife looked at him with abandoned eyes before she turned away. "I didn't buy any."