

DELIVERY BOY



image info

MARC MORGENSTERN

IT'S EARLY, TOO EARLY EVEN FOR YOU TO get up and yell for breakfast. Out your window, over the Pacific—is that a plane or a planet, that light punching through? Maybe they're looking down at us while we're looking up at them, right Travis? I don't look up very often. Or back. Can't do anything about what happened, so why stare in that mirror? They might be gaining on you. But I'm making an exception now, with you, my only grandson. I must be out of my mind talking to a two-year-old still in the crib. Even if you were listening, you wouldn't understand a lick. I can tell from your breathing that you're in that thick sleep that comes only to children and never to tired old men. No matter, someone's got to teach you—just as my mother did—toughen you up like me, add some rind to that melon head of yours.

When my mother found out that she had a killing disease—that's what I called it then—she decided to teach me everything she could before she died. I was twelve and sat at the end of her bed, learning things like: how many tines in a dinner fork (four); how to take a compliment (just say thank you); how to flatter a girl's choice of shoes ("Those shoes make your legs look so long."); how, when I was old enough to wear a hat, I should always take it off when going inside, hold it casually in my hand as if it isn't really there, or hang it on a fancy

hat stand or hook. A man should never hide behind a hat, she said. A matter of respect and courtesy.

Every man in the Bronx wore a hat in 1945—a fedora, derby or bowler, or a Homburg, the broad and heavy hat on Churchill's head in the newsreels—not boys, but men, as a kind of uniform after the war was over. Every man walking the Grand Concourse gave his brim a different tweak, a bend that declared who he was. Except for my father, who never served because of a bum foot; he kept his brim stiff just like it came out of the box. His grey suit coat was always pressed and stuck to his shoulders as if still on a hangar.

My father's mother, my Bubbie, lived with us. She freshened my mother's sickbed every day, rolling her onto her right side, sliding linens under half of her. There was only half of Mother really left, a shrinking lady. I helped Bubbie turn her back to the left side, then tucked in the rest of the sheets, smelling still like the ashy, bricked-in space between our building and the next where they'd hung to dry.

I was small for my age, but of course a lot bigger than you, Travis. As Mother fell slowly asleep—she did everything at half speed, carefully, like she might break—I looked out the window and down and I remember feeling stuck in that brick shaft. I couldn't get out and no one could see me. I was a miner, all alone

in the dark without a headlamp. The harder I tried to breathe the coal air, the less I could. The only thing that could unlock me was my mother's voice. I'm a record company man now—who would've predicted that?—and she sounded to me like Benny Goodman's clarinet: trying so hard to be cheerful, but sad from the throat at the same time.

In that voice, Mother instructed me one day: "If a shopkeeper gives you too much change, return it immediately, even if it's a penny. If you don't notice until later, give the extra to the busker outside the subway entrance. Just put it in his cup—no need to say anything. Do

not jingle change in your pocket; you need money and it's very, very good to have, but unsafe for a boy to advertise. Your father will make sure you have enough money for what you need." Beside her on the bed, I pulled my hand out of my pocket and the jingling, which sounded like the ice cream man's bell, stopped.

"After you're bar mitzvah'd," she said another day, "you will wear long pants with cuffs, because that is what a man wears. They close not with buttons, but with a metal zipper, which you must secure at all times. Cuffs exist to make men look taller, not to hide things or

hold things that do not fit in your pockets. In general, do not hide things—let the sun shine on everything you do and you are." Saying that, she'd smiled.

On everything I am? A riddle, I thought at the time. I was just a boy and didn't grasp it. I understand now, but don't practice what my mother preached. You give too much away and people take advantage of you, Travis. You show your cards, you lose. Do you think I got this successful and renting this fancy schmancy beach house for the whole family without some hiding?

"Clothes don't make the man," my mother told me that day, "the man does." Pleased with her words, she clapped her hands together and they crackled. So that Mother couldn't scratch her sores and make them bleed, Bubbie had wrapped those hands in clear cellophane. She'd wind the roll around and around each paw, way too tight to pull off. "For your own good," my grandmother said. When Bubbie left the room, which was not often, my mother'd beg me to scratch her rash, just a little. Of course I would, my fingers walking backwards over her skin. I'm not a poetic man—anything but—but this time, she felt like a fire dying.

My mother passed away in her own bed in our little apartment. There was so much more that I, as a boy, wanted to know—like how to live when your mother was gone. I still haven't figured it out all these years later. If you have any brainstorm, Travis, please speak up. When you wake up alone in the morning, first off, don't you wonder where your mother is? That night when mine died, it was not like the movies. No final words for the ages, no thrashing, not even the flicker of an eyelash. Just a quiet there on the bed. All the noise was inside me—like the light had changed and all the cars and trucks were charging right at me,

grinding and honking. Bubbie leaned down and put her ear to Mother's chest and then to her lips. Bubbie motioned for me to listen. She lifted Mother's dead hand off the covers and offered it to me: "Take, Jackie. Touch." But I was afraid that I'd disturb Mother and that she'd already turned cold.

Travis, you've no idea what a mother's passing does to a boy. How could you? You call and my youngest, Ellen, jumps. She barely leaves your side for a minute. A motherless boy—or man, even—wears scars. You ache with your own disease and will do anything to make it go away. Marry at twenty. Bang out three children. Name the firstborn Sophie after your dead mother. Work like a demon to prove yourself. Turns out, money is what makes the man. I even purchased you, paid full price for your adoption. A pretty penny to lawyers and doctors, my little pischer! A grandson with blond curls, blue eyes, and a perfect nose stamped out of a mold. Nothing like my own schnoz—big as a lightbulb. Had she lived, what would my own mother have said about her great-grandson, procured from a Kansas farmgirl?

I remember sitting next to my father during the funeral service at the synagogue the next day. In the first row of chairs. Men in baggy black suits surrounded us, bobbing to the rabbi's chants. The professional mourners—old ladies too good at their jobs—wailed like they were the ones dying and leaving their boys and girls behind. Bubbie sat back there with them. Next to me, my father wore a Homburg over his yarmulke. The air was so heavy in there, even the feather in his hat stayed stock still. I took a chance and put my hand on top of his hand, all hairy and damp, and he let it stay there. At least that was something.

I was not bar mitzvah'd yet, so when he was called up to the bima, I stayed in the



Aleksander Kotsis, *Dead Matula*, 1868

congregation. All by myself, I wasn't sure of what to do with my hands, or how to make my face look unafraid. I didn't allow myself to cry—no constant waterworks like you, Travis. Everyone was looking at me so I pretended to pray, repeating the Yankees line-up under my breath. I still can: Stirnweiss, Crosetti, Martin, Metheny. But I never said that prayer for the dead. My mother couldn't hear it anyway. In the dim light, her coffin seemed to be disappearing, as if it was already in the ground. Didn't they know she was scared of the dark?

That night, after the Shiva, my father and I shared a stew that Mrs. Schwartz had brought over from next door. Bubbie ladled it onto our plates and then took her cup of tea into the tiny bedroom that she and I shared. So now it was just my father and me left at the kitchen table with my mother's empty seat. He ate sloppily, spooning it much too fast like it could be his last meal. Waiting for what he had to say, I didn't touch my own food. Father never talked much and when he did, his words usually came out in one flat tone, as if they'd been washed too often. My mother had chattered enough for both of them.

"There's something we need to discuss," he said finally, his voice surprisingly deep.

This was alarming to me because the last time he used those words, my mother had just taken sick. I kept my eyes on my plate with its veins of cracks and a crust of overcooked noodles left from dinner the night before. She would've cooked the noodles just right and made sure the plate was properly washed. My father wiped his mouth with a napkin, cleared his throat.

"Jacob, I am moving in with a lady." He looked out the window, as if she might be nearby. "You do not know her. With a baby."

"So where will we live?" I asked. "Will I have my own room?" Young as I was, Travis, I somehow knew it would be hard to compete with a baby. Just look at you—candy for any lady. You get more action than any adult male, a breast to bury your head in, a warm lap. You even get your ass wiped daily. My mother always said she'd wanted a brother or sister for me before she got sick. That would have made such a difference. You'll probably want one yourself. One thing I knew even at twelve—it took two to make a kid.

"We?" my father answered.

The next day, he delivered me and my wicker suitcase to his sister Rose's place up the street. We climbed the steep stairway up to my aunt's second floor dress shop with the small apartment behind it.

"It's better this way," he muttered from a few steps below me.

I looked up to the top of the stairs, as if my mother might be there waiting. What might she say: "Shush, Jackie, it's going to be all right." No, it's not going to be all right. I wasn't going to be living with him and that woman. He didn't want me around. There was a name for me—*orphan*—and it applied even though my father was still present. Right then, Travis, I only wanted him dead. Not like my mother's slow dying—instead, a fast, loud, and painful extinction. One good shove down the steps would've done it. But then I would've been by myself out there alone on the Grand Concourse with everyone else rushing by. So then, I wanted him alive, but with a catch: I would be as quiet as he'd always been, quieter even.

I would never say a word to him again.

After the last step, a door opened into a brightly lit hall of mirrors facing each other. They'd been put up for customers who wanted



Zdzisław Jasiński, *Sick Mother*, 1889.

to admire the backs of their dresses as well as the front. I remember my reflection that day—a short boy in short pants with a pulpy nose too big for his face. An army of me's, shrinking down to toy soldier size, with weapons that couldn't fire. No ammo for that poor kid, Trav. I counted the soldiers in my head, as if that would do any good.

"Rose!"

My father caught up, breathing heavily and multiplied in the mirrors. He put down the suitcase and took off his hat.

"Coming, Manny."

She'd just painted her cheeks, like it was some special occasion. Maybe it was for her, Travis. For the time, Aunt Rose was unusual—a divorced dressmaker scraping by alone. She

was a nice enough lady, but knew nothing about kids. She buried me in her bosoms and said, "Oh, Jacob. Oh, oh, oh." We all looked at each other without speaking for a long time, until she squeaked "Oh" a few more times. No one seemed to know what to do next, until my father took the suitcase to the kitchen and sat at the small pine table. He slapped down his hat in front of him. Bubbie appeared from the bedroom, which she must have been sharing with Rose.

"I expect you will have certain reimbursable expenses for the boy," he said.

"Re-im-burs-able?" Aunt Rose asked, though she must have known what the word meant.

By now, the kitchen was filled with her flowery perfume, trying too hard to smell good.

"You know, food and clothes and such," my father said. "I've thrown in a little extra for your trouble."

Bubbie slurped her tea. Though she spoke Yiddish most of the time, she understood what her son had just said. I remember her nodding towards me with that wobbly chin of hers. As young as I was, I got it, too—her grandson was trouble, and somebody had to be paid to take care of that. She slurped louder, but didn't say a word. In the shadow near the only window, I stayed quiet as I'd resolved to do, my hands in empty pockets with nothing to jingle.

Travis, reimbursable means to pay someone back for what they spend on you—something, by the way, you should always do. You don't want to be beholden to anyone or somehow in their debt. That's one lesson I taught myself. But don't think you need to pay me back—nobody in the family does and I don't need it. Though a little gratitude would be nice now and then, especially for this all-expenses-paid vacation on the best beach. You could fit a few dozen of Rose's place in this house.

That night in the kitchen, my father reached into his suit coat and pulled out a wad of green bills. I'd seen men with flashy silver money-clips, but my father's money-clip was a red rubber band. He licked the tip of his first finger and counted out seven one-dollar bills onto the table. It wasn't a lot of money even in that day, barely enough to feed a growing kid for a week. He twisted the red rubber band closed with a slap. Everyone stared at the money for a few seconds until my father stood up and repositioned his hat like a dandy, which he wasn't.

"Next Friday, then," he said and walked out with that limp.

Let me tell you the kitchen was so empty without him, with just a boy and two women

staring at each other and a new cot in the corner with an olive surplus army blanket.

I slept on it every night—or tried to sleep—and smoothed the scratchy blanket flat every morning. I went to school, got good grades, and even delivered dresses for extra spending money. To Rose, I was no trouble at all. But I was almost a teenager, and I did teenage things that she wouldn't have appreciated, had she known. In cahoots with guys she never met, we played craps for Lucky Strike cigarettes. We tossed trash from the windows of the El onto the street. We snuck into the stadium and shared paper cups of beer. My mother, on her deathbed, said she'd make sure I was a good boy if it was the last thing she did. I wanted to be, just for her. But I also had to be tough, tougher than any boy, and later on, any man. There's a lesson in that for you, Travis.

My father's Friday visits always took place between the four and seven o'clock shows at the Loew's Majestic Theater. He was the manager there and ran a very tight ship, according to my aunt. She thought his job was a big deal, Travis, and so did I as a kid. But now I know how small-time it really was. Nothing like my job in the record business. Have you ever heard of the Grammy Awards? I've been there at least a dozen times. Been interviewed in *Cashbox* and *Billboard*. I've saved the clips for when you're old enough to properly appreciate your grandfather.

My father, on the other hand, never had anyone write about him. Each time he showed up, Rose would offer him tea and Ritz crackers straight from the box. I would try to stay invisible by the window, while Rose urged me to tell him how school was going. I always gave the same answer: nothing. Otherwise, I might've burst each time my father counted out the bills and left—explode, like a basketball



Charles de Groux, Portrait of the mother of the artist on her deathbed, 1862

squashed under a truck tire. Are you listening to your grandfather? Mark my words: it's better to hold it in, to harden yourself so not to burst. It's worked for me, though I'm tired and don't have the energy for it anymore.

One Saturday, I snuck in the exit door of the Loew's after the newsreel started. It was a grand hall, full of gold leaf and velvet seats. My last time there, he'd been sitting at his desk, head bent over a ledger book, when I came to tell him about my mother. He'd looked up, unsurprised, with not a question on his lips.

This time, I let the heavy theater door slam, hoping to be caught by one of the ushers in the red uniforms. Maybe they'd drag me by the

collar to the manager's office where my father would have to say something to me. A scolding at least for trying to sneak in; that would be better than nothing. Instead, strangers just shushed me from the dark and I never sat down in any of the cushy seats. I could've walked right in the front door and asked him for a free ticket. But there was something I liked about the feeling of slipping into his majestic house, like a burglar or wolf. Besides, he would've certainly said no. No freebies allowed, reimbursable or not. Imagine that, Travis, I couldn't even ask my father for a free movie ticket. All those empty seats. If only I'd had a grandfather to step in for me, tell him what was what, perhaps even throw a few tight jabs in the right direction.

When I opened the apartment door that night, Aunt Rose and Bubbie were grumbling something in hushed Yiddish. I didn't know a lot of the words, but picked out *machashefa*, which means witch. I wondered who that might be. But they stopped talking as soon as they saw me and looked away. So I never asked. Aunt Rose and I usually chatted whenever I got home from school, about nothing important and never about my father. She'd embrace me with an awkward halfway hug, her big bosoms like earmuffs. She did her best, never being a mother.

That night, I didn't tell her about the movie theater, and she didn't tell me about the witch. By now, Travis, your head must be spinning with all the things we didn't talk about. A very long list that by then included my mother's passing. Maybe that's why I can't stop yakking now, telling you this story as if you can hear me.

Next Thursday evening, Aunt Rose asked me to deliver a dress to an unfamiliar address a few blocks away. It was already after seven, so I hoofed it over to a fancy stone building, guarded by a doorman with gold braids on his shoulders. His white glove pointed to an elevator. Ringing the apartment doorbell, I tried my best to deepen my voice.

"Delivery!" I announced. "Delivery from Rose's Dress Shop!"

In my experience, the more efficient and enthusiastic I sounded, the better the tip I received. The red-haired woman who opened the door was younger than my mother'd been, but older than a high school girl. She would've been pretty except that she obviously needed sleep. She balanced a baby in the crook of one arm like a football.

"So you must be Jacob."

It was a statement of fact, just reciting a

name that Rose must've given her.

"Yes, ma'am. Sent by my Aunt Rose with a package." I grinned like someone worthy of a tip.

"Ah, Rose. Best dressmaker in the Bronx," she said, forcing a smile.

In the living room beyond the foyer, I could see a gold couch with cushions so thick they seemed pumped up with air. The red and gold rug looked deep enough to swallow my toes. The baby began to fuss so she placed a bottle in its mouth, and her smile erased itself.

"A dress. He's going to have to do better than that," she said to herself but loud enough for me to hear. I didn't know what she was talking about or who "he" was. I wonder to this day whether Rose and Bubbie sent me there on purpose, knowing full well what I'd find out.

"Package?" I reminded her. She tilted her head towards a glossy black table just inside the door. On it sat an old-fashioned candlestick telephone and a grey Homburg. As I've said, many men wore that hat, especially rich men and men with small jobs who pretended to be big time, politicians and businessmen who wanted to be powerful, and heads of families. I, too, used to wear one, until they went out of fashion. Anyway, I set the blue box carefully down next to the Homburg.

"Daphne, who is it?" The voice from the other room was familiar, but not. Four words uttered in a strong and put-upon tone, from someone who wasn't afraid to speak. Not flat and dead. I couldn't see him, my father, but heard his newspaper crunch closed as he got up to approach the door. Now, I knew for certain that she was the woman who'd replaced my mother right after the funeral, and this was their baby, and it didn't look very new.

"Manny, it's your son," she said. Coming from her, the word "son" made me flinch. He came

around the corner and our eyes met for just a second. That'd never happened before and never did again. In that instant, I searched deep into his eyes, hoping, but didn't find anything there, Trav—just empty holes.

I ran. Down the dim stairwell, across the blinding lobby, out into the street. I'd run down this street a million times before, tripping over its cracks, swerving to avoid its dog shit. Now, I was running to my mother, listening hard for her voice, wanting just one more crumb of advice. What should a boy do when both his mother and father have left him? Travis, you'll ask that one day, when they tell you about the strangers who made you and then disappeared.

That night, I circled the block, flying everywhere and nowhere, knowing—young numbskull that I was—that everything had changed. No one there to stand tall over me and talk into my ear while I lay asleep.

The next night at Aunt Rose's apartment, my father kept his hat on. That particular Friday—it couldn't have been more than ten weeks since he first dropped me off—he never entered the kitchen. In the multi-mirrored hallway, he surrounded me—so many of him from all different angles, all in grey suits with heavily padded shoulders. Aunt Rose, Bubbie, and I looked up at him, the one real one, waiting a long time for him to speak. Rose had a new look on her face, a tight clench of bad expectations—fear, even. I churned underneath, worried that with nothing left to say, he might even try to hit me. I edged a step back.

He pulled something out from his suit coat: a gold money clip shaped like a dollar sign, a replacement for his rubber band. The light glinted off it and across the mirrors. He lifted the clip with its thick wad of money to his eyes and turned it over and over again, examining it close and long enough to commit

the government numbers to memory if he'd wanted to. He shoved it back in his pocket and stared at the ceiling as if the answer was written up there.

"You're big enough," my father said. "You'll be fine."

As I've said, Travis, I was small for a twelve-year-old. My mother had told me when I complained about my size, "Just you wait, Jackie. You'll be big at just the right time for you."

And now, every ounce of my blood and more pumped through me, right to the edge of my skin, to the ends of my hands and feet. With each pulse, I remember feeling myself growing, expanding so far and so much that even the mirrors couldn't hold me—nothing could. Maybe you'll be lucky enough to feel that way once. I'm no dolt, spilling my guts to a sleeping child, filling your baby dreams. I can see your eyes twitching now under those perfect lids and hear those little lips sucking like a squeeze-box. Music to me. Soft and sentimental I'm not, but is this your way of loving your Grandpa?

My father stood and tilted his hat forward to get ready to leave—I knew, for the last time—a bald, grey man in a grey hat with a woman and a baby. He grabbed the glass doorknob and stopped. I thought he might have something more to say—maybe something important, like what a fine man I'd be without him. Or how my mother would be so proud of me.

Instead, he reached into his left pants pocket. He flipped a small shiny disk spinning across the mirrors towards me. I played second base and could have caught it easily: a quarter, a decent amount of change for a boy back then.

I let it tumble, tripping over and over itself, and fall, and sit there untouched on the floor. The door slammed and night visited. ❖