

Picture Perfect

> Note: This story is about a job I had in 1986 as a van driver picking up unprocessed camera film and delivering developed photos. Along with the references to CB radios and a Walkman, digital photography today renders virtually everything in the story anachronistic. <

After George showed Mark the five forms he'd have to fill out every day, there wasn't much more to learn, just the different routes he'd be driving.

"This job is so friggin' easy you could do it with your eyes closed," George said. Mark found that amusing since, as a Picture Perfect delivery man, he'd be driving at least 200 miles every day.

Mark loaded the station wagon with orange vinyl bags. The bags came from Philadelphia, and were stuffed with envelopes full of photographs. Mark's job was to deliver these to every store carrying the red and yellow Picture Perfect logo. On his way out of each store, he'd pick up the day's undeveloped film and return it to the factory for processing.

Nearly a year after Mark had joined Picture Perfect, George's remark about doing the job with his eyes closed took on a different meaning. Seat half-reclined, cruise-control set, Mark zoomed past the long, empty stretches between Junius Ponds and Manchester twice a day, every day, five, often six days a week. Sometimes, to amuse himself, he'd close his eyes and count till he couldn't stand it. Counting slowly, he once got up to 18 before opening his eyes. Amazingly, nothing had changed. As always, the Thruway spooled out in front of him like a theoretical constant in a plane geometry exercise. The radio blared, echoing the same Doobie Brothers song from 1973. It reminded Mark of George's favorite saying: "Same shit, different day."

For Mark, the key was to concentrate on the parts he enjoyed, like working alone. And once the other drivers showed him their routes, he did just that, worked alone. Sooner or later though, every driver had to come up with a way to deal with the monotony: the same roads, same scenery, same tollbooth attendants, same store clerks, same coffee shops, same paperwork.

Lee took Route 104 whenever he could. Between Red Creek and Williamson there are at least seven vintage car dealers. Lee was always looking for a new toy. If a cherry Studebaker caught his eye, Lee would pull into All-Florida Motors and dicker, whether he had the money or not. Every summer he brought his “babies” out of storage. On any given day he might show up at the driver’s depot in his ’49 Mercury, or ’54 Nash or his prized turquoise-and-cream two-tone ’58 Edsel.

Dottie was the only woman driver on the Picture Perfect crew. After its flash in the ’70s, CB radios only bored the other drivers, but not Dottie. She said she couldn’t see how the others drove without one.

“I can’t count the times I got myself out of a jam ’cause I heard of a pile-up on the Thruway. Or Smokey’s got radar up ahead.”

Ever since Roy saw Dottie at a roadside rest stop sharing a picnic lunch with a driver from J.B. Hunt, he wouldn’t let up on her.

“Dottie likes them big rigs. She uses her CB to flirt with them boys in the K-whoppers.”

“Roy,” Dottie came back, “suck eggs!”

A retired insurance broker and Korean war veteran, Galen didn’t need Picture Perfect for the paycheck. With his Navy pension, he did alright. Mostly, he said, he kept working “just to stay out of the wife’s hair.” “Besides,” he said, “with my north country route, I get to find all the good fishin’ spots.”

Driving past Tug Hill to Ogdensburg, Galen had plenty of chances to pull along the Salmon River and ask fisherman where the rainbow were hitting. Galen said he drove there on his days off but he wasn’t kidding anyone. Even George had seen him slip his rod into a company vehicle. But George told every driver the same thing: “For all I care, you can jerk off out there—as long as you show up on time, make your drop-offs and pick-ups, and bring your car back by five—in one piece.”

George even looked the other way when Morris signed in smelling of beer.

“Morris, I don’t give a shit what you do out there as long as you don’t run over no schoolkids or fuck up that new wagon. But the least you could do is chew some goddamn gum in case Glover shows up.”

As for Niki, he needed his Walkman to get through the day. He’d roar down the road, pounding the steering wheel, screaming along with The Meat Puppets, Lime Green Spiders and Porno Sponges.

Roy preferred to handle his job “as a professional.” He liked to cite his experience as an APC driver in the Army, though every time he mentioned this, his coworkers called him “a lyin’ sack o’ shit.”

“You wouldn’t last two hours in the Army you candy-ass motherfucker!” Larry would cut him short.

On their first day out together, Larry described his route to Mark. Instead of naming the towns and stores it covered, he said, “First we see Tina, then Debbie, Kathy, Cindy and Karen. After lunch it’s Peggy, Donna, Marie, Patty, Sandy and Sue.”

After their first stop, Larry asked Mark, “Is she hot or what? I’d love to go out with her. What the fuck did I get married for?”

Once, Larry told Mark about the time he came home drunk. When he couldn’t come up with an alibi his wife whacked him in the head with a frying pan. Mark shared Larry’s frying pan story with his girlfriend, Natalie. She couldn’t believe it.

Then Mark’s car threw a rod. Larry offered to drive him to work. One morning, Natalie told Mark to invite Larry up for pancakes; she wanted to meet “the frying pan guy.” Later that night, she told Mark that Larry was “sweet.”

“*Sweet*? I didn’t know you had a thing for Neanderthals.”

“Come on,” she said, “he shuffles around like a shy bear.”

Mark had noticed Larry grinning and blushing around Natalie, but he didn't see it as shyness, more like a throbbing itch to know what Natalie was wearing underneath her silk robe.

Mark didn't tell Natalie everything about work. Some things were just out.

One day, pulling out of King Donuts, Larry asked Mark, "You ever go down on a bitch?"

"I'm 31 years old for fuck's sake. Where you think I been, in a monastery?"

Larry dug a snapshot out of his wallet. "Check this out," he said. The picture showed a yellow-haired woman kneeling on a mattress, wearing nothing but a bath towel wrapped around her hips.

"Check out them hooters! Is she awesome or what?" Larry was grinning.

"Who is it?" Mark asked.

"Beats the shit outa me." Larry said. "But I'm gonna find out."

Mark just looked at him.

Larry grabbed one of the orange delivery bags. "Check this out," he said. He unzipped the bag and dumped the contents. Opened an envelope and pulled out some photographs.

"Birthday party, kids playing soccer, baby shower—boring, boring, boring." He stuffed the pictures back in the envelope and opened another.

"Easter egg hunt—boring. Flowers, a garden—boring, boring, boring." He grabbed another envelope. "You gotta go through a ton of these to find anything good."

"Larry, isn't that like, against company policy?"

"Yeah but who's gonna know?"

"You do this a lot?" Mark asked.

"Just when I get bored. And face it, you do this route for six years, you're gonna get bored. Besides, somewhere in all them pictures you might catch the hottest pussy you ever seen. Wouldn't that make your day?"

One day, driving along a vacuous stretch of Thruway, Mark remembered Larry's diversion. He felt guilty, opening an envelope and peaking in on a young girl's First Holy Communion. But alongside the guilt was a little thrill: somewhere in that stack of pictures might be . . . who knows?

He didn't find what Larry found, however. After 10 or 15 envelopes, all pictures were looking the same: endless weddings, birthday parties, vacations. Countless baby shots—drooling baby, napping baby, stumbling baby, shrieking baby. Wrath of baby, funny baby, baby bites mommy's nose. Baby smearing ca-ca, baby goes pee-pee.

And every pet shot you'd care to imagine: toy poodles in pink bows. Rottweilers yanking their chains. Fuzzy kittens balled up in a basket. A lumpen mutt with a pitiful gaze lapping up toilet water.

Kindergarten, high school, college graduations. Bar Mitzvahs. Little League, football, hockey, basketball games. Family reunions all over North America—among picnic tables and badminton nets, backyard barbecues and beach umbrellas, cousins and nephews flashed the overzealous smiles of would-be celebrities.

The Grand Canyon, Cape Cod, Statue of Liberty, Niagara Falls—always the same angles, same lighting, same perspective. It was as though every citizen in America had graduated from the same class: *How To Take a Jim Dandy Snapshot*.

After Fourth of July weekend, there was a huge surge of pictures. The orange bags were stacked so high in Mark's station wagon they spilled over into the front seat. Somewhere along the stretch between Whitesboro and Hamilton he got bored, reached over, and pulled an envelope from a bag.

Three envelopes later, dozens of fireworks (most of them underexposed), a few beach scenes, plenty of picnics. Then, unexpectedly, Mark was jolted. Following pictures of a mud-splattered pick-up truck and lakeside cabin, there was a shot of a woman in panties and bra. She looked Asian, possibly Filipino. Her bra and panties didn't match—black bra, floral panties. She was attractive, but staring

into the camera, looked ill-at-ease. The next picture showed her unfastening her bra.

Route 8 winds through a valley so Mark had to keep his eyes on the road. In the next picture there was a man—or part of a man—the top of the photo cut off his head. He wore only a pair of black bikini briefs, belly glaring white in the camera's flash. Mark caught a glimpse of tattoo on his shoulder, though he couldn't make out what it was, dragon or cobra.

Mark glanced at the road, then flipped the next picture. Now the woman was braless, exposing a tan line and girlish breasts to the camera's hot eye. In the next shot, she was bound and gagged, tied spread-eagle to the bed posts.

Mark knew he should set the pictures aside and focus on driving. Yet he couldn't resist. In the next shot, the spread-eagle woman might be . . . *sans* panties. . . . He turned it over.

He couldn't be sure he saw right. The tug of steering wheel and machine gun clatter of ricocheting gravel startled him. He yanked the wheel back after veering onto the shoulder and slowed down to 50 mph. He looked ahead to a clear straightaway, then back at the last photo.

The guy with the tattoo was straddling the woman, his knees shoved into her armpits, his pelvis thrust in her face. He was holding something, but Mark couldn't tell what it was.

Again, he checked the road, saw it was clear and flipped to the next photo. This was taken from a different angle, at closer range. Now he could see that the guy was holding a bayonet, pressing the cutting edge against the woman's lips.

He'd seen enough—didn't want any more of this. Just as he was slipping the pictures back into their envelope the road curved right, forcing him to grab the steering wheel with both hands. The pictures spilled across the passenger's seat. Luckily, no traffic was coming. He recovered and slowed to 40 mph.

When he looked down at the pictures scattered across the seat, he saw no trace of the Filipino

woman or the tattoo guy. Instead, there were shots of a muddy pick-up truck. A dark red Ford with a dead deer tied in the back. Then there was a shot of the deer, a full-grown doe, suspended by block and tackle outside a tar-paper shack. A guy in camouflage fatigues (tattoo guy?) posed, grinning up close to the drawn and quartered deer.

Mark scooped up the pictures. He needed both hands to slip them back into the envelope. He struggled awkwardly—trying to steer with one knee against the wheel—as one of the pictures slipped from the stack. Only a corner peaked out but it looked like a mess of internal organs: intestines, liver, heart, kidneys. Did he just see what he thought he saw? Should he look more closely at the pictures or stuff them back into the envelope?

His indecision was shattered by a blaring horn. Jerking his head up he saw he was barreling head-on toward a school bus. He yanked the wheel to the right, the bus blurred by, its horn Doppler around a curve and down into the valley.

Mark pulled over and stopped the car. Grabbed the loose pictures off the seat and stuffed them back into their envelope. Dropped the envelope into the orange bag, zipped the bag and tossed it into the back seat. Right then he swore: as long as he drove for Picture Perfect, he'd never peak inside another envelope.

There was no one to tell, that was the problem. Certainly not Natalie. She would ask him what he thought he was doing, peaking at strangers' pictures. He sure couldn't tell her the ugly truth, that he got bored then started snooping for amateur porn.

Telling George, Roy, Niki, Galen or any of his co-workers was out of the question too. He could get fired for what he'd done. Even Larry was out. Larry would never let up on him, especially since Mark didn't keep any pictures of the naked Filipino woman.

It kept coming back to him: the guts. Viscera. A wet heap of spilled organs. It couldn't be, he kept telling himself. His eyes had played tricks on him. Because he only saw a corner of the photo—and only for a second. But if it was a picture of guts it had to come from the deer, right? It *had* to. The camouflage guy nailed his deer and took pictures of the whole thing—skinning, gutting, dressing. Mark let out a nervous laugh, felt like a kid who'd just scared the bejesus out of himself. What a bad joke, he thought, freaking out over a deer-skinning!

Then again, there *was* the picture of the guy straddling the woman, bayonet thrust against her face—there was no mistaking that! What kind of guy would do that? What if he actually butchered her? But who would take pictures of something like that? What kind of psycho would lay a trap for himself by providing such evidence? Then again, if he's really demented, he won't be thinking logically. He's so far gone in his freaky world there's no such thing as circumstantial evidence.

Or what if he's so deranged that he *planned* to leave evidence? What if that's what he had in mind all along: for the ultimate adrenaline rush, he now has to kill everyone who's seen the pictures!

What if tattoo guy had been staking out the store for the past several weeks, taking snapshots of the Picture Perfect delivery driver? For all Mark knew, this weirdo could have been trailing his delivery vehicle back to the distribution depot. He could have traced Mark to his own car, then shadowed him home. The guy may have been parked outside Mark and Natalie's apartment for the past month, spying on them with binoculars, poking a telephoto lens up at their bedroom window, filling albums with shots of them watching TV, sitting around the breakfast table, sharing a bath. . . .

At any rate, driving along those long, empty stretches of road between Picture Perfect stores, it was something to think about, that's for sure.

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