

"Chinaski! Take route 539!"

The toughest in the station. Apartment houses with boxes that had scrubbed-out names or no names at all, under tiny lightbulbs in dark halls. Old ladies standing in halls, up and down the streets, asking the same question as if they were one person with one voice:

"Mailman, you got any mail for me?"

And you felt like screaming, "Lady, how the *hell* do I know who *you* are or I am or anybody is?"

The sweat dripping, the hangover, the impossibility of the schedule, and Jonstone back there in his red shirt, knowing it, enjoying it, pretending he was doing it to keep costs down. But everybody knew why he was doing it. Oh, what a fine man he was!

The people. The people. And the dogs.

Let me tell you about the dogs. It was one of those 100 degree days and I was running along, sweating, sick, delirious, hungover. I stopped at a small apartment house with the box downstairs along the front pavement. I popped it open with my key. There wasn't a sound. Then I felt something jamming its way into my crotch. It moved way up there. I looked around and there was a German Shepherd, full-grown, with his nose halfway up my ass. With one snap of his jaws he could rip off my balls. I decided that those people were not going to get their mail that day, and maybe never get any mail again. Man, I mean he worked that nose in there. SNUFF! SNUFF! SNUFF!

I put the mail back into the leather pouch, and then very slowly, very, I took a half step forward. The nose followed. I took another half step with the other foot. The nose followed. Then I took a slow, very slow full step. Then

another. Then stood still. The nose was out. And he just stood there looking at me. Maybe he'd never smelled anything like it and didn't quite know what to do.

I walked quietly away.

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There was another German Shepherd. It was hot summer and he came BOUNDING out of a back yard and then LEAPED through the air. His teeth snapped, just missing my jugular vein.

"OH JESUS!" I hollered, "OH JESUS CHRIST! MURDER! MURDER! HELP! MURDER!"

The beast turned and leaped again. I socked his head good in mid-air with the mail sack, letters and magazines flying out. He was ready to leap again when two guys, the owners, came out and grabbed him. Then, as he watched and growled, I reached down and picked up the letters and magazines that I would have to re-route on the front porch of the next house.

"You sons of bitches are crazy," I told the two guys, "that dog's a killer. Get rid of him or keep him off the street!"

I would have fought them both but there was that dog growling and lunging between them. I went over to the next porch and re-routed my mail on hands and knees.

As usual, I didn't have time for lunch, but I was still 40 minutes late getting in.

The Stone looked at his watch. "You're 40 minutes late."

"You never arrived," I told him.

"That's a write-up."

"Sure it is, Stone."

He already had the proper form in the typer and was at it. As I sat casing up the mail and doing the go-backs he walked up and threw the form in front of me. I was tired of reading his write-ups and knew from my trip downtown that any protest was useless. Without looking I threw it into the wastebasket.

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Every route had its traps and only the regular carriers knew of them. Each day it was another god damned thing, and you were always ready for a rape, murder, dogs, or insanity of some sort. The regulars wouldn't tell you their little secrets. That was the only advantage they had—except knowing their case by heart. It was gung ho for a new man, especially one who drank all night, went to bed at 2 a.m., rose at 4:30 a.m. after \_\_\_\_\_ singing all night long, and, almost, getting away with it.

One day I was out on the street and the route was going well, though it was a new one, and I thought, Jesus Christ, maybe for the first time in two years I'll be able to eat lunch.

I had a terrible hangover, but still all went well until I came to this handful of mail addressed to a church. The address had no street number, just the name of the church, and the boulevard it faced. I walked, hungover, up the steps. I couldn't find a mailbox in there and no people in there. Some candles burning. Little bowls to dip your fingers in. And the empty pulpit looking at me, and all the statues, pale red and blue and yellow, the transoms shut, a stinking hot morning.

Oh Jesus Christ, I thought.

And walked out.

I went around to the side of the church and found a stairway going down. I went in through an open door. Do you know what I saw? A row of toilets. And showers. But it was dark. All the lights were out. How in hell can they expect a man to find a mailbox in the dark? Then I saw the light switch. I threw the thing and the lights in the church went on, inside and out. I walked into the next room and there were priests' robes spread out on a table. There was a bottle of wine.

For Christ's sake, I thought, who in hell but me would ever get caught in a scene like this?

I picked up the bottle of wine, had a good drag, left the letters on the robes, and walked back to the showers and toilets. I turned off the lights and took a \_\_\_\_\_ in the dark and smoked a cigarette. I thought about taking a shower but I could see the headlines: MAILMAN CAUGHT DRINKING THE BLOOD OF GOD AND TAKING A SHOWER, NAKED, IN ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH.

So, finally, I didn't have time for lunch and when I got in Jonstone wrote me up for being 23 minutes off schedule.

I found out later that mail for the church was delivered to the parish house around the corner. But now, of course, I'll know where to \_\_\_\_\_ shower when I'm down and out.

• 10 •

The rainy season began. Most of the money went for drink so my shoes had holes in the soles and my raincoat was torn and old. In any steady downpour I got quite wet,