

MORNING DELIVERIES (Milkman #1)

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The dawn washed slowly down Culver Street.

To anyone awake inside, the night was still black, but dawn had actually been tiptoeing around for almost half an hour. In the big maple on the corner of Culver and Balfour Avenue, a red squirrel blinked and turned its insomniac's stare on the sleeping houses. Halfway down the block a sparrow alighted in the Mackenzies' birdbath and fluttered pearly drops about itself. An ant bumbled along the gutter and happened upon a tiny crumb of chocolate in a discarded candy wrapper.

The night breeze that had rustled leaves and billowed curtains now packed up. The maple on the corner gave a last rusty shiver and was still, waiting for the full overture that would follow this quiet prologue.

A band of faint light tinged the eastern sky. The darksome whippoorwill went off duty and the chickadees came to tentative life, still hesitant, as if afraid to greet the day on their own.

The squirrel disappeared into a puckered hole in the fork of the maple.

The sparrow fluttered to the lip of the birdbath and paused.

The ant also paused over his treasure like a librarian ruminating over a folio edition.

Culver Street trembled silently on the sunlit edge of the planet—that moving straightedge astronomers call the terminator.

A sound grew quietly out of the silence, swelling unobtrusively until it seemed it had always been there, hidden under the greater noises of the night so lately passed. It grew, took on clarity, and became the decorously muffled motor of a milk truck.

It turned from Balfour onto Culver. It was a fine, beigecolored truck with red lettering on the sides. The squirrel popped out of the puckered mouth of its hole like a tongue, checked on the truck, and then spied a likely-looking bit of nest fodder. It hurried down the trunk headfirst after it. The sparrow took wing. The ant took what chocolate it could manage and headed for its hill.

The chickadees began to sing more loudly.

On the next block, a dog barked.

The letters on the sides of the milk truck read: CRAMER'S DAIRY. There was a picture of a bottle of milk, and below that: MORNING DELIVERIES OUR SPECIALTY!

The milkman wore a blue-gray uniform and a cocked hat. Written over the pocket in gold thread was a name: SPIKE. He was whistling over the comfortable rattle of bottles in ice behind him.

He pulled the truck in to the curb at the Mackenzies' house, took his milk case from the floor beside him, and swung out onto the sidewalk. He paused for a moment to sniff the air, fresh and new and infinitely mysterious, and then he strode strongly up the walk to the door.

A small square of white paper was held to the mailbox by a magnet that looked like a tomato. Spike read what was written there closely and slowly, as one might read a message he had found in an old bottle crusted with salt.

1 qt. milk

1 econ cream

1 orange juice

Thanks

Nella M.

Spike the milkman looked at his hand case thoughtfully, set it down, and from it produced the milk and cream. He inspected the sheet again, lifted the tomato-magnet to make sure he had not missed a period, comma, or dash which would change the complexion of things, nodded, replaced the magnet, picked up his case, and went back to the truck.

The back of the milk truck was damp and black and cool. There was a sunken, buggy smell in its air. It mixed uneasily with the smell of dairy products. The orange juice was behind the deadly nightshade. He pulled a carton out of the ice, nodded again, and went back up the walk. He put the carton of juice down with the milk and cream and went back to his truck.

Not too far away, the five-o'clock whistle blew at the industrial laundry where Spike's old friend Rocky worked. He thought of Rocky starting up his laundry wheels in the steamy, gasping heat, and smiled. Perhaps he would see Rocky later. Perhaps tonight ... when deliveries were done.

Spike started the truck and drove on. A little transistor radio hung on an imitation leather strap from a bloodstained meathook which curved down from the cab's ceiling. He turned it on and quiet music counterpointed his engine as he drove up to the McCarthy house.

Mrs. McCarthy's note was where it always was, wedged into the letter slot. It was brief and to the point:Chocolate

Spike took out his pen, scrawled Delivery Made across it, and pushed it through the letter slot. Then he went back to the truck. The chocolate milk was stacked in two coolers at the very back, handy to the rear doors, because it was a very big seller in June. The milkman glanced at the coolers, then reached over them and took one of the empty chocolate milk cartons he kept in the far corner. The carton was of course brown, and a happy youngster cavorted above printed matter which informed the consumer that this was CRAMER'S DAIRY DRINK WHOLESOME AND DELICIOUS SERVE HOT OR COLD KIDS LOVE IT!

He set the empty carton on top of a case of milk. Then he brushed aside ice-chips until he could see the mayonnaise jar. He grabbed it and looked inside. The tarantula moved, but sluggishly. The cold had doped it. Spike unscrewed the lid of the jar and tipped it over the opened carton. The tarantula made a feeble effort to scramble back up the slick glass side of the jar, and succeeded not at all. It fell into the empty chocolate milk carton with a fat plop. The milkman carefully reclosed the carton, put it in his carrier, and dashed up the McCarthys' walk. Spiders were his favorite, and spiders were his best, even if he did say so himself. A day when he could deliver a spider was a happy day for Spike.

As he made his way slowly up Culver, the symphony of the dawn continued. The pearly band in the east gave way to a deepening flush of pink, first barely discernible, then rapidly brightening to a scarlet which began almost immediately to fade toward summer blue. The first rays of sunlight, pretty as a drawing in a child's Sunday-school workbook, now waited in the wings.

At the Webbers' house Spike left a bottle of all-purpose cream filled with an acid gel. At the Jenners' he left five quarts of milk. Growing boys there. He had never seen them, but there was a treehouse out back, and sometimes there were bikes and ball bats left in the yard. At the Collinses' two quarts of milk and a carton of yogurt. At Miss Ordway's a carton of eggnog that had been spiked with belladonna.

Down the block a door slammed. Mr. Webber, who had to go all the way into the city, opened the slatted carport door and went inside, swinging his briefcase. The milkman waited for the waspy sound of his little Saab starting up and smiled when he heard it. Variety is the spice of life, Spike's mother—God rest her soul!—had been fond of saying, but we are Irish, and the Irish prefer to take their 'taters plain. Be regular in all ways, Spike, and you will be happy. And it was just as true as could be, he had found as he rolled down the road of life in his neat beige milk truck.

Only three houses left now.

At the Kincaids' he found a note which read "Nothing today, thanks" and left a capped milk bottle which looked empty but contained a deadly cyanide gas. At the Walkers' he left two quarts of milk and a pint of whipping cream.

By the time he reached the Mertons' at the end of the block, rays of sunlight were shining through the trees and dappling the faded hopscotch grid on the sidewalk which passed the Mertons' yard.

Spike bent, picked up what looked like a pretty damned good hopscotching rock—flat on one side—and tossed it. The pebble landed on a line. He shook his head, grinned, and went up the walk, whistling.

The light breeze brought him the smell of industrial laundry soap, making him think again of Rocky. He was surer all the time that he would be seeing Rocky. Tonight.

Here the note was pinned in the Mertons' newspaper holder:Cancel

Spike opened the door and went in.

The house was crypt-cold and without furniture. Barren it was, stripped to the walls. Even the stove in the kitchen was gone; there was a brighter square of linoleum where it had stood.

In the living room, every scrap of wallpaper had been removed from the walls. The globe was gone from the overhead light. The bulb had been fused black. A huge splotch of drying blood covered part of one wall. It looked like a psychiatrist's inkblot. In the center of it a crater had been gouged deeply into the plaster. There was a matted clump of hair in this crater, and a few splinters of bone.

The milkman nodded, went back out, and stood on the porch for a moment. It would be a fine day. The sky was already bluer than a baby's eye, and patched with guileless little fair-weather clouds ... the ones baseball players call "angels."

He pulled the note from the newspaper holder and crumpled it into a ball. He put it in the left front pocket of his white milkman's pants.

He went back to his truck, kicking the stone from the hopscotch grid into the gutter. The milk truck rattled around the corner and was gone.

The day brightened.

A boy banged out of a house, grinned up at the sky, and brought in the milk.