

POSTAL

It was when I woke up tied to my office chair with the taste of blood in my mouth that I realised my postman was not as harmless as I'd first thought.

I'm not the kind of person who seeks out personal attachments with people I have to deal with every day. The barista at my local cafe knows my order every morning - long black, glass of water, croissant, strawberry jam on the side - but I have never told him my name. I know his name is Maurice, but I have never used it. I have had breakfast there every day for three years. I don't wish to share. I don't wish to be part of the cafe's community - the gay couple who stop by after their gym workout, the bald bike rider in his fluorescent lycra and ridiculous click-clacking shoes, the gossipy woman with the pursed lips and the yapping dog.

I don't wish to make small talk with these people or share my views on the weather or the cricket or the government with them. Same with the Vietnamese woman who does my laundry on Sundays, the Thai girl who takes my order every Friday night, the Italian greengrocer where I buy my fruit and veg every Saturday morning.

Or my postman.

"So let me ask your advice on something, Ben."

I should have shut him down right there.

"You're a man of the world, right?" he continued.

"Well, I don't know about that."

I angled my body back towards my front door, glanced at my watch, trying to give him some non-verbal cues that I wanted to get away. He picked up none of them.

"Of course you are. Look at you. Successful career. Nice place. On the radio all the time. Lots of invitations in the mail."

I bristled. He delivered my mail. Did he also open it? My mouth settled into a fixed smile that probably looked like sheer terror. It hurt my face.

"I've met this woman," he said.

Dear God.

"Well, that's good," I said.

"Yeah. Thanks. It *is* good. But there's a problem."

He paused. We looked at each other. A crow made that sound like a child crying. It was then I realised that he wanted me to fill the gaps, to ask him about his problem, to engage as

if we were friends. But we weren't friends. He was my postman. I said nothing. I just kept that idiot grin on my face. This was a contest of wills now.

"Do you want to know what the problem is, Ben?"

No, I did not want to know what the problem was. I did not want to know about this poor woman, who was surely blind, or incarcerated, or institutionalised, or all three. I did not want to talk to my postman, who was paid to deliver my mail, not to confide in me and ask for personal advice on matters I was not vaguely interested in.

“Mm-hmm,” I said, in a tone that I pitched somewhere just north of bored and a long way south of enthusiastic.

“So, she’s from the Philippines, right? Lovely lady.”

Oh for Christ’s sake. The Philippines? Lovely lady? Let me guess. They met online. She wants to get married so she can stay in the country. She needs money.

“How did you meet?” I asked.

“Online.”

Strike one.

“And what’s the problem?”

“Well, she wants to get married because her visa’s about to run out.”

Strike two

“Right,” I said, rubbing my chin as if I was seriously considering what he was telling me.

“Plus she needs money to send back to her mother and little sister.”

And there’s strike three, ladies and gentlemen.

Who fell for this kind of thing? Was he a complete idiot? Or just really, really lonely?

I looked at him - the saggy jowls, the crooked teeth, the dried spittle at the corners of his mouth, the cocker spaniel eyes pleading with me to help with his conundrum.

“Look, you want my personal opinion?”

“Yes. Of course I do. That’s why I asked. I value your opinion, Ben. I really do.”

He valued my opinion? He didn’t even know me.

“How long have you been seeing this woman?”

“How long have I been seeing her?”

“Yes.”

“Well, we’ve been emailing for about three weeks now.”

“Emailing.”

“Yes.”

“But you’ve met, right?”

“In the flesh, you mean?”

“Well, yeah, of course.”

“No.”

Jesus.

“She sent me pictures, though, Ben. She’s a lovely lady. Look.”

Dear God. He was reaching for his phone.

The pictures were so obviously fake that it was sad. They looked like they’d been cut and pasted from shopping catalogues. Didn’t he wonder why his new girlfriend would send a picture of her in a bra in one picture and holding up a blender in another? She didn’t even look like the same woman in every photo.

“Lovely lady, isn’t she Ben?”

I wanted him to stop saying my name and I wanted him to stop saying “lovely lady”.

“Look, you asked for my opinion, and in my opinion I’d suggest not making any rash decisions. You haven’t even met this person. I definitely wouldn’t agree to marry her. And please, don’t send her money.”

“I hear you, Ben. I hear you. I hear what you’re saying. But I really love this girl. And she loves me.”

My face was beyond aching now.

“Well, that’s fine. But I’d exercise caution if I were you. What’s the rush?”

“That’s the thing, Ben. There’s someone else.”

“You have someone else?”

He laughed for about five seconds longer than necessary.

“No. God no. She knows another man who wants to marry her. But she says she likes me better. So she’s given me until Monday to send the money. Then she’ll break up with the other guy and we can be together.”

I needed a heavy, blunt object to hit him over the head with. Fortunately my phone started ringing in the house. I made my excuses, shut the door and raced inside. It was a market researcher. I hate market researchers, but I talked to this one.

I did a one-minute survey about shampoo, even though I shave my head twice a week.

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“Update, Ben!”

It was Monday. He was back.

“Good news!” he said when I got to the door. He couldn’t stop smiling. My god, those teeth. That dried spittle. I was torn between giving the poor guy a consoling hug and slapping him across the side of his head.

“Game on, Ben! Game on!”

“What do you mean?”

“She chose me. She dumped the other guy.”

“Really?”

“Yep. Last night. I wanted you to be the first to know. Because, you know, if it wasn't for you I mightn't have had the courage to go through with it.”

What was he talking about? I'd given him no encouragement whatsoever.

“She told you this herself?”

“She emailed me last night, right after the money went through.”

“Wait. You sent the money?”

“Well, yeah.”

“Jesus.”

“Sorry?”

“You idiot.”

I just couldn't hold it in anymore. I was angry at him for being such a gullible fool and angry at myself for getting involved in his life in the first place.

“Of course she's telling you you're the one. You sent her...how much?”

He looked sheepish. “I don't want to say.”

“How much?”

“Fifteen hundred.”

“Fifteen hundred. Don't you get it? She's played you. This happens to lonely men like you all the time. They're desperate, they get hooked by some woman, they get asked for money and they get ripped off. You realise you'll never hear from this woman again, right? If it even

is a woman. It's probably some fat, sweaty middle-aged guy in Manila. You can't possibly

believe those pictures are real, can you? I mean, you cannot possibly be that stupid.”

And that's when he hit me. I saw black confetti, then the pain spiked from my nose, then I looked down and saw red, wet spots splattering on my front steps.

That's the last thing I can recall before coming around, tied to my office chair.

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“Wakey, wakey, Ben.”

He was holding a knife. My carving knife. The good one. I immediately thought of how sharp it was, how beautifully it sliced slabs from a leg of lamb, how cleanly it cut through the

chicken wings I would prepare for my cat. Now that knife was in the hand of my psychotic postman, who was not happy with me.

He had something around his mouth. Something dark and glistening. I realised he'd been eating my chocolate icecream. For some reason this made me feel violated. Here I was, bleeding, tied to a chair, being threatened with a knife, and I was pissed off with this guy for eating my icecream.

"Sorry for the interruption," he said. "What were you saying about my fiancée again?"

I opened my mouth to speak and pain darted through my jaw. I winced.

"Cat got your tongue, Ben? You were so talkative before. Come on. You know I value your advice."

The icecream around his mouth was making me feel queasy. His face shone with sweat and his eyes vibrated in their sockets, as if they weren't firmly anchored into his skull. The sunlight through my office window glinted off the knife, which was shaking in his hand.

"I'm not giving you any more advice," I said. "It's your life."

I heard the sound of his hand against the side of my face before I even felt the pain.

"Wrong!" he yelled. "Wrong! Wrong! Wrong! Wrong! Wrong! Wrong! Wrong!"

What did the guy want? I tell him what I think and he hits me. I tell him to do whatever he wants and he hits me. No win.

That's when he started wobbling. The knife fell from his hand and dropped with a metallic rattle to the floor. His eyes rolled back so I could only see the bloodshot whites of them. His face drained of colour. He dropped to his knees first, like a marionette whose strings had been cut. Then his body folded forward and his forehead hit the polished floorboards with a satisfying thud, like the single thump of a kickdrum during a band's soundcheck. A small pool of dark blood spread across the floor from his nose. He didn't move.

My postman was out cold. I was tied to a chair. This was turning into a strange day.

The doorbell rang.

"Parcel!"

It was the courier. The Chinese guy. I didn't know his name. The only words he'd uttered to me in the two years he'd been doing the job were "Parcel" and "Signature".

"Come in!" I yelled. "It's unlocked!"

I'd never asked him to come inside the house. He rang the doorbell again.

"Parcel!" he repeated.

"Please come in!" I called out.

I heard the door open.

"In here!" I shouted.

I had to hand it to him. The guy was stoic. His head appeared around the doorway of my office and his expression betrayed nothing. One guy tied to a chair with blood all over his face. Another guy passed out on the floor, a knife next to his motionless body, and the courier doesn't blink. Perhaps he saw this kind of thing regularly in his line of work.

"I'm okay," I said, even though he hadn't asked anything. "I'm sorry, I don't know your name."

"Bruce."

"Your name is Bruce?"

"Yes. Bruce. You think because I'm Chinese I can't have an Australian name? I was born here."

"Of course. I wasn't suggesting anything. Bruce. Listen. Can you please untie me?"

He shrugged, stepped over the postman as casually as he would have stepped over a discarded takeaway coffee cup, swivelled my chair around with one hand and started fiddling with the extension cord around my arms.

"You probably want to know what happened here," I said after thanking him.

"Not really," he said.

"Really? I mean, I know it looks strange."

"No. I don't need to know. Signature."

"Sorry?"

"Signature" he said. "Parcel."

I didn't call the police. I did take the knife into the kitchen and then washed the dried blood off my face.

My postman came to eventually. He was embarrassed and apologetic.

"I was wrong to rope you in..." he said, stopping himself when he realised I'd only recently been tied to a chair. "I was wrong to try to get you to help me solve my personal problems."

Medication - and his decision to take himself off it recently - was mentioned.

I told him to clean himself up in the bathroom. He shook my hand on the way out and apologised again.

The next day I filled out the paperwork for a post office box. It would be a twenty-minute walk from my home office to the post office every day, but I figured the exercise couldn't hurt me.