



Mark Smith

A Messenger Travels Great
Distances to Reach You

1.

Every night of your life a
messenger travels great
distances to reach you.
Through the highlands his
footsteps are pounding,
where the sheep cross the
tarmac he leans on his
horn, the bell of his
bicycle clangs through
Calcutta. Mush! he cries in
the tundra.
In his leather suit and goggles
he hugs his
motorcycle. These darkened
woods have been the
site of many human
sacrifices and massacres.
Signs warn of him of wild
boar.
Comrade, have you heard of
Herzegovina? the town
of Mostar? The home of
blatina? With the help of
a Turk, he saddles his mare.
In the diner of a truckstop he
unfolds a map and,
with a purple marker,
highlights the route along

the Blue Ridge and the
Natchez Trace.
The yellow fog lamps of a
Citroen are emerging
from the mists of Gougane
Barra. Rowdy
fairies in the backseat urge
the driver forward.

2.

In the dark he will announce
himself
with his footsteps on the roof,
with a banging like a
shutter, with his face in
the window,
with a posthorn, a yodel, with
luffing sails, with
the bells of an ice cream
truck, the put-put of a
motorboat, the bass of a
boom box.
He will set the Doberman to
barking, the toulouse
to hissing in their cages,
he will grab and shake your
foot, your prosthetic
foot, which his violence
will disengage,
his snowshoes are silent,
his business will bring out the
neighbors,
so will the piss of his camel,
the trumpet of his
pachyderm,
he will imitate a bird call in
the manner of the
Delaware.

3.

In the dawn's light he will
appear before you
as a pigeon, a town crier, a
bellhop, a dove,
as a mailman in Bermuda shorts,
sorting your news
from the chaff,

as a bargeman in black, like a
mussel,
as a parachutist, dragging his
chute,
as a zombie, his corpse only
weeks in the grave.
You will know him by his winged
heels and helmet
 as he flies above the town,
your letter extended in
 his hand.
O delivery man, step down from
your van, let this
 sleepy one sign for his
parcel.

4.

He will deliver his message like
a lispng courtier in
 Shakespeare.
He will nail it to the door. An
eviction notice! a
 quarantine! a manifesto!
He will creep into your bed and
whisper with his
 mouth against your ear,
he will read aloud the
misdirected correspondence
 from the great lady who
never answered you. The
 postmark is from another
century. You must pay
 forty cents postage due.
He will sing the committee's
salutations in his
 countertenor,
he will slide the packet through
the slot, then hide
 himself behind the tool shed
with his fingers in
 his ears,
he will bring the news of a
famous victory before
 expiring in your arms, his
lungs blasted from the
 effort of his marathon.

5.

With the message made known
you will call your many friends
and acquaint them
 with the honor bestowed upon
you by your
 colleagues,
you will dispatch the biscuit
tins and ordnance to
 the beleaguered outpost,
you will put the pistol to your
ear, although if your
 mood is loquacious, you may
substitute a
 telephone,
you will copy in your own hand a
love poem from
 an anthology and send it,
without the proper
 attribution, to this new
admirer,
you will initiate the search for
the mother of the
 baby in the basket. If she
is needy, he could
 become your stepson.
The birdcage is the best place
to hide the white
 feathers that floated from
the envelope.

6.

And if the message involves the
messenger?
As bidden, you will take him to
the beet field and
 show where the marquis is
buried,
you will surrender the exciting
snapshot of a
 flagrant infidelity someone
committed in a
 cul-de-sac,
you will make certain the
quinine and morphine are
 in your satchel, then you
will accompany him at

once.
(No, I beg you, do not go with
this stranger, he is
not who he says he is, you
will never see your
partner or her child again.)
You will inform him your reply
to the dean's
impertinence is silence. No,
defiance! But when
he leaves, your hands
tremble when they meet
your face.

7.
And how will you reward this
messenger?
You will kiss him on both
cheeks, avoiding the
dueling scar,
You will put your miser's back
to him and crack
your tiny purse, showing him
no elbows,
from the gift-wrapped box of
chocolates you will
offer him the bon-bon in
which you found the
pinprick of a syringe,
you will take him to your garden
and fill a shopping
bag with zucchini the size
of dachshunds,
you will sit at your desk in
your nightgown and
autograph a glossy of
yourself in drag.
Of course, if he brings bad news
you may want to
kill him, there is precedent
for such behavior.
But if the news is good why not
strike a medal in
his honor?

8.

But he does not come, this
gilded messenger. Not
tonight. Not any night. As
he pens his travelogues
what excuses can he recall
or manufacture to
explain his absence?
His donkey will not budge from
the thorn bush
despite the many beatings he
delivers with his
stick,
the ferry he must take to cross
the straits has sunk in
a typhoon, drowning many
pilgrims,
he cannot jumpstart the car he
plans to "borrow,"
he is distracted by a barmaid in
an inn along the
mountain path and stops to
schmooze, drinking
from a beer mug decorated
with Thunbergia
and Lorelei,
he pauses in a field to eat his
sandwiches and,
thinking of his daughter in
her leg brace playing
with her broken doll, falls
into a trancelike sleep,
he brings his punt ashore and
leans his pole against
a willow. The lockkeeper's
widow will nurse his
neuralgia in her narrow
cottage on the small
canal.
He tends the lock, he hoes the
cabbages, he weeds
the showy flower patch that
favors cosmos, he
fishes with a pole for
pickerel, with his teeth he
scrapes the garlicked
muscles from the legs of
frogs.

Somewhere in the locked sailors'
chest he keeps
 beneath his bed is your
forgotten message. Long
 ago the key was taken by a
rat.

Without your message
God lets you live the life you
lead.

But not forever.

Mark Smith has published seven
novels, including *The Death of the
Detective*, an NBA finalist. He is
an emeritus professor at the
University of New Hampshire.