



The Delivery

JW Burns

The sun small but hot even before 9am.

Salvador guided the boat alongside the dock, jumped out, looped a tie around one cleat, reached for a second line and looped it around a second cleat. Carrying a heavily taped but essentially lightweight cardboard box he walked up the path toward a cluster of low buildings; getting close, inhaling wood smoke, bacon, waste, chicken feathers—mingling human and other animal odors. Behind him the sea shifted orientation, the shimmering water alternately liquid, solid, wind-wrought gas. At the shoreline breakers digested the glare.

The first building was a low concrete block structure largely blank with a hollow doorway. Inside, a gloomy passage opened on a bright shelter of plain tables and skeletal wooden chairs. The room shone because the fourth wall was missing revealing a gently descending view of sand and sparse vegetation down to the water's edge. Slouched over a mop, a one eared bald man slowly spread his instrument swirling on scarred permanently stained boards. It was difficult to see where the floor stopped and his bare feet started. When Salvador walked in, he gestured without looking up.

“Hey hey, Sal...hey...ho”

“Hey, Boss. Ho.”

The gap-toothed head executed a bloated roll, regarded Salvador, returned to the sweeping mop. His boggled torso heaved in an awkward but sturdy pattern with his arms and shoulders.

“Tell me, man.” Salvador advanced, affecting relaxed buoyancy. “Where I find Anna Emile?” Waved the cardboard box.”

The mop stopped. His arms executed two elevated flaps, settled.

“You no want find her, man. No.” He focused intently on Salvador, shifted his weight.

“Why no?”

“Bitch a witch. Stay away best thing.” Mop raised, plopped on the floor forcing gray rivulets from discolored strands. A grease spot rippled on his t-shirt belly.

There was one tree in view from the vacant side of the building, twisted, perennial, eliminating everything excepting a few branches, leper leaves, a bird on a middle branch. Nut brown, white belly. No resemblance to a shore bird. At that moment stringing together a stinging volley causing Salvador to flinch and immediately try to cover it with an exaggerated stretch.

“What witch?” Salvador stepped to the edge of the wet part of the floor.

“Everybody know, man. Tell you how it is. One time she come in here, sit down. Everybody quit talk. Mouths goddamn ice. Nobody move. Blender stop work. All fuckin quiet. She say 'Black coffee, please.' No air in here. I hustle-bustle pour coffee make my legs carry to her put it on table. She take some. Everything back—people drink chew talk.”

“She walk in drink coffee walk out?”

“Yea.”

“What witch? Everybody walk in eat drink some walk out.”

“You been here you see. Nothin’ like it.”

“Ok. Where she live?”

“Up the hill,” nodding, “left, biggest damn white house here be. Go with God.”

“Always. Thanks, man.

Still nodding.

Three stories, white as a floating cloud, windows in refined rows.

A shining magnolia towered beside the house on the left. Maybe 40 feet tall its aromatic reach caught Salvador well before he gained the red door. It was hot and the walk up the hill with the package had started sweat to ooze under his loose shirt, pop on his forehead. Along the front facade tightly woven gray bushes pushed out bright yellow flowers, these large empty cups except for a couple of insistent insects. For some reason the bushes made him think of knapsacks melted together as he approached the door. Before knocking he wiped his face and neck with a small towel he carried for that purpose. Sweat didn't promote tips. The enigma of a knock: Salvador licked his lips, cleared his throat. Firm, a resonate thump.

“Yes?” The voice seemed to open the door. A woman in the frame wearing a cheerful shift colored in calm pasteurized pastels, geometric shapes in orange and green dominating those

in purple and silver on a background of default cream. Her slim figure motionless as a distant river. Salvador saw a perfect nose, sublime curve, delicate hidden nostrils, light terra cotta hue, slightly flushed closed lips, bluegreen eyes willing him to form an omniscient thought containing all the known and unknown resources in his mind.

“This...”

“Yes...?” Softer.

“...for you.” He timidly raised the package. Forage steady hands. But no thought, only her image directly in front of him.

“Thank you.” She relieved him of the package. “One moment, please.” Her smile caught him without words, thoughts, clothes; even his skin was threatened so he looked away to his right. There was a plumeria, brushed momentarily by a breeze before resettling, blooms deep in their blush. Salvador stood at attention staring down a narrow hallway cased in shadow.

Abruptly Salvador disappeared. In his place was a shiny shell in three segments. The first segment had twin eye holes and openings for four antenna which twitched constantly. Underneath was a mouth loaded with gashing teeth, discharging thick lumpy salvia. The second segment was smooth, containing a single chamber devoted to an array of tubes, sloshing vessels, extinct fluids come back to life filling everything. A small red ball of wires throbbed under the third segment of the shell, this and an anus capable of squeezing and releasing. Legs would materialize from each segment if these were needed.

“Please follow me.” She was back, the package gone, her hand brushing his arm as she turned down the hall. Sixteen legs obeyed her, scratching on the stone floor, then eight, four, finally two; his head soft as music from beyond the final sea.

The hall was dense, obscure, bowing to the right. All at once a vast bright space with wide casement windows, high walls blending airy lemons and limes, ornate black lacquered gold cushioned armchairs and sofas. In one corner a floor to ceiling cage lured alive with several species of small birds including parakeets, canaries and two collared puffbirds, these perched about the enclosure silently attentive.

“Please sit.” She indicated a chair. He sat.

“The pack...age...” Words became fragments in Salvador's mouth, shrinking, hollow. An attempt at a slight squirm found him grafted to the chair.

“Thank you so much for delivering the package. I've been expecting it.”

“Some...times...sometimes it takes...a while.” Actually he felt pride that the words managed to form at all.

“Excuse me.” She was gone again.

One of the birds, black and emerald plumage, hooked orange beak, began an iridescent song, notes wispy daggers, then flaring contradictions of flame and ice, finally bouncing rubber droplets—suddenly in jackknife flight the bird superimposed countless ovals around the cage causing Salvador to look down, dizzy, his vision splattering on the floor. When he looked up the

cage was quiet, the birds still. The woman stood before him, offering a teacup and saucer, a plate with cookies. First he took the plate, placed it on a small table beside his chair. Then the teacup and saucer which he lowered next to the plate. Finished, he regarded the objects with a sense of accomplishment. The woman sat across

from him, one white hand resting on the arm of her highbacked chair, legs crossed.

Salvador cleared his throat, again, picked up the teacup, ignoring the thin handle held the delicate china with both hands, sipped lightly, not tasting the warm liquid, his eyes closing with each sip. After carefully replacing cup with saucer he took up one of three bite-sized cookies on the plate. Embedded in the cookie chocolate chips appeared ready to burst out of the dough, assume their rightful place in the electronic universe. She sat across from him neither obviously attentive nor inattentive toward her guest, which despite himself he was beginning to feel like, finally indulging a prolonged glance in her direction immediately swimming into a frozen yet mischievous countenance suggesting a vast domain the depths of which he'd never considered.

“I trust you found the house without too much trouble.”

“Yes, Ma'am.” His answer was automatic even though he sensed that she hadn't really asked a question.

A prominent window to her left displayed the outside world almost as if it were part of the room, manicured lawn bordered by giant elephant ears above lapping caladiums; realizing he was absently holding the cookie he put it in his mouth where it seemed to melt before he could chew. Beyond the window the lawn and the plants began to fade, abruptly the glass was wiped blank. His shudder was less than half realized. A new view began to take shape: bare cinnamon earth replaced the lawn, farther, sand smoothed by seawater breaking gently over its surface. There was a skiff, a man having just dismounted the boat wading ashore, his smiling face blotted with a course beard, loose shirt a billowing sail. When his bare feet left the water he stopped, his eyes flickering at the small boy running toward him, arms outstretched, breathing, breathing, closer, closer to his father. Their embrace brought the safe containment down from above. At some length separating, the man bent close and offered a clenched fist. Following a sheepish hesitation the boy tapped the fist. Open, a gold piece in a lined palm released a gleaming scream.

“Have another.” She indicated the two remaining cookies, her hand pausing for a moment before sweeping above her head creating a glowing stream of pastel color, flavoring for a regal instant the whole room.

Salvador snatched up a cookie, this one dissolving in his mouth as had the first one. The room had again found footing in furniture, carpet, round tables and representational paintings; again his unsettled gaze returned to the window. What materialized could easily have been hung in the ballroom of the Ovalflow Club on the Grand Isle. A female figure breasts confronting the delivery man's pulse, sleek, shifty, while her hips of proclamation, chrome lips, eyes preening slowed at the same time stretched his breath to irregular lengths. Buoyant, naturally composed, she made him for an instant feel marvelous then blinking back her radiance—he settled into an unposed ease, shoulders somewhat folded. She stood one foot slightly behind the other her

nudity sinking slowly through him, a vapor he was able to inhale without fully acknowledging it. Only gradually and with no real sense of surprise did he realize that the woman in the widow was the same woman sitting fully clothed across from him. In the window the backdrop roamed in eccentric neglect, indistinct Albizia shrubs fluttering fernlike leaves around wispy yellow/white blooms below a wet sodium sky.

“When I was a small girl,” She spoke from her chair, recrossing her legs, “an orphan like you, I came to this house to be raised by my dead mother's sister. She was a widow, childless but quite sensitive to the needs of others. She had been married to an adventuresome young man, the son of a notorious buccaneer who had amassed a fortune through his lawless deeds. At home her husband was an endearing man who unobtrusively designed each of her days to reflect happiness, charm and contentment. But when he was away he followed in his father's footsteps, the drug trade, trafficking in weapons of warfare on an international scale, the sale and enslavement of human beings. This frequent contact with unsavory elements eventually lead to his demise. But my aunt was a woman of no meager resolve plus her extraordinary ability to foresee the future as it was birthed in the past and present her to maintain and even enhance her material situation without resorting to association with malodorous elements.” The woman leaned ever so slightly forward. “These qualities she passed on at least in some part to her only surviving relative.” Her smile entrenched itself in Salvador's heart, robbing him forever of the flat smooth notion of surface rigidity.

He took the last cookie from the plate, felt it melt in his mouth before putting it there.

The whole house seemed to open wide letting in a gentle downdraft of loyal air. Salvador saw himself dressed down to shorts casually chasing a herd of small joyous children. Together they would execute nimble cuts, turns, zigs, sudden stops, starts, switchbacks—breathlessly happy he followed behind making sure to keep up but not to catch them, waving his arms, grinning, unleashing whatever youthful residue the intervening years had spared.

“Thank you.” Salvador stood just outside the doorway.

“Of course. Thank you for the package.” She disappeared before the door closed.

He was halfway down the hill before realizing that his only tip was a cookie and a cup of tea.

The sea was almost smooth. Low breakers resigned to the shore. Maybe a renegade breeze carrying a gull or a pelican pitching headfirst into the water, coming up quivering, head up, neck extended. The half dozen small buildings near the shoreline squatted in afternoon shadow windows vacant sockets.

Passing the last building before the dock Salvador again peeked in. The man with the mop had become the man behind the bar wiping the laminated finish with a smudged cloth. Inside his half-buttoned shirt his chest was scabbed clay packed with twigs. In the room one table was occupied by three men. All were smoking, two oblique plastic cups and an aluminum can on the table. A gray dog lay flattened behind one of the men.

“Hey, Boss—see you next time.” Salvador waved.

“So you survived the witch, eh. Good.” He waved the rag.

“I was blessed.”

The boat was as he had left it, rocking against the dock. Overhead a few white scribbles marked the pulseless blue sky. He unhooked the ties, jumped aboard, the motor adding its own gasoline smell to the humid mid-afternoon perfume. Set free, the boat quickly found its place on the water, slicing toward the horizon. A floating pelican suddenly lifted its wings, balanced for a second big feet walking on water, flew in the opposite direction from the boat. Reconnecting with the water was always easy for Salvador. Seated in the stern guiding the craft he felt the liquid shed any notion of firmament as it became free to form fluid balance. His flesh seemed to bloom with the trapeze-ing motion, flowering beyond arms legs head, any limits of his frame. Land distant, he hung outside the tug of gravity consciousness submerged in clinging turquoise where duration goes to escape the air.

And so the boat creeping under a blue sky steadily filling with clouds. Graceful white clouds thickening with gray balloons marked by darker charcoal streaks, these growing into bulging sooty misshapen monsters. The first zigzagging flash plus merging boom sent Salvador swerving to that part of his brain where he had four limbs, four clawed feet, a rugged ridged back, iron jaws and a snake-line tongue. Rigid, he thrashed his massive tail on the seat, screamed in unison with the booming thunder. But in the next instant he regained control of the motor with one stiff hand at the end of a newborn arm, steered toward the distant clot of land.

But then the monster was everywhere: ripping the sky into jagged pieces, unraveling olive threads of water, these threatening to twist around the boat, roll it over. Sheets of stinging glass spray broke over Salvador until his breath was almost gone. The rain fell as runny ink, rinsing through ruinous bright ligaments of lightning—disappearing, reappearing, blending until the boat became little more than the blunted tip of stillborn anticipation, an iron bolt closed on electrified atmosphere.

Salvador himself was less than willful, control of the boat lost, his soggy noggin squeezing little more than murky water from his brain. One arm hooked around the useless motor, hand dug into a wooden rib, one leg locked under a seat; remote logic whispering that it was only a matter of one more topping wave before the boat would capsize and he would be alone rolling bouncing smothering without anything to touch. Another gigantic heave, abruptly his stomach turned upside down, windpipe backpedaling, mouth a widening cone. He voided the recently ingested cookies and tea, the vomit forming an elongated string among hurling waves. Salvador squeezed his eyes shut coughing, spitting, crying, awaiting a final crashing deluge. The monster fumed punched frailed, weaker weaker while the sky inhaled itself found the blue above the darkness. He tasted slinging spray, sparks banking around the insides of his mouth. The crash came in a tongue of licking quiet—he must be dead or at least unconscious.

He sensed rather than saw the yellow glow, felt the rain as gnarled mist.

“No way. No way. No way...” There was a tedious charm in reciting the two words over and over.

Eyes open, blinking moisture brushing his hand through his hair blowing his nose between thumb and index finger leaning over the side hand in the placid water watching the snot string and slowly float away. A few tallow clouds looked as if they might disintegrate, sprinkle down like confetti. The humidity seemed to trim away taking a portion of Salvador's fatigue with it. Wobbly but determined he pulled himself on the back seat, stroked the motor to a contented purr, aimed the vessel toward the growing land.

JW Burns lives in Florida but please don't hold that against him; there for the sun and close proximity to the Gulf and Atlantic waters, not the present political/cultural impulses as flumed in the news. His prose and poetry have been published in several journals, most recently *Midway Journal*, *Moon City Review* and *Panoply*.