

Armored in cynicism and worldly wisdom, we are sometimes unable to perceive it when an ordinary person does something noble.

Redemption

by Patricia Russo

Four months delivering pizzas for La Bocca Grande, Austin knew all the stories. The fat lady who came to the door naked. The latchkey kid who handed over two dollars and twelve cents on an order that came to eleven-fifty. The guy who loosed his pitbull at you so you'd drop the box and run. The old woman who forgot she'd placed an order and wouldn't let you in, then called the shop five minutes later complaining her pizza hadn't arrived. The guy whose delivery you did not want to take, even though he was a good tipper, since when he opened up the door the smell from his big old unwashed self would seriously choke a swamp gator.

That was the easy stuff, the experiences he could laugh about, turn into a funny story over a beer with his roommate Jerry or recount in a phone call to Yolanda, his almost-ex girlfriend. *Let me tell you about the idiot who came in today, wanted us to dry clean his fucking beach towel, she'd say. Oh yeah? Let me tell you about the college boy who puked on my goddamn new BK's, then asked me if I had change for a fifty,* he'd say.

Amusing anecdotes.

Then there were the once-upon-a-time stories. The celebrity who handed over a hundred-dollar tip, the hot girls who handed over sex, the eccentric recluse who handed over the secret of immortality. The seven little dudes who paid in gold, the guy with donkey ears, the old witch and her talking rats. Austin didn't believe a word of these stories, but they were sort of fun to listen to if you were drunk enough.

There were other things that weren't fun at all, that none of the delivery guys or the oven guys or the phone guys talked about much after they happened. One time, some kids phoned in a forty dollar order, the address almost out of their delivery zone, way on the north end of Lake Street. But for forty bucks you go, and the guy who went got the crap beat out of him and his money and car taken. One time, there was a delivery to the Heights, upscale, yeah, where the doctors and stock brokers lived. Man came to the door with a gun and shot the delivery guy in the face. Didn't kill him. Blew his face off, but didn't kill him. One time, this normal order came in, repeat customer, large pie with mushrooms and a

side of garlic breadsticks. Man invited the delivery guy in, said *hold on a minute, I left my wallet on the TV*, hit the guy, tied him up, worked him over with a knife and other shit, killed him. Nobody told those stories, but they always popped into the back of Austin's mind whenever an order came in that seemed...off.

We Deliver Late, La Bocca Grande proudly proclaimed on its red white and green sign and its red white and green flyers, and Austin's shift was six to twelve. It had been a slow night, just a couple of short runs. He'd burned more in gas and aggravation than he'd made in tips, so he perked up when the phone shrilled and the telephone guy started scratching on his pad. "Mine," Austin said, though Leodan, the other delivery guy on Wednesdays, was also hanging out with his thumb up his ass, drinking Cokes and bugging Maricela the counter girl. Leo had had more runs tonight than him, so Austin felt cool calling this one.

Stefano, the phone guy, was taking too long getting the info, though. Usually it was, "Yeah, yeah, yeah," scratch scratch scratch with his goddamn softlead pencil, "twenty minutes." Austin stood up, came around the partition between the back tables and the kitchen area. A little tickle of unease began to stir in the space between his shoulder blades.

"Yes, sir. Twenty minutes." Stefano hung up the wall phone. His eyes were narrow, unhappy.

"What?"

"Carlton Street. Three pies," he said, ripping the top sheet off the order pad.

"Yeah, but what?"

"Guy was calling from a pay phone."

Which meant Stefano hadn't gotten a home call-back number in case they needed to check the order, check the address.

"Legit?"

"I think so. Guy said he was on his way home. Called on the way to make sure he didn't miss last delivery."

"His address in the system?" The system being the boss's kid's castoff Mac, humming on the counter under the wall phone.

Stefano shook his head. "First time customer."

"Shit," Austin said.

"You want the run or not?" Stefano held out the order slip. "Cause Leo looks free."

"Shit." He snatched the slip. "I'll take it."

Carlton Street was low-rent residential, two-story eight-unit buildings mixed with three-story three-family houses, all of which, from the mailboxes outside, looked to house at least six families. No high rises, no private homes. Austin, cruising slowly, searching for the address, thought the area looked nicer than his neighborhood. The garbage cans were all chained up, and they all had lids; the three-family houses had two-car ground-level garages. Of course, if you hauled up the sliding door on any of those garages, what you'd find behind it would most likely be a makeshift dorm and a lot of tired men in their underwear, but still the garages and the tarred driveways gave the neighborhood an air of class. Kinda like the suburbs.

437 Carlton, apartment 1D. The building was low, squat, a twin of the one directly across the street from it. A long time ago, someone had decided to put aluminum siding on both of them. Bad idea. The lighting was pretty good, though, a streetlight in the middle of the block, and house lights on the twin. No house lights on 437, but Austin could read the numbers okay. He hated it when he had to get out of the car and guess in the dark.

OK, 1D would be in the back. Austin unzipped the red keep-hot case, hauled out the three pizza boxes. The aroma of hot cheese mixed with warm oil mixed with baked cardboard whooshed up into his face. He'd stopped finding this smell appetizing about two weeks into this gig. Now pizza was just something he ate every day, because he and Leo got the leftovers from the slice trays free at the end of the night. Taking the boxes out of the keep-hot case was a no-no, the boss wanted them to haul the carry-case to the client's door, unzip it there, but that took time, and Austin wanted to be in and out fast. Boss would never know, anyway. Got the bill slip. \$26.97. Son of a bitch better give him more than a three-cent tip.

Damn. *Hot*. Austin held the boxes by the sides, but the heat still scorched his fingers.

437 had a foyer. He shoved the door with his shoulder, and it swung open—good, no springlock. 437 had a row of mailboxes with doorbells set into them. Yeah, good. 1D. Austin ducked his head, pressed the button with his chin, held it down hard until he heard the ding-ding echoing from inside the building.

The foyer's second door, the one opening on the first floor hall, was a flimsy thing, old wood and old glass windows. A white curtain hung over the windows on the inside of the door. Austin hoped the guy would come out and open up, not just buzz him in.

He hit the bell again. *Come on, man, I'm burning my fingers off here.*

Fuck it. Austin set the boxes on the floor of the foyer. Boss would have a shitfit if he saw that, but fuck it. Austin flapped his fingers in the air, then blew on them. That helped a little. Then he thought, three pies for one guy, and went, "Fuck!" out loud. This was a *gag*, a street kid phoning in a late order to nowhere, so the pies would get tossed in the back Dumpster when Austin got back to the shop after closing time, easy pickings for the hungry. Motherfucking waste of time, motherfucking waste of his life....

Just for the hell of it, he tried the knob of the inner door. It turned; the door opened.

Great security they had in this place.

The hall floor was dingy brown linoleum, the walls almost the same shade of brown, though probably they'd started out as tan or something. There was one light above the inner door, a bare bulb, maybe forty watts. Made the place look like an abandoned tunnel. Stairs to his left, but he didn't have to worry about stairs. Closed doors to the left and right, one with a very tired-looking Christmas wreath on it. 1A, 1B. He didn't have to worry about them, either. As he'd figured, 1D was at the ass end of the corridor.

Shit.

Austin picked up the three pizza boxes. Less hot, but still hot, goddamn it. He walked to the ass end of the shit-brown corridor, set the boxes down on the dusty floor, and knocked sharply on the door of 1D. "Hello! Pizza!"

A couple of seconds later, a voice called from inside the apartment. "Come in."

Then another, "Come in!"

And another: "Come IN!"

Female voices. Soprano, mezzo, alto. Loud, bold, though sort of strained. Sort of eager. Come in? What was up with this place, nobody locked any freaking doors here? And what happened to the guy? Stefano said it was a guy who'd phoned in the order.

Fuck me, Austin thought. "Pizza!" he shouted again, just to make double-damn-sure, and opened the apartment door.

It was dark inside. Pizza boxes back in his hands, Austin stood on the threshold, peering into shadow. Goddamn it to hell, this was going to be one of those days, wasn't it? The apartment smelled of spider webs and dust, mouse droppings and very old pillows. Crack whores, he thought. That explained why all the doors were unlocked. Easy access. Cheap-ass crack whores, or broke crack whores, who couldn't get it together to keep the electricity on. Wonderful. And what were the odds these three had thirty bucks on them?

Austin made out some darker shadows in the gloom, more solid, closer to the ground. They're sitting on the floor, he thought. Great. They got no furniture, either. Probably just a couple of mattresses, for business purposes. I'm gonna fucking kill Stefano when I get back to the shop.

"Hello," he called into the darkness, as politely as he was able, given that he was thoroughly pissed off and expected to be stiffed. "Can I get a little help here?"