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Havenly Pizza

Andrew Udelsman

New Haven boasts over 40 pizzerias, some of which are frequently cited as serving the finest pizza in the United States. Havenly Pizza holds the lesser distinction of serving the lowest priced pizza in town. Our customers aren't looking for gourmet meals—they want cheap food, fast. I deliver it with honor and pride.

Friday, May 15

It's my first delivery of the night. Order: one small pepperoni pizza and a buffalo chicken sandwich. Address: Room 114 of the Three Kings Motel. I knock on the door with the food in in my red hot-bag.

"Yeah?" A woman rasps from behind the door. Her voice is scratchy and hoarse.

"Havenly Pizza!" I announce, proudly.

The door opens a couple of inches and a long, slender arm extends out towards me. At its end there's an open hand with inch-long purple fingernails. I stare at the fingernails, perplexed. Through the crack in the door I see the back of a man's head illuminated by the glow of a television.

“C’mon,” the woman demands from behind the door, “Gimmie the food!”
The hand closes and opens in time with her words.

I hesitate. “You gotta pay first,” I tell her.

“I ain’t paying shit ’til you give me the food,” she rasps.

“It’s our policy that the customer pays first.” This is a lie—Havenly Pizza doesn’t have policies.

“I don’t give a fuck!” The hand waves up and down in time with her words.
“Gimmie the food or get the fuck out!”

I place the sandwich in her outstretched hand. It retracts into the room and reappears empty, the hand closing and opening expectantly. I place the end of the pizza box in it. The hand grasps the box and tilts it sideways to fit through the door. I shudder at the thought of cheese sliding off the vertical pizza.

The hand reappears again, this time closed in a fist, with the purple fingernails pointed toward the ground. I cup my hand under the fist just before it opens, releasing some dollars and change into mine. The door slams shut and I walk away, counting the money. Thirteen \$1 bills and exactly 57 cents for an \$11.57 bill. A \$2 tip—average.

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My next order brings me to the Valley. Before leaving headquarters, my boss gave me a piece of advice: “Listen, when you get there, look around, you know? If it looks bad, just stay in the car and call. Okay?”

I understood his warning before I arrived. The Valley is home to a gang that calls itself “The Tribe.” It’s a fairly peaceful group, funding itself through drug and gun sales. But still, no one wants to deliver pizza at nine o’clock on a Friday night in gang territory. Especially not in the Valley, where houses are located down a hill, 30 yards off the street.

When I arrive, I sit in the car and look around. There’s a group of eight young men walking on the hill. They’re talking and smoking quietly; I can see the glowing red of their cigarettes. Are these Tribesmen? I pick up my hot-bag and leave the car.

As I descend the hill, the group walks toward me. Suddenly one guy leaves the group and runs toward me. When he is ten yards away, he raises an arm and yells, “Yo white boy, gimmie all your cash!”

I freeze. Not all animals have the fight-or-flight instinct. The possum, for example, loses consciousness when threatened, collapses to the ground, and emits a nasty-smelling green fluid. The reaction is involuntary, so it’s a bit of a misnomer to say that possums “play” dead.

As I adopt the possum’s defense, my assailant grins and breaks out laughing. One of the other guys in the group repeats in a mocking voice, “Yo white boy, gimmie all your cash!” and they all crack up in laughter. My assailant turns around and rejoins them.

When I regain control over my limbs, I continue down the hill, find the right apartment, and ring the bell.

“Who is it?” A girl’s voice calls out.

“Havenly pizza!”

“Coming.”

From inside the apartment a young boy yells, “PIZZZZZZZAA!” I hear him running through the building repeating, “Pizza pizza pizza pizza pizza!” The door flies open and a grinning, gap-toothed boy stands before me. He takes a deep breath and gets halfway through announcing “PIZZA” again when he stops mid-breath and stares at me quizzically. “Hey! You’re not the pizza man!”

I look around. Seeing no other pizza men in the vicinity, I answer hesitatingly, “Uh . . . yes I am.”

“No you’re not! You’re not even a *man*.”

“Well, I’m the pizza *boy*.”

He remains skeptical. “Pizza *boy*?”

“Yeah. See?” I unzip the hot-bag. Steam billows out, and with it that unique smell of tomatoes, melted cheese, and toasted crust. The kid’s eyes widen with astonishment. I hand him the pizza.

He holds the box to his face and takes a sniff. Satisfied, he quips “Thanks, *pizza boy!*” and runs off.

“Hey!” I yell, taking a step forward, “Come back!”

“It’s okay,” a girl’s voice calls from the steps at the end of the hall, “I’m coming, I’m coming.”

I watch as she descends. First I see bare feet and long, thin legs. She’s wearing short shorts and a cut-off tee-shirt. Flat stomach, long neck, full lips, long brown hair. She looks at me and smiles, revealing dimples under both cheeks.

I’m mesmerized. This is every pizza delivery boy’s dream. A hungry family sits anxiously at home, waiting for deliverance. When the hero arrives, adults look at him with respect, children sing tributes to his name, and beautiful girls swoon before him. For once, the dream is coming true! True, the adults are missing—but the most important part is the swooning girl, and she is swaying toward me.

As I stare at her dumbstruck, her smile contorts into a look of fear. “JESUS, NO!” She yells, “SHUT THE DOOR!”

Her yell triggers my possum reflex; my limbs freeze and I squint at her in a look of stupidity. As I stare, a blur of fur passes through the half-open door, brushes against my leg, and disappears into the night. “Oh, shit,” I mutter, dazed.

The girl runs toward the door. “Why didn’t you shut the door?” she demands.

“Uh . . .”

“Move!” She pushes me out of the way and walks outside. “Jesus? C’mere Jesus!” She scans the hill and then turns to me. “What part of ‘shut the door’ did you not understand?”

“I understood but . . . I was too slow. I’m sorry. I’ll help you look for it. Was it a cat?”

She looks out into the dark and sighs. “Nah . . . we won’t find him tonight. He’ll come back. He always does.”

“So . . . this has happened before?” I ask, relieved.

She snorts. “Oh yeah. That cat can’t help himself. He’s got a girlfriend a few blocks away. He’ll go over there, you know, do-his-little-cat-thing,” she says the last few words in a singsong, moving her hips in time, “And then he’ll come back. I just hope he doesn’t get hit by a car again.”

“Again? How many times has he been hit?”

“Why don’t you ask him on your way out? I only saw it once—this big old pick-up truck ran right over his little head. He was out cold, but he was still breathing, so I took him inside. Three days later, he got back up! That’s why we call him Jesus,” she concludes.

“Ya know,” I tell her, “He’d stay home more if you got him neutered.”

“What do you mean, ‘neutered?’”

“I mean, like, an *operation*.” With my hand I make the universal sign for scissors.

“An *operation*? You talking about cutting off his little cat balls?”

“Well ... he wouldn’t run around as much then.”

“Yeah, well, what would you say if someone tried to give *you* an operation?”

I look at the floor, blushing heavily.

“Here,” she says, handing me money. I thank her and start to turn away.

“How old are you?” She asks.

“Seventeen.”

She looks me up and down, disapprovingly. “You don’t look it.”

I shrug, trying to look nonchalant, knowing that my reddening face betrays me.

“Well, be careful out there,” she warns, shutting the door.

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My last delivery of the night is to the Royal Inn, one of New Haven’s humbler lodging places. For one week of the year, the Royal Inn hosts parents of Yale graduating students who failed to book a room downtown years in advance. During the rest of the year, the Royal Inn is a modern day opium den.

I knock on Room 109 just before midnight. I hear rapid footsteps as someone scuttles towards the door. It swings open to reveal a wire-thin man wearing heavily stained clothes.

“Tookyasolong?” He speaks rapidly and strings all his words together.

“What?” I ask.

“What took you so long?” He repeats, marginally slower.

“You ordered 10 minutes ago.”

“That’s right! What took you so long?”

I shrug. "One large Hawaiian Surprise?"

"That's right, that's right" he says, taking the pizza. His voice drops to a conspiratorial whisper. "Hey, listen, you alone? Cmonside."

"What?"

"C'mon inside, c'mon inside."

"Uh . . . no."

"I ain't gon' hurt ya, c'mon inside."

"Why?" I ask.

"Look!" He points behind me to the roof of a two-story building. "See that?"

"See what?"

"The camera! You ain't see that camera up there? Pointing right at us!"

"All I see is a roof."

"Yeah, on the roof! I'm out here everyday, and that camera's staring at me, watching every damn thing I do."

I see nothing resembling a camera. But it's dark, so I give him the benefit of the doubt. "Well, so what?" I ask him, "We're not doing anything wrong, right?"

"That's right, that's right." He jerks his head left and right as he scans the area before resuming his whisper, "Listen though: Smocrock?"

"What?"

"Smoke rock?"

"Uhh . . . no. I don't smoke rock."

"Weed?"

"No."

"Yayo?"

"No."

"Dope?"

"No! Look, just pay for the pizza."

"Alright, alright." He hands over the money. "Listen, just remember: anything you need, I got it right here. Big Daddy, Room 109. You got that?"

“Got it.”

Friday, July 17

After two months, my Friday night deliveries have become predictable. Around 8:00 o'clock, the woman from Room 114 of the Three Kings Motel orders a buffalo chicken sandwich and one other item. When I knock, she stands behind the door and reaches out with her long arm and purple fingernails. She's invariably rude and impatient, but she always gives a generous \$2.00 tip. The only things that change are the second food item—usually another sandwich, but sometimes pizza or pasta—and the man watching television. From the crack in the door, I can see the back of his head, which is sometimes covered with hair, sometimes bald.

Big Daddy is usually my last delivery of the night, just before midnight. Either he has trouble recognizing me, or he is relentlessly optimistic—no matter how many times I refuse to buy drugs, he offers me the full cornucopia before he pays for his

food. His paranoia varies from week to week, but his usual fears are cameras and spying cops.

The highlight of my week is delivering to the girl from the Valley—Josie is her name. She lives with her little brother, Ray, and their mom who is never home. I still get nervous when I deliver to her, partly because of the kids outside that stage mock hold-ups on me, and partly because Josie is most beautiful girl I know. All week I think of clever, sexy things to say to her. But when I stand before her, all I can think to talk about is her cat, Jesus.

In stark contrast to Josie, Jesus is the ugliest creature in New Haven. His fur is mangled and bare in places, both his ears have large chunks bitten out of them, and he is missing an eye. He looks like a Gremlin. After the first time I let him escape, he returned the next day, escaped the day after that, and returned a week later. Josie enjoys talking about Jesus's exploits. We've gotten into a routine where I hand Ray the food and then Josie and I talk for a few minutes by the door.

Tonight, however, I've resolved to go a step further: I'm going to ask Josie out on a date. As far as I know, Havenly Pizza doesn't prohibit delivery boys from asking out customers. It's not exactly encouraged, since romantic solicitation is generally bad for business. But these are extenuating circumstances.

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I practice lines during my drive to the Valley. When I arrive, I scan the hill for assailants as I pull over to the curb. Suddenly, my car rattles as my front wheel drives

over a bump in the road. I jump out and look under the car. There, just behind my front wheel lies a large cat with scraggly fur.

I squat down and examine it. Half-bitten ears, missing eye, scars all over its body. “Aw, shit, Jesus, you okay?”

The cat opens his only eye, mutters a meow, and rolls to his feet. He staggers forward a few feet, shakes the dirt off his body, and stretches. Then he stumbles back toward me and rubs affectionately against the wheel that ran over him. I pick him up and carry him to Josie’s apartment.

Ray answers the door. “Hey *Pizza Boy*. What’s that?” He asks, pointing towards Jesus.

“It’s your cat. Here, take him,” I say, extending the cat towards him.

Ray recoils. “Get it away! I’m scared of that thing!” He turns around and yells, “Josie! *Pizza Boy* found Jesus!” Then, to me, “Where’s the pizza?”

I place the cat in the hallway, close the door, and run back to my car. When I return, Josie and Ray are standing together by the door. I hand Ray the pizza and he runs off.

“Where’d ya find Jesus?” Josie asks.

“In the road.”

“Was he hit? He’s dirty and . . . look, he’s acting funny.” The cat stumbles as he weaves between Josie’s feet, purring loudly.

“Hmm, I’m not sure. He was acting like that when I found him.”

She sighs. “Well, thanks for bringing him back. We’re gonna have to get screens for the windows—this time he jumped from the second floor! Ya just can’t stop this cat when he’s got pussy his mind.”

I laugh.

“Here,” she says, offering me money for the pizza.

“That’s okay,” I tell her, “It’s on the house tonight.”

She looks at me skeptically. “On the house?”

I nod.

“Something wrong with the pizza?”

“No! It’s just . . . a present. You and Ray are my favorite customers.”

She still looks skeptical, but now she’s smiling slyly. “Oh yeah? Why’s that?”

I shift my feet and look at the cat, the walls, the ceiling—anywhere but Josie’s big brown eyes. “I dunno. But, um . . .”

“Yeah?”

“If you’re around this weekend, wanna hang out sometime?”

Her grin widens. She stares deep into my eyes for a few seconds before answering, “Sure, pizza boy. Whatcha got in mind?”

“Maybe . . . we could watch a movie?”

She chuckles. “Tell ya what. Come over at 12:00, when Ray’s asleep.”

I nod eagerly.

“Do you like to smoke weed?” she asks.

I shrug and nod simultaneously. It’s an odd gesture that she interprets as a yes.

“Bring some, then. We can blaze and see what’s on T.V.”

“Sure,” I answer, “I’ll do that. Midnight, right?”

She nods.

“Great, see ya Josie.”

With a slight grin, she raises her hand and wiggles her fingers in a seductive wave. “Bye, pizza boy.”

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I’m grinning as I drive around town, imagining Josie’s smile and the way she looked at me when she waved goodbye. At 11:45, my last order of the night comes in.

“Who’s that?” Big Daddy yells when I knock on his door.

“Havenly Pizza!”

“What kinda pizza I order?” I can hear the suspicion in his voice.

“Hawaiian Surprise!”

The door swings open. Big Daddy glances to my left, ducks, glances to my right. “Alright c’mon, c’mon inside.”

“No,” I tell him firmly, “We’re not doing this today.” I hand him the pizza. “Nine nintety-five.”

He fishes a ten out of his pocket. As we exchange, he whispers quickly, “You need anything?”

“Actually,” I answer reluctantly, “I’d buy some weed if you have it.”

“Weed? Alright, I got that. C’mon inside.”

I glance inside. “Nope. We trade out here or I’m out.”

“Alright, alright . . . How much you need?”

“Twenty dollars’ worth.”

“Alright, one second.” He puts the pizza in the room and steps outside. “I gotta go up, I’ll be right back.”

He runs up an outdoor staircase to an apartment on the second floor. He knocks, the door opens, and he goes inside. He emerges a few minutes later with a small paper bag. I hand him \$20, he hands me the bag, and we part ways.

Back in my car I inspect my purchase. Inside the brown paper bag is a small green mass heavily wrapped in plastic. I’m pretty sure I’ve been ripped off—there seems to be a lot more plastic than weed—but I expected as much from a dealer who calls himself “Big Daddy.” I return to headquarters, check out for the night, and head straight to Josie’s.

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I knock on Josie’s door rather than ringing the bell. It opens a few seconds later to reveal Josie wearing her typical outfit of short-shorts and a cut-off tee-shirt. “Hey,” she whispers, “Come in, but be quiet—we don’t wanna wake Ray.”

I step inside and she leads me to a small room with a television and couch. She closes the door, turns on the television, and we sit down. “We can talk now,” she tells me, “Ray can’t hear us from here.”

I nod.

“So!” She asks, settling into the couch, “How’s delivering pizza? Make a lotta money?”

“Nah,” I tell her, “People don’t tip much.”

She smiles. “Oh yeah? People stingy?”

I half-nod, half-shrug.

“I guess times are bad for people. Do you carry a gun?”

“Why would I carry a gun?”

“Protection! Why do you think they call it ‘Pistol wavin’ New Haven?”

I can’t tell if she’s joking. “Is that what they call it?”

“You never heard that? Crack shavin’, sucka slayin’, New Haven!”

Earnestly, I ask, “Do people seriously call it that?”

“Nah,” she answers, “I’m just messing with you.” After a pause she points to the paper bag in my hand and asks, “That the weed?”

I hand it to her, nodding.

She picks it up and starts unwrapping the plastic. She smiles, showing off her dimples. “You should deliver weed instead of pizza. You’d make a lot more money.”

“I’m thinking about it.”

She holds the partially unwrapped package up to the light. A foot of loose plastic hangs down. “Where’d you get this? Looks like a crackhead wrapped this up.”

“Actually, funny story—”

I’m interrupted by her gasp of surprise. When she finished unrolling the package, a shower of small green objects fell onto her lap. She picks a couple up and inspects them.

“The hell . . .?” She asks, handing them to me, “This ain’t weed. What is this?”

They’re long, narrow, and soft. “I think . . .” I take a sniff and my heart sinks. “These are pine needles.”

“Pine needles?”

I nod, meekly.

She looks at me in disbelief. “How much did you pay for this?”

I lower my head in shame. “20 bucks.”

“You paid 20 dollars . . . for *pine needles*?”

As I nod my head, she erupts into laughter. I try to join, but the most I can manage is a fake smile and a grunt.

She continues laughing. “You better stick to delivering pizza! You’d be the worst drug dealer ever!”

I eke out a “Hah.”

“Who sold you this?”

“There’s this guy I deliver to—he’s always asking if I wanna buy drugs. I’m pretty sure he’s a crackhead.”

“You bought weed off a *crackhead*?”

“Well,” I point to the pine needles, “I tried to, anyway.”

She erupts into laughter again, but this time I join her. She cracks a couple more jokes about my ephemeral drug delivery career and then starts flipping through channels on the television. She stops at Judge Judy.

“You ever watch this?” She asks.

“Sometimes. That Judge Judy is pretty quick.”

Josie scoffs. “Nah, she ain’t quick! They just put the dumbest people in the world on her show.”

“Think so?”

“I *know* so. Like once, there was this girl who says a man stole her wallet. The man tried to deny it, like, ‘No Judge Judy, I didn’t steal no wallet.’ So Judge Judy asks the girl, ‘What was in the wallet?’ And the girl goes, ‘Like fifty dollars, some addresses, a phone card.’ And then the dumbass guy interrupts her, he yells out, ‘No, Judge Judy, she’s lying! There was no phone card in the wallet!’”

I laugh.

“See what I mean? *Anybody* could be a judge for idiots like that.”

“Oh yeah?” I ask. “Maybe *you* should be a judge.”

She purses her lips, pondering that possibility, while I ponder the possibility of kissing her pursed lips. “Do you need to go to college to be a judge?”

“I think so,” I tell her.

“Ah well,” she concludes, “I bet it gets annoying to listen to people’s problems all day, anyway.”

“You’re not going to college?” I ask.

“Does it *look* like I got money for college?”

I look around. The room is clean, the electricity is on, and the television is in working order. I shrug.

She scoffs. “Maybe someday. Need to make some money first.”

We spend the next hour talking on the couch. Around 1:15 she tells me I better go, before her mom comes home. She takes my hand and leads me to the door. Still holding hands, she opens the door and says, “Thanks again for the pizza.”

“It’s nothing,” I tell her, looking into her eyes. She grins slightly and stares back at me like she did earlier in the evening when she waved. I hesitate for a second before leaning in to kiss her. She responds eagerly, pressing her lips and body against mine. After a long kiss, she steps back, smiles coyly, and whispers, “Bye pizza boy.”

I’m practically skipping as I ascend the hill back to my car. I pay no mind to the guys smoking nearby, one of whom half-heartedly says, “Gimmie the keys to your car!” I pause momentarily—more out of politeness than fear—and then continue to

my car and drive off. I'm halfway home when I realize that Josie and I forgot to exchange cell-phone numbers.

August 7

The following Friday, I brought a bouquet of flowers to work to give to Josie. But she didn't call. The Friday after that I did the same, but still no call from Josie. My confidence wilted with the second bouquet of flowers. I couldn't understand it—Josie had ordered pizza every Friday night for three months. Then we kiss one night, and all of a sudden she disappears. What had gone wrong? I considered showing up at her door or calling the number Havenly Pizza had on record. But I decided against it—nobody likes a stalker. So I resolved myself to be patient.

But being patient is no easy task for a seventeen-year-old boy. The subtle distinction between love and lust is lost on me; I spend every waking moment thinking about Josie. At the same time, I'm anxious because as the summer comes to an end, my pizza delivery job is ending with it. In fact, this is my last Friday on the job—my last chance to see Josie.

I buy a third bouquet of flowers before going to work. At 9:30, just as I'm beginning to lose hope of ever seeing Josie again, my boss gives me the order: one buffalo chicken sandwich and one small pizza to Josie's apartment in the Valley.

I keep an eye out for kids and cats as I pull up to the curb. No sign of either, so I get out and approach the apartment with my hot bag in one hand and flowers in the other. Ray answers the door.

He greets me with his usual, "Hey *pizza boy*," and then, noticing the flowers, asks, "What's that?"

"These are flowers," I tell him, "We ran out of pizza so I brought you these instead." I offer him the flowers.

Ray recoils. "Nuh uh! I can see the pizza right there."

"Okay, okay," I laugh, opening the bag and handing him the food. He runs off immediately.

Half a minute later, a girl comes walking down the stairs. I open my mouth to greet Josie, when she asks "How much is it?" I pause open-mouthed, confused. This is not Josie's voice. It's deeper, hoarser. The girl's body and walk are identical to Josie's, but as she approaches, I notice that her face is about a decade older. The biggest difference is in the eyes—whereas Josie's are bright and welcoming, hers are cold and distrustful.

"Thirteen dollars exactly," I tell her.

She gives me a ten and five ones. “What are those for?” She asks, pointing to the flowers.

“They’re for Josie,” I tell her. “Is she here?”

“You brought flowers for Josie?” She asks.

I nod.

Her lips widen in a malevolent smile, revealing dimples under both cheeks. “Josie started working,” she tells me, “You ain’t gonna see her no more.”

I lower my head, my heart dropping as I process her statement.

“I’ll give her those,” she offers, extending a long arm.

Dazed, I hand her the flowers. As she grasps the bouquet, one of her inch-long, purple fingernails scratches against my wrist. A cold shiver travels up my arm, settling in my chest as I turn around and walk away. As I ascend the hill, Jesus walks by my side, weaving in and out of my legs. I pause to pick him up, think better of it, and continue walking.