

THE MAIL THIEF

Brian O'Hare

Some would have called Lance Corporal Colón a thief. Technically, Colón stole mail, which of course is a Federal crime. (Five years in Federal prison and up to \$250,000 in fines.) I say 'technically', because Colón always returned whatever he stole to the proper addressee. Who, as far as I could tell, was only me.

You see, Colón was our battalion 'mailman'. His MOS, or 'military occupational specialty', was Admin Clerk, which is as exciting as it sounds—keeping records, typing and other clerical shit—but Colón also delivered mail when we were deployed, as we were, to the Persian Gulf. Everyone had one or two jobs in addition to their regular job, and Colón was lucky in a way, he could've been a 'SAC-A', or 'Substance Abuse Control Assistant', in charge of the piss bottles during drug tests; also known as 'Meat Gazer'. But that was Harrison's collateral duty. Colón was only a mailman.

Colón was Puerto Rican, or Dominican maybe. From somewhere in the South Bronx. The kind of place that shows up on the news only after something bad happened. I liked Colón. He wasn't like the other young Marines. He was thoughtful. Curious. Kind of lost. Which explains how he ended up in the Marines. Most mornings, I'd come out of a bunker where I'd spent the night, hungover by life, to be greeted by a smiling Colón, an armful of mail for me from home. There'd be stuff from my girlfriend, Norma, a jewelry designer, back in Hawaii; she loved putting together care packages for me and my Marines: Hawaii junk food, like dried cuttle fish, rock salt plum, saimin noodles and whatever subversive or pornographic art she'd make. She'd identify each Marine by name on the package; they loved that. My mom sent chalky baked goods, that

we'd feed to the kangaroo rats that shared our bunkers. And from my dad, postcards with inspirational sayings dashed off in a large loopy hand, almost feminine, signed with a spirited "Semper Fi, Marine!" There'd always be plenty of "To Any Marine" letters too, from elementary schools across the country, with crayoned epics of Iraqi soldiers engulfed in flames which always reminded me of Picasso's *Guernica*, and the Polaroids from anonymous bikini and lingerie patriots doing their part to lift morale.

And then there were the magazines; a lifeline to a world outside the Marines, where people thought big thoughts, did big things and had big times in places like New York and Los Angeles. So I subscribed to the *LA Weekly*, *Village Voice*, *Paper*, *Esquire*, *The New Yorker*—all the usual suspects, devoured in a multitude of sandy holes pockmarking the Saudi desert like acne. I was cuckoo for magazines.

But after a while, I began to notice my magazines would arrive smudgy and pawed, with covers missing and pages torn out, especially pictures of supermodels or actresses. This was distressing. I mean, I *needed* a picture of Wynona Ryder rolling those big brown eyes for my bunker wall.

Yet, it was wartime and the mail was coming from far away, so I didn't think too much of it at first. *C'est la guerre!* Right? But the real shock came when I realized that Norma's care packages had been pilfered; *ratfucked* as we'd say in the Marines.

Again, whatever. Weird shit happens. But one day I get a letter from Norma. She asked if I liked the book she'd sent me: *Alien Sex*, an anthology of science fiction pornography. Sex with robots. That kinda thing. That absolutely got my attention. So I hitched a ride down to Manifa, the Division bivouac, maybe two hours south, to ask the Admin bubbas what was up with the mail. I got there and Manifa was *deserted*.

So nobody expected me when I suddenly appear in the Admin hooch. As my eyes adjusted to the dark, I discovered a gagglefuck of Admin Clerks jockeying around a field desk. Their heads snapped toward the door at the sudden flood of light, and then scurried like silverfish when they realized I was an officer. And there's Colón, hunched over my *Alien Sex*, the Saudi sunlight spotlighting him like a goddamn movie.

"What the fuck, Colón?"

Colón looked up casually from *Alien Sex*. A bloody Kleenex dangled from his nostril.

"Hey, sir..."

"Don't 'hey sir' me. What're you doing with my mail?"

"Sir, I'm just reading it, sir...I'm gonna return it, sir..."

He couldn't say 'sir' enough times. As if this alone would placate me. The Admin Clerks were suddenly absorbed in their ledgers, log books and personnel files, but had their collective third eyes trained on me and Colón, ready to hit the deck if necessary.

"Let's go. Outside."

Colón dutifully followed, like a dog being led to his kennel. He handed me the book.

"Here you go, sir."

"Get the Kleenex outta your nose, please..." Colón obeyed.

"Let's talk a walk, lad."

As we walk through the bivouac, I tried to play the role of 'angry alpha dog', but it was pretty much impossible. First off, the way Colón *looked*. I mean, he's built like a goddamn spider monkey, with these long arms and legs and this short body; fucker was all of 5'3". And he had an almost perfectly round head, geometrically speaking; a sphere. It's big too, and *fuzzy* like a spider monkey's. All out of proportion. I think he cuts his own hair too. And he had a pair of

what we call 'BCGs' or 'Birth Control Glasses'—Marine issue glasses so fucking ugly you'd *never* get laid wearing them, big, brown-orange squares that morphed Colón's eyes into one giant worried Cyclopean eye. And he's got these troubled brows, like two caterpillars boxing, and a mustache, I guess you'd call it. The finishing touch is this .45 caliber pistol, an engorged piece of metal, drooping from his right hip like some Mickey Mouse gunfighter. It's so heavy that Colón actually *limps* when he walks. He's not even authorized to carry a .45. But again, for all of these reasons, and more, I find it impossible to be angry with this kid. Because that's what he is, really: a kid. Nineteen or twenty at the oldest.

"Colón..." I sigh. He turns his spheroid head to me, brows sparring nervously.

"Sir."

"Seriously. What the fuck? Mail theft is a Federal crime."

"Yes, sir..."

He says this as if resigned to his fate. He'll swallow the poison; he'll slash his wrists—as I demand.

"Why?"

His hands go wide, fingers spread, as if to emphasize their emptiness, their inability to thief. Colón looks up at me with his colossal eye.

"You've got interesting mail, sir."

I laugh. "What the fuck does that mean?" Blood trickles from his nose.

I remove the t-shirt that I'm using as a scarf from around my neck, hand it to Colón.

"Thank you sir. It's dry. The desert I mean. I'm prone to nosebleeds when it's dry."

He tilts his head back and presses the filthy shirt to his nose. The nosebleed has seemingly loosened something in Colón. I hear his voice, muffled now, from beneath my shirt:

"I mean, most stuff to read out here is like Victoria's Secret catalogues and *Leatherneck* and *Word Up!* Mouth-breather stuff. I've got nothing to read, sir."

I let this sink in. I'm a reader. Books were very important growing up. I just assumed everyone was the same. The printed word excited me, filled me with possibility. As long as I had a book I was okay. At that very moment, I had a well-worn copy of *A Tree Grows In Brooklyn* tucked into my flak jacket. The idea that Colón had nothing to read was oddly affecting. I couldn't conceive of such a situation.

"What about your folks? Have them send you some books or something."

Colón removes my shirt from his nose and looks at me as if I've said the dumbest thing imaginable.

"Okay...maybe not. How about the Commandant's Reading List? There's gotta be something from that list floating around the battalion..."

The Commandant, who's like the Pope of the Marines, initiated an official "Reading List" a few years before. Surprising—but the Marines, paradoxically maybe, like to think of themselves as a marriage of violence and scholarship.

"I don't want to read books about Marines, sir..." I didn't blame him.

"Yeah, but isn't there some sci-fi on that list? *Starship Troopers*? That's a classic. You like sci-fi..." I wave *Alien Sex* at him.

"I like *The New Yorker*, sir. The 'Fiction'."

"So get a goddamn subscription."

"I make \$878.10 a month, sir. I got an allotment for my mom and sister. Some parking tickets I'm still paying off." We look at each other.

"You're a mess, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir."

Now it's my turn to be silent. We keep walking, past the shitters, past a burning trash pit, past a makeshift boxing ring, made up of howling Marines, calling for blood as two face off, bare-knuckled. Colón ignores all this, hands clasped behind his back, like an old man out for a walk, a Puerto Rican Alvy Singer from "Annie Hall". We come to the Baskin-Robbins trailer. Colón turns to me:

"Are you going to put me up on charges, sir?"

"Fuck no." His brows relax.

"Thank you, sir. I really appreciate it."

"No more 'borrowing' mail, okay?"

"No more, sir. I'm done."

"Good."

I look at Colón, clap my hands twice: "That's it. Fort Pitt." Colón is confused.

"Sir?"

"Oh. That's just something my dad would do when something was finished. It's from a beer commercial. Fort Pitt beer. 'That's it. Fort Pitt.' "

I catch scent of something sweet. The smell of ice cream mixes with burning garbage and whatever else is on fire.

"You want a cone?"

Colón answers carefully, as if it might be a trick: "Sure, sir..."

We sit atop a pile of sandbags, eating our ice cream.

"How's the book?"

"Sir?"

"*Alien Sex.*"

"Oh." Colón holds back; hedges his bets: "It's good."

"Good? That's a terrible word."

"Yessir. There's a story in there about a scientist, who's married, but falls in love with an orangutan he's doing experiments on." He quickly adds: "A female one."

"Interesting."

"Sir?"

"Yes, Colón?"

"This is yours too."

Colón hands me a cassette, a mix-tape from Norma. *Fuck Music* written on it in ball point pen.

"Thank you, Colón."

"I'm sorry, sir."

From my flak jacket, I hand Colón *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. "Read it. It's good. She's a kid like you."

Colón has this stunned look on his face. I'm not sure anyone's ever given him a present before. I scribble inside the cover: "To LCPL Colón: A smart guy. A good Marine. Semper Fi! 1st Lieutenant Keane, Manifa, Saudi Arabia 1991"

Norma started sending Colón books soon after: *Lolita*, *Tropic of Cancer*, J.G. Ballard's *Crash*. Pornography masquerading as classic literature, as was her specialty. I got him a subscription to *The New Yorker* and the *Village Voice*. What the hell, right? I didn't have a family, no kids yet. I'd just spend the money on beer anyway. He was thrilled. We kind of 'adopted'

Colón in a way; at least temporarily. When he bitched about how bad Saudi hamburgers were, I took him to get *shawarma*. Pita bread. Hummus. When we got back to Hawaii, Norma and I took Colón out for Japanese food; sushi, sashimi, ramen noodles, you name it. He loved it.

Then one day, I discovered that my Doc Marten shoes were missing from my car, parked on base. (I never locked my doors.) I was pissed at first, but like they say—"the only thing you can trust a Marine with is your life." About a week later, I'm at the PX, and who did I cross paths with? *Colón*. And he was wearing my goddamn Doc Martens. (We're both a 10.5 D apparently.) Let's just say we were both surprised to see each other. I let him know that I knew, but I didn't do anything about it. I needed a new pair anyway.

Later, when I transferred to Headquarters Marine Corps in Arlington, Virginia, Colón would call me from the pay phone outside the Enlisted Club at Camp Hansen, in Okinawa. He'd be drunk of course, bitching about the Battalion and "all the mouth-breathers". I'd give him a pep talk, encourage him to keep reading, keep learning. This, remember, is from the guy who couldn't afford a subscription to *The New Yorker*. I don't even want to imagine how much those calls cost. After a while, Colón stopped calling.

Why put up with Colón's shit, you ask? The simple answer is that I'm a 'bleeding heart'; a sucker. But that's hard to accept. Marines are supposed to be 'tough'. But the 'official' answer, the one I give myself in defense of being that sucker, is that I felt I had a responsibility to return my Marines better human beings than I found them; more open to the possibility of the world. At the very least, I wanted their eyes to be open. To be curious. That was *my* 'collateral duty'. But that's all bullshit obviously; pretty words to soothe my Irish-Catholic guilt that I was somehow less than a 'real' Marine because I'd indulged Colón; that I'd failed somehow.

But if I'm being honest, there's another part of me that missed Colón's attention. His

adoration, I guess you'd call it. It's embarrassing to admit, but it was nice having someone look up to you, thinking you're brilliant and that your thoughts were worth listening to; that not only your mail, but even your *shoes* were worth stealing.

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