

Between Bars, Season 1, Episode 3 “Special Delivery”

Hey, everyone. Welcome to Between Bars, a poetry podcast that not only shares poems, but takes a look at the inspiration behind the bars. I’m Sheryl Leigh, your host and resident poet.

For today’s episode, I’m bringing you a poem that’s not in either of my books. It’s actually coming to us straight from... the notes section of my cell phone. Now, my notes are home to everything from grocery lists to restaurants I want to patronize, to texts that I had the good sense not to send, to of course, bits of writing. Sometimes these writings are just a line that popped into my head that I don’t want to forget, and other times they materialize into full-blown pieces.

What I’m sharing today is technically a full piece, but a short one. It’s a little something I call “Special Delivery.” I actually started it maybe a couple of years ago, figuring one day I would post it online. I wanted to put a little time between the inspiration for it and the public appearance of it, because over the years I’ve learned not to bleed all over the Internet. It leaves a stain.

Anyway, there was a meme floating around recently that reminded me of this. As a writer, I hate being scooped, but I figured it was still worth dusting this off.

Here goes....

Special Delivery

Don’t fall apart
When he deems you total package—
Yet returns to sender.
Don’t wonder whether
The label was illegible,
If he missed the ‘fragile’ markings
on your wrapping,
Or had to sneak peeks at your contents
To know
He was not the intended recipient.
He is not the first to benefit
From a carrier’s error.
You might even admit
You too enjoyed the mix-up
If you stopped assigning blame
And released the worry
Of going unclaimed.

That was “Special Delivery.”

The first line of this poem was actually the last line that I wrote. Initially, I had a different opening line, but as I was editing, I realized I wanted to start it another way. I really wanted it to sort of summarize the way you should respond to a scenario such as this. So, we’ll deconstruct this poem kind of like I wrote it: backwards. We’ll double back to the first line at the end.

First, the back story. This piece began as a note in my phone a couple of years ago. I honestly don't remember the exact wording or the flow of the conversation that inspired it. But I remember it feeling like a bit of an "it's not you – it's me" talk. The guy I had been dating was saying something about us fooling ourselves and the fact that it – more accurately, we – would never work. And he used that phrase to describe me: the total package. Yet in spite of my apparently numerous good qualities, the bottom line was that he was walking away.

I'm the type of person who turns things over and over in my head until I exhaust all possibilities – and thus exhaust myself mentally and emotionally. So, I was no doubt walking around with his voice in my head telling me I was the total package, and trying to reconcile that with the outcome of our relationship. By not keeping me in his life, he was essentially returning me to sender.

The poem really speaks to that mental exercise. "Don't wonder whether" is my feeble attempt to talk myself out of trying to figure it out. The words are coated in anger and laced with sarcasm because that's always appropriate after a breakup – or so I tell myself.

The next few lines are really just an accusatory way of wondering. Think Claire Huxtable running down a list of questions to Vanessa after Vanessa's night of "big fun" – and Vanessa trying to answer and Claire telling her she better not answer – followed by Claire asking more questions and Vanessa saying nothing and Claire telling her she better answer her when she's talking to her. Yeah, that type of energy. Except all in my head – me asking him rhetorically – when he knew that I, as the total package, was not *for him*.

Of course there are exceptions, but typically items are returned to sender because the person they're addressed to does not reside at that mailing address, or the person who is there doesn't want it. The person at the address sees the letter or package, looks at who it's addressed to and who it's from, doesn't bother to open it, writes 'return to sender' on it, and puts it back in the mail. It's a quick process.

The piece suggests that the man and I had passed a certain point in our connection, as if to say, *how are you just now reaching this conclusion?* So that's where the Claire Huxtable line of questioning comes in. Was the labeling illegible – like the first impression, the outer appearance, gave no indication that I was a package that was not addressed to him? Did he think for a moment that I was addressed to him, but then make out the handwriting better later on? By asking if he missed the 'fragile' markings on the package, of course I'm questioning whether he gave consideration to my feelings and my heart – did he not think that this package could be damaged by being mishandled in this way? The part about sneaking peeks at the package's contents speaks to peeling back the layers of a person and looking at who they are on the inside – unwrapping the package. In essence, does it take *all of this* to know someone is not *for you*?

But then there's a shift in the piece because – although I'm rarely satisfied with the conclusions I reach in situations like these, I do tend to find truth and lessons in them.

The first truth is that umm, stuff, happens. He's not the first recipient "to benefit from a carrier's error." Of course it's a benefit because though he's returning to sender, in the time that it's taken him to do so, he's enjoyed my company. Originally, I'd capitalized Carrier in the phrase "carrier's error." I was thinking more of it as situations out of the package's control. Like life, God, the universe, the ocean, something... carried her into these unprepared or unwilling hands. But since I try to keep things real with myself eventually, I had to accept that sometimes we carry ourselves into situations. Even if life causes us to

cross paths with a person, we are actually not packages – we’re not inanimate objects with no control. We make the decision to leave or stay. And in those times of getting to know him, when something revealed gave me pause, I had decided to stay.

The realness continues with the idea that perhaps this man was not the only person benefiting from the mishap of the total package being in the wrong hands. Like I said, I could have carried myself away at any moment. But there were things about him that I liked, things that made me want to continue in relationship with him.

I know the typical line of thinking is that this delivery, or relationship, was a failure. The wrong package in the wrong hands, returned to sender. But I wrote the bit about admitting I enjoyed it and the need to stop assigning blame because I wonder how freeing it might be to stop thinking of relationships with a pass/fail grading system. They come to teach us. In my time with this man, I discovered some qualities that he had that I loved, which I came to realize I wanted and needed. I also saw some qualities that I’d be better off without. I saw some old insecurities within myself make an unwelcome appearance as well. But mostly, I laughed and had fun and felt appreciated and adored... even if it was temporary.

Maybe I should appreciate the beauty of that and not allow it to be totally overshadowed by the fact that it didn’t end in happily ever after. Maybe it was beautiful in its time, and I don’t have to resent the fact that I wasn’t the one who called time.

When this started as a note in my cell phone, I didn’t actually finish it. I knew the points I wanted to hit – the annoyed and slightly bitter “oh you just now realizing this” points I wanted to make. But I didn’t know the main point. When I pulled it up to finally put this piece to bed, I realized that something was driving the anger and the questioning and the refusal to let it go: fear. Perhaps I worried that I would never be claimed – that plenty of men might say that I was the total package – but that they would all decide that ultimately, for whatever reason, I wasn’t for them.

But I realized that I needed to release that fear for three reasons. First of all, I’m actually not a package or a piece of baggage to be claimed. I’m a person with a mind, body, and spirit. A woman to be discovered, and cherished, and walked alongside.

Second, I’m not incomplete. A “total package” is not missing parts and pieces. Relationships don’t always end because you’re not enough of something. There are a million possible reasons, and as this man told me, those reasons may not be an indication of what you need to change about yourself.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, a fear of never being chosen reveals a lack of faith. If I truly believe that God loves me and wants the best for me – and that God took the time to piece me together to be what someone would consider a “total package,” then God is particularly concerned about my heart’s destination. A man may call me the “total package,” but to God, I am a special delivery. I have to trust that God wants me in capable and caring hands – and that in due season, those hands will unwrap the fullness of me and be unwilling and unable to let me go.

Which brings me back to the first line of this piece: don’t fall apart. A woman who is the “total package” is complete. She’s not perfect, but she is whole. And the worst possible way you can respond to someone walking away from you is by becoming less of who you are, less whole, less of what likely drew them to you in the first place.

If you feel you've been mishandled by someone, if you've experienced the hurt of being walked away from, if you sometimes feel overcome with fear that you'll never be claimed by that special someone, remember that you are whole. Determine that you will remain that way. Take the fun and the beauty from that experience and hold onto it – but throw the rest away. The questioning, the hurt, the doubt, the fear – throw it all away.

This was Between Bars. I'm your host, poet, and producer, SheryLeigh. You can connect with me on Instagram and Facebook @sheryleighwrites, on Twitter at @sheryleigh, and on my website at sheryleigh.com. If you have thoughts or suggestions, feel free to email me at info@sheryleigh.com.

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See you soon, between the bars.