

Snow Crash

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snow n... 2.a. Anything resembling snow. b. The white specks on a television screen resulting from weak reception.

crash v... -infr.. . . 5, To fail suddenly, as a business or an economy. -The American Heritage Dictionary

virus.. . . [L. virus slimy liquid, poison, offensive odour or taste.]
1. Venom, such as is emitted by a poisonous animal. 2. Path. a. A morbid principle or poisonous substance produced in the body as the result of some disease, esp. one capable of being introduced into other persons or animals by inoculations or otherwise and of developing the same disease in them.. .
. 3. fig. A moral or intellectual poison, or poisonous influence. -The Oxford English Dictionary

The Deliverator belongs to an elite order, a hallowed subcategory. He's got esprit up to here. Right now, he is preparing to carry out his third mission of the night. His uniform is black as activated charcoal, filtering the very light out of the air. A bullet will bounce off its arachnofiber weave like a wren hitting a patio door, but excess perspiration wafts through it like a breeze through a freshly napalmed forest, Where his body has bony extremities, the suit has sintered armor: feels like gritty jello, protects like a stack of telephone books.

When they gave him the job, they gave him a gun. The Deliverator never deals in cash, but someone might come after him anyway -- might want his car, or his cargo. The gun is tiny, acm-styled, lightweight, the kind of gun a fashion designer would carry; it fires teensy darts that fly at five times the velocity of an SR-71 spy plane, and when you get done using it, you have to plug it into the cigarette lighter, because it runs on electricity.

The Deliverator never pulled that gun in anger, or in fear. He pulled it once in Gila Highlands. Some punks in Gila Highlands, a fancy Burbclave, wanted themselves a delivery, and they didn't want to pay for it. Thought

they would impress the Deliverator with a baseball bat. The Deliverator took out his gun, centered its laser doohickey on that poised Louisville Slugger, fired it. The recoil was immense, as though the weapon had blown up in his hand. The middle third of the baseball bat turned into a column of burning sawdust accelerating in all directions like a bursting star. Punk ended up holding this bat handle with milky smoke pouring out the end. Stupid look on his face. Didn't get nothing but trouble from the Deliverator.

Since then the Deliverator has kept the gun in the glove compartment and relied, instead, on a matched set of samurai swords, which have always been his weapon of choice anyhow. The punks in Gila Highlands weren't afraid of the gun, so the Deliverator was forced to use it. But swords need no demonstrations.

The Deliverator's car has enough potential energy packed into its batteries to fire a pound of bacon into the Asteroid Belt. Unlike a bimbo box or a Burb beater, the Deliverator's car unloads that power through gaping, gleaming, polished sphincters. When the Deliverator puts the hammer down, shit happens. You want to talk contact patches? Your car's tires have tiny contact patches, talk to the asphalt in four places the size of your tongue. The Deliverator's car has big sticky tires with contact patches the size of a fat lady's thighs. The Deliverator is in touch with the road, starts like a bad day, stops on a peseta.

Why is the Deliverator so equipped? Because people rely on him. He is a role model. This is America. People do whatever the fuck they feel like doing, you got a problem with that? Because they have a right to. And because they have guns and no one can fucking stop them. As a result, this country has one of the worst economies in the world. When it gets down to it -- talking trade balances here -- once we've brain-drained all our technology into other countries, once things have evened out, they're making cars in Bolivia and microwave ovens in Tadzhikistan and selling them here -- once our edge in natural resources has been made irrelevant by giant Hong Kong ships and dirigibles that can ship North Dakota all the way to New Zealand for a nickel -- once the Invisible Hand has taken all those historical inequities and smeared them out into a broad global layer of what a Pakistani brickmaker would consider to be prosperity -- y'know what? There's only four things we do better than anyone else

music

movies

microcode (software)

high-speed pizza delivery

The Deliverator used to make software. Still does, sometimes. But if life were a mellow elementary school run by well-meaning education Ph.D.s, the

Deliverator's report card would say: "Hiro is so bright and creative but needs to work harder on his cooperation skills."

So now he has this other job. No brightness or creativity involved -- but no cooperation either. Just a single principle: The Deliverator stands tall, your pie in thirty minutes or you can have it free, shoot the driver, take his car, file a class-action suit. The Deliverator has been working this job for six months, a rich and lengthy tenure by his standards, and has never delivered a pizza in more than twenty-one minutes.

Oh, they used to argue over times, many corporate driver-years lost to it: homeowners, red-faced and sweaty with their own lies, stinking of Old Spice and job-related stress, standing in their glowing yellow doorways brandishing their Seikos and waving at the clock over the kitchen sink, I swear, can't you guys tell time?

Didn't happen anymore. Pizza delivery a major industry. A managed industry. People went to CosaNostra Pizza University four years just to learn it. Came in its doors unable to write an English sentence, from Abkhazia, Rwanda, Guanajuato, South Jersey, and came out knowing more about pizza than a Bedouin knows about sand. And they had studied this problem. Graphed the frequency of doorway delivery-time disputes. Wired the early Deliverators to record, then analyze, the debating tactics, the voice-stress histograms, the distinctive grammatical structures employed by white middle-class Type A Burbclave occupants who against all logic had decided that this was the place to take their personal Custerian stand against all that was stale and deadening in their lives: they were going to lie, or delude themselves, about the time of their phone call and get themselves a free pizza; no, they deserved a free pizza along with their life, liberty, and pursuit of whatever, it was fucking inalienable. Sent psychologists out to these people's houses, gave them a free TV set to submit to an anonymous interview, hooked them to polygraphs, studied their brain waves as they showed them choppy, inexplicable movies of porn queens and late-night car crashes and Sammy Davis, Jr., put them in sweet-smelling, mauve-walled rooms and asked them questions about Ethics so perplexing that even a Jesuit couldn't respond without committing a venial sin.

The analysts at CosaNostra Pizza University concluded that it was just human nature and you couldn't fix it, and so they went for a quick cheap technical fix: smart boxes. The pizza box is a plastic carapace now, corrugated for stiffness, a little LED readout glowing on the side, telling the Deliverator how many trade imbalance-producing minutes have ticked away since the fateful phone call. There are chips and stuff in there. The pizzas rest, a short stack of them, in slots behind the Deliverator's head. Each pizza glides into a slot like a circuit board into a computer, clicks into place as the smart box interfaces with the onboard system of the Deliverator's car. The address of the caller has already been inferred from his phone number and poured into the smart box's built-in RAM. From there it is communicated to the car, which computes and projects the optimal route on a heads-up display, a glowing colored map traced out against the windshield so that the Deliverator does not even have to glance down.

If the thirty-minute deadline expires, news of the disaster is flashed to CosaNostra Pizza Headquarters and relayed from there to Uncle Enzo himself -- the Sicilian Colonel Sanders, the Andy Griffith of Bensonhurst, the straight razor-swinging figment of many a Deliverator's nightmares, the Capo and prime figurehead of CosaNostra Pizza, Incorporated -- who will be on the phone to the customer within five minutes, apologizing profusely. The next day, Uncle Enzo will land on the customer's yard in a jet helicopter and apologize some more and give him a free trip to Italy -- all he has to do is sign a bunch of releases that make him a public figure and spokesperson for CosaNostra Pizza and basically end his private life as he knows it. He will come away from the whole thing feeling that, somehow, he owes the Mafia a favor.

The Deliverator does not know for sure what happens to the driver in such cases, but he has heard some rumors. Most pizza deliveries happen in the evening hours, which Uncle Enzo considers to be his private time. And how would you feel if you had to interrupt dinner with your family in order to call some obstreperous dork in a Burbclave and grovel for a late fucking pizza? Uncle Enzo has not put in fifty years serving his family and his country so that, at the age when most are playing golf and bobbling their granddaughters, he can get out of the bathtub dripping wet and lie down and kiss the feet of some sixteen-year-old skate punk whose pepperoni was thirty-one minutes in coming. Oh, God. It makes the Deliverator breathe a little shallower just to think of the idea.

But he wouldn't drive for CosaNostra Pizza any other way.

You know why? Because there's something about having your life on the line. It's like being a kamikaze pilot. Your mind is clear. Other people -- store clerks, burger flippers, software engineers, the whole vocabulary of meaningless jobs that make up Life in America -- other people just rely on plain old competition.

Better flip your burgers or debug your subroutines faster and better than your high school classmate two blocks down the strip is flipping or debugging, because we're in competition with those guys, and people notice these things. What a fucking rat race that is. CosaNostra Pizza doesn't have any competition. Competition goes against the Mafia ethic. You don't work harder because you're competing against some identical operation down the street. You work harder because everything is on the line. Your name, your honor, your family, your life. Those burger flippers might have a better life expectancy -- but what kind of life is it anyway, you have to ask yourself. That's why nobody, not even the Nipponese, can move pizzas faster than CosaNostra. The Deliverator is proud to wear the uniform, proud to drive the car, proud to march up the front walks of innumerable Burbclave homes, a grim vision in ninja black, a pizza on his shoulder, red LED digits blazing proud numbers into the night: 12:32 or 15:15 or the occasional 20:43.

The Deliverator is assigned to CosaNostra Pizza #3569 in the Valley. Southern California doesn't know whether to bustle or just strangle itself on the spot. Not enough roads for the number of people. Fairlanes, Inc. is laying new ones all the time. Have to bulldoze lots of neighborhoods to do it, but those seventies and eighties developments exist to be bulldozed, right? No sidewalks, no schools, no nothing. Don't have their own police force -- no immigration control -- undesirables can walk right in without being frisked or even harassed. Now a Burbclave, that's the place to live. A city-state with its own constitution, a border, laws, cops, everything.

The Deliverator was a corporal in the Farms of Merryvale State Security Force for a while once. Got himself fired for pulling a sword on an acknowledged perp. Slid it right through the fabric of the perp's shirt, gliding the flat of the blade along the base of his neck, and pinned him to a warped and bubbled expanse of vinyl siding on the wall of the house that the perp was trying to break into. Thought it was a pretty righteous bust. But they fired him anyway because the perp turned out to be the son of the vice-chancellor of the Farms of Merryvale. Oh, the weasels had an excuse: said that a thirty-six-inch samurai sword was not on their Weapons Protocol. Said that he had violated the SPAC, the Suspected Perpetrator Apprehension Code. Said that the perp had suffered psychological trauma. He was afraid of butter knives now; he had to spread his jelly with the back of a teaspoon. They said that he had exposed them to liability.

The Deliverator had to borrow some money to pay for it. Had to borrow it from the Mafia, in fact. So he's in their database now -- retinal patterns, DNA, voice graph, fingerprints, footprints, palm prints, wrist prints, every fucking part of the body that had wrinkles on it, almost -- those bastards rolled in ink and made a print and digitized it into their computer. But it's their money -- sure they're careful about loaning it out. And when he applied for the Deliverator job they were happy to take him, because they knew him. When he got the loan, he had to deal personally with the assistant vice-capo of the Valley, who later recommended him for the Deliverator job. So it was like being in a family. A really scary, twisted, abusive family.

CosaNostra Pizza #3569 is on Vista Road just down from Kings Park Mall. Vista Road used to belong to the State of California and now is called Fairlanes, Inc. Rte. CSV-5. Its main competition used to be a U.S. highway and is now called Cruiseways, Inc. Rte. Cal-12. Farther up the Valley, the two competing highways actually cross. Once there had been bitter disputes, the intersection closed by sporadic sniper fire. Finally, a big developer bought the entire intersection and turned it into a drive-through mall. Now the roads just feed into a parking system -- not a lot, not a ramp, but a system -- and lose their identity. Getting through the intersection involves tracing paths through the parking system, many braided filaments of direction like the Ho Chi Minh trail. CSV-5 has better throughput, but Cal.12 has better pavement. That is typical -- Fairlanes roads emphasize getting you there, for Type A drivers, and Cruiseways emphasize the enjoyment of the ride, for Type B drivers.

The Deliverator is a Type A driver with rabies. He is zeroing in on his home base, CosaNostra Pizza #3569, cranking up the left lane of CSV-5 at a hundred and twenty kilometers. His car is an invisible black lozenge, just a dark place that reflects the blinking of franchise signs -- the loglo. A row of orange lights burbles and churns across the front, where the grille would be if this were an air-breathing car. The orange light looks like a gasoline fire. It comes in through people's rear windows, bounces off their rearview mirrors, projects a fiery mask across their eyes, reaches into their subconscious, and unearths terrible fears of being pinned, fully conscious, under a detonating gas tank, makes them want to pull over and let the Deliverator overtake them in his black chariot of pepperoni fire.

The loglo, overhead, marking out CSV-5 in twin contrails, is a body of electrical light made of innumerable cells, each cell designed in Manhattan by imagineers who make more for designing a single logo than a Deliverator will make in his entire lifetime. Despite their efforts to stand out, they all smear together, especially at a hundred and twenty kilometers per hour. Still, it is easy to see CosaNostra Pizza #3569 because of the billboard, which is wide and tall even by current inflated standards. In fact, the squat franchise itself looks like nothing more than a low-slung base for the great aramid fiber pillars that thrust the billboard up into the trademark firmament. Marca Registrada, baby.

The billboard is a classic, a chestnut, not a figment of some fleeting Mafia promotional campaign. It is a statement, a monument built to endure. Simple and dignified. It shows Uncle Enzo in one of his spiffy Italian suits. The pinstripes glint and flex like sinews. The pocket square is luminous. His hair is perfect, slicked back with something that never comes off, each strand cut off straight and square at the end by Uncle Enzo's cousin, Art the Barber, who runs the second-largest chain of low-end haircutting establishments in the world. Uncle Enzo is standing there, not exactly smiling, an avuncular glint in his eye for sure, not posing like a model but standing there like your uncle would, and it says

The Mafia

you've got a friend in The Family!

paid for by the Our Thing Foundation

The billboard serves as the Deliverator's polestar. He knows that when he gets to the place on CSV-5 where the bottom corner of the billboard is obscured by the pseudo-Gothic stained-glass arches of the local Reverend Wayne's Pearly Gates franchise, it's time for him to get over into the right lanes where the retards and the bimbo boxes poke along, random, indecisive, looking at each passing franchise's driveway like they don't know if it's a promise or a threat.

He cuts off a bimbo box -- a family minivan -- veers past the Buy 'n' Fly that is next door, and pulls into CosaNostra Pizza #3569. Those big fat contact patches complain, squeal a little bit, but they hold on to the patented Fairlanes, Inc. high-traction pavement and guide him into the chute. No other Deliverators are waiting in the chute. That is good, that means high turnover for him, fast action, keep moving that 'za. As he scrunches to a stop, the electromechanical hatch on the flank of his car is already opening to reveal his empty pizza slots, the door clicking and folding back in on itself like the wing of a beetle. The slots are waiting. Waiting for hot pizza.

And waiting. The Deliverator honks his horn. This is not a nominal outcome. Window slides open. That should never happen. You can look at the three-ring binder from CosaNostra Pizza University, cross-reference the citation for window, chute, dispatcher's, and it will give you all the procedures for that window -- and it should never be opened. Unless something has gone wrong.

The window slides open and -- you sitting down? -- smoke comes out of it. The Deliverator hears a discordant beetling over the metal hurricane of his sound system and realizes that it is a smoke alarm, coming from inside the franchise.

Mute button on the stereo. Oppressive silence -- his eardrums uncringe -- the window is buzzing with the cry of the smoke alarm. The car idles, waiting. The hatch has been open too long, atmospheric pollutants are congealing on the electrical contacts in the back of the pizza slots, he'll have to clean them ahead of schedule, everything is going exactly the way it shouldn't go in the three-ring binder that spells out all the rhythms of the pizza universe.

Inside, a football-shaped Abkhazian man is running to and fro, holding a three-ring binder open, using his spare tire as a ledge to keep it from collapsing shut; he runs with the gait of a man carrying an egg on a spoon. He is shouting in the Abkhazian dialect; all the people who run CosaNostra pizza franchises in this part of the Valley are Abkhazian immigrants.

It does not look like a serious fire. The Deliverator saw a real fire once, at the Farms of Merryvale, and you couldn't see anything for the smoke. That's all it was: smoke, burbling out of nowhere, occasional flashes of orange light down at the bottom, like heat lightning in tall clouds. This is not that kind of fire. It is the kind of fire that just barely puts out enough smoke to detonate the smoke alarms. And he is losing time for this shit.

The Deliverator holds the horn button down. The Abkhazian manager comes to the window. He is supposed to use the intercom to talk to drivers, he could

say anything he wanted and it would be piped straight into the Deliverator's car, but no, he has to talk face to face, like the Deliverator is some kind of fucking ox cart driver. He is red-faced, sweating, his eyes roll as he tries to think of the English words.

"A fire, a little one," he says.

The Deliverator says nothing. Because he knows that all of this is going onto videotape. The tape is being pipelined, as it happens, to CosaNostra Pizza University, where it will be analyzed in a pizza management science laboratory. It will be shown to Pizza University students, perhaps to the very students who will replace this man when he gets fired, as a textbook example of how to screw up your life.

"New employee -- put his dinner in the microwave -- had foil in it -- boom!" the manager says.

Abkhazia had been part of the Soviet fucking Union. A new immigrant from Abkhazia trying to operate a microwave was like a deep-sea tube worm doing brain surgery. Where did they get these guys? Weren't there any Americans who could bake a fucking pizza?

"Just give me one pie," the Deliverator says.

Talking about pies snaps the guy into the current century. He gets a grip. He slams the window shut, strangling the relentless keening of the smoke alarm. A Nipponese robot arm shoves the pizza out and into the top slot. The hatch folds shut to protect it.

As the Deliverator is pulling out of the chute, building up speed, checking the address that is flashed across his windshield, deciding whether to turn right or left, it happens. His stereo cuts out again -- on command of the onboard system. The cockpit lights go red. Red! A repetitive buzzer begins to sound. The LED readout on his windshield, which echoes the one on the pizza box, flashes up: 20:00.

They have just given the Deliverator a twenty-minute-old pizza. He checks the address; it is twelve miles away. The Deliverator lets out an involuntary roar and puts the hammer down. His emotions tell him to go back and kill that manager, get his swords out of the trunk, dive in through the little sliding window like a ninja, track him down through the moiling chaos of the microwaved franchise and confront him in a climactic thick-crust apocalypse. But he thinks the same thing when someone cuts him off on the

freeway, and he's never done it -- yet.

He can handle this. This is doable. He cranks up the orange warning lights to maximum brilliance, puts his headlights on autoflash. He overrides the warning buzzer, jams the stereo over to Taxiscan, which cruises all the taxi-driver frequencies listening for interesting traffic. Can't understand a fucking word. You could buy tapes, learn-while-you-drive, and learn to speak Taxilinga. It was essential, to get a job in that business. They said it was based on English but not one word in a hundred was recognizable. Still, you could get an idea. If there was trouble on this road, they'd be babbling about it in Taxilinga, give him some warning, let him take an alternate route so he wouldn't get

he grips the wheel

stuck in traffic

his eyes get big, he can feel the pressure driving

them back

into his skull

or caught behind a mobile home

his bladder is very full

and deliver the pizza

Oh, God oh, God

late

22:06 hangs on the windshield, all he can see, all he can think about is 30:01.

The taxi drivers are buzzing about something. Taxilinga is mellifluous babble with a few harsh foreign sounds, like butter spiced with broken glass. He keeps hearing "fare." They are always jabbering about their fucking fares. Big deal. What happens if you deliver your fare late you don't get as much of a tip? Big deal.

Big slowdown at the intersection of CSV-5 and Oahu Road, per usual, only way to avoid it is to cut through The Mews at Windsor Heights.

TMAWHs all have the same layout. When creating a new Burbclave, TMAWH Development Corporation will chop down any mountain ranges and divert the

course of any mighty rivers that threaten to interrupt this street plan -- ergonomically designed to encourage driving safety. A Deliverator can go into a Mews at Windsor Heights anywhere from Fairbanks to Yaroslavl to the Shenzhen special economic zone and find his way around.

But once you've delivered a pie to every single house in a TMAWH a few times, you get to know its little secrets. The Deliverator is such a man. He knows that in a standard TMAWH there is only one yard -- one yard -- that prevents you from driving straight in one entrance, across the Burbclave, and out the other. If you are squeamish about driving on grass, it might take you ten minutes to meander through TMAWH. But if you have the bails to lay tracks across that one yard, you have a straight shot through the center.

The Deliverator knows that yard. He has delivered pizzas there. He has looked at it, scoped it out, memorized the location of the shed and the picnic table, can find them even in the dark -- knows that if it ever came to this, a twenty-three-minute pizza, miles to go, and a slowdown at CSV-5 and Oahu -- he could enter The Mews at Windsor Heights (his electronic delivery-man's visa would raise the gate automatically), scream down Heritage Boulevard, rip the turn onto Strawbridge Place (ignoring the DEAD END sign and the speed limit and the CHILDREN PLAYING ideograms that are strung so liberally throughout TMAWH), thrash the speed bumps with his mighty radials, blast up the driveway of Number 15 Strawbridge Circle, cut a hard left around the backyard shed, careen into the backyard of Number 84 Mayapple Place, avoid its picnic table (tricky), get into their driveway and out onto Mayapple, which takes him to Bellewoode Valley Road, which runs straight to the exit of the Burbclave. TMAWH security police might be waiting for him at the exit, but their STDs, Severe Tire Damage devices, only point one way--they can keep people out, but not keep them in.

This car can go so fucking fast that if a cop took a bite of a doughnut as the Deliverator was entering Heritage Boulevard, he probably wouldn't be able to swallow it until about the time the Deliverator was shrieking out onto Oahu. Thunk. And more red lights come up on the windshield: the perimeter security of the Deliverator's vehicle has been breached.

No. It can't be.

Someone is shadowing him. Right off his left flank. A person on a skateboard, rolling down the highway right behind him, just as he is laying in his approach vectors to Heritage Boulevard.

The Deliverator, in his distracted state, has allowed himself to get poned. As in harpooned. It is a big round padded electromagnet on the end of an arachnofiber cable. It has just thunked onto the back of the Deliverator's car, and stuck. Ten feet behind him, the owner of this cursed device is surfing, taking him for a ride, skateboarding along like a water skier behind