“Next time I’m gonna’ tell her what she can do with her coffee ice cream.” Sam didn’t mean it, but it sure felt good to say it in his head. It was a scorching Wednesday afternoon and he was finally getting to make his grocery deliveries. Sam worked at the local grocery store that had been open—and at its current location—for over fifty years. Every Wednesday morning at 8:00 sharp, calls to the store would start pouring in. Mrs. Harris with her redundant gallon of Heinz vinegar, Mr. White with his weekly supply of Miller Lite and Tennessee Pride sausage biscuits, blind Mr. Shaw with his cartons of cheap cigarettes and iced oatmeal cookies, Mrs. Flowers with her sacks of Fresh Step cat litter and supply of Blue Bunny ice cream sandwiches, and last but not least, Mrs. Bryson with her roll of Skoal, carton of Winstons, and her infamous, two, half-gallons of Blue Bell coffee ice cream. The orders were pretty much the same from week to week, varying only by a couple of items, but these people definitely had their constants. Sam didn’t mind the work at all really, the shopping was the fun part—and until recently—the tips were good on deliveries. That was until the store tacked a $5 delivery charge onto every order.

After dropping off Mrs. Bryson’s order and waiting for her
to poke her only slightly softened ice cream with her wrinkled finger, Sam took his fifty-cent-piece-tip with a fake Opie Taylor smile and wondered on the way back to his truck whether or not banks even accepted those as currency anymore. “It’s 92 degrees outside and you expect your precious Blue Bell to be frozen solid after a three mile ride in the back of a delivery truck with no roof?” It’s true—the truck had no roof: no left blinker, no right brake light, no rearview mirrors, no a/c—the heater worked fine, and no magic ice cream box. Sam actually liked Mrs. Bryson; he once went to another store after work and fetched her some coffee Blue Bell and Skoal because they were out at the store he worked at. He thought it was kinda sweet—in a weird way—how she started dipping the snuff her husband used to dip right after his death.

Next stop was Mrs. Flowers. This old lady had to be the biggest Atlanta Braves fan in the world. Her one bedroom apartment at Pleasant Gardens assisted living facility looked like a guy’s dorm room at the University of Georgia with the addition of quite a few silk flower arrangements adorned by clusters of glass grapes. Pennants, foam fingers, posters, she had it all—and a huge cat. She cooked for her cat—I mean her cooking was his only food source. If you offered “Chipper” something from a bag or can he wouldn’t know what to do with it until you put it in a pan with
some onions and gravy and maybe a little garlic. Sam would always put Mrs. Flowers’ groceries and cat litter up for her while she watched the Braves game on TV—even when it wasn’t baseball season—she must’ve taped them. She still tipped, always added three dollars extra to her check, and even trusted Sam to fill it out for her.

Number three on the list was Mr. White. He lived downstairs in the same building as Mrs. Bryson and Mrs. Flowers, but downstairs in a wheelchair accessible smoking room. There was always thick cigar smoke billowing out from under his door that would slowly rise and engulf the full urine receptacle that hung from his doorknob by a rope. Sam wasn’t sure if it was supposed to be there or if it was just Mr. White’s sick sense of humor. Urine or no urine, Sam would walk in and find Mr. White sitting 17 inches away from his television with a half smoked cigar hanging out of his mouth still lit. As Sam was putting Mr. White’s beer and biscuits into the fridge, Mr. White would roll himself up to his magic magnifying glass and begin to fill out his check. He always tipped—five dollars—except one time he gave a twenty, but Sam knew it was a mistake so he gave it right back.

Next stop was Mr. Shaw. Mr. Shaw was a blind man but he had a hearing ear dog – Susie was blind too. He lived in a trailer
park and as soon as he and Susie heard Sam's sputtering delivery truck pull into the gravel drive, they would both stumble onto the front porch, which was a sight to see. Sam would purposely bag Mr. Shaw's cigarettes separately as the old man liked to help carry something in—made him feel a little more independent. Sam always wished that Mr. Shaw could see the inside of his trailer. It was full of paintings that he had painted before losing his eyesight and all sorts of knick-knacks that he had evidently collected on world travels. Sam would make conversation with him while he put his things away and filled his check out. Mr. Shaw tipped a dollar or two every now and then, but Sam only added it to the check when Mr. Shaw said something—he always felt greedy about *asking* for tips. Finally it was time to visit Ms. Harris. She was always Sam’s last stop. It didn’t matter that she lived out of the way. You see, she lived right behind Pleasant Gardens where Ms. Bryson, Ms. Flowers, and Mr. White lived, but Sam would drive three miles to Mr. Shaw’s trailer and then back to Ms. Harris’ just so he could have a longer visit.

Ms. Harris was pushing 90, but it didn’t faze her. She would always tell Sam “If I don’t come to the door when you pull up just come on in...it means I fell asleep on my good ear.” Ms. Harris had her own little house now, and loved the independence
of it. She used to live at Pleasant Gardens, but left because—as she put it—“that crazy lady kept stealing my panties.”

Her house was surrounded by immaculate flowerbeds that she tooled around in religiously. She would give Sam potted plants to take home and tell him exactly what to do to make them do their best.

Sam pulled up in the drive that was lined with red tulips on either side to see Ms. Harris smiling at the screen door. She would have already fixed him a glass of ice-water or lemonade and placed it on the magazine-covered breakfast table. Then, she would come to hold the door open—or so she thought—Sam always placed her gallon of Heinz vinegar in the way to keep the screen door from closing. She would stand with her hand on the door until Sam had brought all of the groceries inside.

The two would sit down at the tiny table and Ms. Harris would begin with her stories. Sam would listen as she would tell of how she was married “to the meanest man in the world.” Her tiny, animated voice would fill the room as she would tell of how he had left her for another woman and then became very ill—then the other woman left him. “You know what I did?”—no ma’am. “I took care of him till the day he died.”

Before she married, Mrs. Harris saw the world as a cook on
a supply boat. Every Tuesday, she cooked lunch, and her
daughter—who was a prominent local attorney—would come and
eat with her. She had another daughter who worked for NASA,
and a son who died young in a car crash. She apologized for the
smell—vinegar—but explained how it killed germs and she’d never
mopped her floors with anything else. After their conversation of
about 20 minutes or so, Sam would make out Ms. Harris’ check
while she reminded him over and over again to make it out for five
dollars over the amount—so that he would have a tip.

Sam would make this round week after week, delivering to
the same group of people every time, hearing their different stories
from week to week—except for Ms. Harris. She and Sam would
have the same conversations every Wednesday. She knew what
time he was coming, so she would have a cool drink ready. She
would begin with her marriage and her life on the supply boat—
Sam would listen. Then she would continue by bragging about the
success of her children whom she loved so dearly—Sam would
listen. Sam would listen every week, to the stories he had already
heard, because it wasn’t the stories that intrigued him so much. It
was the storyteller. When someone is affected by alzheimers in the
way that Ms. Harris was, it takes a lot to hold on to a memory, and in the
same sense it takes a lot to make a memory worth holding on to.