

**The Busboy**  
by Donald Olson

**Solitary people and solitary places—like the busboy of this story’s title and his “Hideaway from the World”—often figure in Donald Olson’s work. The upstate New York author has become one of the genre’s most prolific short story writers. He is also a frequent contributor of articles on the craft of writing to publications such as Writer’s Digest Books.**

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Until he found the wallet his life had been a string of short-lived jobs, menial and unrewarding: gas-station attendant, dishwasher, whatever came along to pay for a place to live and the basic necessities, including an ancient Harley which on Sundays he liked to ride into the countryside around Unionville.

His name, Tyler Berlinghoff, might have suggested a young man with a dash of the debonair, with respectable well-connected family ties. Such was not the case. Tyler Berlinghoff had no family ties, certainly not to the string of foster families who had nurtured him with neither love nor understanding; they considered him “slow.” He was a forgettably featured young man whose darker than brown eyes never looked deeply into anything but what would satisfy his immediate needs or beyond the dull daily routine that never varied. He cherished no secret dreams or immoderate ambitions.

During the first week of that hot dry August, Tyler had been working first as a dishwasher and then as a busboy at the Golden Griddle Cafe in downtown Unionville. Late one morning while clearing a booth on the windowless side of the cafe, Tyler chanced to glance down at the seat and discovered a wallet, a slim blue leather wallet more like what a woman would carry than a man. Absently, he slipped the wallet into his pocket underneath his apron. That he didn’t turn it in at the counter was not with any intention of stealing it. He would never have done that. Tyler Berlinghoff was an honest young man.

Not until he was back at his room at the Delahoy Street rooming house where he lodged and changing from his dark work pants into the jeans he habitually wore did he realize what he had done, or forgotten to do. He would turn the wallet in next day. Still, he was not without curiosity. In the blue leather wallet he found forty-seven dollars in bills and a card identifying the owner as a Ramona Lerch with a phone number and address, 24 Stoneham Avenue Villas, and a dog-eared snapshot of a thin-faced man with fair hair.

Would it not be proper, he reasoned, to phone the owner and let her know her wallet had been found? Which is what he did from the pay phone downstairs in the hall.

The phone rang at least ten times before a woman, sounding out of breath, answered. Tyler asked for Ramona Lerch.

“This is Ramona. Who is this?”

“My name is Tyler Berlinghoff, ma’am.” He was always politely spoken. “Did you lose a wallet? A blue leather wallet?”

“Not that I’m aware—hold on a sec.” Another lengthy delay. “Mercy, yes. I didn’t even know it. Where did you find it?”

“In the Golden Griddle Cafe where I work. I was going to turn it in but thought maybe I’d better give you a call.”

“How awfully sweet. Listen, dear. I’m a virtual cripple. Would it be terribly inconvenient for you to bring it to me? Of course I’d give you something for your trouble.”

“That’s okay, ma’am. No trouble.”

After a light supper Tyler mounted his Harley and followed the woman’s directions on how to reach Stoneham Avenue Villas, which turned out to be a development of large Spanish-style houses perhaps forty or more years old on the western fringe of Unionville. Seen up close, Number 24 showed signs of long neglect, peeling stucco and paint and untrimmed shrubbery, mostly rhododendron and hydrangea.

Tyler knocked at the door and waited, waited so long he began to wonder if Ramona Lerch might not be home. But finally the door opened.

“Do forgive me, dear,” the woman said. “I’m not so quick on my pins since my accident.” She supported herself on two canes. “You must be Mr. Berlinghoff.”

“I brought your wallet, ma’am.”

Ramona Lerch told him to go through into the living room, not to wait for her. Tyler looked about him with interest. Chairs and a massive sofa cushioned in worn brown mohair. Tables loaded with knickknacks of no more value than carnival prizes. A row of china dolls in soiled lace garments lined the fireplace mantel. A faded Axminster carpet showed spots of damp where the black-beamed ceiling might have leaked. Once-white plaster walls were threaded with fine lines of cobweb.

Tyler was aware of a faint smell, a mixture of scents: dead lilies, stale incense, the mustiness of long-unventilated space. Streaks of dust coated the pleats of moss-green velvet curtains closed as if to conceal the overall dinginess.

Ramona Lerch herself projected a similar impression of careless disregard for appearances. The once-red wig she wore looked as faded as the dolls’ hair, her dress might have been the same vintage as the doll clothes, her puffy face above double chins might have been painted by the same brush as the garishly colored doll faces.

Tyler handed her the wallet. "Everything's there," he said.

"Of course it is," she replied with the same candor, "or you wouldn't have returned it. Few young men would be as honest. You're a sweetheart." With that she opened the wallet and extracted a twenty-dollar bill. "For your trouble, dear, with my gratitude."

Tyler protested. Ramona Lerch insisted. Tyler pocketed the bill, happy now that he hadn't turned the wallet in at the cafe. "Thanks a lot, Mrs. Lerch."

"Miss Lerch, actually. Ramona to my friends—and chance acquaintances as sweet as you, dear. Now sit you down and tell me all about yourself."

There was little to tell, but Ramona Lerch listened to the scant details with rapt attention, studying Tyler's face as if it could tell her more than his few stumbling words. When he finished, she continued to contemplate him with frank approval.

"Now let me ask you something, Tyler. I won't be at all put out if you say no, truly I won't. There's a sad task I must have done, and as you can see, I'm in no shape to do it myself. It's Pussky, you see. My darling cat. My sole companion, aside from Mr. Chambers, a dear departed friend."

"I'm sorry."

"Long departed, not dead. But that's another story. Pussky died a week ago, from some feline complaint. She must be buried. Would you do me that service, that very great favor?"

"Well..." Tyler was uncertain how to respond. "Where is the cat now? I mean..."

"I removed the silver from Mama's silver chest. Plush-lined, it is, just the right size for a kitty coffin. I had in mind a grave under the catalpa tree out back, but as it is..."

Never dreaming that his finding the blue leather wallet could lead to such a bizarre request, Tyler asked Ramona Lerch how she had injured herself.

She dabbed at her amber-speckled eyes with a grubby lace handkerchief. "I was fetching something from the kitchen and, clumsy me, didn't I trip over poor Pussky. Went down like a ton of bricks on both knees. They're bad enough as it is. Arthritis, osteoporosis, you name it. Somehow I struggled to my feet, but since then I've been a virtual cripple. Bless the Lord I had Daddy's canes or I'd be totally helpless."

"Was there no one to lend a hand?" Tyler asked.

"Not a soul on God's green earth. As it is, I've been alone and all but housebound for years. I was *not* about to call Mr. Chambers, thank you very much.

He'd probably have thought it was a trick to get him over here. Once upon a time, wild horses couldn't have kept him away. And then, to add misery to misfortune, poor Pussky passed away on the kitchen floor. She can't stay in the pantry forever. She must be given a decent burial. My dear boy, I'd be ever so grateful if you'd do me this favor."

"In the backyard, you said?"

"Under the catalpa tree. There's all you'd need in the toolshed. Do please say you'll do it."

Well, why not? He had all the time in the world and he was feeling genuinely sorry for Ramona Lerch. He promised he would come back next day after work.

"You're an angel. I shan't be ungenerous."

Tyler rode home feeling very pleased with himself. Ordinarily he was less inclined to daydream than most young men of his age and circumstances, yet living as he did on the fringe of poverty, with little to distinguish one day from another, he took it in mind that the finding of the blue leather wallet might have fateful consequences. Suppose Ramona Lerch were to continue to depend on him. She said herself that she was all but helpless. Inside and out, the house was in dire need of attention. Everything appeared to be in a state of rapidly advancing dilapidation. That he might become indispensable to Ramona Lerch was a pleasant prospect to contemplate as he lay in bed in his cramped room at the rooming house.

This fantasy occupied his thoughts as he took off for Stoneham Avenue Villas the following afternoon.

"I was so afraid you wouldn't come," exclaimed Ramona Lerch, resting heavily on her two canes. "Then I *would* have been in a fix."

"I promised I'd be here, didn't I?"

Ramona made her way to the back porch where, leaning on the rail, she pointed out the spot under the catalpa tree at the far end of the lawn, unmowed in many a summer from the look of it, where she wanted Tyler to dig Pussky's grave. With a spade from the toolshed Tyler neatly excavated a site into which to lower the silver-chest coffin, encircled with a pink silk ribbon tied in an elaborate bow.

Without being asked, but still observed by the sniffing Ramona, Tyler then proceeded to mow the lawn with an old push mower he found in the toolshed. He quite enjoyed the task, despite the heat of the day, and was encouraged by Ramona's praise to believe it might be the first of many tasks she would require of him. Painting the house, for instance, were Ramona agreeable, could take weeks, while even from the cracked cement driveway he could spot traces of rust on the narrow wrought-iron balcony adorning the window of a room high up under the gable, possibly an attic bedroom which Tyler thought would be just right for him.

“You’ve worked up quite a sweat,” said Ramona as Tyler joined her in the big old kitchen with its outdated appliances. “Why not take a refreshing shower? I’m so lucky Daddy installed a downstairs bathroom when Mama could no longer manage the stairs, as I can’t now. While you’re doing that, I’ll brew us a nice pot of tea. Do you like tuna fish sandwiches?”

Over tea and sandwiches in the far-from-spotless kitchen Tyler offered discreet suggestions for the improvements he had in mind, undismayed by Ramona’s halfhearted enthusiasm. “All that takes m-o-n-e-y, my dear boy. One can’t live on capital forever. The money Daddy left has dwindled nearly to the point of extinction.”

“I wouldn’t ask for money,” said Tyler. “I’d work just for a roof over my head. Anything to get out of that crummy rooming house.”

“We shall see. For now, it would be a blessing if only you’d run errands for me and do a bit of tidying up, things like that, you know.”

Tyler knew that for the time being he must be satisfied with this arrangement. He was soon as familiar with the house as if he’d lived there all his life. He liked especially the room in the attic, which was as commodious as the rooms on the floor below, with its dainty, somewhat rickety balcony overlooking the cracked cement driveway. It was sparsely furnished with a white-painted iron bed, a single lounge chair, and a pine chest of drawers on which stood an old-fashioned table lamp with a scenic glass shade and a photograph of a couple standing in front of the much smaller catalpa tree under which he had buried the silver-chest coffin. The woman was unmistakably a younger and slimmer Ramona Lerch; the man might have been the one in the snapshot in the blue leather wallet.

Tyler could imagine no room more to his liking. He’d be able to stand on the balcony at night and look up at the stars. He spoke of this room with wistful fondness to Ramona, who smiled quite as wistfully.

“Tell you a secret, dear. That was my special room as a child. My hideaway from the world.”

“Yes,” murmured Tyler dreamily, “that’s it. A Hideaway from the World.”

“I’ll tell you another thing. Mr. Chambers and I would often steal up there and ... well, let’s say it stirs romantic memories.”

Romantic memories clearly tinged with bitterness, as Ramona thereupon poured into Tyler’s ear the story of herself and Mr. Chambers.

“He founded the Unionville Box and Label Works. Made a pot of money when he sold it to an outfit in Cincinnati. I was only nineteen when I went to work for him. He always said I was his First Little Girl. First in more ways than one, if you catch my meaning. He’d never married and after Mama and Daddy died, we became

even closer. Some people thought he was a dry old stick, all business, but he had another side. I gave him my heart. I cherished girlish hopes, long after girlhood was only a memory. He strung me along with promises I assumed were sincerely made. 'You wait till I've sold the business,' he was always telling me, 'and then we'll have a royal fling. We'll travel around the world, we'll do this and we'll do that.' Well, my dear, he sold the business and he did go around the world, but not with his First Little Girl. On one of his trips to Cincinnati he met a younger woman. Before you could say lechery treachery, it was ding-dong wedding bells. Farewell, Ramona. No more gazing at the stars in our little hideaway from the world."

The story seemed a very sad one to Tyler. "I don't think he's a very nice man, treating you like that."

"You know, dear, you're right. He's *not* a nice man. Leaving me high and dry after I'd devoted my best years to him."

"How long's it been since you saw him?" Tyler asked, helping himself to another sandwich.

"Would you believe it? Ten years. And then one day when I was feeling so blue I could have stuck my head in the oven, I yielded to a very foolish impulse. I wanted him to see with his own eyes what a wretched condition I was in. Not that he'd feel an ounce of shame, but just to see the look on his face. I wrote him a note asking him to meet me at the Golden Griddle Cafe just for old time's sake. He used to love their blueberry waffles. We'd go there two or three times a week. I called a taxi, the same one that picked up my grocery order every week from Lovejoy's Market. Let me tell you, it was a painful ordeal. And all for nothing. He never showed up. That was the day you found my wallet. So you see I tell a lie, it wasn't all for nothing. The good Lord sent me you."

A few days later Tyler arrived at the house to find Ramona in a mood of eager excitement. She thrust a piece of paper into his hand. "Put this in your pocket, Tyler. It's a list of items I want you to pick up at Lovejoy's and the liquor store. I told you about wishing Mr. Chambers could see me now. Well, so he will if he accepts my invitation to a little tea party. Tête-à-tête. Wifey not included. I shall phone him tonight."

Tyler sensed more heartbreak ahead. "Are you sure he'll come? I mean, after last time—"

"I'll tell him I've something of great importance to tell him, something very much to his advantage. Curiosity, if nothing else, will do the trick, if I say it's to his *monetary* advantage. Everything must be shipshape, my dear. He mustn't think I've been living in a pigsty, not that everything isn't a sight more tidy since you came to my aid."

Within the hour Tyler had the front room, the kitchen, and the downstairs bath fit to receive the most censorious of ex-lovers. Wasted effort, most likely, as Tyler

did not share Ramona's confidence that she could lure Mr. Chambers to the house, not after he had avoided her so long and stood her up at the Golden Griddle.

On Sunday, as he explored parts of the countryside he'd never seen before, his mind kept reverting to Ramona's pathetic yearning to win the sympathy of her long-lost love. Could she possibly expect to revive his romantic interest after so long an estrangement?

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Arriving at the house on that Monday which was to prove as momentous as his finding the blue leather wallet, he was met by an extraordinary sight, a police cruiser parked in front of the entrance. The front door stood open, and as soon as he stepped inside Tyler was aware that something must be terribly wrong. In the living room Ramona, clutching a handkerchief to her bosom, slumped awkwardly on the sofa, quietly weeping. A uniformed police officer sat facing her on a chair drawn up close to the sobbing woman. He rose as Tyler entered the room.

Before he could speak, Ramona lifted her face and regarded Tyler with a look of piteous distress. "Oh, my dear boy, thank goodness you're here."

"Ramona? What's wrong? Are you all right?"

Ramona burst into fresh sobs. The policeman said, "Mr. Berlinghoff? I'm afraid Miss Lerch has suffered a great shock."

"My God, what is it? What's happened?"

"There's been an accident," said the officer. "A man—a Mr. Henry Chambers—was visiting Miss Lerch this afternoon. Apparently he had occasion to go upstairs and somehow fell from the balcony opening off one of the rooms, and was killed when he landed on the cement driveway below. Miss Lerch discovered what had happened and called nine-one-one. The body was removed less than an hour ago. Miss Lerch asked that I remain until you got here."

Ramona strove to compose herself, dabbing at her eyes and struggling to sit up, her two canes beside her.

"Tyler, dear, I told the nice policemen about the lovely time we were having, Henry and I, our little party of wine and cheese and reminiscences." She picked up a photograph from the end table and held it in her lap, caressing it with puffy fingers. "I told them about our Hideaway from the World and how dear Henry wanted to carry me up there for old time's sake. Spoofing, of course, he was. As if that sweet little man could have carried *me*. Ha ha. But he went up—wanted to see the room once more. And how I heard this—this *noise*. I won't ever forget it. I called out. I went to the window. I saw his poor broken body. Awful. Just awful. I got to the phone quick as I could. 'Ambulance! Ambulance! Hurry, hurry!' But it was too late."

At the time, Tyler attached no significance to the photograph Ramona kept stroking. He was too overcome by this frightful turn of events. The policeman moved his chair back, rose, and beckoned Tyler to follow him out of the room. The remains of Ramona's party littered the dining room table along with two empty wine bottles.

"How long have you known Miss Lerch?" the officer asked.

Tyler, in a far from steady voice, explained about the blue leather wallet, the burying of the cat in the silver-chest coffin, and how Ramona had befriended him, come to rely upon him. And the story, as Ramona had told it, of her doomed love affair with Mr. Chambers.

"You hadn't seen her at all today?"

"No. I usually come by late in the afternoon after finishing work at the Golden Griddle Cafe."

"And you were there today?"

"Yes, sir."

"Now let me ask you something, as you seem to have known her better than anyone. Her condition and all, could she have gone upstairs?"

"Gosh, no. It was all she could do to hobble around down here. I had to do everything for her. She was pretty well helpless since her accident."

"Thank you, son. Someone will no doubt question you again. One of the detectives."

"Detectives?"

"In cases of accidental death a report must be made."

It was that night when, sleepless on his bed at the rooming house, the image of Ramona weeping on the sofa, caressing the photograph in her lap, provoked a niggling uneasiness in his mind. Something about the photograph. Surely it was the same one he'd seen the day he'd ventured into the Hideaway from the World. He could see it in his mind's eye sitting on the pine chest of drawers, that photograph of Ramona and Mr. Chambers in happier days.

How had it got downstairs? Or *was* it the same one? Was it even identical? He tried to dismiss the troubling thought, but it would not go away.

Although the following day Tyler was aware of a somber pall hanging over the house, he was glad to find Ramona much like her usual self and expressing a mild resentment over some of the questions the police had asked her.

"Harping on my condition, as if it wasn't plain to see I could no more climb



those stairs than I could turn a somersault backwards. If you don't believe me, I said, you just ask my friend Tyler. He'll tell you."

"I told them just how helpless you are."

Ramona sighed. "I suppose if they find out about the policy they might question me again."

"Policy?"

"Oh, didn't I mention that?" said Ramona as if it had not been worth mentioning. "There was this time when Mr. Chambers was involved in some sort of class-action lawsuit. All the litigants ended up not with a cash settlement but with a hundred-thousand-dollar accidental-death policy from the insurance company that lost the suit. Mr. Chambers made me the beneficiary of it. It's still in my strongbox. As if it would ever do me any good. What was he going to do, get run over by a train or something? The old duck led a charmed life."

"But he did die in an accident," said Tyler.

"What you call irony, right? Poetic justice, I call it, after the way he treated me."

After that, life went on as before the tragedy. Ramona's condition remained the same. Tyler felt confident that any day now he would be able to say goodbye to the rooming house and move into the Hideaway from the World. He ventured discreet hints and waited for Ramona to make the suggestion. Days passed, grew shorter. Leaves began to turn, nights grew chilly. Tyler dreamed of winter evenings, blazing logs in the fireplace, hot chocolate with marshmallows.

And then, at the end of September, the most extraordinary thing happened, foretelling the end of his new life even before it began.

Tyler arrived at the house on a windy, rain-spattery Monday, removed the key from beneath the flowerpot as was his custom, and entered the house, which seemed unnaturally still. No response to his greeting. No sound of a soap opera on television, one dim light in the hall.

He found a letter addressed to him on the kitchen table. His hand trembled as he read it for the second and third time, leaving him as bewildered as if it were written in a foreign language.

*Dear Tyler, Please forgive my hasty departure. I cannot bear to stay in this house with the ghost of Mr. Chambers forever hovering over my shoulder. I can never thank you enough for all your kindnesses. Maybe someday we shall meet again. God bless you and goodbye. Your friend Ramona.*

Why did she go? *How* did she go? Tyler wandered through the rooms with a numbness in his breast. Only when he went into Ramona's bedroom and saw her

two canes propped against the wall in the closet and what seemed most of her clothes missing did bewilderment gradually change to the most dreadful of speculations. Her departure could not have been a spur-of-the-moment decision. Careful planning must have preceded it.

He thought of remaining in the house overnight but its ghost-ridden silence frightened him. He left hurriedly and returned to the rooming house, where that night he tossed and turned in his bed, his mind a prey to suspicions which by dawn had acquired an appalling significance.

Was it all a hoax? Had she befriended him with no other purpose than to make certain there was one person to verify her physical helplessness, caused by a fall when she tripped over her cat?

Such an elaborate pretext, yet what other explanation made any more sense? Had a sort of madness grown out of her sense of betrayal and festered in her brain until a plan for revenge had lodged there, waiting for the right person to come along who could lend credence to her bogus physical infirmity?

Not every day, but at least two or three times a week Tyler would ride his bike past the house in Stoneham Avenue Villas, half believing that Ramona might have returned, that she was in there watching her favorite soap operas. Until one day he saw a For Sale sign in front of the house. He would have ridden past, but then, with no clear idea of his intention, turned into the driveway and coasted around to the back of the house.

As he'd done on the day he buried Pussky, he fetched the spade from the toolshed, knowing there was no one to observe him, and proceeded to open the grave under the catalpa tree.

He lifted out the silver-chest coffin, untied the faded pink ribbon, and opened the lid. He was not surprised to discover that the chest contained nothing but what it was intended to hold. Silver flatware wrapped in gray velvet.