



When an A&W takeout bag appeared on my neighbour's porch in the middle of the night—followed by another, then another—I became obsessed with solving a fast food whodunit that was as baffling as it was beguiling

THE GREAT FRENCH FRY MYSTERY

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IT WAS THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT, a Wednesday in early April, when the first bag of A&W french fries was deposited on my neighbour's porch. Nobody saw who put it there, but when my neighbour opened her door to get her mail the following morning, there it was—a fast food bag crumpled up at the foot of her white wooden bench. She hadn't ordered any A&W french fries in the middle of the night, and she wasn't the one who had eaten them either.

The first bag was a mild curiosity. But the next morning my neighbour found another one on her porch, this time with a few fries still inside. She texted me and my wife in a group chat. "So some guy named Rodolphe keeps eating his A&W lunch on my porch," she typed. "Have any of you seen him?" I joked that I would put our two young kids on neighbourhood watch and sent her a video of them staring out the window, looking for someone eating french fries. "That's scary!" my much more compassionate wife

texted back. "How do you know his name?" Because, my neighbour replied, it was written in black Sharpie on both bags: Rodolphe.

Friday morning. Another mostly eaten bag of A&W french fries had appeared on her porch. The third night in a row. Rodolphe again. The following evening, in an attempt to make her space less inviting, my neighbour turned her bench around to face the house. Maybe that would be enough of a deterrent.

On Saturday morning, as I was about to take my kids to the park, I stepped outside to check the weather and glanced across the gap between our houses. My neighbour's bench was still facing the wall, but underneath it was yet another brown A&W bag. I texted her a video. "You have to be fucking kidding me," she replied. "I am going to check if it's Rodolphe." Almost immediately, she texted back a photo: "Rodolphe" scrawled in black Sharpie across the brown paper bag. The mysterious midnight french fry eater had struck again.

MY NEIGHBOUR, who recently turned 50, lives alone. By the time the fourth A&W bag materialized on her porch, she had gone from being curious about what she'd viewed as random littering to frustrated to shaken by the invasion of her privacy. She decided to leave the interloper a note: "Rodolphe: stop throwing your garbage here, thank you." She placed it at the top of the stairs leading to her front door, in clear view.

The next day: a warm Sunday. Before settling into my early morning routine of reading the news with a cup of coffee, I stepped outside. I had to check. Through the dim blue-hour light, I scanned my neighbour's porch. All clear. But then I noticed something sticking out of her metal mailbox, on the wall next to her door. I did a double take. It didn't look like mail. I scurried down our steps and up my neighbour's. There it was: another A&W bag, containing a dozen or so french fries and, this time, two packets of ketchup. This was the fifth night, the fifth bag of fries, the fifth "Rodolphe." Two was a potential coincidence, three an oddity, four a puzzle. But five? I was obsessed.

I told my neighbour that we needed to compare all the bags. "Damn," she answered. She had thrown out the first three. *Garbage day hasn't come yet*, I thought. But, before I could offer to dig through her trash, she texted, half sheepish, half proud: "I went through the garbage." I headed next door, and we laid out the bags on her kitchen island for examination. They were all small, made of the same brown paper, and adorned with the restaurant chain's logo and depictions of a happy community: one figure riding a bike, another planting a garden; there's a dog, a couple holding hands, several people in line at an A&W food truck. Inside each takeout bag was a whisper-thin pouch that had once contained a single order of fries. The tops of the outer bags had been folded down and secured with A&W-branded tape.

We spun a few theories. Perhaps this person worked nights and considered my neighbour's bench an inviting spot to sit and snack on their commute. Maybe a hungry student was returning home after cramming at the library. Later that morning, when I was at the park, my neighbour left me a voicemail. This had all started the day after she'd stuck a Chrystia Freeland sign on her front lawn, she said, the only one along our stretch of street in the leafy west end of Toronto. Was Rodolphe a political prankster? A potato-loving Tory frustrated with the polls? I suggested that someone looking to make a political statement would have taken a more direct approach than repeatedly leaving a single piece of garbage on her porch.

My neighbour, not the kind of person to float conspiracy theories or harbour irrational fears, confessed that she wasn't sleeping well. She was waking up in the night and staying up for hours, obsessing over the bags. She had started locking her doors—not just her house's front and back doors but also her bedroom door. I tried to assuage her fears: it could be rats, maybe a raccoon, but it was probably squirrels that had dug leftover bags of fries out of someone's garbage can and deposited the remains on the porch.

Squirrels, among other animals, have been known to leave things outside people's houses. It's called reciprocal altruism—a kind of evolutionary cooperation. But I knew that theory would have made more sense if these had been random pieces of garbage, not five bags of A&W french fries, five nights in a row, emblazoned with the exact same name. If it was the same squirrel accessing the same garbage night after night, why would it bring just this one piece back to the porch? I kept telling my neighbour it had to be squirrels, if only to avoid admitting it could be something else.



THERE WERE FOOTPRINTS
ON MY NEIGHBOUR'S PORCH—
HUMAN SHOES, TWO FACING
UP, TWO FACING DOWN.
THIS WAS NO SQUIRREL

ON SUNDAY AFTERNOON, seeking some form of confirmation, I rummaged through drawers in our basement until I found our old baby monitor. The camera didn't have the capability to record automatically, but when it detected movement, it sent a notification to our phones. If my wife and I were lucky and quick, we could record whatever was happening in the moment. I asked my neighbour if I could set it up on her porch. "Yes!" she answered enthusiastically. The next day, a Monday, I woke up at 5 a.m. I didn't look at my texts or my emails. The first thing I checked was the camera feed. Nothing. But, a couple of hours later, my neighbour texted: "There is another bag!" Sure enough, directly in front of her door but too low to be seen on the baby monitor's camera, there it was. The sixth bag. The sixth Rodolphe.

My neighbour and I had been canvassing our social circles for theories. One of her friends posited that someone was clumsily flirting with her, trying to ask her out on a date to A&W. Another friend took to ChatGPT, texting her the results: "The search 'Rodolphe and fries and A&W' likely refers to the fact that Rodolphe, a character on the Canadian TV show *The Beaver and the Boomerang*, is an avid fan of A&W root beer and fries. The show often features him enjoying these items, particularly the fries, as a part of his character's enjoyment of fast food and simpler pleasures." I was skeptical of this bizarre hypothesis. I decided to conduct my own online search and found no evidence that *The Beaver and the Boomerang* was ever a TV show—in Canada or elsewhere.

"My friend said I should call the cops and tell them...seems like overkill," my neighbour texted me later that morning. I agreed with her assessment. "Overkill at this point," I texted back. Instead, she called 311 and laid out the story to the city call-centre employee on the other end of the line. The woman was aghast, confused, unsettled by the mystery; she was concerned that stalking could be involved. "You should definitely call the police," she told my neighbour, then concluded on a heartening note: "Usually I get calls from neighbours complaining about each other or ratting them out for something. It's so nice to hear about neighbours helping each other out."

By this point, I was fully invested. Sure, I wanted to ease my neighbour's stress, but I also desperately wanted to solve this mystery. What was happening? Who was behind it? And above all, why? My wife, eight months pregnant, joked that I was spending more time thinking about the french fries than preparing for the birth of our third child. She wasn't entirely wrong. I needed to know for certain that it was a human depositing the A&W bags. But I wasn't willing to stay up all night watching the live camera feed, so I proposed an experiment: we could tape a piece of thread across the staircase leading onto my neighbour's porch. If it was broken by morning, we would know for sure that a human had been there.

"But what if a raccoon trips the thread?" my neighbour asked. I thought for a moment. "Do you have any flour?" I texted. "I have baking soda," she replied. At dusk, we sprinkled the soda across two of her porch steps, a dusting so light it would be impossible to see at night. If someone—or something—breached the stairs, they would leave clear prints behind.

Tuesday morning, 5 a.m. I checked the camera feed. It was on night vision mode, and I could see something on the porch. I ran outside to check our traps. The thread had been snapped, and there were prints in the soda: human shoes. Two facing up, two facing down. This was no squirrel. And there, right beside my neighbour's welcome mat, delivered at 12:33 a.m., was a small brown bag. A&W. Rodolphe. Number seven. A full week of french fries deposited in the middle of the night.

THIS HAS TO BE POLITICALLY MOTIVATED," my neighbour said when she woke up. She does a lot of environmental advocacy. She often displays protest signs on her lawn. She decidedly does not eat fast food. Was someone eating A&W on her porch and leaving the trash to make some kind of statement about her values? Maybe, I suggested, the person on her porch wasn't coming to eat a midnight snack but rather to deliver a midnight snack. It would explain why the restaurant fastened the top of the bag with branded tape—in-store and drive-through purchases aren't taped closed. It would also explain why someone's name was scrawled on the bag—to guide a courier picking up an order.

The eighth day. Just after 1 a.m. My wife, already awake from the baby kicking, received a notification on her phone that someone had been spotted on the porch cam. She opened the app. The image blinked from a porch without an A&W bag to a porch with an A&W bag leaning against our neighbour's door. Rodolphe had struck again. But whoever dropped it off was already gone. Eleven minutes later, my wife got another notification and saw a raccoon ripping open the bag. At 5:30 a.m., while we were making coffee, another notification showed a squirrel snacking on the few remaining fries.

The bags were being delivered, but we still didn't know from where or why. I needed to conduct a test. As we drank our coffee, I downloaded the A&W app and placed an order for a single bag of thick-cut fries. Including delivery fee and tip, the total came to \$10.58. I received a text that my order was being prepared and that it would arrive in 19 minutes. Nineteen minutes later, I received a notification that my order had been delivered. By the time I rushed outside, all I could see was an e-bike courier scooting away, into the dawn, heading for his next pickup.

At my feet was a small brown A&W paper bag, exactly like those left on my neighbour's porch: the same happy community, the same black Sharpie, the same A&W tape securing the top. "Now that I know someone isn't sitting on my porch in the middle of the night, I'm not scared anymore," my neighbour said later that day, grateful for my experiment. A gig worker was delivering the fries, and animals were eating them.

That night, at 11:49 p.m., the ninth bag of french fries was deposited on my neighbour's porch. Our next step was clear: head to the source. There are multiple A&W restaurants in our neighbourhood, but the text I'd received confirming my order had noted which location had prepared the fries. It was 800 metres away. My neighbour and I decided to go for a walk.



OUR CLOSEST A&W LOOKED like any of them, like all of them. Outside, an orange sign advertising: "Home of the Burger Family." Inside, faux-wood-panelled tables and booths, a mirror-clean stainless-steel counter, fridges of root beer. And crucially, like many A&Ws, it was open 24 hours. We approached the counter, and I spoke a phrase I'd hoped never to utter: "Can I speak with a manager?"

The man behind the counter was the assistant manager. I introduced us, two neighbours, and explained the mystery: the deliveries of french fries, the odd hours, the distinct tape on the bags, "Rodolphe" in Sharpie. I outlined some of our theories and the lengths we had gone to confirm or disprove them. Obliging but clearly confused, the man turned to his tablet to check if any Rodolphes had ordered french fries in the middle of the night from that location. As he scrolled back through the previous night, and the night before that, and the night before that, there they were: Rodolphes, again and again. Single orders of french fries.

These orders hadn't come through A&W's app, the assistant manager explained; they were placed through Uber Eats. After orders come in from a third-party delivery app, all the A&W store sees is what the order is for, a first name and the first letter of a last name, and eventually the time it was delivered. The restaurant doesn't record addresses, phone numbers or full names. Peering at the tablet over the man's shoulder, I spotted the first letter of Rodolphe's last name. I took note of it as well as several order numbers.

When I got home, I conducted another test: I placed an order for A&W french fries through Uber Eats. Would this one look the same as Rodolphe's? In fact, yes—the bag of fries that was left on my welcome mat half an hour later looked exactly like his. Using the baby monitor, we had uncovered the when. Via our tests, we had figured out the how. And we had solved one who: who had been eating the fries. But other questions remained. Who was ordering them? Who was Rodolphe? And why was someone repeatedly sending orders of french fries to my neighbour in the middle of the night?

A friend of mine suggested that a technological glitch was to blame and that the fries were being reordered by mistake every night. But, if some computer somewhere was malfunctioning and placing the same order again and again, why were the deliveries coming at irregular times throughout the night? It was too personal, too human. Was it a scam? I wondered if someone on the other side of the world was hacking a delivery app during their nine-to-five, our middle of the night.

A journalism contact connected me with a former senior employee of a major food delivery app, who agreed to speak to me only on the condition of anonymity. This person wondered if someone was making repeat orders of something cheap in order to game a rewards program. Or, they said, this could be scammers trying to validate or test stolen credit cards, purchasing something cheap and innocuous to avoid a card's fraud detection measures, and the address where the food was sent had been selected at random. It's a practice called "card testing" or "card cracking." According to Visa's website, it's meant to reveal "which cards have been cancelled or deactivated—and which ones are still valid. Once the cancelled or declined card numbers are weeded out, fraudsters move on to make larger purchases or resell the validated information."

An *LA Times* article from 2023 raised a similar theory after residents living in the northeast of the city repeatedly received un-ordered deliveries from McDonald's and Starbucks, often of single low-cost items: a carton of milk, an order of french fries. Follow-up articles never quite got to the bottom of things, though they posited that deliveries like this might be an experiment conducted by a psychology class—or a way for thieves to canvas a house to see if anyone is home. I didn't mention that last theory to my neighbour.



PRIOR TO THE A&W FRIES showing up, my neighbour and I would chat over tea or talk across the fence that separates our two backyards—politics and the environment, mainly. More recently, it was Trump and Carney, tariffs, nationalism, elections, the media. But, for weeks this spring, we forgot about all that. We found ourselves tied up in a riddle—at times a disconcerting one, then a funny one, but every day, with every new bag of french fries, an engrossing distraction. The 311 operator was right. This is what neighbours are for. It's a relationship that goes beyond a quiet wave and nod, a cup of sugar, an emergency. Neighbours are there when the world gets a bit weird, or scary, and we turn to those closest to us—not families a province or a country away, not friends on the other side of town, but those with whom we happen to share a wall or a fence.

On the 10th morning, after nine nights and nine bags of A&W french fries, my neighbour's porch was empty. Was it over? Had the assistant manager at our local A&W flagged Rodolphe's name in their system, cancelling future orders from him? Three more mornings went by, and nothing. Then, on the fourth morning, as I stepped outside to check the mail, I saw it. Another brown A&W bag on my neighbour's porch, with a few loose fries inside. Whoever had been sending the bags of A&W fries had taken four days off—the Easter long weekend. They were back to work on Tuesday.

That was the last bag of french fries delivered to my neighbour's door. It was around the same time that I contacted Uber looking for clarity. I gave my neighbour's address, the name Rodolphe, and the approximate dates and times of the deliveries. Two



THE EIGHTH DAY, JUST AFTER
1 A.M., MY WIFE RECEIVED
A NOTIFICATION ON HER PHONE
THAT SOMEONE—OR SOMETHING—
HAD BEEN SPOTTED
ON THE PORCH

employees at the company reached out to me within half an hour of each other. In an email, a safety communications staffer wrote that "Uber takes reports of unsolicited deliveries seriously" and that they had "identified and banned the account behind the fraudulent orders." The email also included the words "crime," "fraudsters" and "illegal activity," so I pressed for more information about the exact nature of the scam. The representative noted that often these kinds of repeat unwanted orders are conducted in order to "age an account"—to build a positive Uber rating—or "place 'good' orders before committing a larger scheme," but they declined to offer specifics about what exactly was happening. "We don't want to give others ideas," they wrote.

I can see why. Scams are everywhere. And while they often seem impersonal, behind each one is a person, a schemer lighting the match that sets off a chain reaction—in this case, through apps, credit card companies, fast food restaurants and delivery drivers, all the way to my neighbour's door. And at the end of the fuse, there are people too—most often victims, or in our case, two people fixated on the compelling task of solving a mystery. Weeks after the last bag of A&W french fries appeared on my neighbour's porch, she sent me a text: "I miss Rodolphe."

I had a first name, a last initial and a city. With that little bit of information, I conducted an internet search to see if I could find our Rodolphe. A LinkedIn page popped up, then a Facebook page: same first name, same initial I'd seen on the A&W tablet, listed as living in Toronto. I messaged him and sent emails—bizarre to receive, no doubt—describing the mystery and asking if perhaps he had lost his credit card or had an account hacked that spring. Surely he wasn't ordering french fries every night and sending them to the wrong address. Surely he was a victim who'd had his information stolen and used by a scammer eight time zones away. But Rodolphe never wrote back.

One day, while I waited in vain for a response, I casually scrolled through the photos Rodolphe had uploaded to Facebook. That's when I saw them: a selfie overlaid with the French flag, and multiple pictures of burgers and fries. 