

# Louisville

## MAGAZINE



### **I'M YOUR SURPRISE:**

Louisville's Personalized Telegrammer

*Written by Dylan Jones  
Photos by Aaron Kingsbury*

Today Denise Mattingly is someone easy to be, or at least easy to look like, so she gets up only a few hours early, at 4:30 a.m. She draws her shiny brown hair into pigtails on either side of her head, Harley Quinn style. Squeezes her “huge boobs” into a minimizer bra “for modesty.” Applies rosy circles to her cheeks, cartoonish. A black skirt with pink trim, pink hair extensions, a “university” shirt, a class ring on a necklace like a pendant. Today Denise is a cheerleader. So much easier than when she’s a Vegas showgirl, all sequins and feathers. Not so complicated as her spot-on Gene Simmons getup. Nowhere near the prep time it takes to pull off Marilyn Monroe.

Mattingly, the one-woman cast of characters who operates Louisville Telegrams full-time, drives down the Watterson Expressway beneath a peaches-and-cream sky, warming up by singing Madonna at the top of her lungs. “I love Madonna,” she says between perfectly tuned verses. “I even have the sex book.” When Mattingly ran a modeling agency way back when, an actor she’d scheduled to play Monroe flaked, leaving nobody but Mattingly to don the white gown. She’s been doing telegrams ever since.

For today’s clients, she has a bag of personalized goodies — stickers, road-trip games like Mad Libs, a two-liter of Dr. Pepper she knows they’ll like. Both sets of the young couple’s parents have conspired to wake up their kids via singing telegram and get them ready to visit. Mattingly knows the boy’s a gamer, girl’s a superhero fan, and she’s been up late the past couple of nights writing, fine-tuning and practicing a routine. “I pretend I’m a writer for *SNL*,” she says.

She swings through Panera to grab hot coffee for the unaware couple. Back on the road, she starts the next part of her warm-up ritual: rapping “White America” by Eminem, glittery lip gloss sparkling as she spits: “And now they’re saying I’m in trouble with the government — I’m lovin’ it!”

Mattingly sticks a tablet in her cheek to keep her mouth moist, balances the coffee and goodies and a black pompom and the Dr. Pepper — “No! You can’t help me, honey; that wouldn’t be true life” — and climbs a set of wooden stairs into an apartment building. At the top floor, she knocks on the door. No answer. Knocks. Crickets sing, car engines grumble. Minutes pass, and she calls the mom to see what’s up. Maybe they’re in the shower. She clasps her hands behind her back, picks at a manicured nail. She can’t just leave. She’s already been paid \$200. Still, it wouldn’t be the worst gig gone awry. Not as bad as that construction worker who was so embarrassed to see Marilyn Monroe in front of his work buddies

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that he jumped in his truck and drove away. Not so mortifying as arriving at a place of business to find out that it wasn't the client's wife who ordered him a telegram, but his mistress.



sings to the tune of "Happy Birthday." She gives them a card from Mom. The woman shrieks over the set of stickers Mattingly hands her. The cheerleader makes them promise they'll only play the road games when they're not driving. "Go Springfield!" she yells, waving her pom. Back outside, she punches the air in a silent cheer and cackles down the stairs. She smiles over her shoulder, bright enough to stop ships, and says, "That was great."

After a trip back to the car to make another call to Mom, Mattingly knocks again, louder, but still dainty. "I hate that knock, it's so aggressive," she says.

A young man in PJs and a T-shirt opens the door, bleary-eyed. "I'm your surprise!" Mattingly tells him. "Can I come in?"

"Oh my gosh," the young woman says, still sleepy in her Superman shirt.

"Good morning to you, good morning to you," Mattingly

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