

Caitlin Moy

October 2017

### Tales of a Mailman

Ms. Larson's petunias. A well-used welcome mat. A mailbox posing as a miniature barn, meant for holding Christmas cards and Sears catalogues, not chickens and hay- it doesn't fool anyone.

The sun is scraping the top of the sky, but John Stammerstein continues to roam the roads of Humsville, sporting a heavy blue button-down and navy slacks. On autopilot, he marches on, from house to house, passing a plethora of pachysandras, Mrs. Jackson on her three o'clock jog, and two stray soccer balls lazily rolling down the street. When he spots the jowls of a 65 pound bulldog rippling in the air, slobber flying in every direction as the canine charges him, John doesn't flinch. He continues on towards the next house, tossing the little guy a milkbone on the way. Nearing the Gonzalez's front door, he skips the third step on the their porch- five years and they still haven't fixed it.

At the top of the steps, John is holding a box. With his free hand, he rings the doorbell. No response. He sets the plain brown package on the ground. It was light anyway, and he didn't mind carrying it at all. People like the Gonzalezes make John's job a piece of cake.

As he makes his way back to the road, a grey minivan comes peeling down the street as if it's a sports car, making a sharp left turn into the Gonzalez's driveway. John is nearly run over in the process, but luckily he knows by now to step out of the way as soon as he sees that familiar face behind the wheel.

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“Wow! 3:17, just like always! You have impeccable timing- do you know that?” calls out the man in the minivan. The window slowly rolls down, revealing white hair and thick glasses.

“Any mail today?”

“Nope, just a package,” John replies with a friendly grin and a wave, as he continues down the block.

For 25 years, John Stammerstein has graciously served the people of Humsville, delivering *People* magazines, credit card bills, postcards from North Carolina, good news, and bad news. He’s seen plump New Jersey tomatoes ripen and fall every year, witnessed kids go from waist-high to eye-level in just a few summers, and finally overcome his lifelong fear of dogs.

Every day, John is proud to don his satchel full of letters. Because of his job, he can spare his wallet from a monthly gym membership and eat as many hot dogs on the Fourth of July as he wants, or go on a vacation every year because he knows his paycheck can fund a boat rental in the Outer Banks. Without his job, John would be like an envelope without a stamp, incomplete and with nowhere to go.

As he continues his route, the mailman reaches into his bag for the next stack of letters. A puzzled look spreads across his face as he reads the name, “Sherry Kim,” on the face of the letter- certainly not the name of the 42-year-old male accountant who used to live at this address. Looking up from the envelope, John is greeted by a moving van parked right in front of the house. A man and a woman, both in their mid-thirties, are just about finished moving all their belongings into their new home. Exhausted, they drag themselves over to the front door, looking ready to retire for the evening. Before John can hand them their mail, the door shuts closed

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behind the couple. With a sigh, John instead strolls over to the tin mailbox at the foot of the driveway. He opens it up, but rather than hearing the creaking of metal, he hears a familiar tune. His first instinct is to check inside the box, but his ears guide him to an open window in the couple's house. A little girl is sitting in front of a piano working through a sheet of music. Her furrowed brows make it clear that she's putting 100 percent of her concentration into the song. Her fingers aren't quite coordinated, and the notes sound forced and choppy, but it is enough for John to recognize the tune as "Minuet in G" by Petzold. The mailman closes his eyes for bit and sways along to the rhythm, recalling the time he was a young boy in Humsville. As if he's the one playing, John's fingers begin to trace the tune, catching all the sharps and flats. However, his fingers don't play the way they used to, and much like a letter in an envelope, songs should be treated with care.

Going from house to house, John knows the lives of almost everybody in Humsville. Each day, he sees lawyers, teachers, middle-schoolers, dog-owners, and soccer players, but it's always the musicians that strike a certain chord with him. He'll hear a drummer begin a beat or a singer belt out a few words, but he can never stick around for a full song; he's a mailman, and he has a duty to stay on schedule.

Three weeks since the Kims moved in, John continues to deliver letters to them and their neighbors. He passes a plethora of pachysandras, Mrs. Jackson on her three o'clock jog, and a stray soccer ball lazily rolling down the street. However, this time, by the end of the day, his bag is not empty; there's a small brown package the size of his hand.

*Just one last stop*, John thinks to himself as he unwraps his package.

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On his mail route the next day, there is a familiar tune in the air, but it's far from the sound of anything with black and white keys. John is waltzing down the street, letters in one hand and harmonica in the other. His fingers may not be what they used to be, but there are other instruments besides the piano. The Kims pop their heads outside their front window to see what all the commotion is. Mr. Gonzalez drives by in his grey minivan, so entranced by John's playing, he nearly runs him over again. Even the bulldog all the way down the block pauses to tilt its head at the sound. 25 years ago, John would've given anything to play piano day and night for the rest of his life, but now, as a mailman, he wouldn't give up Ms. Larson's petunias, the Gonzalez's third porch step, or bulldogs with big, droopy jowls for the world.