The Swift Completion of Appointed Rounds

By Emily Weber-Wood

To Lloyd’s relief, nobody had seen him fall except for the sleepy-eyed black lab tied to the tree outside 520 North Serpico Avenue. The dog cocked its head and lifted an ear as Lloyd sucked air past his teeth, cursing the envelopes that had scattered into the street. Thunderclouds loomed in the east, and a stiff wind flipped one of the envelopes like a thin piece of scrapple. The bruise forming on his tailbone was nothing compared to the foolishness Lloyd felt: a man of seventy huffing and puffing down the busted-up sidewalks shouldering a bulging blue sack of mail. *When you buy a house in Bethseda,* he thought, *Lloyd Carter comes with it.* The town joke. Lighthearted, of course. It wasn’t supposed to be mockery—it was veneration. It’s what you say about the mail carrier whose retirement three years ago prompted a hagiography in the town newspaper. The man who knew almost every single person in town by name, who’d carried treats in his right pocket for the dogs on his route, who had congratulated young couples on births early in his career and college graduations by its end.

Lloyd rolled onto his right side—the better one—and had gotten himself almost all the way up when the familiar lightning flashed through his bones. Twenty years ago, his hip had taken a bullet. *Just like the dad on Frasier*, he’d joked with his daughter as she sat in a plastic chair by his hospital bed, her face gray and eyes red. It was late fall, in the thick of the Y2K insanity. A hunting accident up in the Poconos that landed him in the ER and then the OR and then a year of physical therapy so grueling he almost missed that the world had failed to end.

“Fat lot of help you are,” he hissed at the dog, whose tail thumped pitifully against the tree. As the skies darkened with coming rain, Lloyd limped home to his one-bedroom apartment above the laundromat. It took nearly five minutes to summit the stairs, another five to open his door, hang the half-empty bag of mail on its hook, and clamber up the top steps into the main section of his apartment. For the second or third time since They came, he considered packing a couple of bags and breaking into one of the many one-floor vacant houses in town, which had been looted ages ago and now stood unoccupied, their previous owners unable to refill their prescriptions for insulin and blood thinners or handle the last bad strain of the flu. Not the worst idea, all in all. Was it technically breaking and entering when the occupants had been dead for a year? Let’s say it was—who would arrest him? Nobody had seen a uniformed police officer in two years. As far as Lloyd knew, he was the only government employee in town—maybe in the whole state.

On his way to the bathroom, he paused in the gauntlet of his grandchildren’s photos hanging in dusty gold frames on both sides of the hallway. For each child, one baby photo and one school photo, the most recent taken two and a half years ago. The baby, bright-eyed little Matias, was six; the twins, Maya and Leah, were eleven, in matching green sweaters that attempted to make them identical instead of fraternal. He hadn’t seen any of them—the grandkids or his daughter, now thirty-two, or her husband—in four years, and he hadn’t heard from them since They came two years ago. In the span of a few hours, the existence of family members had become a great unknown. Worse still was the knowledge that you were a similar mystery to them.

Lloyd had downed two naproxen tablets and was settling into his favorite recliner when he heard the *tink* of something hard but light hitting his window. Adrenaline forced him to his feet. On the sidewalk below was a boy no older than the twins, his arm snapped back, ready to throw something. Lloyd debated opening the window. He recognized the boy but couldn’t say where he lived. The boy raised his eyebrows and made an upward motion with his hand. Lloyd’s muscles shook as he strained to open it the window in its swollen frame.

“You gonna deliver the rest of the mail or what?” the boy hollered, dropping a small handful of pebbles onto the sidewalk.

“Pardon me?”

“You still have mail in your bag.” The boy wore someone else’s shirt, perhaps belonging to whoever once occupied his current home. But the collar was crisp, and it looked clean. He had the same gaunt face and dull skin and thin limbs that made everyone in town look like ghosts. His straggly black hair needed a good wash, and in a few years, his upper lip would need a shave it would never get.

Lloyd ran a hand over his own gray stubble. “You been spying on me?” he asked.

The boy kicked at the sidewalk and shrugged.

“Where do you live?”

The boy pointed down the street toward a small stone house with iron bars over the door and stubby green plants in flower boxes nailed to the porch. Lloyd tried to remember if he’d picked up or delivered mail there. If so, it hadn’t been lately.

“Where are your parents? What are you doing out here?”

“You still have mail in your bag,” the boy said, quieter than before.

“I can’t finish today.”

“Why not?”

“My hip.”

“What’s wrong with your hip?”

“An old injury,” Lloyd said, hoping the boy wouldn’t press it.

“What if I help?”

“*Help*?”

“With the mail.”

Lloyd knew he should respond but couldn’t coax a full sentence from his mind.

“I can use a compass and a protractor, and I can read cursive handwriting,” the boy continued. “And I know where the stamps and the return addresses go.”

Lloyd sighed. Where to begin? Maybe with the fact that being a mail carrier required more cardiovascular fitness than compass skills. Or the fact that nobody used stamps anymore—money being useless and their proxies even less so—and that envelopes weren’t scanned at the post office. No electricity; no scanners. Maybe the fact that Lloyd ran an entire post office by himself, delivering all of the mail for a six-square-mile borough because those of his colleagues who had survived the aftermath and lived nearby hadn’t exactly rushed back to work to uphold the unofficial motto of the United States Postal Service: *Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds.* And who could blame them? For all anyone knew, there was no such thing as the United States anymore.

“What’s your name?” Lloyd asked.

“André.”

“Pleased to meet you, André.” Lloyd bristled at his own tone: gentle, quiet, like he was speaking to his daughter, or his grandchildren. But this boy was a stranger.

“And why would you want to help me?” Lloyd glanced down at his wristwatch. Six days a week, for two years, Lloyd left his house at eight o’clock, according to the black watch that could be found in only two places: on his wrist during rounds and on his nightstand when he returned each day at four o’clock. He would wind the watch and review the day: the morning run north into town, where the occupied buildings were much closer together, giving him more places to rest his hip, peek into mailboxes, chew the fat with shop owners and folks sitting on their porches. Before, nobody offered him things; these days, people on his route would press bread and tea and jams and bulbous zucchini from their gardens into his hands. After the northern route, he would head back to the post office and sort through the outgoing mail before making an afternoon run to one of three different areas on the outskirts of town. On a good day, when the weather was fair and his hip compliant, he might deliver to two of the outlying areas. But no matter how much he hustled, some mailboxes simply couldn’t be reached more than three days a week. While Lloyd and the boy stared at each other, the second hand made half a revolution. “All right,” Lloyd said at last, sighing. “You can tag along tomorrow.” As Lloyd struggled again with the window, the first fat raindrops of the season darkened the sidewalk beneath the boy.

In the morning, André was nearly half an hour late. Maybe it couldn’t be helped. Almost nobody was on time these days—almost nobody *thought* of time these days, since there were no radios, no smartphones, no cyan readouts on kitchen microwaves.

“The first step is to pick up the outgoing mail from the post office,” Lloyd explained, ushering André out the door of his apartment and up the block toward the post office tucked between a copse of trees and a beer distributor with broken windows. As they walked, Lloyd wondered if the boy was hungry, who he lived with, who’d picked out his pink and green button-up shirt with a collar that swallowed his jawline.

When they reached the post office, a squat concrete building with orange tiles on the roof, Lloyd unlocked the front door and resisted the urge to reach for the light switch. He breathed in the stale air and the musk of moldy ceiling tiles. Even in the dark, it was still one of his favorite places; not the building, but what it meant. The postal service was simple and vital, like a heartbeat: a tiny and unappreciated wonder. And yet all anybody could talk about were the hiccups—the mail returned to senders and the package that arrived one day late—never mind the miracle that it had arrived at all.

André spun in a slow circle, taking in the racks full of faded greeting cards, unopened rolls of packing tape, neat stacks of flat-rape shipping boxes—red and white and blue like the tattered flag out front that had been permanently left at half-mast. His eyes stopped on a framed map of the borough that hung near the front counter. “What’s Penna?” he asked.

“That was the old postal abbreviation for Pennsylvania. It changed to P-A in the 60s when all the states got two-letter abbreviations.”

André nodded. “A nanny pelvis.”

“Excuse me?”

“Pennsylvania is an anagram for *a nanny pelvis*.”

Lloyd shook his head and waved for André to join him behind the counter. He had sorted yesterday’s mail into its four piles: one for the route north into town and three piles for the outlying areas. André studied the envelopes with a cloudy expression, scanning for something.

“It’s been a slow week,” Lloyd explained. As the weather had warmed, people in town were content to hop on a bike or walk to see someone in person rather than send a card or a letter. He envied their mobility, their destinations. But everything came in waves: a few weeks ago he’d dealt with a surge of Easter cards in pastel envelopes, and in another week or two he would probably buckle under the Mother’s Day cards, though many of them would be addressed beyond the borough.

During an early winter snow last year when he couldn’t make his appointed rounds, he’d spread a map over his kitchen counter and marked the number of occupied and unoccupied houses in town. Before They came, twelve mail carriers delivered mail to nearly 8,000 people in the borough. Working by candlelight, Lloyd marking with a green crayon the buildings that were still occupied and used a dry Sharpie for the abandoned ones. By his best estimate, there were now 1,800 people in 600 buildings, which was the only reason he could deliver all of the mail for the entire town. Just as long as the mail was going to someone in the same town. As far as the postal service was concerned, everything beyond the outer perimeter of the borough might as well have slid off a cliff and into the Atlantic Ocean.

“We used to get a lot of mail,” André said. “Stuff we didn’t want, like the junk mail folder in your email. Sometimes it came in real envelopes with stamps and everything. My mom would throw it all away without opening it.”

“We all got junk,” Lloyd muttered, placing the outgoing mail into canvas bags. A few envelopes had no return addresses. Some were cards. Some were thick, as if they contained many sheets of paper, but Lloyd couldn’t fathom who had this much to say to someone so close. Nothing had been weighed or properly stamped.

“Do you deliver mail every day?”

“Every day except Sunday,” Lloyd said. “That’s the Lord’s day.”

“How long does it take for someone to get something in the mail? Like if I sent a card on a Monday, how long would it take to get to the person?”

Lloyd handed him the lighter bag and waved the boy toward the front door. “It all depends.”

“On what?”

“Lots of things. How far it’s going. The volume of mail. My hip.”

André shook his head. “Too many variables.”

Lloyd tapped his watch, with its continuous second hands, the knob he continued to wind up day after day. “The only one I control is when I start my rounds.”

For just a moment, André tilted his head in wonder at the watch. Thinking better of it—or perhaps not caring about punctuality—he adjusted the bag on his shoulder and bounded through the door, as if nothing in the world could weigh him down. Lloyd thought of his grandchildren and blinked hard, facing the place where the sun would be but for the clouds.

It was slow going. The boy didn’t know how the outgoing mail had been organized, and he misplaced the mail they picked up. He spent too long peering into mailboxes that were clearly empty. He wanted to talk to everyone but couldn’t muster words after saying hello. When a white-haired woman sweeping her front porch offered him an old Scrabble game from her basement, he said no thank you, it’s not a good game if you can win just by playing short words on triple-word tiles. Worse still, he read every street sign aloud and quickly announced their anagrams, racing to think of the best one. Poplar Street became *Pearl Spotter*, which made Lloyd think of a scuba diver wearing a miner’s headlamp, eager to crack open the first clam he found in the muck of the ocean floor. Main Street transformed into *Terminates*, then *Easter Mint*, then *Meat Insert*.

But it was handy to have someone to carry the offerings they received that day: two biscuits, a small glass jar of preserved peppers, and a thick bundle of asparagus wrapped in an old pillowcase. One man offered a pack of playing cards, which Lloyd refused, and a woman offered a tiny lavender-scented candle, half-burnt and dusty from disuse. André accepted it, slipping it into the pocket of his jeans. “Do you always get so much stuff?” he asked, his eyes wide.

Lloyd nodded. “It’s slim pickings in the winter. But people are grateful.”

It was well past lunchtime by the time the first round of mail had been delivered and replaced with the mail that would be delivered the next day. Lloyd reminded himself to be patient. The boy was just trying to help. They would finish when they finished. But he liked to be done before four o’clock, even if nobody else remembered what four o’clock was anymore.

“Where’d you get the watch?” André nodded toward Lloyd’s wrist.

“A Father’s Day gift from my daughter,” Lloyd said. “Twenty years old, at least. She must have been nine or ten.”

“Is it mechanical? My mom had one of those.”

“Yep.”

“Wanna know how it works?”

Lloyd tilted his head. “Tell me.”

“When you turn the knob, you wind up a spring, which is connected to a bunch of gears that power the balance wheel. That wheel oscillates at a constant rate because it’s attached to a special wheel called an escapement that moves a little bit every time the balance wheel swings. That’s why the hands move forward at a steady rate.”

Lloyd stared at André. He felt like the air had been let out of his body.

“That ticking sound,” André continued, pointing at the watch face, “is the escapement stopping the balance wheel from using all the power from the spring all at once. If one gear slipped out of place, it would stop working.”

Lloyd crossed his arms. “How old did you say you were?”

André didn’t answer. They entered the cool, dark of the post office, dropping their bags and beginning to sort through the mail they had taken in. André ruminated: maybe about school, maybe about an anagram, maybe about the physics of a mechanical watch—who could tell? He was inscrutable in a way that kids shouldn’t be. They gathered the second batch of mail for the west part of town with smooth sidewalks, formerly green lawns that were both deep and wide, houses with plaques on the doors noting the year of their completion in the nineteenth century. Most now abandoned. Lloyd explained how he had sorted the mail by street and then block and then house number. He was in the middle of explaining the zigzag they would cut through the neighborhood when André’s face twisted in alarm.

“What about the mail for people out of town?”

Lloyd’s face fell. “Well,” he said, dropping his pile of envelopes and settling his weight against the railing that followed the wall adjacent to the front counter. “I can’t deliver all the mail I pick up. How would I get mail to a different state?”

“Does somebody come to pick it up?” André asked.

“No.”

“So *where is it*?”

Lloyd bristled at the accusatory edge. “It’s in there,” he said, pointing to the door to the back office. “Waiting.”

“Waiting for what?”

“For civilization! For Them to leave and for whoever is left to get the lights back on.”

“What if They never leave?”

“Son,” Lloyd said quietly, “I think people realize the mail isn’t getting across the country. Not for a long time, anyway.”

André’s eyes brimmed with tears.

“Come on. Don’t cry.”

“Last week, I sent cards to all my old teachers,” André mumbled. “For Teacher Appreciation Day. I guess they’ll never get there.”

“If I picked them up, then they’re still in the back, sorted by state and county. Bundled up. Safe and sound.” Lloyd tightened the corners of his mouth into what he hoped was a comforting smile. It was everything he had to offer the boy and not nearly enough. “If any of your teachers live in town, maybe I already delivered them.”

André shook his head. “There was only one teacher who lived in town,” he mumbled. “The mean one.”

“But you sent her a card?”

André nodded.

Lloyd stood up straighter and checked his watch. “Come on,” he said too brightly. “We’ve still got our rounds.”

The teacher’s last name, McCollum, was etched in swooping calligraphy on a slate hanging above her front door. There was nothing on the covered porch besides a broken rocking chair lying on its side and a smashed clay pot, its soil long gone. The storm door was locked, but behind its dusty glass hung a wreath dotted with plastic winterberries.

Though he knew what he would find, Lloyd peeked into the rusty mailbox hanging to the left of the door. Weeks of mail. Half a dozen letters, some addressed to Joseph and Miriam McCollum, some to Joseph himself. A crude, hand-drawn advertisement—a far cry from the quarter-page glossies of the past—for the cattle-raising venture someone was trying to start on the outskirts of town. Bless them. A bright pink envelope, constructed from old gift-wrapping paper: an Easter card. And a green card—a real card, thick with a factory-made gold envelope and a Forever stamp—addressed in a ten-year-old’s squashed lettering. No return address.

Lloyd plucked the envelope from the stack and turned to André, who faced the wrong direction on the sidewalk below.

“I’ve got it,” Lloyd said, flapping the card in his direction.

The boy didn’t turn. “She’s gone,” he said, looking down the row of houses.

“Just because your teacher isn’t home *now* doesn’t mean she’ll never be back,” Lloyd said. “Lots of people moved. To get a bigger house. Or to be closer to…”

André picked up a small rock from the street and hurled it toward the front door, missing Lloyd by inches. Before he could react, the boy was racing back the way they came.

Lloyd completed his rounds—later that day than he’d been in weeks—and dropped his full mail sack in the post office. The outgoing letters and cards could wait until tomorrow morning; he would try to start earlier, at 7:30, when the gray light gave way to sunrise. He locked the post office door behind him and pocketed the keys. As he limped home, he tried to rearrange the letters in *McCollum* into a funny word. No matter how hard he worked on it, started with different letters, even said the letters out loud—nothing came to him. As he neared his house, the steps to the second floor seemed even steeper than before. He looked up the street toward André’s house, deciding.

He knocked twice—hard the second time—before the door was opened by a young woman with the same mane and black hole pupils as André. She looked him up and down, scowling, with one hand on her bare midriff. Lloyd bristled. It wasn’t *that* warm yet. She certainly didn’t dress as well as her brother. Behind her, he could hear something bubbling in a pot and wondered if their parents were still around, and if not, how these two managed to cook for themselves. The house smelled of onions and armpits.

“You’re the mailman,” she said.

Lloyd nodded.

“André doesn’t want to see you.”

Lloyd removed the ticking watch from his wrist and held it up to her, dangling it by its clasp like it might hypnotize her. “Just give him this for me.”

She looked from Lloyd to the watch and crossed her arms.

“Please.”

She snatched the watch and studied its continuous second hand. It would need to be wound before nightfall; would she know that?

“If he asks, I guess you could tell him…” Lloyd sighed, running a hand over the back of his neck. “Tell him I’ll head out at 8 o’clock tomorrow, if he’d like to join me.”

“Okay.”

“And that I’m sorry that his teacher is missing.”

She rolled her eyes. “I’m sure he’ll be *so* relieved to hear that.”

Lloyd stepped onto the porch. If he wasn’t mistaken, he heard the wooden creak of someone hiding at the top of the stairs, eavesdropping. “Oh, I almost forgot,” he said, raising his voice, “please tell André that I could use someone to help me figure out how to get mail to the surrounding zip codes. We need a good system. Someone smart to plan it out and strong to help me carry the mail.”

Lloyd limped back up the street toward his apartment building and rubbed his naked left wrist with his right hand. A light breeze tickled the hairs that had been flattened for decades, lifting them like daffodils craning toward spring sunlight. He would arrive home, make dinner, go to sleep, and wake the following day—Lord-willing—without any idea what time it was. He’d have to judge by the light and its shadows, by the rising swell of birdsong. But he couldn’t sleep in, of course: there was work to be done in the morning.