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Lorna Landvik, author of *Oh My Stars: A Novel*



BEWARE of CAT

and Other Encounters of a Letter Carrier

VINCENT WYCKOFF



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*For MacKenzie Wyckoff—
this is what your grandpa did*

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I want to recognize my fellow letter carriers at the Nokomis Post Office, whose integrity and work ethic never take a day off. I'm proud to work beside them. Of course, this book would not be possible without the wonderful folks living on Route 17. It has been a pleasure delivering their mail each day and an honor to know them. These are their stories, and while I've attempted to relate them as accurately as memory allows, it should be noted that every writer is a storyteller first.

I also want to thank my best friend and wife, Sybil, for listening to my mail-delivering escapades throughout the years. She often commented that I needed to write these stories down, but I didn't take her good advice until the day she asked about a particular character from a tale I had related years earlier. I barely remembered the incident, and the fear of losing these stories inspired me to get them down on paper. Thanks, Syb.



ONE EVENING SEVERAL YEARS AGO, Sybil and I invited a few friends over for dinner. Our oldest son, Sam, was finishing up high school, and I had recently noticed his less-than-exuberant response whenever the topic of college arose. In our house, from the time the kids were old enough to understand the words, the discussion had always been about *when* you go to college, not *if*.

Gathered at the dinner table were some interesting conversationalists, so as host I took the opportunity to ask a question that I hoped would spark a discussion about furthering one's education and reaching for goals and dreams.

"If you could have any career imaginable," I asked, "with no concern about how much money you earn, or how much education it requires, what would you choose to do for a living, and why?"

One by one I directed the question around the table. Some of the answers were downright startling, creating lively rounds of laughter and conversation. There was the insurance agent who saw himself as a classical musician, and a nurse who dreamed of being a doctor working with Doctors Without Borders. A corporate communications executive said she would have been a puppeteer. "I've always loved the Muppets," she added.

Sam listened and laughed along with the rest of us. I wasn't sure my little exercise had fulfilled the intended purpose until we reached the end. When the laughter died down, Sam spoke up, directing the question my way. "How about you, Dad? What would you do for a living?" he asked. "Would you still choose to deliver mail?"

Everyone looked at me, and I found that providing an answer was no simple task. I had been too busy working and raising a family to ponder such questions. For years my wife and I had concentrated on helping the kids grow up strong and healthy and motivated, and I hadn't thought about my own dreams for a while.

"You know, Sam, I've always wanted to be an author. If I had the opportunity, and a chance to take some classes, I think I'd sit down and write a book."

"Well then, why don't you do it? You're always telling me that I can be whatever I want. If your dream is to be an author, to write a book, then you should do it."

So here it is, Sam, with a nod of gratitude.

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The Red Piñata

After delivering mail on the same route for over fifteen years, I've become something of a fixture in the lives of more than five hundred residents in a quiet neighborhood in South Minneapolis. I know all their first and last names, including the children's, and I can recite every name in every house as I drive through the route.

I learn much more than just names, however, while delivering the mail. Stacks of handwritten cards show that someone is celebrating a birthday or anniversary. Certified letters from the IRS clearly signal an investigation. Newspapers from other towns reveal a patron's origins. I know who receives X-rated magazines, and for a time I delivered love letters to a woman from an inmate in federal prison. The explicit artwork penciled on the envelopes was the clue.

Change-of-address forms show where someone is moving to, or where a new family is coming from. I'm aware of divorces and separations, when a child is born or somebody passes away. I've even attended some of their memorial services. Of

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course, I know every single dog on my route, the good ones as well as the bad.

Years ago, when still a substitute carrier, I noticed a warning sign on an open porch: Beware of Cat! I grinned at the snarling animal etched on the sign as I put mail in the box. Not until I turned to leave did I notice the huge feline watching me from a shadowed corner of the porch. With its back arched, the cat spat at me, showing off gleaming canines. I lunged for the steps, but he caught me halfway down. He clawed his way up my legs and latched onto my mail satchel as I ran for the next house. He finally let go, but then strutted along the perimeter of the yard to ensure I had no plans to return. After all these years, I'm sure that cat is long gone, but I'll never forget that house.

While it's possible to learn many details of people's lives from the mail they receive, most of what I've discovered has come from talking to people. It can't be helped. Walk through someone's life once a day, year after year after year, and you're bound to learn a few things.

My relationships with several patrons are almost like those within an extended family, and I know other carriers enjoy similar connections. As coworkers we share many of our experiences from the route; however, out of respect to the patrons, we keep some stories, as well as people's names, to ourselves.

One of the more important lessons I've learned, and the most incredible to me, is how many everyday heroes are walking around out there: unassuming folks who have accomplished amazing feats with little fanfare or acclaim. Take all the war veterans, for instance. On my route lives a man who landed on

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Iwo Jima. His old unit holds a reunion every year, and he tells me how the few remaining survivors still shed tears when the reminiscing begins. I've talked to Korean War vets and listened to stories from veterans of both gulf wars.

One fellow on my route fought in Vietnam. He is a quiet, modest man with a tidy little house and a loving family. It was years before he finally talked to me about being drafted and becoming a machine gunner in the infantry. He told me how, over just a few months' time, his whole unit was killed off and replaced by new recruits, many of whom didn't make it home themselves. He was shot in the neck and barely survived. Now the vertebrae in his upper back are fusing together, twisting his head and neck painfully. The Veterans Administration won't help him because he can't prove his wounds caused the problem. The truly amazing aspect of the story is his lack of bitterness. Unable to drive anymore, he goes to work every day on the bus and always greets me with a smile and a wave when I see him.

Not all of my patrons' stories evoke compassion, however. Another fellow lost his wife to cancer at a very young age. For the last few months of her life, a nurse spent several hours every day with her to make her as comfortable as possible. One day, I accidentally spotted the husband and nurse in a compromising position on the couch. I wasn't surprised when they became engaged just two months after the wife died.

Above all, I particularly admire those people who quietly go about living their lives, raising families (a heroic effort in itself) while trying to do the right thing by others, especially

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those folks who struggle with emotional, mental, or physical disabilities. They go to work every day at menial jobs, pay their bills, and find peace and enjoyment in the little victories and rewards of life.

With so much time on the same assignment, I've seen children go off for their first day of kindergarten—and years later I've attended their high school graduation parties. In South Minneapolis, these summertime celebrations are often centered on a backyard barbeque. Colorful helium-filled balloons are a common decorating motif: blue and orange for Washburn High, burgundy and gold for Roosevelt, and black and orange for South.



A FEW YEARS AGO I witnessed the preparations for a slightly different graduation party. The Anayas, a family of recent immigrants from Central America, lived together in a tiny one-bedroom house: a young boy and girl, their parents, and their grandmother. The boy, and occasionally the grandmother, met me at the door to get the mail. They never said anything, just nodded and smiled. I figured it was a language thing, because sometimes I offered a “gracias,” or “buenos dias,” and they giggled while responding with a phrase totally incomprehensible to me.

One day the front door was wide open. I couldn't help but see inside. A mix-and-match array of kitchen chairs, stools, straight-backed wooden seats, and folding chairs neatly lined the walls of the small front room. Dozens of pages of crayon

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artwork, finger paintings, and elementary worksheets of ABCs were taped to the walls. A bright red piñata, shaped like a bunny, hung from the light fixture. Salsa music played softly in the background. Then the little boy came running through the house to meet me.

“Are you having a party?” I asked.

The grin on his face threatened to consume him. His big brown eyes shimmered and sparkled. “Later,” he replied, bouncing up and down as he reached for the mail. I think that was the first word of English I ever heard from him.

“Is it a birthday party?” I asked, thinking his excitement was due to the presents he would soon be opening.

But he shook his head. “My sister,” he said.

“It's your sister's birthday?”

Again he shook his head. I thought the kid would burst. “My sister, she is done from kindergarten!” he exclaimed.

I smiled and turned to leave. It seemed they were making a mighty big deal out of passing kindergarten, but maybe it was a big deal for the little girl. After all, she was the one who had gone off to school all alone in a strange new country. She hadn't even spoken the language all that well.

As I reached the foot of their stairs, I realized her little brother, who could not possibly understand her accomplishment, was showing the joy and pride he sensed in his parents and grandmother. His sister was launched into this new world, and he would soon follow. I glanced back to see him standing in the doorway, the bright red piñata swaying in the breeze behind him.



A Splendid Day

There is no question that delivering mail in the deep freeze of a Minnesota January is difficult. The thing to remember about an Upper Midwest winter, however, is that it's a familiar, known entity, and while it may be relentless, it is at least honest and straightforward. Letter carriers will forget a snowstorm with a foot of snow within a couple of weeks. We brag about delivering mail in twenty-five-degrees-below-zero temperatures; wind chills must reach sixty below to be remembered until the end of the season. These hardships are expected in the winter, and we slug it out with felt liners and Vibram soles on the ice, while piling on layers of wool and cotton flannel against the cold.

It's the *length* of our winters that make them so demoralizing. Well into April my fellow letter carriers maintain hunched-over shuffles, with fur hats and woolen scarves always near at hand. By then, the snow cover is receding grudgingly, like a bully grown tired of the game. But we know not to let our guard down, for there's a deceptively brutal day each spring

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that sneaks down out of the far North Country to smack us with a wintry sucker punch.

The day begins in a harmless fashion, with nothing more than a light drizzle. Maybe a little rain from time to time, but mostly just a cold mist hanging in the air, a continuous cloak of dampness to walk through. Temperatures hover around the freezing point all day. At the end of a block, and sometimes between houses, an icy wind off the Canadian snowpack pokes and prods at the layers of clothing. After several hours of this, tendrils of Arctic air finger their way through coats and sweaters, meeting up with the freezing rain that inevitably finds its way beneath collars and gloves. It doesn't matter how many layers we wear, or what the fabric. Eventually, the cold wins out.

Carriers plod back to the station at the end of their routes, pulling off wet clothing, clapping hands together to thaw frozen fingers. There's no need to commiserate, no use seeking sympathy, for every carrier has just endured the same miserable day. Slumped on your stool, exhausted, you look around to take stock of your comrades.

"Where's Joe?"

"Not back yet."

If the missing carrier is older, or has recently been sick or injured, you may get some volunteers to go back out with you to help. A supervisor might ask a younger carrier with less seniority. These are the days we truly dread, and it seems that Old Man Winter relishes this one last laugh at our expense every spring.

But now we had put even April behind us for another year.

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It was the first truly mild day of summer, with the sun resting warm on my face. My stride opened up, and my neck and shoulder kinks began to loosen. A soft breeze out of the south carried the first taste of humidity, the first aromas of a reawakening Earth. Even the mail volume was lighter on this delightful day.

Near the end of my route, I spotted Mr. Harris standing on the city sidewalk looking up at the bare treetops. I was earlier than usual, so I sauntered over to talk. Mr. Harris had been retired for more years than I had been on the route, and I encountered him regularly working in his yard. He wasn't the greatest talker, however, and we never got beyond the usual greetings and brief discussions of the weather. Sometimes, like today, I saw him slowly walking around the block. He was very old and stopped often to rest.

"Hello, Mr. Harris," I called as I approached. He gave me just the briefest glance, then returned to his inspection of the treetops. Nothing could spoil my mood, though, so I put on a big smile and asked, "How are you? Isn't this a lovely day?"

"My bird escaped," he replied. I wasn't sure I had heard him correctly, but then he added, "He must have opened the cage door by himself. He's a real smart one, you know."

I followed his gaze up into the treetops. "He escaped? What kind of bird is it?"

"A parakeet. He's bright green and yellow. No bigger than your fist, but real smart. Smarter than most people I know," he added, finally looking at me.

Ignoring his sarcasm, I asked, "He can fly? I thought they clip their wings or something."

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“Don’t you believe it! That’s what they tell you, but those little devils can fly. Not very far, mind you, but you can bet they’ll take off if they get out of the cage. And fast? Turn your back for a second, and they’re gone.”

I looked down the street, scanning trees and bushes, wondering what we’d do even if we got lucky and spotted him. Suddenly, the old man let go with a piercing whistle. I jumped back, almost dropping a handful of mail, and the hair on the back of my neck stood up. The tremolo echoed through the neighborhood.

“That’s what he sounds like,” he said, peering through the leafless trees like a squirrel hunter searching for dinner.

“Green and yellow, you say?”

“Yup. He’s small, but real smart. If you see him, just whistle like I showed you. He might come land on your shoulder. But remember, that little guy is mighty clever.”

“Sure. I’ll keep an eye out.” Setting off again on my rounds, I called back to him, “Good luck, Mr. Harris.”

I was glad to get away, but I felt bad for the old guy. He wasn’t the type to admit it, but it was obvious that bird meant a lot to him. The least I could do was keep alert, maybe catch a fleeting glimpse of green and yellow, and come back to tell him about it. If the bird hadn’t been missing long, he couldn’t have gotten very far.

This wasn’t the first time I had searched for a lost bird. A few years earlier a resident on my route had lost a cockatiel. She put a big sign in her front yard and tacked flyers to telephone poles offering a reward to anyone who spotted it. About

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two weeks later, on a rainy, gloomy day, I saw the bird on the ground between two houses. The poor thing looked exhausted and bedraggled. It wouldn’t last long with all the cats roaming the neighborhood.

I drove back to the house to tell her where I had seen the bird. She came running, barely believing the cockatiel could still be outside and alive. It was, and after a few days of loving attention, it made a full recovery. The signs came down a day later, and I never heard a word about the reward, but at least the bird had survived its little adventure.

I looked back at Mr. Harris. In his prime he had been a big fellow, but the years had withered him down to a mere shadow of his youth. He shuffled along slowly with his hands in his pockets, eyes aloft.

At the corner I crossed the street to work back up the other side. With the old man’s pace, I would get to his house at the far end of the block long before he did. He startled me with another loud whistle as I drew up directly across the street from him. When I looked over, I realized he was too caught up in the search to be aware of my presence.

I continued looking for the bird. I had the idea that the little creature probably couldn’t fly up into the tallest trees, so I narrowed my search to hedges and bushes. It would be nice to help the old man if I could; besides, I was early and in no hurry.

I’ve always liked older people. Perhaps it’s because I’m interested in history, so I enjoy listening to their stories. And I always remember something my father told me years ago. We were driving in his car when an old man suddenly turned in