Opening Extract from...

The Peculiar Life of a Lonely Postman

Written by Denis Thériault

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The Peculiar Life of a Lonely Postman

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Translated by Liedewy Hawke

To Louise and Guy

I

Swirling like water
against rugged rocks,
time goes around and around

Beech Street, rue des Hêtres, was for the most part lined with maples. Glancing down the road, one saw a double row of four- or five-storey apartment buildings, with outside staircases providing access to the upper floors. The street had 115 of those staircases, which added up to 1,495 steps. Bilodo knew this because he had counted and re-counted them, since he climbed every one of those stairs every single morning. These 1,495 steps, each with an average height of 20 centimetres, made for a total of 299 metres. More than one and a half times the height of Place Ville-Marie. He in fact hoofed it up the equivalent of the Eiffel Tower day after day, rain or shine, not to mention the fact that he had to go back down, too. Bilodo did not view this vertical marathon as an achievement. It was a daily challenge rather; without it, his life would have seemed quite flat to him. Considering himself a kind of athlete, he felt a particular kinship with long-distance hikers, those bold trekking specialists, and felt the odd twinge of regret that, among all the admirable forms of endurance sports, there wasn't a category for stair climbers. He would almost certainly have put up a good show in the 1,500 steps or 250-metre ascent–descent. If at the Olympic Games there had been a stair-scaling event, Bilodo would have stood an excellent chance of qualifying, perhaps even of mounting the ultimate, glorious top step of the podium.

In the meantime, he was a postman.

He was twenty-seven years old.

* * *

Bilodo had been tracing the same postal route in Saint-Janvier-des-Âmes for five years now. He had actually moved into the heart of this working-class district so as to be closer to his job. During all those years of loyal service, he had missed only one day of work to attend the funeral of his parents, who had died in a funicular accident in Quebec City. He could be described as a steady employee.

In the morning, at the Depot, he began by sorting his post for the day. He had to arrange all the envelopes and parcels into the order they were to be delivered and tie them into bundles, which a postal employee in a van would transport to secure boxes along the route. Bilodo managed to carry out this tedious task with exceptional speed. He had his own sorting method, which was inspired by both the card-dealing technique of croupiers and the expertise of knife-throwers: like blades flung with lethal accuracy, the envelopes would leave his hand, fly towards the target, and slip into the appropriate pigeonhole. He rarely missed. This remarkable skill allowed him to finish well before the others – a good thing, too, because he could then escape. Bilodo couldn't think of anything more exciting than taking off, decamping, drinking in the fresh air and savouring the fragrance of a new day while walking about in the morning hours without anyone telling him what to do.

It wasn't all roses, of course. There were those blasted advertising flyers to be delivered; the backaches, the sprains and other run-of-the-mill injuries; there were the crushing summer heatwaves, the autumn rains that left you soaked to the skin, the black ice in winter, which turned the city into a perilous ice palace, and the cold that could be biting, just like the dogs for that matter – a postman's natural enemies. But the moral satisfaction of knowing oneself to be indispensable to the community made up for these drawbacks. Bilodo felt he took part in the life of the neighbourhood, that he had a discreet but essential role in it. For him, delivering post was a mission he accomplished

conscientiously, knowing he contributed in this way to the maintenance of order in the universe. He wouldn't have wanted to swap places with anyone in the world. Except perhaps with another postman.

* * *

Bilodo usually had lunch at the Madelinot, a restaurant located not far from the Depot, and, after his dessert, he'd spend a bit of time doing calligraphy, that art of fine penmanship, which he practised as an amateur. Getting out his exercise book and nibs, he would settle himself at the counter and transcribe a few words from a newspaper or an item from the menu. He'd grow absorbed in the choreographic movements of the nib on the paper, waltz among the downstrokes and upstrokes of Italian hand, perform volts with opulent uncial or cross swords with Gothic script, fancying himself as one of those worthy medieval copyist monks who lived on ink alone, ruining their eyes, their fingers freezing but their soul aglow.

Bilodo's colleagues at the Depot were baffled. As they flocked noisily into the Madelinot at lunchtime, they jeered at his calligraphic efforts, calling them scribbles. Bilodo didn't take offence, because they were his friends, and all they were really guilty of was ignorance. Unless one was an informed and devoted enthusiast like himself, how could one possibly savour the subtle beauty of a pen stroke, the delicately balanced proportions of a well-executed line? The only person who seemed capable of appreciating these things was Tania, the waitress. She was always pleasant and appeared genuinely interested in what he was doing and told him she thought it was beautiful. A sensitive young woman, to be sure. Bilodo liked her very much. He always left her a large tip. If he'd been a little more observant, he would have noticed she often watched him from her spot near the till and at dessert time always served him

the biggest piece of pie. But he didn't notice. Or did he choose not to?

Bilodo no longer looked at other women since Ségolène had come into his life.

* * *

Bilodo lived on the tenth floor of a high-rise in a one-bedroom apartment decorated with film posters, which he shared with his goldfish, Bill. In the evening he played Halo or Call of Duty, and then ate his dinner, a ready meal, while watching TV. He hardly ever went out. Only the odd Friday, when Robert became too insistent. Robert, a fellow postal worker, was assigned to the clearing of postboxes, and was also his best friend. Robert went out often, almost every night, but Bilodo rarely agreed to come along because he didn't really care for those smoky nightspots, those earsplitting raves, and those clubs with nude dancers his friend dragged him off to. He preferred to stay at home, far from the hustle and bustle of the world and from female posteriors – more so than ever since Ségolène had entered his life.

Anyhow, he had better things to do with his evenings. Bilodo was extremely busy in his apartment at night. After the TV and the dishes, he bolted the door and indulged in his secret vice.

2

Bilodo was an unusual postman.

Among the thousands of soulless pieces of paper he delivered on his rounds, he occasionally came across a personal letter – a less and less common item in this era of email, and all the more fascinating for being so rare. When that happened, Bilodo felt as excited as a prospector spotting a gold nugget in his pan. He did not deliver that letter. Not right away. He took it home and steamed it open. That's what kept him so busy at night in the privacy of his apartment.

Bilodo was an inquisitive postman.

He himself never received personal post. He would've liked to but didn't have anyone to whom he was close enough to correspond. He used to send letters to himself, but the experience had been a disappointment. He'd gradually stopped, and didn't really miss it; he didn't miss himself. More alluring by far were letters from others. Real letters, written by real people who preferred the sensual act of writing by hand, the delightfully languorous anticipation of the reply, to the reptilian coldness of the keyboard and instantaneity of the Internet – people for whom the act of writing was a deliberate choice and in some cases, one sensed, a matter of principle, a stand taken in favour of a lifestyle not quite so determined by the race against time and the obligation to perform.

There were those comical letters Doris T. wrote from Maria in the Gaspé Peninsula to her sister Gwendoline to fill her in on the local gossip, and those heart-rending ones Richard L., detained in the Port Cartier prison, sent to his young son, Hugo. There were those long mystical epistles Sister Régine of the Congrégation du Saint-Rosaire in Rimouski dispatched to her old friend Germaine, and those erotic little tales Laetitia D., a young nurse temporarily exiled in the Yukon, composed for her lonely fiancé, and also those strange missives in which

a mysterious O. gave advice to a certain N. on how to safely invoke various supernatural beings. There was anything and everything, coming from here, there, and everywhere: letters from close relatives and faraway correspondents, letters from beer tasters comparing notes, from globetrotters writing to their mothers, from retired steam locomotive firemen listing their bumps and bruises. There were those overly reassuring letters servicemen dispatched from Afghanistan to their anxious wives, and those worried words uncles wrote to their nieces concerning secrets that shouldn't be revealed for anything in the world, and those Dear John or Dear Mary letters in which circus acrobats in Las Vegas broke up with their former lovers, and there were even hate letters crammed with insults spilling out onto the envelope.

But above all there were love letters. Because even after Valentine's Day, love remained the most common denominator, the subject linking the greatest number of pens. Love in every grammatical form and every possible tone, dished up in every imaginable shape: passionate letters or courteous ones, sometimes suggestive and sometimes chaste, either calm or dramatic, occasionally violent, often lyrical, and especially moving when the feelings were expressed in simple terms, and never quite so touching as when the emotions hid between the lines, burning away almost invisibly behind a screen of innocuous words.

Once he'd read and reread the letter of the day, had savoured it down to the very marrow, Bilodo made a photocopy of it for his records. He put this in a folder, the colour of which corresponded to the subject, which he placed in a fireproof filing cabinet. He would slip the original letter back into its envelope, deftly seal it, and drop it into the addressee's letterbox the next day as if nothing had happened. He had been practising this clandestine activity for two years now. It was a crime, he was well aware of that, but guilt paled into insignificance beside supreme curiosity. No one was hurt by it, after all, and he

himself didn't risk much as long as he continued to be careful. Who was going to worry that the delivery of a letter was twenty-four hours late? And, for a start, who could know it was late?

* * *

Bilodo intercepted letters from about thirty correspondents in this way. All together they formed a kind of soap opera with multiple plots. Or rather half of a soap opera, whose other half, the one of the 'outgoing post', was unfortunately unavailable to him. But he liked to make up that other part, to draft elaborate replies he never posted, and when another letter arrived he was often amazed to see how naturally it fitted in with his own secret reply.

That's how it was. Bilodo lived vicariously. To the dullness of real life he preferred his infinitely more colourful, more thrilling, interior serial drama. And of all the clandestine letters that constituted this fascinating little virtual world, none mobilized or enchanted him more than the ones from Ségolène.

3

Ségolène lived at Pointe-à-Pitre in Guadeloupe and wrote regularly to a certain Gaston Grandpré, who rented an apartment on rue des Hêtres. Bilodo had been intercepting her letters for two years now, and whenever he spotted one while sorting his post, he always experienced the same shock, the same shiver of awe. He would quietly slip that letter inside his jacket and only allow himself to show any emotion once he was alone on the road, turning the envelope over and over, fingering the exciting promise. He could have opened it right away and revelled in the words it concealed, but he'd rather wait. All he granted himself was the fleeting pleasure of inhaling the fragrance of oranges wafting up from the letter before bravely putting it back in his pocket, and he kept it there all day, against his heart, resisting temptation, drawing out the pleasure until evening, until after the washing up was done. Then the time had come. He would burn a few drops of citrus oil, light a few candles, put on a disc of dreamy Norwegian jazz, and then, at last, he unsealed the envelope, gently reached into its inner fold, and read:

Under clear water
the newborn baby
swims like a playful otter

Bilodo could see it. He vividly saw that stark-naked baby in the aqueous luminescence of the postnatal swimming pool while it swam towards him as if he were its mother, as if it were swimming towards the outstretched arms of a mermaid who would be its mother and who was watching him with deep blue flabbergasted-salamander eyes. It didn't know it couldn't swim, hadn't forgotten how to yet. It had no idea water was dangerous, a foreign element, that it could drown in it. The baby was

ignorant of all this, it just moved about, followed its instinct, kept its mouth closed, and simply swam. Bilodo saw that young pinniped clearly – that funny underwater gnome with the crinkly features of infants and nostrils ringed with bubbles, as it glided through the voluptuous water, and Bilodo laughed because it was unexpected, because it was amusing, touching. And *he* thought he was floating too. He could hear the water buzzing against his eardrums. He felt as though he was in that swimming pool together with that baby. For such was the suggestive power of all those strange little poems Ségolène wrote: they made you feel things, made you see them.

The letters from the Guadeloupean woman contained nothing else. Always a single sheet of paper on which was written a single poem. It wasn't much, yet it was generous, since those poems nourished you as much as a whole novel – they were long in your soul, where they echoed forever. Bilodo learned them by heart and recited them to himself on his morning round. He treasured them up in the top drawer of his bedside table and liked spreading them around him at night, constructing a kind of mystical circle, and rereading them one after the other…

Slowly flowing sky
breakup of the clouds
icebergs that have lost their way

Leaving its harp shell,
the spider crab, bungee queen,
takes the final plunge

A hammering in the streets
shutters are nailed down
the cyclone draws near

Nighttime out at sea
the shark yawns indolently,
munches a moonfish

Dancing, swaying bowls
as the tablecloth
billows in the summer breeze

Ségolène's poems, as different as they were from each other, were all alike in their form, since they always consisted of three lines: two of five syllables and one of seven, adding up to seventeen syllables, no more, no less. Always that same mysterious structure, as though governed by a code. Because Bilodo sensed that this consistency had to have a specific purpose, he'd puzzled over it until the day when, after months of foggy surmising, he happened to discover what it was all about. It was on a Saturday morning. He was having breakfast at the Madelinot while reading the entertainment supplement of a newspaper. Suddenly the sight, at the top of a page, of three written lines that seemed to form a short poem made him choke on his coffee. The poem had two lines of five syllables and one of seven. The verse was disappointing in other respects; it simply gave an ironic commentary on current affairs. It was nothing like the living fragments of eternity created by Ségolène. But the column's title was revealing: 'THE SATURDAY HAIKU'. Bilodo rushed home, combed the dictionary and found the word:

> **Haiku**/'haiku:/ *n.* (*pl.* same) **1** a type of very short Japanese poem, having three parts, usu. 17 syllables, and often about a subject in nature. **2** an imitation of this in another language. [Japanese]

So that was it. That's what the Guadeloupean woman's poems were. Since then, Bilodo had been able to consult numerous

books containing haiku at the library – books translated from the Japanese, grouping together well-known authors such as Matsuo Bashō, Taneda Santōka, Nagata Kōi and Kobayashi Issa, but none of the poems by these men produced the effect of Ségolène's, none of them carried him off to as faraway a place or made him see things as clearly or feel them as acutely.

No doubt Ségolène's penmanship contributed greatly to this exceptional magic, for she expressed herself in a more delicate, more graceful Italian hand than Bilodo had ever had the good fortune to admire. It was a rich, imaginative handwriting, with deep downstrokes and celestial upstrokes embellished with opulent loops and precise drops – a clean, flowing script, admirably well-proportioned with its perfect thirty-degree slant and flawless interletter spacing. Ségolène's writing was a sweet scent for the eye, an elixir, an ode. It was a graphic symphony, an apotheosis. It was so beautiful it made you weep. Having read somewhere that handwriting was a reflection of a person's soul, Bilodo readily concluded that Ségolène's soul must be incomparably pure. If angels wrote, surely it was like this.