

**P O S T   O F F I C E**

It began as a mistake.

It was Christmas season and I learned from the drunk up the hill, who did the trick every Christmas, that they would hire damned near anybody, and so I went and the next thing I knew I had this leather sack on my back and was hiking around at my leisure. What a job, I thought. Soft! They only gave you a block or two and if you managed to finish, the regular carrier would give you another block to carry, or maybe you'd go back in and the soup would give you another, but you just took your time and shoved those Xmas cards in the slots.

I think it was my second day as a Christmas temp that this big woman came out and walked around with me as I delivered letters. What I mean by big was that

she was big in all the right places. She seemed a bit crazy but I kept looking at her body and I didn't care.

She talked and talked and talked. Then it came out. Her husband was an officer on an island far away and she got lonely, you know, and lived in this little house in back all by herself.

"What little house?" I asked.

She wrote the address on a piece of paper.

"I'm lonely too," I said, "I'll come by and we'll talk tonight."

I was shacked but the shackjob was gone half the time,

off somewhere, and I was lonely all right.

"All right," she said, "see you tonight."

She was a good one all right, \_\_\_\_\_ but \_\_\_\_\_ after the third or fourth night I began to lose interest and didn't go back.

But I couldn't help thinking, god, all these mailmen do is drop in their letters and get \_\_\_\_\_. This is the job for me, oh yes yes yes.

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So I took the exam, passed it, took the physical, passed it, and there I was—a substitute mail carrier. It began easy. I was sent to West Avon Station and it was just like Christmas

But the soup was easy and I strolled around doing a block here and there. I didn't even have a uniform, just a cap. I wore my regular clothes. The way my shackjob Betty and I drank there was hardly money for clothes.

Then I was transferred to Oakford Station.

The soup was a bullneck named Jonstone. Help was needed there and I understood why. Jonstone liked to wear dark-red shirts—that meant danger and blood. There were seven subs—Tom Moto, Nick Pelligrini, Herman Stratford, Rosey Anderson, Bobby Hansen, Harold Wiley and me, Henry Chinaski. Reporting time was 5 a.m. and I was the only drunk there. I always drank until past midnight, and there we'd sit, at 5 a.m., waiting to get on the clock, waiting for some regular to call in sick. The regulars usually called in sick when it rained or during a heatwave or the day after a holiday when the mail load was doubled.

There were 40 or 50 different routes, maybe more, each case was different, you were never able to learn any of them, you had to get your mail up and ready before 8 a.m. for the truck dispatches, and Jonstone would take no excuses. The subs routed their magazines on corners, went without lunch, and died in the streets. Jonstone would have us start casing the routes 30 minutes late—spinning in his chair in his red shirt—“Chinaski take route 539!” We’d start a half hour short but were still expected to get the mail up and out and be back on time. And once or twice a week, already beaten, \_\_\_\_\_ we had to make the night pickups, and the schedule on the board was impossible—the truck wouldn’t go that fast. You had to skip four or five boxes on the first run and the next time around they were stacked with mail and you stank, you ran with sweat jamming it into the sacks.

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The subs themselves made Jonstone possible by obeying his impossible orders. I couldn’t see how a man of such obvious cruelty could be allowed to have his position. The regulars didn’t care, the union man was worthless, so I filled out a thirty page report on one of my days off, mailed one copy to Jonstone and took the other down to the Federal Building. The clerk told me to wait. I waited and waited and waited. I waited an hour and thirty minutes, then was taken in to see a little grey-haired man with eyes like cigarette ash. He didn’t even ask me to sit down. He began screaming at me as I entered the door.

“You’re a wise son of a bitch, aren’t you?”

“I’d rather you didn’t curse me, sir!”

"Wise son of a bitch, you're one of those sons of bitches with a vocabulary and you like to lay it around!"

He waved my papers at me. And screamed: "MR. JONSTONE IS A FINE MAN!"

"Don't be silly. He's an obvious sadist," I said.

"How long have you been in the Post Office?"

"Three weeks."

"MR. JONSTONE HAS BEEN WITH THE POST OFFICE FOR 30 YEARS!"

"What does *that* have to do with it?"

"I said, MR. JONSTONE IS A FINE MAN!"

I believe the poor fellow actually wanted to kill me. He and Jonstone must have slept together.

"All right," I said, "Jonstone is a fine man. Forget the whole \_\_\_\_\_ thing." Then I walked out and took the next day off. Without pay, of course.

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When Jonstone saw me the next 5 a.m. he spun in his swivel and his face and his shirt were the same color. But he said nothing. I didn't care. I had been up to 2 a.m. drinking. I leaned back and closed my eyes.

At 7 a.m. Jonstone swiveled again. All the other subs had been assigned jobs or been sent to other stations that needed help.

"That's all, Chinaski. Nothing for you today."

He watched my face. Hell, I didn't care. All I wanted to do was to go to bed and get some sleep.

"O.K., Stone," I said. Among the carriers he was known as "The Stone," but I was the only one who addressed him that way.

I walked out, the old car started and soon I was back with Betty.

"Oh, Hank! How nice!"

"Damn right, baby!"

• 5 •

But the next morning it was the same thing:

"That's all, Chinaski. Nothing for you today."

It went on for a week. I sat there each morning from 5 a.m. to 7 a.m. and didn't get paid. My name was even taken off the night collection run.

Then Bobby Hansen, one of the older subs—in length of service—told me, "He did that to me once. He tried to starve me."

"I don't care. I'm not kissing his ass. I'll quit or starve, anything."

"You don't have to. Report to Prell Station each night. Tell the soup you aren't getting any work and you can sit in as a special delivery sub."

"I can do that? No rules against it?"

"I got a paycheck every two weeks."

"Thanks, Bobby."

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I forget the beginning time. Six or 7 p.m. Something like that.

All you did was sit with a handful of letters, take a streetmap and figure your run. It was easy. All the drivers took much more time than was needed to figure their runs and I played right along with them. I left when everybody left and came back when everybody came back.

Then you made another run. There was time to sit around in coffee shops, read newspapers, feel decent. You even had time for lunch. Whenever I wanted a day off, I took one. On one of the routes there was this big young gal who got a special every night. She was a manufacturer of sexy dresses and nightgowns and *wore* them. You'd run up her steep stairway about 11 p.m., ring the bell and give her the special. She'd let out a bit of a gasp, like, "OOOOOOOOOOOOOhhhhhhhHHH!" and she'd stand close, very, and she wouldn't let you leave while she read it, and then she'd say, "OOOOOoooh, goodnight, thank YOU!"

But it was not to last. It came in the mail after about a week and a half of freedom.

"Dear Mr. Chinaski:

You are to report to Oakford Station immediately. Refusal to do so will result in possible disciplinary action or dismissal.

A. E. Jonstone, Supt., Oakford Station."

I was back on the cross again.