

## POSTMEN AND PISTON RODS

The mailman stood outside her door sorting mail.

“Mike,” she said. “I wanted you to be the first to know; I’m getting a divorce.”

“*I* know you’re getting a divorce, Sarah. I’m the *mailman*. I know everything.”

Last month, for reasons that don’t make a great deal of sense to me, they changed nearly all the postmen’s routes in Metuchen. And so, after fifteen years, Mike is no longer my mailman. This should be a small, insignificant ripple in the current of things, but it doesn’t feel that way. A mail route isn’t an algorithm or a computer-assisted map. It’s a network of expectations, seasons, remembrances.

Mike looks like Kevin Costner—the same angular face; the same movie-star smile. He wears one of those old-fashioned pith helmets when the weather gets hot. And, as in the story of the divorced woman (which he told me), he *does* know everything. He’s the telephone wire connecting an entire neighborhood. He sees the certified letters, the arrival of birthday cards, the notes of condolence, the third requests for payment, the college acceptance envelopes (thick), the rejection envelopes (thin.) He knows when I stayed home sick from work. (“Robert, how ya feelin’?”) He knows the name of my dog. (“*Nellie!* How’s the little baby?”) He knows the exact day when I stop the mail for vacation. (“How was Maine? Is it as beautiful up there as they say?”)

And I know about him. I know about the fishing trips he takes with his father. (“We didn’t catch nothing, but we had a great day with Captain Bob!”) I know about his prostate, his colonoscopy, his kidney stone. (“I

never felt anything so freakin' painful in my life.") I know his car troubles, his drainage troubles. ("We dug a five-foot trench under the basement window. But it kept filling up with water, so we had to run a goddamn pump!")

He is a part of every person's life on Woodbridge Avenue—and we felt we were a part of his.

Mike seems part of an old local network that has diminished since I was young. Now it's possible to live next door to people whose names I will never know.

There's a line in Paddy Chayefsky's film *Network*, spoken by Howard Beale, the mad prophet of the airwaves. Beale tells his audience, "This is a nation of two hundred-odd million transistorized, deodorized, whiter-than-white, steel-belted bodies, totally unnecessary as human beings and as replaceable as piston rods."

I think about people as replaceable as piston rods, and some deep part of me rebels. To me Mike the mailman is not replaceable. And that is his value.

I walk in the mornings and I pass an older woman almost everyday. I don't even know her name, but we speak a few words every morning. Yesterday, as she was heading towards town, she said, "If it's Tuesday, it must be bingo." She was heading for the bingo game at the senior center. I know she graduated from Woodbridge High sixty-five years ago. I also know she and her four girlfriends were the first women admitted to her high school band.

She is not replaceable either.

I walk into the Jewelry Doctor downtown. The first words the proprietor says to me are, "So that watch isn't really running right, is it?"

“How did you know?”

“Because you didn’t just walk straight towards the counter to talk to me. You turned to look at the cases as you came up here. You’re thinking of buying a watch.”

He, too, is not replaceable.

As I write these words, the Steely Dan album *Everything Must Go* is playing in the living room. The co-founder of the band, Walter Becker, died last month at age sixty-seven. “We’re going out of business; everything must go,” sings Donald Fagen. I’ll miss Walter Becker and the deep delight his songs gave me. I’ll miss his sardonic humor: Who else would write a song about a private detective hired to kill the Almighty (“Godwhackers on the case!”) I’ll miss his musical sophistication and his absolute refusal to deal in clichés....

Please, wait a minute, Mr. Postman.