

THE PROMISE OF POST OFFICE BOXES

The last time I used a post office box was in the mid-1970s when I attended Rutgers in New Brunswick, in the first class that admitted females. I only lived on campus for freshman year: I was too restless to enjoy it, spending far too much of my time wandering pointlessly around the campus. The guys in my dorm were forever suggesting we “check the rip-ohs”—Rutgers post office boxes—to see what might have been delivered since the last time we checked. (Ten minutes earlier.) It’s hard to convey how central mailboxes were then, before emails and cellphones—how they practically glowed with possibility. Everything exciting or unexpected still appeared there—a birthday card from an old friend, the response to a short story I’d mailed to a magazine.

I was the four-year renter of RPO 5030. The combination lock of that tiny post office box was broken, and so it remained perpetually unlocked. It may still be unlocked today. My friends and I checked the boxes at least seven times a day. Usually there were magazine subscription cards for *Playboy*; invitations for credit cards and the Columbia record club; dot-matrix computer printouts of schedule cards—and maybe, once a week, a genuine letter. My former high-school girlfriend Vicki (who was attending Oregon State University in Corvallis) sent me real letters written in her large, confident, sharply angular handwriting. Sometimes her letters were scented. She’d affix one 11-cent airmail stamp to the envelope (white silhouette of a jet airliner against a red background) and write, assertively, beneath it: *par avion*.

The romantic sweep of her letters began diminishing from almost the first week I arrived on campus—and, as months passed, her tone grew increasingly querulous, impatient, accusative, angry, hopeless. This was the sound of a relationship collapsing over 3,000 miles.

By Christmas she was dating someone else...and by then I was finding charming notes in RPO 5030 from Marian, a young woman I met through the *Targum*, the Rutgers daily newspaper. Marian was a gentle, funny, and observant writer. She taught me about the Salinger short stories, Francois Truffaut, Paul Simon, Gordon Lightfoot. I dragged her to screenings of *The Third Man*; I introduced her (I think) to Nabokov. Her handwriting was small and delicate—she often wrote in pencil—and a note from her lying diagonally in that tiny box was a source of surprise and delight.

When I think back to those times, I can remember that, at age 18/19 we both articulated our ambitions to become professional writers—and, astoundingly, we both actually pulled it off. We each ended up legitimately published. In hardback and well-received! It

seems an impossible accomplishment in today's digital, disposable world—and, even back then, it seemed so remarkable that it defied belief.

All of this returns me to my new post office box—which I occupy once again, like an old suitor—but now in the name of *The Metuchen Times*. And, here, after all these years—I turn the key to box 4465—and there, inside, to my delight and disbelief, lay five letters. *The Metuchen Times* is a print-only newspaper, and the solicitation in the first issue indicated that the only way to subscribe was to mail a check (no credit cards, no PayPal, no electronic currency.) The result has been not only a collection of checks but a collection of colorful envelopes (red, lemon, flowered) all handwritten, stamped with old Christmas stamps, and often containing personal notes:

Hi, Robert—Looking forward to it!

*So happy to have a local paper back!
Good luck!*

Robert, Congratulations to you & Lynn on Vol.1 – No. 1! What a tremendous accomplishment. Hats off & wish you a long run.

We are certain that Terry is “beaming with pride” over this.

I see COVID drove you mad enough to start a newspaper!

Bob and Lynn: You did it!

The notes are even better than the checks. I cash the checks and keep the notes. They're sitting in a pile on the kitchen table right now, next to a small figurine of a laughing Buddha, and a Secured by ADT alarm decal that I plan to stick on the side of one of the birdhouses in the back yard. I figure it'll scare off the squirrels who can read.