

Peter, Peter: A Mailman's Story

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Table of Contents:

Fingers to the Keyboard: Reflection Paper.....	3
<i>The Beginning</i>	4
<i>Early Problems</i>	5
<i>Technical Aspects of Writing</i>	8
<i>Masculinity</i>	11
<i>Wrapping Up</i>	13
Peter, Peter: A Mailman’s Story.....	15
<i>Ch. 1 – Neither Snow</i>	16
<i>Ch. 2 – Nor Rain</i>	20
<i>Ch. 3 – Nor Heat</i>	34
<i>Ch. 4 – Nor Gloom of Night</i>	41
<i>Ch. 5 – Stays these Couriers</i>	54
<i>(Author’s Note)</i>	78
<i>Ch. 12 – That Would Not Stay Him</i>	79
<i>(Ending Note)</i>	98

Fingers to the Keyboard

Reflection Paper on *Peter, Peter*

If a young writer can refrain from writing, he shouldn't hesitate to do so.

—*Andre Gide, French critic and novelist*—

When it comes to writing, discouragement is not difficult to find. From a financial perspective, the market is flooded with 175,000 newly published books every year, according to the Book Industry Study Group. Conversely, even with the increase of published books the total number of readers declined by 44 million from 2003 to 2004. That's as if the states of California *and* Virginia decided to stop reading. Writing books to make money is like going to college to meet women; a lot of people are already trying and there are more efficient ways to accomplish the goal.

What's to be said in defense of writing? The other side of the above statistic is that 175,000 authors publish new books every year. People are still writing, meaning benefits exist beyond "getting published." I entered into this creative thesis a year ago knowing that the process would contain edifying and enriching elements that could not be experienced outside of a project such as this one.

This reflection paper begins with the impetus for this project a year and a half ago. After a few months of writing, the project showed glimmers of promise, but was also woefully deficient in many areas, as discussed in the "Early Problems" section. Many of the early problems dealt more with practical aspects of writing rather than creative storytelling, although these two areas are connected since a writer must be competent at the former to attempt the latter. These topics are addressed in "Technical Aspects of Writing." In the conclusion, I discuss whether or not my initial goals of creating a compelling story along with an ongoing exploration of masculinity were accomplished.

The Beginning

It is because things are difficult that we do not dare; it is because we do not dare that they are difficult.

—Seneca, Roman philosopher and dramatist—

The idea of writing vocationally and as a fulfilling experience began in high school. My journal entries dripped with idealism and clichés such as, “I want to write for the sake of writing, for love, to express, to be fulfilled through words and the clicking of the keyboard. The stroke of an ink pen on a piece of paper where I can write a definition to that which was previously undefined” (July, 2002). Reading this now makes me throw up a little bit in my mouth, but it exemplifies how writing was important and something I wanted to try. Even with these high school dreams, I never actually wrote any creative fiction—until last year.

In August 2005, the first line of a yet to be titled mailman story was typed: “Not knowing what to do next, Peter despondently stared at the man entering the room playing a mental game of connect-the-dots.” (This line along with the entire opening paragraph was eventually cut from the story.) Throughout the month more was added, but once classes began writing stopped. Without the story as an official school project, assignments with due dates always took precedence meaning the story sputtered and stalled. Knowing that personal writing would not be possible with other assignments looming, a creative project for my thesis seemed like a good way to force myself through the process.

Early Problems

Writing a book is a long, exhausting struggle, like a long bout of some painful illness. One would never undertake such a thing if one were not driven by some demon whom one can neither resist nor understand.

—George Orwell, *British novelist*—

The earliest drafts tried to encapsulate everything I thought a good story needed. The first feature was humor. Everyone enjoys laughing, and if a book can do that all the better. This desire partially stemmed from my enjoyment of British writer Douglas Adams, author of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. His books feature crazy characters doing outrageous things, and initially my story followed that pattern. It was a sort of collection of funny scenes held together by a loose and somewhat unimportant plot. In between the funny scenes, I wanted the story to become mysterious and thrilling in the genre of Dan Brown's *Angels and Demons* or a spy novel. In other words, the story tried to become a thrilling comedy mystery all based around a suburban mailman. Trying to write a book in this non-existent genre was problematic.

Comedy does not transfer well to the written page. Funny situations and circumstances can occur, but it's difficult without making them feel forced. Also, the written word is entirely different from hearing jokes or funny stories in a group setting. Humor is often community based, and trying to create something that appeals to a wide-range of people felt impossible. Even Douglas Adams' books, which I enjoy, proved to be "too British" at times. As my story tried to be funny, characters and plot were sacrificed. While entertaining, comedy does not create a compelling story. It's not completely jettisoned from the novel, but some themes shifted drastically.

Another misguided expectation was once the characters and basic storyline were created, the rest of the plot would fall into place. This wasn't a stated or conscious expectation, but looking back I see how this problem influenced my writing. Much of the first semester was spent writing a storyline that "felt right." Most the second semester was spent rewriting what I wrote during the first. The initial storyline was too scattered and lacked purpose. Creating a plot outline and character summaries over the summer helped refocus the novel, and in the second semester the story improved.

Looking at the realm of character development, a problem in the earlier drafts is the characters reacted disproportionately to the situations they faced. Peter was meant to be a quiet, fairly subdued character, yet he erupted at the slightest provocation. In a scene that was later removed, a woman calls Peter's house then hangs up saying she dialed the wrong number. The following lines are Peter's reaction: "Emotions boiled and surged as hot anger flowed through his body. Peter didn't know whether to scream or be relieved." People do not respond like this when someone dials a wrong number. Maybe if someone wrecks their car, but not a wrong number.

The question then is why did I write like this? Was I really just "that bad"? The reason Peter responded this way is I, as the author, knew the phone call was important. The woman on the other line plays an important role later in the novel, so the reader needed to know this interchange was important; however, Peter did not know this. A normal response should be more relaxed. Problems like this showed up time and again in the earlier drafts where I would instill my knowledge of the larger story onto the characters causing scenes that made little sense.

Many of the early character development problems involved Peter. Since his character was not clearly defined, he made decisions based upon what I thought would be best. Strangely enough, Peter didn't control his own decision making. He reacted in ways I would react, and displayed characteristics I see in myself. He could not become an individualized, nuanced character if he simply embodied me. His individual characteristics could not mature since the story followed how I thought somebody like me would develop.

Peter's reactions and responses ranged from nonchalant to furious with no consistency. Once he was distinguished and defined, the storytelling process became simpler. Peter had fewer options, which limited what I could write about him. Even if a scene would be more interesting with a confrontational exchange, Peter's character guided his response and he could not break from that character. An example of this occurred in the fourth chapter following Peter's observance of a dark-haired woman leaving Chuck's house. He considers calling Chuck to ask her who she is, and originally I spent an evening writing a two-page phone conversation. I wanted the readers to know that this woman was important and provide some insight into some of the earlier clues in the novel. After finishing the section, the thought struck me: "Peter wouldn't call Chuck at this point. He wouldn't be bold enough to do it." Two deleted pages later, I was left with, "Peter thought about calling Chuck, but the more he thought about it the less he liked it." Peter's response in this situation is limited to his already established character.

Technical Aspects of Writing

Books aren't written, they're rewritten. Including your own. It is one of the hardest things to accept, especially after the seventh rewrite hasn't quite done it.

—Michael Crichton, contemporary American novelist—

At the beginning of this project, I went through a rigorous phase of deprogramming. The past four years of college papers demanded a certain level of technical expertise and form in order to create academic papers. Papers should have well thought out arguments with an opening thesis and numerous scholarly references. This project required the exact opposite.

Not only did the practice and knowledge gained from past papers seem useless, it proved to be hindrance. Complex sentences with multisyllabic words littered the pages; the world of Iria County read like literary criticism. The following sentence is an example: “Standing out in the thundering majesty of the storm, Peter felt the worries of the world melt away as he allowed himself to be engulfed in the storm’s power.” Too long, too wordy, too technical. Understanding this concept was part of the deprogramming process, but it never stopped being a struggle.

A second point the above complex sentence illustrates is a tension between the narrator’s voice and Peter’s voice. Not until the summer and second semester did I begin how this problem permeated the entire project. The story is told from a limited, third person narrative perspective. This meant the reader only experienced the novel through Peter’s point-of-view. The disconnect occurred in thinking that Peter’s voice only took place when he talked, and the separate narrative voice occurred when explaining his surroundings. With Dr. Jensen’s help (and prodding at times), I began to understand that

the closer the narrative voice is to Peter's, the more compelling and immersive the story would become. The reader would experience the story not only through Peter's perspective, but through his words and language as well. That's why I couldn't say "engulfed in the storm's power" because Peter would never think in this kind of language. He'd probably think, "Man, it's raining, I should go inside." Capturing that language and simpler perspective of thinking was difficult, but overall worthwhile in order to create a more consistent story. An example where this method is used successfully occurs immediately after Peter reads the clue written in his journal:

"'What the...' he stopped short of swearing, but a few choice words danced around his mind. This was ridiculous. Absolutely ridiculous. Nothing in this made any sense either. It wasn't even understandable! Something about a queen and a knight and a *nekke-boon*, whatever that is."

By omitting phrases such as "He thought" or "He didn't even think it was understandable," the narrative places the reader directly into his thoughts, into his mind. From a narrative perspective, this is exactly what I want to happen.

Capturing authentic conversation is another narrative area that proved difficult. When people talk to one another, they rarely respond to the actual intent of the other person. People are inwardly focused and are more likely to respond with a story about themselves rather than fully understanding what the other person said. Andrew might ask Peter about his day at work, but that doesn't mean Peter will accurately and directly answer the question. This can be problematic in fiction writing. When two characters talk, they need to advance the storyline or introduce something new to the plot. At first, when characters talked, they proceeded through a near logical syllogism to arrive at that

new point I wanted to introduce. People do not talk this way. Conversations range in and out of topics, looping and surging in unpredictable directions. Unfortunately, this realization did not happen until late in the writing process, so this story does not capture the principle very well. In future writing endeavors, I hope to utilize this idea more effectively.

In the latter stages of editing, I began noticing certain unnecessary words cropping up time and again. These words could usually be deleted and nothing would be lost. The first category of words were “-ly” words; most words that end in *-ly* tend to be superfluous. “He was thoroughly convinced,” “the momentary pause,” “absolutely crazy,” and so on. In all these cases, the *-ly* word can be removed and the phrase still says the same thing. Other words I became wary of were up, down, just, well, and actually. Up and down tend to be filler words; “he sat down on the chair,” “his back pressed up against the door.” Is there anyway to sit other than down? Again, the words could be removed without any loss.

“Just,” “well,” and “actually” were used too often in conversations. The following is an example:

“Hi, did you get the letter?” asked Chuck.

“Actually, I’m not sure I did. Which letter?” said Peter.

“Well, just keep an eye out for it,” replied Chuck.

In editing these kinds of words were deleted when I saw they contributed stilted sentences and meaningless pauses.

Masculinity

*Some men are born mediocre, some men achieve mediocrity, and some men have
mediocrity thrust upon them.*

—Joseph Heller, American novelist—

Two years ago I wrote a paper entitled “The Duality of Masculinity” where I labeled what I perceived to be the two dominant forms of masculinity in American culture: the “Action Hero” and the “Befuddled Father.” The definition of the Action Hero is a man who is, “virile, strong, unrestrained, and unattached; a man of action and adventure,” according to media critic Bill Romanowski. Usually this man is not married, not restrained by children, and seeks action and adventure through his job or everyday life. These men do not have flabby bodies, bills to pay, or ordinary problems. Examples include James Bond or Ethan Hunt.

An equally discouraging portrayal of men is the “Befuddled Father.” This male is often married with children and lives in small town suburbia. Instead of the man of the house being strong and authoritative, he is portrayed as unreasonable, dimwitted, and henpecked by an overbearing wife. Examples of this character are Ray Romano on the TV show *Everybody Loves Raymond* or Tim Allen of *Home Improvement*. So what changes a man from the Action Hero to the Befuddled Father? Usually the culprit is marriage and children, and with marriage brings a controlling and emasculating wife who always seems to be correct.

Men can be tempted to measure themselves against the Action Hero they see on the screen, or fear relationships and marriage as the end to freedom. Stereotyping men one way or another negates the complexity men face in defining their own role in a

family or social setting. With these two opposite portrayals of men in mind, I set out to write the story of a man somewhere in the middle.

Peter is not meant to be the perfect or ideal man because in reality no such man exists. His character flaw explored throughout the novel is being unable to act in dire situations. He does not save the woman in the alleyway, he cannot open his closet door when he suspects an intruder is inside, and considers walking away from Sheri when she is bound towards the end of the book. In some ways, he is the antithesis of the action hero, feeling paralyzed when he is needed the most. However, the final scene also offers a form of redemption:

If he went into the room all he would do is put him and Sheri in danger.

He stared down the empty hallway then turned around the other way towards

Sheri's room. He turned around again to look down the empty hallway.

He walked into the room.

While somewhat subtle, the fact that he does finally enter the room is his way of overcoming this flaw that affects him throughout the story. He is not perfect, but this is the first time he shows the ability to overcome his inability to act.

Peter is not married nor does he have children so his character does not fully deal with the Befuddled Father role. Unfortunately, this manuscript did not explore this role as much because it requires more relational interaction. Most of Peter and Sheri's relationship will be explored in the yet-to-be-written middle portion. In that section, I hope to show a man who makes some relational mistakes but still has the capacity of respecting a woman in the way she deserves while maintaining control in the relationship. Sheri will not function as a threat to Peter's freedom or as an emasculating force.

Wrapping Up

I hate writing; I love having written.

—*Dorothy Parker, American poet and novelist*—

The above quote provides a nice summation of the project. The word “hate” is a bit strong, but the quote captures a common feeling throughout. Writing takes a lot of time, energy, and creative exploration, and that’s before the fingers ever touch the keyboard. At times, the writing process halted at dead-ends or entire sections were cut because they were poorly written or didn’t make sense. However, during the summer I remember reading this thesis for the first time as a story rather than a project; I realized, “this story actually makes sense.” Not an overly flattering thought, but one that helped propel me through the rest of this semester. I was writing a story—a legitimate story—with characters and themes and plot twists. Since high school I’d wanted to do this, and now I was in the midst of it.

Going into this project, I wondered if I had the capacity to write a novel. Could I create a storyline that made sense and produce the sheer number of pages required for a book? With the project concluded and over 100 pages of the novel complete, now is the time to enjoy the warm glow of having written. Fiction writing is a deep and rich area of exploration, and I enjoyed playing the role of traveler for the past year. Personally, however, sometimes I enjoy returning home from my travels even more.

Another goal for this project was to discuss masculinity in a fictional setting. The media portrayals of men tend to be limited to superheroes or bumbling fathers, so I wanted this project to embody a more complex, realistic character. Peter needed to have weaknesses since he wasn’t a superhero, but he shouldn’t be a total idiot either. His

character needed to balance his flaws with his strengths. At first this idea was foggy, but developed more as the story progressed. His inability to act in crisis situations confronts him in the final scene, and he achieves a sort of redemption when he walks through the door to save Sheri. His flaws make him human, but also show how humans overcome deeply ingrained problems to better themselves. This to me is a satisfying and realistic form of masculinity.

Looking back on my earliest drafts, the story was bad verging on awful at times. While this might sound harsh, it is encouraging since I can trace my progression from a bad to at least a better writer. The novel still suffers from these early flaws and my inexperience, but has improved in many areas as well. I've discussed some of these areas of growth in this paper, but a lot of writing as with any skill is confidence. I would never be able to understand fiction writing without going through this process. The confidence gained from hands-on experience and honest feedback is invaluable. For that reason, this project was worthwhile in that it instilled a confidence in my own writing abilities and provided an enriching opportunity to develop mentally, technically, and creatively.

Writing a book is an adventure. To begin with it is a toy and amusement. Then it becomes a mistress, then it becomes a master, then it becomes a tyrant. The last phase is that just as you are about to be reconciled to your servitude, you kill the monster and fling him out to the public.

—Winston Churchill, British politician—

Peter, Peter:

A Mailman's Story

By Stephen Calhoun

Chapter 1 – *Neither Snow*

As the door creaked open, Peter peeked around the edge to see if she knew he was home yet. He carefully sidestepped through the door and closed it with a soft click behind him—but that did it. A few metal jingles and the sound of paws desperately trying to find traction on a hardwood floor were heard before Jolly came bounding into the room. She rubbed her body against Peter and sniffed around before standing on her hind legs in hopes of a good head scratch.

He let her outside knowing that if he didn't there'd be consequences later. The backyard provided plenty of entertainment for the dog, and she bounded around pouncing on any piece of grass that seemed to wave at a funny angle. "That dog," Peter muttered to himself with a slight smile, and closed the back door. His left shoulder ached a bit as he swung the door shut, and he went into the bathroom. The shoulder didn't feel like anything serious, just a dull soreness that develops from constant strain. The mirror reflected a narrow face with high cheekbones. His sandy hair touched the edges of his ears and fell well above his brown eyes. His eyes were set into his face with a slightly larger than average nose protruding below. His eyes were bright most of the time, but the past few days they'd reflected a shadow. "Two years ago this month," he thought as he slowly massaged his shoulder; his stomach clenched as the memory replayed itself.

The rest of his body remained trim from the miles of walking everyday. His arms were tanned from the sun while everything underneath his shirt stayed as white as a fresh envelope. The shoulder seemed fine other than the aching. He called Jolly inside before taking her with him to retrieve the mail.

He walked to the end of his driveway and shuffled through the mail, disappointed by the continuous stream of bills, subscription reminders, and upcoming sales. Everyday he received the same mailings to encourage him where to spend his money. A black Jeep Wrangler pulled into the drive across the street and out stepped his neighbor.

“Hey Peter!”

“Hey Chuck, how’s life?”

“Oh, can’t complain, had a few interesting things happen lately. Some of it has to do with you,” Chuck said, nodding his head towards Peter.

“What?” Peter asked, suddenly curious.

“It’s no big deal, just some—” Chuck stuttered, looking for the right words—
“regular business.”

“You’re no help at all,” Peter said. “Here, why don’t you do something useful and throw this away for me.” He held a flier for a local grocery store, King Koala.

“I was just there last Saturday to pick up some food for camping.”

“Camping? I didn’t know you were going.”

“I didn’t either until the day before. A friend of mine said they were doing a weekend excursion about two hours south of here. As soon as I heard I was in,” Chuck said.

Peter shook his head and chuckled a bit. Chuck was the only person he knew who used the word “excursion” to describe a trip. Part of him wanted to have this kind of pick-up-and-go personality. Chuck had gone to more places and seen more things over the past year than Peter had in the last twenty. But the other part of Peter preferred staying home. Most of the time Jolly was better company than most of the people he saw anyway.

“Did you get the letter?” Chuck asked.

“Huh?” Peter said, shuffling through the mail again.

“Did you get the letter?” this time with a hint of sarcasm.

“What letter? I mean, I have some letters here—is there a specific one you are talking about?” He held up some of the envelopes to see if Chuck recognized any of them.

Chuck shook his head. “You’ll know when you get it, perhaps in the next few days then.”

Surprised, Peter asked, “What are you talking about? Are you just puttin’ me on about something or is there some super secret letter that I should know about?”

“Like I said, in the next few days. Have a good one.” And with a brief wave of his hand Chuck strolled into his house. Jolly darted into the street to try and lick Chuck goodbye but Peter grabbed her by the collar. A passing car made him glad he did. He rifled through the mail again to see what his neighbor might have been referring to, but all he found was “Total liquidation! All must go!”

Jolly beat him back to the door and waited. He chased her back into the house and found an old chewed sock to use for tug-of-war. Jolly wasn’t a big dog, around forty pounds, but when she clamped her teeth, it took some serious pulling to get that sock again. Peter never figured out all of Jolly’s breeds—she was definitely a mutt through and through—but he did know one of them: golden retriever. He knew this from all the gold-yellow hair that covered her and most of the house as well. The dog shed like a dying tree. If people came over more often, he would probably need to vacuum every

other day. As it was, he didn't mind the bits of extra hair; he just never wore dark clothing.

That evening he found time—as he did most nights—to explore strange new worlds; to seek out new life and new civilizations; to boldly go where no one has gone before. Peter loved Star Trek. Not to the extent of the Trekkies he'd seen on TV. He couldn't name all of the characters' parents and their blood types, nor did he know the Klingon language. The main reason he watched was Captain Jean-Luc Picard. In tonight's episode, a new intelligent life form had been created in a lab somewhere, but it had become too powerful and was now wreaking havoc on the Pnixnor galaxy. The Enterprise was the only vessel within sixteen light years of the tragedy, and of course somehow their power and main guidance systems were offline as well. It was up to Picard to figure out a solution; with Jolly curled up beside him, Peter watched with increasing anticipation.

Picard saved the day again, outsmarting the enemy and delivering the crew from danger. He always acted when the situation looked hopeless and presented no obvious solution; that's when he was at his best. That's what kept Peter watching.

The show ended as did the day and Peter and Jolly went to bed.

Chapter 2 - *Nor Rain*

The next morning Peter woke and put on his work clothes. He ate a quick breakfast then grabbed his bag before stepping outside to face the day as he always did: in blue shorts and vest embroidered with “United States Postal Service.”

Some complained about their jobs, others counted down the days until retirement, but Peter was happy to spend his days as a USPS employee. The people, the neighborhoods, delivering important letters into expectant hands, those were the best moments. Sometimes he was the only person his clients talked to or saw for days and weeks at a time. He took pride in delivering mail and making it possible for people to put a stamp on an envelope in California and ship it across the country in a few days’ time; but actually handing the envelope to the person was much more enjoyable.

Most of the days were good, but the bad ones usually contained rain or angry dogs. He splashed through puddles while wearing a giant orange poncho large enough for a three hundred pound man. One day he dropped a letter on the ground, bent over to pick it up, and spilled the rest of the bag’s contents all over the place. The job then became fifty-two envelope pickup, but with children pointing and laughing at him.

During his ten years of delivering, he saw many changes in the neighborhoods. Children went from grade school to high school graduates, families moved in and out of homes in search of better locations. He saw little Daniel Gomez launch himself off a bike ramp without thinking where he would land while his two brothers watched. The boy’s leg hit the pavement first and his paramedic brothers grabbed some nearby leaves to try and stop the bleeding. Peter went to the boy’s house and told his mother. Two days later he saw Daniel in a cast and on crutches—but still outside trying to play with his brothers.

After eating breakfast, Peter walked to his car, a well-used Honda Accord. While backing out, he saw Chuck in his rear-view mirror leaving for work. Peter never did find the letter Chuck mentioned the day before, but the letter left his thoughts when he saw a female figure sitting shotgun in Chuck's Jeep.

Strange, Chuck wasn't married, nor was he seeing anyone. Peter couldn't remember the last time Chuck hosted guests. He went out, but never had people over. Who would be at his house, and at seven in the morning?

A shadowy outline of long dark hair flowed down the woman's back. The car continued to roll backwards and Peter looked with squinted eyes into the mirror trying to make out a face or some features. The loud thump of backing into something brought him back to reality.

Chuck's Jeep sped down the street, and Peter stepped out of the Accord to find out what he hit. The car was fine, no visible damage at least, but his mailbox definitely lost the battle. The place the bumper had hit cracked the wooden post in half. The top half leaned forward at a strange angle, and splinters and wood chips littered the ground. A small sigh left Peter's mouth as he examined the damage.

He checked his watch and knew he would have to wait until after work to fix this. Once on the road the strangeness of a mailman not having a mailbox struck him. Sort of like being a plumber whose toilet leaks or having an overweight personal trainer.

Arriving slightly after 7:30, Peter slid his badge through the ID scanner and opened the door to a busy mailroom. The click and whir of the mail machines accompanied by the soft chatter of fellow workers welcomed him. The smell of sweaty palms and large

evergreen air fresheners filled the air. Large yellow and orange light bulbs lit the warehouse-like mailroom. The room provided enough space for all the mailmen, their work areas, the machines, and the large storage bins needed to move mail and packages around. Peter walked over to his workstation and began the routine.

His work area consisted of three walls each about eight feet high, but it was not the typical business world cubicle with a nice chair and desk complete with computer, cheesy motivational posters, and nicely framed pictures of family. It did feature some family photos, but they were simply taped or stapled to the wall, dirtied by fingerprints. Peter did have a picture of the prettiest girl he knew. Her rosy cheeks and energetic smile created the same image on Peter's face every time he looked at her. If she were here now, she would be telling him stories about her latest adventures and favorite cartoon shows. In the end, Peter knew that preschool was probably a safer place for his four-year-old niece. Still, Natalie beamed back at him with a bright red train car gripped tightly in her hand.

The other two walls of the work area were less exciting. They featured mail slots with an address below each space. The mail slots looked like small mailboxes lined up side-by-side, but without a lid. As Peter sorted his mail, he placed addressed envelopes into the corresponding slots. Looking at the slots, Peter noticed a piece of mail was already placed in 823 Woodlawn Terrace.

“Thanks, Boo,” he called over the left wall.

“No problem,” replied a female voice.

“How much did you beat me in by this morning?”

“Oh, you know me; I finished my stops yesterday and came back here to sleep overnight so I could get started early this morning. Those bins are actually quite comfortable if you lay in them the right way.”

Peter shook his head and grinned. “Yeah, well, I have an excuse for being a bit late.”

“I’m sure you do,” Boo said, her voice suggesting sarcasm.

Ignoring the tone, Peter told her about the mailbox incident that morning choosing to leave out the actual nosy-neighbor reason, instead blaming the crash on early morning sleepiness. Boo expressed some sympathy, and then made a comment about it being an “epic tragedy worthy of poetry.” Peter smiled, rolled his eyes, and continued sorting.

Pamela Ayoob, nicknamed Boo, always seemed to cheer Peter up; something about her style of humor caught him off guard. Her nickname came from her last name, Ayoob, or “Booya” spelled backwards. She had told Peter the story of a high school friend noticing this when she was a freshman and calling her “Booya Ayoob.” When she walked down the hallways other students would call out “Booya!”, and the nickname stuck. She backed up this story by bringing in a few softball shirts with Booya printed on the back. After graduating high school, she decided the nickname didn’t sound very professional. She didn’t want to do away with it completely, so she shortened it to just Boo. That’s how everyone knew her at the post office; occasionally someone would be looking for Pamela and Peter would tell them they were in the wrong place.

The shuffling and whirring sounds coming from the mail machines provided the mailroom’s soundtrack. The machines didn’t have official names other than Mail Sorters, or MS, so the employees took to calling them Ms. MS, or “Miz Miz” when spoken. The

Miz Miz machines sorted about sixty percent of the mail and the mailman did the rest. Miz Miz was still new technology, which, as Peter pointed out, meant they didn't work very well. They commonly placed mail into the wrong routes. Most of the postal workers disliked the machines anyway because they tended to make their jobs more difficult. The sorting aspect was nice, but because Miz Miz made so many errors the pile the machine sorted couldn't be combined with the pile the carriers sorted. This meant that Peter had to carry two bundles while he delivered: one sorted by him and one by the machine.

By the time Peter left the mailroom, the sky was overcast. He enjoyed being on the streets, among the people of Iria County and delivering letters; although after seeing hundreds of pre-approved credit card applications, he wondered if they looked forward to seeing him. He'd delivered this route for two years now, ever since he requested reassignment from the last route.

Even with the threat of rain, he liked the clouds since he quickly grew tired of the dry days that baked his skin. His mail load wasn't bad, and considering it was Tuesday that wasn't surprising. People tended to wait until the weekend to mail items, and during the week he carried mostly magazines, brochures, and the always present bills bills bills.

The first stop was 1200 Dragon Avenue in the Shady Forest housing development. The Shady Forest Development made Peter smile every time he entered. For reasons beyond his understanding, the developers of Shady Forest decided to build a community based on fantasy creatures and stories. The streets were titled Dragon, Wizard, and his personal favorite, Troglodyte. Why anyone would live on a street with such a name was none of his business, but every time he delivered mail to 1879

Troglodyte Court he grinned a bit. Apparently the builders thought humble Iria County, with its small town feel and less-than-exciting local attractions, could use a place full of magic and wonder. If they'd actually convinced some real dragons or wizards to move in, it might have worked, but as it was Peter just smiled when delivering to the elderly couple at 678 Basilisk Road.

He greeted the regulars and balanced his and Miz Miz's bundles, trying to catch mistakes before they went into the mail chutes. He said hello to Doris Hayman—who sat on her porch most days waiting for him to come—and paused for a few moments to hear about her granddaughter's latest gymnastics meet. Doris was an elderly lady, and except for once or twice a month when her son visited, she didn't interact with anyone. Peter knew this, so he stayed for a few minutes and listened.

The route contained close to 550 stops a day, and with many of the homes and apartments packed together he could deliver four or five stops in a minute. Darby Lane was the last neighborhood and the last stop of the day, but that last stop happened to be one of his favorites: the Baker's. Stacey Baker kept a nice garden and was almost always outside working on something; but it wasn't Stacy he looked forward to seeing, it was her two children: five-year-old Aaron and three-year-old Christine. They too were always outside "helping" their momma ("Mom, do you need a worm for the garden?" "Mom, should I eat this dirt for you?").

"Hi Stacey," Peter said as he walked slowly by their mailbox.

"Mr. Peter!" the two children yelled and ran over to the grinning guest.

Stacy turned, knees covered in dirt, and waved hello.

“Hey there Aaron, Chrissy,” Peter said to the children reaching into his pocket. Their eyes became big like oversized gumballs as he took out two fresh Jolly Ranchers.

“I want raspberry!” Aaron yelled, and snatched the red piece of candy from Peter’s hand before Chrissy could reach them. He darted into the yard before being sent back a few seconds later.

“Thank you for the candy, Mr. Peter,” his eyes toward the ground having just been scolded by Mom.

“You’re welcome little man,” Peter laughed, and gave Chrissy her piece—also raspberry.

“I’ll see you tomorrow!” he called out as he continued walking.

After delivering the last letter and picking up his car back at the post office, Peter headed home. The cracked wooden mailbox post smiled at him with jagged, wooden teeth as he pulled into the driveway. He sighed and went inside to eat some dinner.

“Jolly, oh Jolly! Where are you girl?” he said as he stepped through the doorway. Jolly didn’t need to be called twice and bounded down the stairs. Peter clapped his hands and said “C’mon girl, come up here!” She jumped, leaning against his legs and wagging her tail with extreme intensity.

A blinking light caught his eye and Peter saw new messages on the answering machine. Caller ID or a cell phone would tell him who called, but he placed both those items firmly under the category of “technology,” and he stayed away from such things whenever possible. He pressed the play button and the machine smoothly said, “You have” then blurted out “THREE new messages. Message one.”

“Hi Peter, this is Molly from the post office...”

“Uh oh,” Peter thought, a piece of mail needed to be delivered today and Molly called to ask him to come back to work. This happened every so often, and usually he was told to deliver it right then, especially if a customer complained. Instead of heading back into work, Peter quickly deleted the message so if questioned he could say he never heard about it.

The next message was from Andrew, a good friend and one of the clients on his route. “Message two.”

“Hello? Um, hey Pete, this is Andrew. Haven’t talked in a while, and I’ve been meaning to, and since you don’t have a cell phone looks like I’m stuck leaving a message on your machine again. Just give me a call back when you get the chance. So, yep, that’s it, thanks. You have my number, give me a call. Bye.”

Peter smiled and rolled his eyes. Andrew gave him a hard time about not having a cell phone, but Peter told him, “If I wanted people to be able to talk to me anytime they wanted, I would work in a confessional.”

“Message three.”

“Hey Peter. This is Chuck. Did you get the letter? Figure out the clue? Give me a holla when you do, I’ve got more to tell you.”

And with that the phone clicked... or did it? Peter thought he heard something very quiet at the end and listened to the message a second time. There it was again, some sound at the end of message. After listening to it a third time—and becoming rather annoyed with Chuck’s use of the word “holla” and the way “clue,” “do,” and “you” rhymed—he figured it out: a female’s voice. He could faintly make out a “Ch” sound right before the receiver hung up. Could that be the same woman he saw this morning?

He checked the time the message was left. The answering machine told him Chuck had left the message at 3:47 AM the next morning, and Peter remembered he never figured out how to set the time on this dumb machine.

While standing there, he noticed the business card with the name “Sheri Crisp,” and seven digits he’d never dialed. Sheri was on the mail route he delivered two years ago before the change, but she was no ordinary client. The first thing he noticed about her was the smell—she was always surrounded by a rich chocolate aroma. She smelled like she carried freshly baked brownies stuffed in her coat pockets. But beyond the scent her deep brown eyes and hair were just as appealing. Whenever he walked past her place, his steps would slow or he would “accidentally” drop a piece of mail. The first time they talked, she stopped on her way to her car and offered him something chocolaty. His initial guess was correct: her coat was stuffed with chocolate goodies.

“Do you always carry loads of chocolate around with you?” he asked in a tone he hoped was playful.

“It’s sort of my job,” she responded. She seemed shy, and Peter found himself becoming nervous now that this woman was actually talking to him.

“Your job is to eat chocolate? What college degree allows you to do that?” The small joke broke the tension in his own mind, and his shoulders and thoughts began to relax. He then realized her hand was still extended holding the chocolate out to him, and he snatched it from her as coolly as he could manage.

“I don’t eat all of it, I make it. Here.” She reached into her purse and pulled out a business card. The words “Tasteful Treasures” were printed at the top along with a slogan: “What day isn’t better with chocolate?” Underneath the slogan were words such

as candies, cookies, bars, crepes, and other mouth-watering items. In the lower corner was an address followed by “Sheri Crisp, Owner.”

Peter to introduced himself, ending with “I’m your mail carrier.”

“My name’s Sheri. Nice to meet you,” and they shook hands.

“Yeah, I saw it on your card here. Your name, I mean, I saw your name on your card.”

The two stood there for a moment before Sheri told him that she needed to get to work. After the first meeting, they passed each other every once in a while and exchanged glances and greetings. Peter discovered he looked forward to her part of the route. She had something tasty for him, and he had her mail, so it seemed like a balanced relationship. But that was two years ago. One of the hardest parts about requesting his route change was knowing he wouldn’t see Sheri anymore. The day he told her he was switching, he thought he saw a brief flash of disappointment in those dark brown eyes, but it was gone just as quickly as it had appeared. She looked at him with a polite smile.

“I’ll miss having you as my mailman.” Peter tried to read her tone but couldn’t figure it out.

“I still have your card, maybe I’ll stop by your shop sometime,” his voice sounded hopeful.

“I’d like that.”

Peter stared at that business card wondering if he should just get rid of it. “Two years is long enough, right? They say if you don’t use something for at least two years it’s probably safe to throw away.” He reached for the card but couldn’t bring himself to

put it in the trashcan, so he stuck it back next to the answering machine and walked outside.

With his mind on Sheri and the strange messages from Chuck and Andrew, Peter looked at the broken mailbox, his eyes wandering from the post to the ground. After five minutes, he cleared his thoughts enough to figure out the tools he needed. He gathered his hammer and nails and walked back outside thinking that a simple wooden post would only take an hour at the longest to fix. He would remove the old post and replace it with an extra piece of wood stored in the garage.

He saw he needed a screwdriver to remove the mailbox from the post, so he went back inside to get one. With the mailbox off, Peter tugged at the loose bottom post. After five minutes of sweaty pulling, he went in to get a spade. The spade wasn't digging deep enough—he was surprised how far down the post went—so he went back in to get a shovel.

He dug with sweat dropping off his face after just a few jabs; every inch of dirt was a struggle. The air around him became thick with humidity as a storm approached and all became still. The sweat began sticking to him instead of dripping, and a general feeling of annoyance clouded Peter's mind. "Stupid mailbox," he thought, "stuck twenty feet into the ground." His shoulder began bothering him again as the shovel plunged into the dirt. As he dug, he heard Chuck's Jeep rumbling down the street and into his drive. He looked up and a flash of lightning burst into view many miles away.

"Hey Chuck!" Peter yelled across the street.

"Hiya Peter. Whatcha got going on over there?"

“Just another house project. Do you have a minute? I’ve got some something I want to ask you.”

“Sure thing.” Chuck walked down his driveway and across the street. The overcast weather matched the gray polo shirt he wore that day, but his blue eyes contrasted with the drab shirt. As he approached Peter realized that Chuck could probably dig this post out in a few minutes. He went to a fitness club a few times a week and it showed in his arms and legs. Unfortunately, he was still in his work clothes, and Peter hadn’t called him over to ask for help anyway.

“What happened to your mailbox?” Chuck asked in a puzzled voice. He walked around the broken pieces and shook the part of the post still stuck in the ground.

Peter opened his mouth to respond then closed it. He recalled that Chuck was why it was broken, although in an indirect way. His mind searched thinking about what the truth would sound like: “Well Chuck, I was backing out of my driveway this morning when I began spying on you. I saw a woman in your car and wanted to get a closer look, not because I’m interested in her or anything, mainly because I’m a nosy neighbor. So I took my eyes off of my own driving and then hit my own mailbox.” He decided to make something up instead.

“I don’t know, I got home from work today and it was all busted up. I’m guessing somebody hit it during the day, some sort of hit and run.” He didn’t like lying, but the truth seemed worse at this point.

The storm continued to move closer and Peter felt small drops of rain misting around him. Chuck was prodding at the ground with the shovel, clearly distracted by something else. Peter decided to break the silence.

“Chuck, is everything OK?”

Chuck’s eyebrows shot up and he appeared to snap out of some sort of daydream.

Peter took advantage of the pause to ask his question.

“That message you left me on my answering machine, what did it mean? What letter are you talking about?”

“Sorry, my mind was elsewhere. You still haven’t gotten it yet?”

“I don’t know because I have some letters, but I don’t know if I got the one you’re talking about,” Peter said.

“The one I’m talking about—” a crack of thunder muffled the rest of the sentence and both men turned in the direction the sound came from. The rain started coming down a bit faster.

“The one I’m talking about will have a knight stamp in the corner and should be handwritten I think,” Chuck said.

“A knight stamp?” Peter asked. This was odd because he saw all the different stamps available all the time. Dead presidents, weird art designs, even the top roller coaster parks in America series, but he never came across a knight of any kind.

“Maybe it’s a sticker or something. It has something to do with a knight,” Chuck said. He held out his palm turned upwards to the sky, trying to feel for rain. “Sorry to cut this short, but I’m starting to get pretty wet. I can tell you more once you actually get the letter. Is that cool?”

“Yeah, that’s fine. I’ll let you know when I do. Sorry to keep you out here in the rain.”

“That’s alright, and good luck with your mailbox repairs. You said you don’t know who knocked it over?”

Sticking with his story, Peter said “No clue” before gathering his tools and heading back inside. He wanted to ask about his lady friend he spied this morning, but talking outside in the rain wasn’t the best place to discuss something that might be a private topic.

Peter called Andrew when he got back inside, but Madeline, his wife, answered. Andrew was still at work and wouldn’t be home until later. “Tell him I called,” Peter said, and hung up the phone. The storm swirled in full force now and Peter watched as raindrops splattered down the windowpane. “A good night for a book,” he thought, and grabbed a science-fiction novel off the shelf before heading into the living room with Jolly.

Chapter 3 — *Nor Heat*

Peter slept through the alarm clock the next morning, but Jolly woke him with a few messy licks to the face. “OK, OK. Blech. Why do you enjoy licking my face so much?” he said to the dog. She looked at him with sleepy eyes but her tail never seemed to rest as it continued to wag.

After arriving at work, the empty mail slots stared at him like mouths that needed fed. Boo walked in and handed him some school glue.

“For your mailbox,” she said, and went back to her workstation.

Peter shook his head and smiled: “You’re ridiculous.”

“I know you’re not the handiest of men around the house so I thought you could use all the help you could get. How’s it coming along? Did you get it fixed yesterday?”

“Not quite, but I’m close.” Peter pictured his mailbox and saw that actually it wasn’t close at all. “I was working on it when it started raining and couldn’t finish.”

“That storm was crazy. It kept me up until two in the morning I think,” Boo said. “I was already up until midnight talking to Jake, and I thought I would fall right asleep, but it was so loud.”

“What’s Jake doing these days?”

“He’s out of town right now. He’s got a meeting with—” she stopped for a moment. “Peter, do you remember where he works?”

“Shoot, walked right into this one,” Peter mumbled. He couldn’t remember when this joke started, but at some point Boo told him where her boyfriend worked; then she told him again later, then again another time. For whatever reason, he could never remember. Always looking for ways to poke fun at him, Boo noticed this weird memory

lapse and began asking every so often where Jake worked. Peter never remembered, and so the joke continued.

He knew the answer was somehow related to cars. “Gas station attendant?” He picked an answer he knew was way off.

“Yep, Jake’s out of town at a gas station attendant meeting. They talk about how to make customers angry by raising and lowering gas prices. Then they have workshops on how to properly put the little gas price numbers up on the sign,” she said.

“Alright alright. Tell me again, where does he work?” This time Peter pulled out a pen and grabbed a piece of paper to write it down.

“OK, for the last time, he sells car insurance with Iria Insurance, which is the same job he’s been doing for the past—you’re writing this down!” Boo said in a surprised voice. Peter looked up and Boo was peeking around the corner. He smiled somewhat embarrassed and showed her, “Jake sells Car Insur.” He added on the “ance” and pinned the note up next to his niece’s smiling face.

“I won’t forget now.”

“You better not,” Boo said, smiling. Her head disappeared back around the corner and Peter heard the busy shuffling of envelopes.

Three hours later Peter arrived at Shady Forest and waved hello to the people of Wizard Way and Dwarf Drive. The day was hot and humid from the night before, and the heat made him sweat while the humidity caused the salty beads to stick to his face. The hot and cold weather caused his shoulder to throb. Aching shoulders were common for carriers since they usually had a twenty pound bag pulling on them four to five hours a

day. Strangely, his shoulder never bothered him until the route change two years ago. Seemed like within the first week of the new route it began hurting; Boo said not to worry about it, but Peter wondered if it was related to something else.

Seeing his usual clients distracted him from the soreness and helped him think about other things. He hoped to find Andrew at home and ask him about the message from the night before. Andrew worked as an editor for the local paper, the Tallmadge Telegram, so his hours were all over the place. Sometimes it was the usual nine to five routine, other days he had meetings in the evening, and so on. Perhaps today he had the afternoon off.

When Peter knocked on Andrew's door nobody answered, so whatever Andrew wanted to tell him would wait a little longer. He opened their mailbox and saw a letter with "Peter" written on the front:

Pete, sorry we keep on missing each other, did you get the letter? Mine doesn't make sense and I think they might go together somehow. Try to figure out what yours means. I'll call again tonight.

Andrew

"What is going on?" Peter wondered out loud. He realized he was talking to himself; he looked to see if anyone heard him, but the nearest living things were two dogs barking at each other across the street.

Another mention of this letter he supposedly had but didn't, and nobody would tell him why this letter was important anyway. For the first time, some annoyance began

forming. Andrew could've easily written, "Hey, here's what's going on and why I need to talk to you," but instead he writes something that doesn't make sense. Same with Chuck! He could've told him last night at the mailbox but instead says, "I'll tell you the rest when you get it." Why couldn't he tell him now?

He wiped some sweat off his forehead and reread the note. And these letters are connected somehow? So Andrew received the same letter? Nothing made sense and each explanation ended up going nowhere, but then he didn't even know what he was trying to figure out in the first place. He began walking to the next house, the frustration causing his shoulder to ache.

Somewhere towards the end of the route between Mrs. Tramell's pink garden ornament flamingoes and Ted Paulson's Turbo GrillMaster 5000 at the end of the street, Peter stopped walking. He paused, looked around, smacked his forehead with a sweaty palm, then mentally kicked himself for not figuring it out sooner. Of course none of this made sense, and of course he hadn't received the letter. Of course he was confused, and of course Chuck would be worried yesterday: he didn't have a mailbox!

One of the rules Peter learned during training is a carrier cannot deliver mail to a house with no receptacle (that was the word the trainer used). This seemed obvious, but the point is unless a house has an enclosed, predetermined area where the mail is supposed to go, they cannot receive mail. The area was usually a mailbox or slot, and it was actually against the law for Peter to leave mail on a doorstep or anywhere else. The rule protected the client's mail from others while also providing a consistent location for the carriers to deliver. Peter didn't have to search around hedges and rose bushes for a secure spot; instead, he could go to the same place everyday and move on.

His own house currently broke this rule. The “enclosed area” was lying on its side in the middle of the yard. So what he—and all other postal workers—were told to do is leave the mail at the post office until the resident comes up with a mailbox of some sort. Usually the clerks at the post office would call that residence and tell them about the problem. All his mail from the last two days must be sitting at the post office.

The Baker’s house ended the day, and Aaron and Chrissy were disappointed that Peter did not have candy for them. Peter did have some tucked inside his jacket, but he figured once or twice a week was plenty; otherwise he might start receiving the kids’ dental bills.

He returned to the post office, but as a customer instead of an employee. After waiting in line, Peter approached the desk. The clerk appeared surprised to see a carrier this late in the day.

“What can I help you with?” the man asked.

“No no, I’m here as a customer, not as a carrier. Is there any mail being held for Peter Ellis?”

The clerk’s shiny nametag read “Marco.” He began typing on the keyboard and Peter smiled at the name, thinking of the poolside game he loved playing as a kid. He remembered learning in elementary school about the famous explorer named Marco Polo, and he had raised his hand to ask, “Why did they name him after a pool game?” The teacher tried not to laugh and explained that wasn’t the case.

Peter began mentally playing the game and laughed out loud while thinking “fish out of water!” Marco eyed him strangely then brought out a stack of mail addressed for him.

“Yes, these were in the undeliverable pile. Is there something wrong with your mailbox or mail chute right now that is making it difficult for your mail carrier to leave your mail in a safe place?”

These were obviously some canned lines this man memorized and said to everyone who came in to pickup mail. Here he was, a carrier, and Marco was repeating to him the same stuff he said to the general public; the little seed of annoyance grew a bit more.

“Yes, I know. My mailbox is broken. Could I please just have my mail?” He didn’t feel like explaining how or why it became broken to the man named after a childhood game.

“OK then Mr. Ellis, if I could just see some ID, I’ll send this mail home with you. And the sooner you can get that mailbox repaired the better. You won’t have to bother with coming down here anymore.”

Peter felt the muscles in his shoulders tightening, especially the sore one, which seemed to increase in pain as his frustration grew. He pulled out his wallet and showed his driver’s license. To relax, he began thinking about the “Marco Polo” game and playing it as a child. Marco gathered up the rest of the mail and handed it over the counter before wishing him a good day. Still lost in his childhood memories, Peter picked up the mail, responded with “Polo,” opened his eyes wide and quickly walked out of the

store like Jolly after being scolded. Once back in his car, Peter didn't know whether he should laugh at himself or punch the dashboard.

The broken mailbox post now leaned sideways even more from the previous nights' rain. It looked like it was about to fall over, and Peter thought about hopping out of the car and ripping it out of the ground. The grooves circling the post from his shovel were much deeper from the rain too; it looked like somebody had hacked at the ground all around the post with an axe. His mind wandered from the post to the mailbox to the mail sitting next to him and he remembered why he went to get his mail today. He stopped the car in the middle of the drive, left it running, and flipped through the letters looking for anything out of the ordinary. Then he found it.

A handwritten envelope with a jousting knight in the place where there's normally a return address. "Return to Mr. Jousting Knight I guess," Peter thought, and he opened the envelope. He allowed his mind to wander for a moment thinking what might be inside, but it probably wasn't a winning lottery ticket or a free trip to Disney World. Seeing only a scrap of paper, he pulled it out and read what looked like gibberish:

*And happed that, allone as he was born,
He saugh a mayde walkynge hym biforn,
Of which mayde anon, maugree hir heed,
By verray force, he rafte hire maydenhed;
For which oppressioun was swich clamour
And swich pursute unto the kyng arthour*

Chapter 4 – *Nor Gloom*

Peter woke with a headache. The night before he stared at those nonsense words for so long he felt blood begin to pound at his brain. They didn't mean anything; they weren't even English. The only thing that looked kind of familiar was "kyng arthour," but even that was misspelled.

He gave Chuck a call, but no answer, so he left a message saying call him back that night even if it was late. This had to be the letter he and Andrew were talking about, but *verray force? Rafte hire maydenhed?* If one of them was playing a joke on him, Peter didn't get it, and he definitely didn't think it was funny.

He walked down the stairs and saw the paper lying on the kitchen counter. Jolly came tumbling down the stairs behind him, afraid she might miss out on being let outside. She began whining at the door, but when Peter did let her out he saw it wasn't a bathroom problem; a squirrel was searching for some acorns and Jolly made sure he didn't find any in her yard.

He took the letter with him to work and showed Boo.

"Is this some sort of joke?" she asked.

"I don't know. I asked myself the same question, but I don't know what it is."

"It looks like English, but I can't read any of the words," she said, lifting the paper into the lights as if trying to find a hidden message in between the lines. "Seems like there are too many 'y' sounds."

"I know. I can't tell what it is. All I know is a neighbor and friend of mine keep on asking me about this letter—and I know this is the one—but now that I have it, the letter doesn't mean anything."

“Did you try looking it up on the Internet?” Boo asked.

“I don’t, uh, have the Internet at home.”

“What?” Boo looked at him like he was a time traveler just arrived from the Jurassic period. “You don’t have Internet at home?” She paused for a moment. “Oh, you must be part of the two percent of the population that doesn’t have it. I’ve wondered what that group of people looked like,” she said sarcastically.

“What we looked like?” Peter asked.

“All I’m saying is it’s weird you don’t have Internet, you’re like a knight from the Dark Ages or something.”

Peter looked her in the eye and studied her face.

“What?” she said, wrinkling her eyebrows and looking uncomfortable. “Why are you looking at me all funny?”

“You said I’m like a knight from the Dark Ages.”

“Yeah? So?”

“Are you in on this too?” Peter said, looking doubtful.

“In on what? All I’m saying is you’re behind the times. You should get Internet at home!” Boo said, shrugging her shoulders. “It was just a joke. I mean, those words look like they could even be from the Dark Ages I suppose.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. It’s just that on the envelope...” he trailed off. This joke wouldn’t have meant anything yesterday; just another sarcastic Boo comment that might cheer him up in the morning. Now he didn’t know how much he should tell her.

“It’s nothing,” he said. “I just watched a show on knights recently and it was weird that you brought them up. That’s all.” His voice still sounded skeptical, so he tried

smiling to smooth things over. Boo continued looking at him strangely, then went back to sorting mail. Somewhere on the other side of the building the Miz Miz machines hummed and clicked along.

Shady Forest to Darby Lane, the communities passed as Peter's mind drifted from King Arthur to the pain in his shoulder to the Starship Enterprise and a handful of other topics. The day was overcast and a bit gloomy as if threatening to storm again, but Peter wasn't paying attention to the weather.

The mental distractions made him to fall behind schedule, and in the world of delivering mail people noticed this. Some expected him at the same time every day and waited at their doorstep. Some talked to him, which he enjoyed, but others treated him like a bad waiter at a restaurant. They would snatch their mail and as he walked away murmur complaints such as "why am I brought these stupid advertisements?" as if Peter was hand selecting what each person should get.

His manager would probably talk to him about being late too. People had this idea that mailmen deliver at their own leisure and on their own time. Peter had been told many times how he must enjoy his job of strolling around neighborhoods and talking to elderly people. In reality, he had a tight schedule to follow everyday. The Post Office enforced this schedule through another lovely technological invention: the barcode scanner.

The system worked by placing barcodes at certain stops. Peter carried a scanner gun—the kind seen at any department store—and scanned the barcodes when he reached those houses, apartments, or businesses. That location would be time stamped and stored in the gun, then turned in at the end of the day. He should be at 871 Jacobs Street by

about one in the afternoon or to 2156 Killington Street close to 3:17. Every minute counted. If he was late to one of the barcodes, then he wasn't delivering fast enough. Peter often pictured the little barcode stickers holding whips and shouting, well, he didn't know what barcodes shouted, but the whip idea seemed good.

He didn't quite make Killington by 3:17, but it was close enough that the manager wouldn't care. This sense of urgency took his mind off the confusing events of the last few days, and even the pain in his shoulder seemed to go away.

While pulling back into his driveway, the mailbox still lay broken next to the sidewalk, and that small feeling of annoyance crept back into his mind. "Today is the day," he said in a resolute tone. The look of determination stayed on his face as he stepped through the front door and into a puddle of liquid.

He stood there frozen for a moment trying to figure out what just happened. Why was there a puddle in the middle of the floor? He took a deep breath as he looked down at the hardwood and the riddle was quickly solved.

"Jolly!" he yelled. He realized he was still stepping in it and he hopped to the side on one foot trying not to let the stained shoe touch the floor. He stood on one foot and yanked the shoe off before tossing it out the front door. Somewhere Jolly remained hidden.

"Jolly," Peter said again, but this time in a searching and inviting tone. He began walking around the house with one shoe on and one shoe off. "She knows. I don't know how dogs know these things, but she knows she's about to get in trouble." She wasn't in the living room or kitchen so he headed upstairs. On the way up he heard a soft jingle from the bedroom.

He walked through the bedroom door and Jolly sat by the books he kept under the bed. Her mannerism almost made Peter forget he was angry. She was not running around and jumping up and down like she usually is when he first gets home; and gone was the unrestrained smile that usually dominated her facial features. In its place was a repentant look that was trying to figure out what was about to happen. Her face showed a wary half-smile and her eyes pleaded for forgiveness in the way only a dog's can. She waited for him to make the first move.

"You are so crazy, dog, and I love you for it," was all Peter could think. But he said, "Com'ere Jolly."

She stood on all fours and walked slowly over. Her head remained low as did her tail, although it kept wagging a bit hoping maybe nothing would happen.

"C'mon." Peter turned and walked down the stairs, as Jolly slinked along behind him. They arrived at the crime scene and Peter pointed to the puddle still marinating on the floor. He opened his mouth to say something but looked at Jolly first. Her head remained bowed to the floor and her whole body seemed to shake a bit.

"I think she gets the points," Peter thought, and said in a lighter tone, "Alright Jolly, it's OK. C'mon over here." For the first time since he arrived home, Jolly looked up.

"Yes, it's OK, we're fine you crazy dog," and he bent down on one knee being careful to avoid the puddle and slapped his leg calling her to his side. Jolly's eyes seemed to erupt with happiness and she ran over to him. Peter began laughing.

"Man, sometimes you're too dramatic for me, Jolly dog," he said while rubbing her head and petting her back. Her tongue licked the air trying to catch his hand or face.

The smacking sound of her tongue going in and out but not finding anything made him smile even more.

“But I don’t get it, girl. You haven’t done this for a while. I can’t even remember the last time you peed inside the house.” She continued to play and rub her body against his side. Peter caught another whiff of Jolly’s welcome home present and decided he should get cleaning.

Walking into the kitchen, he noticed the envelope with the jousting knight sticker in the corner. He reached into his pocket and read the strange letter again, but still nothing made sense. Crumpled and now on the floor, the letter would probably be better in a trashcan and out of sight. He found the cleaning stuff and some rags and made his way back to the front door. Jolly was off hiding again.

With the floor cleaned, he went out to the garage and rummaged through the tools. “And this time, I’ll do it right the first time.” The plan of action was simple: get that post out of the ground and bring the mailbox inside. Then tomorrow install a new one.

The day was growing darker, but enough light shone through the clouds to work outside . The first strike of the shovel into the dirt sent grass and sod flying. The post began leaning more with every following blow. Finally the shovel wedged underneath the piece of wood and Peter jumped on the other end pushing the post up and out.

“King Arthur that, stupid post,” he said to no one in particular.

A car drove down the street and pulled into Chuck’s driveway. It was black and freshly washed; the exterior looked smooth, and the blackness of the car seemed to

swallow the light around it. Peter watched a few moments before realizing he was staring and needed to get back to work.

He turned back to the hole but kept the car in his peripheral vision. A door handle clicked and woman stepped out who matched the car's color all the way down to the shoes. She wore black pants—jeans maybe, or perhaps more dressy—and a tight long sleeve black shirt. Down her back flowed long, braided black strands stretching down to her waist. They seemed to wave and sway at the slightest movement. As she walked to Chuck's door, the hair bounded behind her as if trying to keep up. She didn't knock but instead opened the door herself and walked inside.

“Could that be?...” the question lingered in his mind for a moment. Was this the same woman he saw the morning he broke the mailbox? Who was she? What was she doing at Chuck's?

Trying to get back to work, Peter brought the two halves of the post into the garage. The day was nearly night and working outside was becoming difficult. He put the bottom half into the trash. The top half he began unscrewing from the mailbox. About twenty minutes later phase one of the mailbox reconstruction project was complete. The old pieces were gone, the mailbox now sat alone on a shelf in the garage, and tomorrow he would attach it to a new post and plant it in the ground.

Feeling accomplished, he went back inside. As he walked into the living room, he looked out the front window across the street at Chuck's house. The black car was still parked in the driveway. “This shouldn't interest me so much, but for some reason I really want to know who that woman is,” he thought, mentally criticizing himself for being

overly curious. He looked a little while longer until the front door opened and the woman stepped out. For the first time Peter saw her from the front; and his heart began pounding.

“Is that?” he whispered to himself. He squinted and leaned forward. “Is that Sheri?” The light was making it difficult to see, and the woman’s hair fell in front of most of her face. Did Sheri have black hair? He couldn’t remember. It was definitely shorter, but that was two years ago; she may have grown it out.

The woman finally lifted her head and looked across the street. She seemed to be looking for something. Peter watched her eyes look over the front lawn and up to his doorstep. Something about her did remind him of Sheri, but the longer he looked the more he was convinced that his first guess was wrong. She did look familiar, but he couldn’t figure out from where. The distance and the darkness made it difficult to see much, but her face didn’t match Sheri’s, and her shoulders were too broad. Her shoulders were quite broad actually. “I bet that woman could beat me up,” Peter thought.

She resumed walking and got into her car. She pulled away and Peter thought about calling Chuck; maybe he could just ask him who she was. The more he thought about this, the less he liked it. How would he phrase it? “Hi Chuck, just watching your house tonight and saw that black-haired woman come and go. Could you tell me who she is and how you know her?” The entire conversation would be too weird, and Chuck never talked about that kind of stuff anyway.

As he got ready for bed that night, Peter reached for some late-night reading. Jolly was back to her usual self; she’d either already forgotten about her accident or didn’t care

since Peter cleaned the whole thing himself. She was now on the bed trying to lick Peter's face and burrow under the covers.

Peter's hand reached under the bed and felt for where he left his book last night, but found a something much thinner in its place: a journal. "It's been a while since I wrote anything in this thing," he thought pulling it out and opening to the front page, which was dated four years.

October 11 -- The last week or so was fine, nothing much new going on really. The weather is getting colder and some of the leaves on the trees are changing color. Saw Sheri a few times but didn't say much to her. She had some chocolate on Tuesday that was ridiculously good. She told me the name of it but I can't remember now. I'm still enjoying delivering and seeing all the different people. Hard to believe it's already been six years on this route. It's such a great route though. Seems like everybody on it likes me, except maybe the McCracken's. Ever since I had to mace their crazy dog they haven't been real kind to me. Anyway, if anything new or exciting comes up I'll

write it in here. Sheri is an interesting girl. I'm guessing if anything new or exciting does happen it would involve her. Until next time.

Scanning through some of the following entries, he saw that nearly every one ended with some mention of Sheri. He flipped through the pages and began remembering how he felt during those times. The last entry was dated the month before he switched routes. He wondered why he never wrote anymore. As his hand turned to the next page after the last entry, Peter's blood chilled and goose bumps crawled up and down his spine.

Somebody else's handwriting was in his journal.

His eyes grew large and stared at the words. How long had they been there? The book was hidden under the bed; it would have been tough for someone to find it. Somebody must have been in his house. Somebody must have been in his bedroom!

Peter looked up and felt suddenly in danger. He looked straight at his closet door across the room. It had two doors that opened in the middle. Two handles protruded from the doors and moved the closet doors outward like a folded piece of paper. Did he hear breathing sounds coming from the other side? He didn't know what to do. If somebody was in there, should he scare them away? Try to beat them up? Call the police? None of these options sounded good.

He slowly lifted his legs out of bed and put his feet on the floor. His legs were shaking, but he tried to remain calm. He began walking, acting like he was just going to the bathroom. Once there he pulled the shower rod down and walked back into the room.

Inching towards the door with his back pressed firmly against the wall, his ears strained to hear anything. Jolly was alert now, too, noticing Peter's strange behavior. She watched him slide with his back touching the wall and his head turned toward the closet. Peter realized her eyes gave away his exact location; if someone was in there, he would know Peter was coming.

Close enough now to grab the closet handles, Peter stopped. "What am I doing?" he thought for the first time since seeing the writing. "What if someone really is in there? What am I going to do?" He thought back to when Captain Picard was in a fistfight with some alien. He always seemed to have a better weapon than a shower curtain rod.

He decided opening the doors was not a good solution; calling the police would be much safer. What would opening the doors accomplish anyway? He began sliding back across the wall, but Jolly jumped off the bed and walked straight up to him.

"No, Jolly!" Peter said through clenched teeth. "Go back!" He poked her with the rod and tried to guide her back to the bed. Instead, she walked over in front of the closet and sat down staring at Peter and wagging her tail.

Jolly was just sitting in front of the closet doors and nothing was happening to her. It took Peter's mind a moment to get around this concept, but once it did Peter dropped the curtain rod and felt foolish. Why would someone be hiding in his closet in the first place? He walked over and opened the doors, pulling them open and taking a quick step backwards. Nobody was inside; a few shirts and uniforms hung there waiting to be worn some other day.

"Thanks girl. I was really acting like an idiot." He rubbed the dog's head. Jolly didn't know why she was being praised, but took this chance to lick his hand anyway.

His heart returned to normal, but his mind was still uneasy. Maybe the closet in the bedroom was clear, but what about everywhere else in the house? “Jolly, c’ mon,” he waved to the dog and they began searching the house.

Peter tried to remain as quiet as possible and found a surprising amount of comfort having Jolly with him. They turned on all the lights in the house and checked the rooms, closets, and behind the couches. Nothing seemed different. He checked the lock on the backdoor and on the way kicked the crumpled letter underneath a chair. A memory suddenly sparked and he bent down to pick it up. He opened it and studied the words. “Wait a minute,” he said to Jolly, scratching her head. He checked the rest of the house quickly and ran back upstairs.

The journal still sat on top of the covers and Peter opened it to the strange handwriting again. As he looked closer at the words and letters, his stomach lurched and tightened at the same time. “These are the same words!” he said in disbelief.

*And after this thus spak she to the knyght,
Whan that she saugh hir tyme, upon a day:
Thou standest yet, quod she, in swich array
That of thy lyf yet hastow no suretee.
I grante thee lyf, if thou kanst tellen me
What thyng is it that wommen moost desiren.
Be war, and keep thy nekke-boon from iren!*

“What the...” he stopped short of swearing, but a few choice words danced around his mind. This was ridiculous. Absolutely ridiculous. Nothing in this made any sense either. It wasn’t even understandable! Something about a queen and a knight and a *nekke-boon*, whatever that is.

He held the other letter next to his journal and compared the two passages. They weren’t exactly the same; they just looked similar. Two separate messages perhaps? There must be a connection somehow. No way do two things like this that look so similar and completely foreign show up at his house in a two day span by coincidence. Then again, it’d been two years since he last wrote in that journal. That strange handwriting may have been there a long time.

Nothing fit together. The journal ended up shoved under the bed into the darkness with the letter folded inside. He laid down to fall asleep, but his mind would not stop racing through possibilities and explanations. His body, exhausted from the stress of the non-existent intruder and all the other activities of the day, finally overcame his mind and he drifted off into restless sleep.

Chapter 5 — *Stays These Couriers*

Somebody knocked on the door. Captain Peter Ellis swiveled in his captain's chair and commanded, "Come in." He waited. The knocking continued. "Enter!" shouted Starship Command's newest leader. The knocking continued. A bright light began shining through the observation window that looked out onto the galaxies. Blinded for a moment, something wet began slapping his face and Peter struggled against this new enemy. The light grew brighter and he blinked a few times before finding himself face-to-face with two large brown eyes and one purple tinted tongue.

"Jolly," the captain grumbled, and he rolled over in bed. The knocking continued.

"Not now, Jolly." A few seconds passed. "Wait a minute." Peter sat upright in bed. "Who's knocking?" He looked at Jolly before remembering that as a dog she was not a likely suspect. "Somebody is at the front door," Peter said to Jolly feeling confused, and he threw on some pants and a shirt.

He peered through the window next to the door and saw Andrew's green eyes and lightly colored hair. Surprised and puzzled, Peter opened the door to his friend. A rush of cool air entered the house.

"Hey Pete. How are you? Sorry to bother you so early in the morning."

"Uh, yeah, sure, no problem. Come on in," Peter said while rubbing his eyes and trying to figure out what was going on. "What brings you by so early?"

"I tried calling you again last night, but nobody answered," Andrew said stepping through the door. "And it seems like we've tried to call each other a few times and nothing worked. I even tried that note but didn't really know what to say in it. My schedule has been really weird this week, working different hours everyday it seems like,

so I didn't know when to get a hold of you. I thought it'd be OK if I just stopped by in the morning, hope you don't mind."

"No, it's OK. I usually get up in about a half an hour anyway." Jolly ran down the stairs and wagged her tongue at the visitor. "Although being licked in the face by Jolly isn't the cleanest way to start the day."

Andrew looked down and smiled. "How's the pup doing?"

"Pretty good, except she peed inside the house yesterday, which is weird. She hasn't done that in a long time."

"Oh yeah? Did you leave her inside too long or something?" Andrew asked.

"No. I'm not sure what it is. I kind of have a guess, but it's no big deal. So what did you want to ask me about?"

"Here's the thing, I have to be at work soon, so I've only got a few minutes. Would you be up for dinner over at my place tonight? Partially I want to catch up, but also I got this letter with your name in it."

"Tonight should be fine. Why didn't you just bring me the letter?" Peter asked.

"Well, it does have your name in it, but it was addressed to me and I think it was meant for me. It's not a big deal, but since I don't know what it is I thought you might. Also, it's a good excuse to invite you over. What do you think?"

"Sounds good to me. I'll come on over around six or so?"

"Yep, six sounds good."

"But what's written in the letter?"

"Actually that's part of the problem. I sort of get the gist of what it's saying, but the words are all misspelled and look weird," Andrew said.

Peter's heart rate seemed to increase. Could this be another one?

"Does it say anything about King Arthur?"

"What?" Andrew appeared caught off guard by this question.

"Nothing," Peter said, backing away from the previous statement. "It was just something else I was thinking about. This might sound strange, but I think I know what you mean by misspelled words and stuff. I received something similar that didn't make sense too. I'll bring it over."

"Hm, strange," Andrew said shrugging his shoulders. "Speaking of bringing things over, would you bring Jolly along too?"

"Is the wife going to approve of that?"

"Madeline won't mind so long as we keep her in the basement."

"You mean so long as we keep Madeline in the basement or Jolly?" Peter asked with a smile. "Jolly does shed worse than any other dog I've come across."

"I noticed," Andrew said, looking at Peter's carpet and smiling.

"Get out of here," and Peter pushed him lightly back through the doorframe into the still dim autumn morning.

"It's mainly the kids. Jake and Alan ask about her everyday it seems like."

"That's funny since I only brought her over that one time."

"I know! Kids remember details like that, but of course they won't remember their math facts or to turn off a light switch when they leave a room," Andrew laughed.

"Alright, I'll see you tonight, and maybe I'll have a dog in tow when I show up."

The usual clicking and whirring of Miz Miz greeted him as he walked into the mailroom warehouse. People were working, but their backs were to him; nobody talked except for a group of guys in the opposite corner. If anything he was a few minutes late, where was everybody? The machines seemed even louder as they sorted and rumbled, filling Peter's ears with metallic buzzing.

"Hey Boo," Peter said as he walked by her mail slots and stopped next to his.

"What's going on around here?"

Silence answered from the other side of the wall.

"Boo? What's up? Why is everybody so quiet today?"

A drained voice came from the other side of the wall: "So you haven't heard?"

If Boo felt bad about something, then it must be serious. Peter could count the days she'd come into work in a bad mood on one hand. He paused before speaking, unsure of whether or not he really wanted to know.

"Haven't heard about what?" He walked around the corner into her booth quietly. She stared at a piece of mail but her eyes weren't looking at the envelope; they seemed to be looking past it, not focusing on anything.

"Did you notice anything strange when you came in this morning?"

"Yeah, that's what I was asking about. Everyone seems really quiet or withdrawn or something—even you. The only people I saw talking were Denis and Wyatt over in the corner, and they looked kind of angry."

"Makes sense I guess," Boo said.

"What makes sense? That they're angry? Why are they angry?"

“I was hoping you would find out before you got back here or would talk to someone else, but obviously nobody is very talkative today.” The last words cracked with fatigue as if she’d already delivered her route twice today.

She looked up from the envelope and at Peter. Weariness clouded her eyes and caused her voice to fade as she spoke.

“Peter, Adam was fired yesterday. The story is he got back from delivering his route and Kathleen called him inside. That’s all I know. Pretty much everyone else already knows he was let go,” she said.

“What?” Peter asked, feeling as though Boo’s words formed a fist and punched him in the stomach. “Wh...what? Why?” He looked away from her feeling confused. Meanwhile the machines continued working, rumbling and moving mail.

“I’m sorry I had to be the one to tell you this.”

“Why? What reason—why? Can they just blindsides a guy like that? I know he wasn’t, y’know, underperforming on the job or anything.”

“No one knows for sure,” Boo said. “But it’s pretty obvious. It was bound to happen and it’s no surprise they picked one of the older guys to go.”

“How can you say that? Are you OK with this?”

“I’m not OK with it, Peter,” she said, her tone hardening. “Do you think I’m glad this happened? That I didn’t like Adam, too? I didn’t know him as well as you, but that doesn’t mean I’m happy that someone I know and worked with for the past five years lost his job.” Her eyes gleamed with bottled emotion.

“This is stupid. How can they give us news like this and expect us to work for the rest of the day? Can’t we just take the day off?”

“I thought about it, but if too many people do, that would be a problem, plus it would fall back on Kathleen.”

“Well good, maybe she deserves to feel a little heat for this.”

Boo glared at him in a way that made him think about hiding his head in a mail slot. “That’s ridiculous,” Boo said shaking her head. “You know it too! Kathleen must feel miserable, and she’s a great manager. She’s always up front with us. I’m sure this day is ten times worse for her than anyone else around here—”

“At least she’s still here.” His words hung in the air like a smack in the face. Boo walked away muttering something about the how the whole situation didn’t feel right.

“Maybe Boo’s right,” Peter thought, “but she doesn’t know. She hasn’t worked here long enough. Plus she doesn’t know Adam the way I do.” Unsure of who won the argument, if there was a winner, Peter began sorting. The eerie silence of the warehouse continued to fill his ears, broken only by the whirring of the machines.

The morning dragged as the whole warehouse remained quiet. Boo came back to her booth but didn’t talk. On his way out the door, Peter stopped and picked up the bundle from the machines he needed to deliver. Boo’s words echoed in his mind: “But really it’s pretty obvious. It was bound to happen and it’s no surprise they picked one of the older guys to go.” Obvious? What was obvious? He looked down at the bundle and back up at the machine. His lips tightened; he gripped the bundle and walked out the door.

Ever since Miz Miz arrived at the post office, Peter’s job began to change. Stops on the route increased, total amount of mail per carrier increased, and nobody was hired to help shoulder the additional workload. The machines were so “efficient” that they

could add to his route, and he was expected to do the same job in the same amount of time. Since the machines sorted, that cut down on the sorting time; and since he spent less time sorting, he could spend more time delivering. The route grew larger and the mailbag heavier.

Apparently, the post office reached the limit. They'd expanded as far as they could without new employees, and now the system wasn't at maximum efficiency. With the expanded routes, the machines sorted more mail too, so some days Peter finished his own sorting before the machines completed their job. Minutes passed where he waited on the machine before delivering. To make up this lost time, the management combined routes so that each carrier would have more mail to sort in the morning. Combining routes meant a carrier lost his job. This is one reason why technology was not Peter's favorite thing. Unfortunately this time it replaced Adam.

Peter knew Adam from his training days ten years ago. To become a mailman, he went through two weeks of classroom instruction, and then he shadowed Adam for a week, learning his daily routine. Then Adam and Peter switched roles the following week. Adam talked about some of the main points of delivering, but they also discussed sports, families, or whatever else came to mind.

Early in the training, Adam told him, "You are the eyes of the community." Adam had all kinds of stories from previous experiences. One of Peter's favorite was Jeremy. Jeremy was a young boy he and Adam saw outside playing basketball everyday. Adam would always stop, shoot a few shots until he made one, then keep on going. Jeremy smiled at them as they left and resumed his solitary play. One day Peter asked why he never got a group of guys together to play. Jeremy said he was home schooled and didn't

know many kids. Apparently his parents noticed this, and for high school they sent him to the local public school, Tallmadge Central, where he became a Titan. Peter followed his scores in the paper, and during his junior year he made first team all-district and led the team to the district finals. Adam and Peter joked about how well they trained their young Titan phenom.

As he remembered these stories, he realized he didn't talk to Adam as much as he used to. For about the past two years he'd only seen him in the mornings and even then it was just a quick hello. His workspace was across the warehouse so their paths didn't cross regularly. Sometimes they would stop and say hello, but with the increased workload nobody talked for long.

After a day that seemed to exist more in the past than in the present, arriving home was a welcome comfort. The emotional toll made him physically tired. Ten minutes after he walking through the door he fell asleep on the couch next to Jolly. He awoke when the telephone yanked him from dreaming.

"Hello," he said in a deep morning voice.

"Hey Pete, this is Andrew."

"Hey."

"Were you still planning on coming for dinner?"

"Yeah, of course. What time is it?" Peter's head turned looking for a clock in the room.

"It's almost six."

“What!” Peter sat up. “I’m sorry, I must’ve overslept. I’ll be over soon, just give me a few minutes to change my clothes.”

Jolly leapt into the car excited that she was going on a drive somewhere. After pulling into Andrew’s drive and ringing the doorbell, the front door opened. Chaos followed. Jolly tore through the house looking for Andrew’s two sons. Andrew’s wife Madeline nearly lost the basket of garlic bread she held in her hands as Jolly zipped through the kitchen and into the living room. Small footsteps could be heard pounding down the stairs. A squeal of delight and the sound of a tongue smearing itself across a soft surface made it a very happy reunion.

“Hi Madeline, sorry about that,” Peter said following Andrew into the kitchen. Madeline turned and looked at him with faded blue eyes. Her brownish hair usually tumbled down just below her shoulders, but now it sat high on her head in a ponytail. Red spaghetti sauce lined her fingers and some seemed to have gotten on her blue jeans as well. Her burnt orange shirt hinted at the coming season of fall. By no means a fragile woman, she had obviously spent plenty of time chasing around two energetic boys.

“Oh that’s OK,” she said smiling and placing the garlic bread on the table. “I wouldn’t have expected anything else from that dog of yours.”

“She can be a bit crazy at times. Although I don’t suppose she comes close to your sons. How are Alan and Jake doing? Didn’t Alan have a birthday party last week or something?”

“Yep. Lots of little kids running around, dropping cake on the floor, that kind of stuff. There was one little boy who’s Alan’s age and he couldn’t find a spoon for his ice

cream, so instead of coming and asking me for one, he proceeded to stick his face into the bowl and eat it out bit by bit. He looked like an alien by the end, or maybe a nicer version of the Grinch—green streaks of mint chocolate chip all over him with little brown spots where the chips melted. It wasn't until Jake came in and told me what he was doing that I cleaned him up, but by that time I think he actually liked the look.”

“You should've seen this boy,” Andrew said. “He was a mess.”

“That's what being a little kid is about though, right? Getting all messy and making your parents clean you up.”

“If you're one of my kids it is,” Madeline commented.

“So Alan is six now, right? Which means Jake is ten?”

“Nine actually. He'll turn ten this coming February.”

The kitchen was filled with a rich garlic aroma. The smell filled Peter's nose and mouth and caused his stomach to grumble. The tan kitchen tile sported a few toys ready for battle in different places. Peter even spotted an action hero on the dark brown countertops next to the pile of dishes.

“Nothing fancy tonight,” Madeline said. “Just some lasagna and garlic bread.”

“Nothing fancy? You do know of course that lasagna is pretty much my favorite dish. And I know it's gotta take a while to make, all those layers and stuff. If I'd known we were having that, I wouldn't have overslept.”

“How many grown professional men sleep from four to six in the afternoon?”

Andrew asked. “I do apologize for waking you up, but that is an odd time to be sleeping. I don't think I've taken a nap since Jake was born.”

A tennis ball bounced into the kitchen and Jolly came flying in after it. She looked at her competitors and quickly snatched the ball before they could grab it. She ran back into the living room where Jake and Alan waited.

“Actually I was sleeping because of some of the stuff that happened at work today.”

“Really? What happened?” Andrew asked.

Peter let out a small sigh. “The gist of it is Adam, who was sort of my mentor mailman and showed me a lot about what it means to be a good carrier, lost his job. I’ll tell you more about it after dinner,” Peter said as the boys and Jolly came into the kitchen. “Right now that lasagna smells pretty awesome.”

They sat down at the table, but the boys were sent back into the kitchen to wash the dog slobber off their hands. Jolly followed but Peter took her back into the living room and told her not to come into the dining room. She obeyed but barely. She sat inches in behind the doorframe and watched the entire meal.

The food was fantastic. Peter rarely ate lasagna since it was a big dish and he cooked for one most nights. The boys were funny, sharing about their school days and the latest recess drama (“Billy said I knocked him over when I went to catch the ball but I didn’t. He just fell over. I caught the ball fair and square.”) Alan was beginning to learn the alphabet and read a few lines from a book.

After most of the lasagna was gone and the garlic bread completely eaten, Madeline took the kids downstairs along with Jolly. Andrew made coffee and offered some to Peter who said he would be fine with just water for now. They went into the

living room where Andrew sat in the recliner chair while Peter sat on the couch. A coffee table sat between them.

“So tell me more about this guy who lost his job today? You sounded kind of shook up about it,” Andrew asked.

“It’s all very weird, very sudden. Usually rumors start circulating or something if somebody is in danger of being laid off, but today I just walked in and boom, Adam is gone.”

“I was going to ask about that. Aren’t postal workers unionized or something?”

“We are, and I’m guessing our union representative is doing something. It’s a complicated process. First, she files a grievance, then it goes from there to level two, then finally arbitration. But in the meantime he isn’t allowed to work,” Peter said.

“So there’s a chance he could come back?”

“There’s a chance, not a great one, and it’ll be at least a couple of months I think. I don’t know, we’ll see what happens I guess. I haven’t talked to him much lately so I’m not sure what’s going on.”

“Sorry to hear about that. I remember when a guy at my work lost his job. It really shook the office for a couple of days,” Andrew said. “Anyway, not to avoid this topic or anything, but this is that letter I told you about.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a folded, yellowed piece of paper.

Peter took the paper from Andrew’s outstretched hand and opened it, somewhat afraid of what might be inside.

*My lige lady, generally, quod he,
Wommen desiren to have sovereynetee
As wel over his housbond as hir love,
And for to been in maistrie hym above.
This is youre mooste desir, thogh ye me kille.
Dooth as yow list; I am heer at youre wille.*

At the bottom of the page the word “PETER” was printed in capital letters.

Peter closed his eyes and rubbed his eyebrows and forehead. This day was not improving. Of course he recognized the letter, it looked like the other two he received. He tossed the paper onto the coffee table and he leaned back into the couch.

“What?” Andrew asked, seeing the recognition in Peter’s face. “Have you seen this letter before?”

“Yes and no,” Peter explained. “It looks like something I got in the mail a few days ago, but it might be different.”

“Do you know what it is?”

“No, I don’t, that’s what’s weird. I keep on getting these things, but whoever is sending them obviously doesn’t understand that I don’t speak their language.”

“It does kind of look like English though,” Andrew suggested and studied the words. “See, it looks like somebody is talking to a liege lady, whatever that is, and says that women desire to have...something. So verity? Sobriety? Those don’t make sense. Soverignly? Sovereignty? Women desire to have sovereignty? Does that make sense?”

“I guess so, but if I was you I wouldn’t waste time trying to figure it out. I think someone is pranking us.”

Andrew looked up from the paper. “Well, what does your letter say? Maybe this letter would make more sense if I saw yours. Your name is written on the bottom here.”

“Give me a minute, it’s out in my car. I was hoping your letter wouldn’t look like mine so we wouldn’t need to compare them.”

Peter walked out to the car and grabbed his journal with the folded letter inside. When he came back into the living room, Andrew sat at the computer staring at some text on the screen.

“I thought I’d check online,” Andrew said. “I didn’t think to do this before because I assumed you knew what the letter was about, but since you don’t I figured I might as well start searching.”

“What’d you find?” Peter asked and walked over behind him. He placed his arm against the back of the chair and leaned forward.

“The Wife of Bath,” Andrew said.

Peter turned his head and listened for running water upstairs. Confused and uncomfortable, he asked, “Why is Madeline taking a bath? Do you mean she’s giving the kids a bath?”

“What? No. I said ‘The Wife of Bath.’ It’s an old story written by some guy.”

“Wait, scroll up, I think I just saw his name,” Peter said.

“Geoffrey Chaucer,” they said in unison.

“That name does sound familiar,” Peter realized.

“Oh, well yeah, of course it does,” Andrew said while pointing to the screen.

“He’s the guy who wrote the Canterbury Tales.”

“That sounds familiar too. What are those?”

“They’re a collection of stories if I’m remembering correctly. It’s been nearly ten years since my college literature course. I don’t remember much about them though.”

“That’s right, I think I learned about him in a high school English course. If only Mrs. Frivaldi could see how much I’m using everything I learned in there.”

“Here’s a link to his biography. Geoffrey Chaucer was born in London... some stuff about his family... says he began working on the Canterbury tales in the 1380s—”

“So he was from England? Well why can’t I understand his writing then?”

“He lived in the 14th century. English has changed quite a bit since then. It says here that he wrote his stuff in what is now called Middle English.”

“That doesn’t help us understand what they mean. Here, click that link there.”

“Where?” Andrew asked.

“In the middle of the page below the ‘win a free cruise’ ad, the link that says ‘In Modern English.’” For the first time since receiving the strange letters, Peter felt hopeful that maybe he could understand them.

The text on the page changed from gibberish to English words. Andrew read:

“Now in the olden days of King Arthur, of whom the Britons speak with great honor, All this wide land was land of fairy.”

“King Arthur! He’s in one of my letters. Look.” Peter pulled the letter from the journal and showed it to Andrew. “Read the last line.”

“And switch pursuit unto the King Arthur. Um, OK. You’re right though, King Arthur is definitely in there.”

“Is that line translated somewhere in Modern English on that Internet page?”

“Maybe, but I don’t know what line it is.” They both paused thinking for a moment. The letters were in Middle English and came from a guy who lived almost six hundred years ago.

“Wait, here we go. Give me your letter. I’ll try to find this line on the Middle English page,” and Andrew typed in ‘*And happed that, allone as he was born*’ into the “Find” text box and clicked enter. Immediately the words were highlighted towards the beginning of the tale.

“And there’s the line number beside it, so now I’ll just click over here to the Modern English...scroll down a little bit... and there it is. That’s your letter in regular English.”

Peter read the translation and began feeling uneasy.

“Hey Andrew,” he asked, his voice sounding airy and distracted. “What’s a maidenhead?”

“A maidenhead? I think it’s another word for... wait, let me check. I don’t want to be wrong on this and sound stupid.” He opened another web page, typed in dictionary.com, and entered the word “maidenhead.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought. Says here it’s a term usually used to refer to a woman’s virginity.”

Peter's face turned white and he inhaled deeply. His stomach became nauseated and his muscles loosened to the point of collapsing. The memory stirred. The woman's face, the hand over her mouth. No, it can't be.

"Are you OK?" Andrew stood and walked around the chair grabbing Peter's bad shoulder. The pain burst down his arm and he stepped backwards.

"Whoa, you look sick, physically sick. Why don't you sit down and I'll get you some Tylenol or something."

Peter sat down, his head still spinning. He heard Andrew leave the room and call down the stairs to Madeline to ask where the Tylenol was. The voices sounded distant as if calling from another world. Andrew's footsteps echoed up the stairs and Peter was alone. Completely alone. He stared at the burning fire, the heat rising in his body, his face now flushed and red. He closed his eyes. "Go away," he murmured to the woman's pleading face. "Go away." The letters were just a joke, a prank or something. Now the wound lay open again. All the time spent forgetting and covering up. Should he tell Andrew?

He felt sick and needed to go home soon. Andrew reentered the room with some pills and Peter swallowed them in one gulp.

"What happened? One minute I was just reading a definition and the next I thought you were going to collapse right in front of my eyes. Are you feeling OK?"

His heart rate returned to normal levels and breathing became easier. He tried to smile to calm Andrew's fears, but all he could manage was a lopsided grin.

"Are you sick? Cause I can get you something else," Andrew said.

“No, really, I’ll be OK. It’s just that letter, it just... reminded me of something, that’s all,” Peter stuttered.

“Take it easy for a few minutes then.”

“Thanks. Really though, I should be going. It’s getting late and probably some sleep would help.”

Andrew looked at him with a wrinkled brow: “Are you at least going to tell me what made you sick all of a sudden?”

“I told you, just too much food tonight I think. I just need to go.”

“No, you said the letter made you sick, that it reminded you of something.”

Andrew continued staring at him strangely making Peter feel uncomfortable. The memory flashed in his brain and he cringed.

Peter felt the urge to walk out. What was he doing? This was Andrew sitting in front of him. Ever since that definition he’d wanted to bury his head in dirt. Why couldn’t he tell him? What held him back?

His body felt exhausted from the day and his mind threatened to close down. But the wound still lay there, and Peter knew it was time—time to tell someone. Two years of hiding it, but now it was time.

“I should tell you something,” Peter admitted, his voice shaking but growing steady.

“You don’t have to tell me anything if you don’t want to. It’s just if you’re feeling sick and need something I want to know.”

“Maybe after I’m done talking you’ll understand a little better.”

Peter opened his mouth to speak but no words came. He'd tried to forget this memory for so long that when he needed to access it he couldn't find the right words. He tried to find someplace comfortable to start.

"How long have we known each other?" Peter asked.

Andrew gave him a puzzled look. "Ever since you became my mailman, so I guess that's been about two years."

"Right. I've been delivering here about two years, but I've been a mailman for almost ten years, so for eight years I delivered a different route, one that was closer to my house actually. Maybe I mentioned this to you before, I don't know."

"So about two years ago I switched to this route. But I don't think I ever told you why I switched routes. In fact, I've never told anyone the real reason why I switched. When people asked, I would usually just say I needed a change of scenery or something like that. The real reason is sort of complicated and a little, er, disturbing too."

"I really liked my last route. The people on it were awesome and loved seeing me. It was a nice area of town and strange as it sounds, it was one of those things where I actually looked forward to going to work some days. Not to mention that that route had Sheri on it. Have I ever told you about her?"

"Sheri? No, I don't remember you talking about a Sheri," Andrew replied.

"Have you ever heard of 'Tasteful Treasures'? It's a bakery and candy store across town. Anyway, she's the owner. So since she owns the place, this rich chocolate aroma always surrounded her, and I'm not kidding, every time we passed my taste buds noticed. She lived in one of the apartment complexes I delivered to. We talked a few

times and she gave me her business card, but I was happy with just seeing her during the day for the most part.”

“Did you ever call her?”

“No, I never did,” Peter said glancing down at the floor. “But that’s not what I’m talking about anyway. All I’m trying to say is I loved this route. Leaving it was one of the hardest decisions I ever made.”

“I think it was the second week in September two years ago. The weather was beginning to cool, and the skies were overcast and dark. It was very dark actually, but kids were still outside playing football or soccer, and I was delivering my route the same way I always do; waving hello to the regulars and people outside. I was almost through all my stops when it happened.”

“Towards the end of my route were these two apartment buildings that are close together but still far enough apart for a narrow alleyway in between ’em. The alley wasn’t pitch black with graffiti on the side or anything, but the apartments blocked the sun enough to cast a long shadow into it. And it was set back far enough from the street that it was difficult to see what was on the other side of it.”

“I walked by these apartments everyday and never took much notice of them. But on this day, as I walked past, I heard a voice. I stopped and looked around but didn’t see anyone, so I began walking again. As soon as I took another step, I heard the voice again. It was a female voice, and I thought it said ‘help.’ It was coming from the direction of the alley, but I couldn’t see into it very well. I slowly walked towards where I thought the voice was coming from and called out to see if anyone was down there. Nobody

answered, but as I came closer to the alley's entrance I saw a black muzzle emerge from the shadow and point directly at me."

Andrew's eyes opened wide and he set the coffee down.

"Somebody was pointing what looked like a gun directly at me. I'm not making this up. Believe me, I'm definitely not making this up. So I stop walking and feel my heart began to pound. It was the most scared I've ever been in my life, I mean I'm really panicking, but somehow it gets worse."

"As my eyes begin adjusting to the darkness of the alley, I see the man that was holding the gun. He was big, but what worried me was what he held in his other arm. The small shape of a woman was pressed tightly against his chest with his hand over her mouth. Her shirt collar looked stretched and fell down one of her shoulders. Her face twisted into frightened expressions, and tears streaked down the sides of her cheek. But it was her eyes—she just looked at me, pleading with those eyes to do something, to save her. Those eyes..." Peter's voice trailed off and his own eyes became moist.

"She just stared at me hoping I would do something. But what could I do? The man was pointing a gun at me! He stood there, not moving, and not saying a word. I opened my mouth to say something but couldn't. What was I supposed to say? Let her go? Take me instead or something? I just stood there, absolutely frozen to the ground."

"The man began backing slowly into the alleyway. I thought about chasing after him, but my legs would not move; that gun still pointed at my chest. I didn't know what to do. He continued backing away until the two of them disappeared out of the other side of the alleyway. I continued to stand there and stare. I heard a car start and then heard it drive away. I don't know what happened after that, but I've got a pretty good idea."

It was out. Peter felt filthy and exposed. Andrew continued staring at his face and not saying anything. A minute passed before either one found the strength to speak again.

“That’s awful,” Andrew expressed with sinking tone.

Another few seconds passed.

“So that’s why I switched routes,” Peter said, continuing the story. “I went back again the next day, but as I walked past that alleyway I could feel my insides tightening up. Some days I even thought I saw that woman’s face looking at me, peering from the darkness with the tears on her cheeks. It became too much. I began dreading having to walk by there and my days were miserable because I knew that it waited for me at the end of the day. I had to get out of that route and away from that place. ”

“So that’s why I became sick few minutes ago or whatever it was that happened. That memory always makes me weak and sick whenever I think about it too much.”

Andrew looked at him with thoughts and questions behind his eyes. “So why did you remember it all of a sudden? We were just sitting by the computer and then you looked sick. All I did was read the definition of that word you asked about.”

Peter stood up and walked over the computer screen, which still displayed the modern translation of “The Wife of Bath’s Tale.” He pointed to the paragraph. Andrew followed him over and read the lines.

“He saw a maiden walking through the corn,” Andrew spoke softly, “From whom, in spite of all she did and said, straightway by force he took her maidenhead; for which violation was there such clamor, and such appealing unto King Arthur.” He paused a moment to think about the lines. Ten seconds passed before Andrew’s furrowed brow changed to one of recognition.

“Now do you understand?” asked Peter.

“Yeah. It’s talking about a knight, er, jumping some lady in a field.”

“So the question now is,” Andrew continued, “why is somebody sending you something about this?”

Peter felt tired and worn-out. The explanation drained his physical and emotional energy and the last thing he wanted to do was solve questions that had no obvious answers.

“I just really need to be going. I’m sorry. We can talk about this some other time but right now my brain is shutting down. What time is it anyway?”

“Whoa, it’s almost 10:30,” Andrew said after checking his watch. “I’m sorry about keeping you here so late. But look, Peter,” and his tone became serious, “I’m really sorry about what you said earlier. That really is a life-changing story. I am glad you told me though cause dealing with stuff like that is never easy on your own.”

“Yeah, I know. Gotta do whatcha gotta do I guess, but thanks, I appreciate it,” and they remained silent for a few moments unsure of what to do next. Peter picked up the journal and letter.

“Where’s Jolly?” Peter asked, trying to put some spirit back into his voice.

“Uh, I think Madeline left her downstairs. I’ll get her.”

A few seconds later Jolly rushed up the stairs and ran around Peter’s legs.

“Hey there girl. It’s alright. It’s OK,” and he bent over and hugged her tight with his eyes closed. He held her for a few moments while thinking about other things.

“Thanks Jolly dog,” he said letting go. Andrew came back up the stairs.

“Kids still up?” Peter asked.

“No, Madeline put them to bed a little while ago.”

“Tell Madeline I said thanks again for the lasagna, I really did like it. And thanks for listening. I’ll talk to you tomorrow. Will you be home in the evening?”

“Yeah, I should be.”

Peter walked through the front door with Jolly at his heels and sat down in his car. “What just happened,” he thought feeling like someone stole all the strength from his body. “These letters, why did I even get one? Why did Andrew get one? I don’t believe I just talked about that day.”

His mind went faster as he drove home. Adam. Middle English. The woman’s face. His eyelids threatened to close if he didn’t focus. He pulled into the drive and went upstairs and collapsed into his bed. Jolly jumped up beside him and lay next to her master’s head. “Why this, and why now?” were the last thoughts Peter remembered before the night swallowed him.

[Author's Note: The story now skips the middle portion of the novel and proceeds to the end of the story. The events listed below will help clarify some of the events to help connect the two sections:

- The three clues in Middle English are pieced together. Andrew and Peter discover that the "Wife of Bath's Tale" is about a maiden who is violated by a knight and the knight's punishment is he must discover what women most desire. According to the tale, women most desire sovereignty of their lives.*
- We learn that Adam was not fired, but instead chose to quit. While the reasons are not immediately apparent, it seems as though he went through a traumatic experience possibly similar to Peter's.*
- Due to Andrew's prompting, Peter visits Sheri at her store and they begin talking and seeing each other regularly.*
- Peter continues to receive clues and veiled references through friends and other sources, but never fully understands what is happening or if anything is happening at all.*
- Peter is captured and imprisoned for one week in complete darkness. He is kept in a room with four bare walls, but does not know why he is there.*

The following section picks up immediately after this last development.

Chapter 12 – *That Would Not Stay Him*

When Peter awoke, his arms and legs were bound to a chair. Four gray walls surrounded him; a large window of glass sat in the wall in front of him. It looked like an interrogation room he'd seen on TV, with people standing on the other side of the glass watching, taking notes perhaps. Everything behind the glass was dark.

Time passed. The chair he sat in was solid and heavy. He shifted his legs and rear end and the chair moved a few inches to the left, but not much at all. With his feet strapped he couldn't push against anything, and he wondered if this chair would be his prison for the next week. Still, the large pane of glass seemed to stare back at him, observing every movement.

His legs and arms began to ache. The chair shifted while he moved and he found it could tip to one side just enough to lift the opposite legs off the ground. He thought about tipping all the way over, but he realized he would then be bound to a chair while lying on the floor, probably with a fresh bump on his head.

A door creaked behind him. Peter heard high-heeled shoes clicking on the floor. He turned his neck but couldn't see anyone.

“Greetings, Mr. Ellis,” an unfamiliar woman's voice said.

The voice made him shiver. Was this the person? Had she locked him in that room?

“Who are you?” He still couldn't see her face as she stood behind him.

“Ay, 'tis the question you must wonder the most. But I cannot provide a glib ‘I am thus’ or ‘my name is as follows,’ for that would severely disappoint both you and I.

And who I am cannot be given in a single word, a solitary name, for that would only demean the cause,” she said.

Peter’s brain tripped and stumbled. What did she say? His question seemed simple, but that answer was staggering. And did she even say an answer in all that? He smiled a little, thinking this must be a joke.

“*‘I thought ten thousand swords must have leaped from their scabbards to avenge even a look that threatened her with insult. The age of chivalry is gone.’* Do you insult me, Mr. Ellis?”

“No,” Peter said, feeling confused and uncertain of what this woman was saying or if he should be scared, “it’s just... I don’t know what to say really. Is this a joke?”

“I give you my utmost assurance that it is not,” the woman’s voice said from behind his shoulder. “If a title would increase your comfort, you may call me Eva, but that is neither my name nor my heritage.”

“OK, Eva, why am I here?” Peter said, trying to sound confident.

“You will understand in a moment, for *‘full hard it is to read aright, the course of heavenly cause, or understand the secret meaning of the eternal might, that rules men’s ways, and rules the thoughts of living right.’* Words, Mr. Ellis, precious words. Do you understand what rules your ways?”

“Uh, I think so,” Peter paused, trying to understand what she was asking. “I’ve always tried to be a kind person, honest—”

“Yet you failed,” Eva’s voice came cold and cutting.

Peter’s thoughts halted at the sudden accusation. “This woman is crazy, and now she’s angry at me about something,” he thought.

“What do you want with me? I don’t have anything.”

“Don’t placate me with your pitiful pleas for preservation!” Eva said with malice in her words. The spit landed on the back of Peter’s neck. “Doth my pursuit end in worldly riches? No, dear Mr. Ellis, my aim is much loftier, and you are but a piece.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I want healing,” and the woman’s heels began clicking on the cold concrete as she circled around in front of him, “I want recompense. Place me on the funeral barge! *‘For I will go unto the vale of Avalon to heal me of my grievous wound: and if thou hear never more of me, pray for my soul.’* But alas he had his time, his knights, his quests and grail, and now it is dead. *Chivalrie ec morte*. I will bring about the new era.”

Eva now stood in front of him, casting an unflinching glare that blazed through his outward appearance and seemed to see into his mind. Terror crept into his throat, making it hard to breathe. Yet somehow she looked familiar, somehow Peter recognized this woman, but every time he seemed to close in, it slipped away.

“You look familiar,” he said slowly.

“I had hoped you might say so,” and she turned from him and looked at the wall.

Long black hair tumbled down behind her ears and stopped at her waist. She looked like she could have been Peter’s age, but deep lines of grief and stress added time to her face. The lines crinkled her forehead and formed small, dark bags under her eyes. At some point this woman was beautiful, but that beauty had faded like autumn yielding to winter. She wore black and her clothes seemed to make her body disappear leaving her head and that long, flowing black hair.

She now turned and walked back towards him. She leaned in close and Peter felt her breath on his neck as chills danced down his spine and he smelled faded perfume.

She leaned in close and whispered, “Let the reformation begin, Mr. Ellis, for you are to become a better person.” The lights shut off. Peter hoped the police found the building and cut the lights. Or maybe she was the police; he was in an interrogation room after all. The lights behind the window turned on and even with the puzzlement over Eva’s words, in one second of identification his world shook and collapsed. His stomach wretched and jaw dropped when he saw the person sitting across from him on the other side of the glass: Sheri.

“Wh—why? Why is...are... you doing—” the words tumbled out of Peter’s mouth as true fear gripped him. Sheri didn’t look physically harmed. She still wore her normal work clothes with the store logo on the chest. Her face appeared calm and she didn’t show the signs of fear Peter fought against. He could imagine the chocolate aroma that always surrounded her figure.

Sheri looked through the glass into Peter’s room. He forced a weak smile from his lips, trying to hide his own fear and appear stable. He mouthed “Hello” and “How are you?”, but she made no response. Peter was startled that her eyes didn’t show the slightest trace of recognition. He mouthed “What’s wrong?” No response. Her eyes weren’t quite focusing on him though; they didn’t seem to be focusing on anything at all.

“What’s wrong. Something’s wrong. Why doesn’t she know who I am?” he said, his voice betraying panic.

“A fair question, but not easy to solve. Why don’t you call to her?”

He glared at Eva then cleared his throat. “Sheri! Sheri!” Eva’s laughter was the only response; Sheri’s eyes remained fixed somewhere else in the room.

“She can’t hear me,” he said feeling angry. “She can’t see me either! I don’t know what you’re doing or why I’m here, but leave Sheri out of it. You’re breaking the law and you’re going to jail for this.”

“Impressive, Mr. Ellis. You show anger, but what of respect? Do you not deem me worthy of your honor? As a lady I am, yet you scorn my essence. For that, you will be punished,” and she rose her arm and backhanded Peter across the face. “And it will grow worse before the dawn breaks.”

Peter tasted blood. Recognition continued to prick at his consciousness, but he did not know from where or when.

“How do I know you?” he demanded.

“Through the eons and ages I survive to bring forth the next generation—”

Peter interrupted: “You’ve been through all that, but I know you from somewhere. I know I’ve seen your face.”

“Have you?” her voice full of ridicule and contempt. “Perhaps some aids for my noble student.” Eva reached behind her and brought out a gun.

The air left Peter’s lungs and he struggled to fill them again. “This can’t be happening,” swirled in his mind. Was he still dreaming? The gun now pointed at his head and Peter shut his eyes, his heart throbbing in an unnatural rhythm.

“Don’t, please don’t,” and fear seized every muscle, every joint and caused him to shake. Eva smiled, then pointed the gun at her own head.

“And at the closing of the day, she loosed the chain and down she lay, the broad stream bore her far away,” Eva murmured closing her eyes, her finger pressed to the trigger.

“What?” Peter gasped, utterly confused at these turn of events.

Her eyes slid open and a passive calm overtook her features. “Fool,” she said.

“Remember.”

Peter sat imprisoned in the chair, mesmerized by the look on Eva’s face. The face. The eyes. The gun pointing to her head. Those eyes.

“You!” and his blood seemed to chill. “No, I don’t believe it. This really can’t be happening.” The alleyway, the face of the woman in the alleyway, and her eyes pleading for help. The image now stood in front of him, an exact replica of that day two years ago. Sharp pinpricks arose on the back of his neck; the taste of bile surged into his mouth. “You’re the woman in that alleyway two years ago—” and he gasped as the words left his mouth.

“Yes, ‘tis I,” and she lowered the gun and flung it at Peter’s chest. He braced for impact, but was surprised when a heavy piece of plastic struck him and fell to the floor.

“That’s not real?”

“Of course not. Did lovely Queen Guinevere utilize trivial weapons of warfare to train Arthur? No, and nor will I. I will use the Queen’s methods, though, for much can be gained from shame.”

Peter stared at the floor, his eyes downcast with shame. “I am sorry about that day. I think about it all the time. I wish I could’ve done something.”

Eva turned and looked at him, a hint of surprise forming around her eyes.

“A noble sentiment, good Mr. Ellis. Your predecessors have not been as forthright, and for that I commend you. The rebirth process is time intensive and you have taken the first step.”

“Wait, my predecessors? Have you trapped others in here besides me?”

“This is of no matter to you. Right now we will begin transforming you into that which was lost,” Eva said.

“You brought me here for a transformation of some sort?” Peter asked, not understanding his own question.

“But why the questions? A murderer’s guilt etches across your face. Be still, *‘one must know oneself, if this does not serve to discover truth, it at least serves as a rule of life and there is nothing better.’*”

“Then why am I here!” Peter said, annoyed with the double-talk and strange language.

“In due time, young sir.” She now stood facing him. “You are here because of the travesty committed by your sex. For the neglect of Arthur that made the Queen an adulterer, the neglect of Adam that caused Eve to sin. For the derisive neglect men exemplify everyday, turning their gaze while others are crushed by their blind perception, destroyed by inadequacy.”

“If you are going to punish me, just do it and get it over with.”

“You are not listening!” and anger flashed in Eva’s eyes. “Punishment is not my aim; you must learn! As a race you suffer and disparage those around you. The plague is you—a small infection that festers into a disregard for women’s desperate pleas.”

“But what could I do?” he replied, gathering up a bit of courage. “I had nothing except a can of pepper spray in my pocket while he had a gun pointing at me. If I’d come after you, I would’ve been shot.”

“Then endure the wound!” Eva whirled on him and glared. Peter shrunk a bit, but found himself feeling defensive.

“And die? Is that what you wanted from me? I’m sorry about what happened that day, I really am. If I could change something now I would.”

“Your paltry understanding, this isn’t about you. *‘Where is the ruler of this folk? I would gladly look upon that hero, and have speech with him.’* And will you answer thus? Will you answer, *‘I beseech ye, my lord, let this venture be mine. Would ye but bid me rise from this seat, and stand by your side, so that my liege lady thought it not ill, then would I come to your counsel before this goodly court.’* Gawain harbored the axe and swung, will you, Mr. Ellis? Or will you tarry longer, running in fear. People suffer when that happens. I suffer when that happens.”

Peter thought, “This woman is a real life psychotic,” but said, “Why not strike back at the one who attacked you? Isn’t he the one really to blame for all of this?”

“Perhaps, but where is Lancelot? Where is St. George? Where are the knights of action, willing to slay the dragon?”

“No, I don’t think so,” Peter replied, finding words and confidence. “Sometimes it takes courage not to act. There are times, but what about people left behind? No, whatever it is you want, whatever idea you have in your mind is wrong. And we mess up. You’re right, but we can only hope to do better the next time. But what you are doing, what you are trying to teach, is wrong.” Peter stopped, trying to think of the right words.

“We must live day-to-day in a way that makes sense. That’s what makes me who I am, not what we do in the when your dragon attacks, but what we do daily to show our love and protection to those around us.” He took a deep breath bracing for another punishment from Eva.

“Eloquent oration, good sir. Very articulate. Bear witness to love and protection against the dragon, for now you shall see; now you shall understand scarring. Be reborn through what your eyes behold.”

She turned and left the room. Were those words a threat? Peter didn’t like how they sounded. He couldn’t see anything right now, just Sheri sitting in front of him, struggling against her bonds but remaining trapped.

A man entered Sheri’s room and began circling her chair. Sheri’s face became uneasy. Peter saw her mouth move but the man didn’t seem to respond. Recognition swirled around Peter’s brain the same way it’d done before. He’d seen this man. Eva reentered Peter’s room and stood next to him. Peter looked at Eva, then at the man, then repeated the process, coming closer to remembering after each glance. Finally, the pieces fell together.

“A setup!” He stared at her breathlessly. “That whole day was a setup!” he yelled. “That’s the man in the alley with the gun to your head!”

Relief came over him at first, realizing that two years ago the worse didn’t happen. Somehow Eva knew this man; but relief changed to anger in a moment, then to fury. These last two years, the second-guessing and pain he felt when he thought of that day. And for what? For a setup? Some sort of game Eva played?

“You’re sick,” Peter said, his tone filled with disgust.

“Do you pretend to know me?” she spat at him, backhanding him in the face and leaving Peter’s eyes red and watery. “Much commendation on your deduction; many of the others did not understand until the end, while some not at all.”

“The end? The end of what?”

Eva turned and smiled at him, then looked back through the glass at Sheri. Meanwhile, the man moved next to Sheri and knelt down beside her. Sheri tried to lean back to create distance between them. The man continued to draw closer.

“What is he doing? What’s happening?” Eva continued smiling as if trying to reassure him that this nightmare was really happening.

The man leaned in and kissed Sheri on the cheek. She screamed and began shaking, her hair bouncing with each gasp of breath. She began yelling for help.

“God no,” Peter murmured.

The man reached up and unbuttoned the top button of Sheri’s polo. Tears formed in her eyes and her face turned red and blustery. She appeared to be gasping for breath, crying and wailing at the same time.

“Stop, please! Eva! I’ll do anything! Tell that man to stop!” He pleaded but Eva remained steadfast.

“Poor damsel, wherefore art thou savior? Where shall she find hope in a barren land? Is it in love and protection?”

Vomit rose in his throat as the man undid another button. Sheri’s shirt slipped over her shoulder revealing a white bra strap. Peter started rocking back and forth; the chair moved slightly. He stopped then started again. He started swaying back and forth as hard as he could with his body still trapped.

“Stop,” Eva commanded, and she reached for his throat.

Before she reached him, he toppled the chair over to his right badly hurting his shoulder. His feet came loose from the floor bindings and he let out a grunt of pain. He lay there unmoving as silver specks dotted his vision.

“Fool,” she said, and tried to prop him back upright but could not. She left and came back moments later with the man behind her.

“Set him upright or else this has no meaning,” she said. The man obeyed and Peter saw a gruff, seasoned face with an impassive stare. He sat facing Eva again, but this time pain throbbed through his shoulder.

“Strike him,” Eva commanded. The breath exploded from his body. His lungs burned, searching for more air. “Do this again and your recompense shall be doubled.”

The man left the room and reentered Sheri’s. The look of fear and revulsion returned to her eyes. “Please no,” her lips moved. Peter’s mind raced, trying to think of anything now that his legs were free. He tried to stand up, but he couldn’t lean forward with his hands still tied to the chair. Eva still watched him intently, as if enjoying the effect a disturbing lesson has on its pupil.

He needed his hands free, but how? Cords of rope tightly bound them together. Peter noticed the man had set him much closer to the window this time. If he extended his legs, he could touch the wall with the soles of his shoes. He could kick off the wall and topple over backwards. But what good would that do? The other man would just come back and probably do worse than a stomach punch this time. What if I crack my head on the concrete floor? What if I blackout right then? He debated how dangerous it would be

until the man slipped his hand under Sheri's shirt. Sheri wretched and threw up on him. Without a second thought, Peter's legs shot forward and his world turned upside down.

He began falling backward. The back of the chair hit the concrete with a metallic crunch; his head whiplashed and cracked against floor, causing a burst of pain and dizziness. The world became foggy and blurred. He had to stand up. His hands were now free of the chair but still bound behind his back. He tried not to think about the taste of blood in his mouth and throat.

Eva's footsteps left the room again and locked the door. Peter stood trying to gain his balance. The man in the other room turned his head and left Sheri, her appearance disheveled and her eyes red with emotion and terror. Peter's world spun until he heard a sound outside the door. It began opening, but Peter threw his back against it trying to keep it closed. An idea came and he rigidly pressed the cords against the edge of the door. He began rubbing them up and down, up and down, and the harder the man pressed, the more tension was put on the cords.

The cords popped; his hands were free. The door flung open and shoved Peter towards the glass. Eva and the man stood there, their eyes locked with his.

"You have not learned yet, Mr. Ellis," came Eva's psychotic words. "You must know suffering and humiliation, for from the fire are we purged and restored. The same is true for your lady," she said nodding at Sheri. "And thus it ends. Your effort was most valiant, but until you experience my pain you must stay."

"Your woman feels good, nice soft skin," the man said.

Peter wanted to choke him, but he looked too large to fight.

Peter inched along the glass and into the corner. He began preparing himself to throw a few punches when his foot bumped against something. He looked down and saw the gun.

“Back off, both of you,” he said, picking up the gun.

The man stopped and looked at Eva. She hesitated for a moment before a smile crept back onto her face.

“You joust without substance,” Eva said.

She walked forward and the man followed behind her, looking uncertain.

“Come!” Eva turned on the man and pulled his arm. Peter took the gun and flipped it into the air towards them, handle and nozzle spinning end over end. The man’s eyes followed the gun and Eva turned to follow his gaze. Sharp pain pulsed down Peter’s shoulder as he ran into them then through the door. He was out; he was free—but two sets of footsteps echoed behind him.

The hallways were dimly lit. Peter ran to his left until the hallway came to a T. Neither direction looked better than the other, so he took off to his right, then to the left, then the right again. All of the walls were the same gray concrete he saw everywhere else. Every so often he heard footsteps, but never where they came from.

A few more minutes of running and he found another door and jerked it open: he was back where he started. The room looked the same as when he’d left it, the plastic gun now lying close to the door.

He looked through the glass window and saw Sheri looking much more alert than she did before. She stared to her left and Peter followed her eyes to Eva. She stood

behind the door, a small can in hand. “Apparently only that guy is searching for me then,” he thought. “How do I get to Sheri and get out of here safely?”

He looked through the glass, then at the door behind him, then at Eva. He began pounding on the glass with both fists, and Sheri’s head immediately turned towards him. Eva also looked at the glass and walked out of the room. Peter ran from the room and hid down the corridor. The sound of pounding feet came down the hallway and a sudden wave of panic washed over him. He needed Eva and the man to come from the opposite direction. What if they were coming straight for him? The footsteps began to mix with his pounding heart and Peter became disoriented, losing track of his plan. Fearful of turning and seeing the man’s muscular figure towering over him, the sound of a creaking door greeted his ears. Releasing his breath in one long gasp, he looked around the corner and saw someone’s leg disappearing into the doorway.

He rushed from the hiding spot, grabbed the doorknob, and pulled, slamming the door closed. He secured the lock moments before the handle began to jiggle. Hard knocking and kicking could be heard on the other side of the door. Peter slumped with his hands on his knees, breathing hard. Now to find Sheri.

He made his way around the corridors, taking his time and trying to figure out where he was at each turn. He found a hallway that didn’t look familiar and tiptoed his way along, trying to emulate spies he’d seen on TV.

Another door handle protruded halfway down the passageway. The mental picture of Eva standing on the other side of the door came into focus. Was she still inside? Who did he actually lock in the room? If he opened the door but didn’t go in, she would still be

standing there, listening for his movements and waiting for him with whatever she held in her hand.

Sheri, of course.

He grabbed the handle and gave it a twist before flinging the door open. He briefly caught a glimpse of Sheri still sitting in the chair before retreating beside the hallway doorframe, his back pressed against the concrete while small, itchy beads of sweat trickled down his face.

He tried to steady his voice and said, “Sheri, is that other woman in there standing beside the door?”

The thought that Eva might just turn and hit Sheri entered Peter’s mind, and he now wished he’d thought through this plan a little more. He waited, trying to control his breathing, but it came in heavy pants followed by sharp gasps. He sounded like Jolly after running around the yard for an hour. Eva would know exactly where he was.

“Peter? Is that you?” Sheri’s voice floated through the doorframe.

“Yes it’s me. Is there another woman in there?”

“No, she left a little while ago.”

Peter looked down both hallways fearful of seeing the lumbering man approaching him from one side and Eva coolly strolling towards him from the other.

“So you are alone then?”

“Yes, I think so. I’m not sure though because of this glass window in front of me. Someone could be on the other side.”

A sense of defeat descended on Peter. He now realized that Eva must have unlocked the door on the other side of the glass and now waited for him to free Sheri. It

would take too much time. As soon as they saw him, they would corner both of them in this room. He had to go in there, he had to untie her, and if he did he would be seen and tied up again.

Maybe now was the time to go to the police. Peter began walking down the hallway away from the door and away from Sheri. Eva was waiting for him, so if he came with more people, she would be at the disadvantage. He took two steps and stopped. The police could come and help them; he didn't know how to deal with a psychotic woman like Eva. "I'm just a mailman," he thought. "I can't do anything here." He stood in the hallway weighing his options. If he left, then Sheri would be alone with those two, but he would come back with more people to save her. But what if they took her someplace else? If he went into the room, all he would do is put him and Sheri in danger. He stared down the empty hallway then turned around the other way towards Sheri's room. He turned around again to look down the empty hallway.

He walked into the room. Sheri's eyes locked with his, glossing over with moisture as soon as she saw his face. He reached down and untied her hands and feet in a deliberate motion. She buttoned her shirt and covered her naked shoulder.

"Peter, they might be able to see us. Work faster," Sheri said.

"It's too late," he replied. "If they want to corner us in here, they will."

Sheri's face became panicked.

"Well then do something! Why did you come in here if you knew they would find you again!"

She ran into the hallway and looked both ways. She turned and slammed the door behind door, her eyes wide and fearful.

“They’re both walking down the hallway! If that man comes in here—”, her voice cracked with emotion. She grabbed the chair and shoved it under the door handle.

Peter didn’t answer; he didn’t know what to say. All he knew was standing outside the door was more excruciating than standing here, next to her, even though he knew he was about to be beaten again. He had to be here, regardless of what happened next.

The handle began to turn.

“Help me!” Sheri pleaded. They both put their weight against the chair to brace the door.

“Think, c’mon, think” he said quietly, more to himself than to Sheri. All he had was his clothes, no tools or weapons of any kind. “Do you have anything with you that might help?”

“Uh, no, I don’t think so,” she said in-between breaths. Both were straining hard against the door to keep it from opening, but the door was gradually winning. “We’ll have to use this chair,” Sheri said.

“Use it for what?” Peter asked.

“Use it to knock out whoever comes through that door. On the count of three, I’ll step away from the chair and the door. You fold up the chair. When that guy steps into the room, I’ll distract him and you whack him over the head.”

Peter was impressed. Not a full proof plan, but the best one they had. “OK, ready,” he said.

“Alright. One, two, three!”

Peter snatched away the chair and the door swung open. The man fell through and landed on his knees, confused by the sudden lack of force on the other side of the door. Peter whipped the chair towards the ceiling and brought it crashing down onto his head. The large man crumpled to the floor.

Peter's eyes began stinging and he grabbed his face, the chair dropping to the floor. It felt as though someone poured hot Tabasco sauce directly into his skull. He couldn't see or feel anything; all he could think about was pain. He fell to his knees and Eva stepped over the man's body and into the room, a bottle of pepper spray in hand.

"Enjoying the pain?" she asked with a wry look on her face. The look of control and triumph returned.

"What do you want!" Peter asked, pleading and fury bleeding into his tone.

"Please, just leave us alone," Sheri murmured. Her teeth sounded gritted, and while her voice tried to remain in control, its quivering reflected her obvious fear.

Eva bent down to check the man, whose body remained motionless. A strange expression crossed her face, and she stood to her full height.

"You displease me greatly," pointing towards bloody gash on the back of the man's head. She stared at Peter for a long time, glaring and thinking. "But now the damsel is with her knight," she said turning to Sheri. "I'm sorry, brave sir knight, but your choices will be your end, for an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth is the appropriate retribution," and with that she blasted Peter again with the scalding spray. Sheri screamed and Eva lifted the chair off the ground and swung it at Peter, connecting with his head.

Blood ran down his nose and into his mouth. The saltiness nauseated him; his eyes tried to close but he forced them open. Sheri watched Eva and began to inch backwards. Eva dropped the chair to the floor and pulled the man's body out of the room. He saw Eva's mouth moving but could not hear the words. The door shut and the lock clicked.

"Peter!" Sheri said in a panic. She went over and held Peter's head in her arms. "You need help, you're bleeding badly," and she pushed her sleeve against the open wound on his head. Darkness began engulfing his peripheral vision and the pounding in his head became deafening.

"What should we do? What should we do?" Tears came from her eyes and she rocked back and forth, kneeling beside Peter. "Help me, Peter, help me."

Peter tried to focus one last time and put his hand on Sheri's cheek. He felt tears trickling down his fingers and wrist.

"Sheri, I tried..." he sputtered, "to rescue. I tried, wanted to... thank you—for time..." For one moment his thoughts became clear and his eyes looked directly into hers, and then darkness closed.

He passed into a world between sleeping and consciousness. He heard multiple sets of footsteps in his world and a screaming voice. A door opened and more footsteps followed. His body floated into the air and let go.

[Ending note: This is not the end of the story, but it will be for this project. In the final chapters we learn that Peter did not die. While in the hospital, Sheri tells him what happened in the room. Paramedics entered after hearing her yelling. She went outside and both Peter and the other man were loaded into an ambulance before being taken away. She briefly sees Eva outside before she leaves. Apparently she had called the hospital because of the other man's health. We also learn a bit more about Eva's history, primarily that she was sexually abused as a teenager by her father, which leads to her eventual mission to train and exact revenge on men through twisted means.

This closing summary does not answer all the questions surrounding the characters and plot developments, but will hopefully provide some closure. This concludes the creative project.]