

Mike Gardner's blue eyes were only half focused on the soggy bowl of cornflakes in front of him. His attention was drawn by his wife Janet. She was busily shovelling in her cornflakes, chewing on a piece of toast, and trying to talk to him, all at the same time. She wasn't doing any of them particularly well. He half listened, nodding as he spooned in the soggy flakes and wished she'd shut up.

"Tonight we're going over to the Dickensons." She said happily, as she shoved some toast into her large mouth.

"Do we have to?" Gardner said running his hand through his prematurely thinning brown hair.

"Yes." She said glaring at him over a half raised glass of orange juice. "They're the most important people in the village."

Gardner almost laughed at the statement, almost, but he caught himself in time. To laugh would have been fatal, Janet would have made life miserable for him for the longest time. She never forget the slightest insult.

Yet it was funny, Dickenson was only a storekeeper. He had only one claim to social importance; he was the part time mayor of the village, and his wife was the village clerk. The store was the only one in the village, but it wasn't much of a store, only a hole in the wall affair that smelled of slow decay.

"What time do we have to go?"

"Eight."

"Eight, that's rather early isn't it?" He said looking vacantly out the kitchen window. There was a bed of fresh snow outside, it would be a bad day for delivering mail.

"No, they asked us to come at that hour. I don't want to offend them, it took a long time to get this invitation so don't mess it up, like you did with the Smith's." She said glaring at him, a jagged piece of toast suspended halfway between her mouth and the table.

"I wouldn't dream of it." He said remembering the night. They were a pair of stuffed shirts, who own half of the village, three stores to be precise.

It had been a strange sort of evening, Smith sitting across from them, trying hard not to glare at the both of them for invading the privacy of his home. Gardner was almost trying not to glare back; while Janet and Mrs. Smith tried to talk about almost everything under the sun. Janet had tried to call it a success. She was still waiting for the Smith's to return the visit.

He hated Janet's ideas of socializing in a small village. She couldn't understand that it wasn't like the old neighbourhood. These people were suspicious of outsiders. They wanted to look them over from a distance before they accepted them. If Janet could only wait, in time they would belong. That was Janet's trouble, she couldn't wait. She had never been able to wait.

He got up from the table.

"Where are you going?" She asked.

"To work."

"Isn't it early to leave, it's only eight miles away." She said buttering another slice of toast.

"No I want to avoid the heavy traffic." He said lying. It only took twenty minutes to get to work, but he left as soon as he was finished eating.

"Well, see you tonight." She said biting into the toast.

He bent down to kiss her. She looked at him puzzled for a second, then he turned away. He walked swiftly out of the house into the front yard. He walked swiftly out of the house into the front yard. Gardner

grabbed the tarpaulin and gently pulled it off the car. There was hardly a spot of snow on it.

He got in and started the car, letting the engine run for a few minutes against the morning cold. He thought of the Smiths, they weren't the first people she had socially assaulted and they weren't the last. In a way he felt sorry for poor old Smith. He felt sorry for all of those people she chose to court, yet he could never bring himself to stop her. Besides she wouldn't have let him anyway. She would have flattened him with tears, and if that didn't work, threats. All he could do was hold on and hope she would come around some day.

He put the car into drive and left the house. He liked his old car, it was reliable; not like most of the defective cars on the road now. His wife often pleaded with him to get a much better car, but that was one thing that he refused to do, no matter what she said.

It didn't take long to reach the post office, there was little traffic at seven in the morning. He maneuvered with precision into his parking space, not that it mattered that much, the parking lot was empty. He hauled his thin frame out of the car and went inside. He passed the security guard and walked down the empty hall to the locker-room.

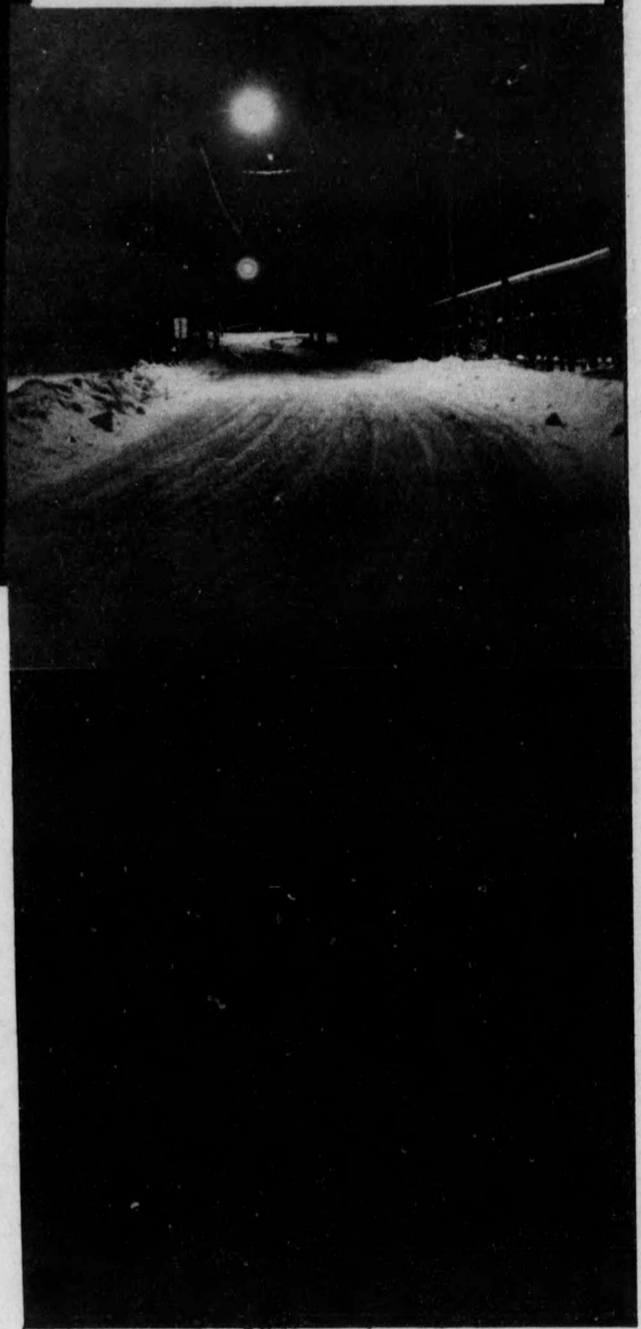
He put a pot of coffee on the hot plate and sat down at the table to await the arrival of the others. It was strange that he had married Janet, he hadn't really loved her. They were fond of each other, but he didn't want to marry her. He only married her because everyone made his life miserable until he did.

They all said she was a girl that would go far. Yeah she went far, she married a mailman. It wasn't supposed to be that way, he was almost finished tech. school, going to be an electrician; but it didn't work out that way. Janet socialized so much that he had to get a job to support her and her living. That was ten years ago. He could be a master electrician by now, making tons of money and supporting her lifestyle instead delivering mail. Yes, if she hadn't been so pushy.

Duffy walked in and sat down beside Gardner. Williams came in right behind him. He helped himself to a cup of coffee then sat down. He took a sip and then asked, "Did you hear the news last night?"

"No!" Gardner said half interestedly as he sipped his coffee. He didn't ask why he should have because Williams would continue to talk any way, whether anyone

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wanted to hear or not.

"Seems someone gunned down an old man last night in the storm."

"So?"

"The old man died in front of a mailbox. The killers set the mailbox on fire as well."

"Huh?"

"They got all the letters except one." "Wierd." Gardner said finishing his coffee, it was time to pick up his mail. He got up, rinsed out his cup and crossed the hall for his bag of mail.

He collected his mail and sat at one of the chewed up tables sorting it out when the superintendent walked in. Gardner noticed he was carrying a slightly blackened envelope in his right hand. He stopped in front of Gardner and dropped it on the table. Gardner stared at the charred edges for a minute then he asked, "What's that?"

"It survived the mailbox fire yesterday." The superintendent said.

"So?"

"You're the lucky man who gets to deliver it." He said turning and walking out of the room.

Gardner stared at the letter's blackened edges for a few seconds longer then he put it in his shirt pocket. He shouldered the mailbag and when outside to the car.

The mail was for Roxbury Heights, a new suburb of the city. Gardner started the car and left the parking lot. He wheeled his way through the slow morning traffic. He liked delivering mail there. It was the only part of the city separated from its neighbours by a