

LETTERS

By Rick Baston



belt of scrawny poplars and fields. He stopped for a moment at a traffic light then moved on rapidly in the suddenly thin traffic. Soon he was in the suburbs.

Yes the boys called him "our rural route mailman" even though the suburb was in the city. He half smiled at the thought as he turned off the main street onto a dirt and snow road that wound through fields of barren white snow broken up occasionally by clumps of tattered poplars. A mile beyond this was Roxbury Heights. The government was going to build a four lane here in the spring to replace the ugliness of the poplars with the ugliness of asphalt.

Gardner glanced into the rearview mirror. Far behind was the blue spec of a car rapidly approaching him. It was very rare that there were any other cars on the road at this time of the morning. It was good to have company he thought.

He thought of the mailbox burning. Why would anyone want to burn mail? Only the perverted and the mentally sick would do things like that. Maybe the old man was the one who did it and someone shot him for it? Maybe? You could never tell, old people did strange things when they got on in years.

He glanced in the mirror again. The blue car was closer now, it was a Camaro, its low slung body filled his mirror. He edged a little closer to the side of the road to give it room to pass. It made him nervous when someone crowded him like that. He let out a sigh when it pulled out to pass.

He frowned as he watched. The passenger's window was rolling down

slowly. Odd behaviour for the middle of winter, but then maybe their windows were fogging up. The car was beside him now. Suddenly the window shattered all over him, the impact shaking his control. The car spun off the road, bouncing over the ditch, half flying through the air until it pancaked in the field. The blue car stopped.

Gardner lay amid the shattered glass, dazed and half blinded by the bleeding cuts from the glass. He began to slowly stir when he heard the car stop. He closed his eyes and stiffened as he heard the crunch of feet in the snow then voices as the door was opened.

"Grab the mailbag, it's in the back."
"Okay, but is the letter there?" the other voice said reaching over Gardner.

"Sure, where else could it be?"
"Yeah, guess you're right, it was luck it survived yesterday, but we got it now." The second voice paused. "What about him?"
"Leave him. He looks half dead, besides he didn't see anything. Let's go."

Gardner lay there listening to their retreating footsteps in the snow until finally the car started and sped away. He slowly raised himself from the remains of his window; then he shoved open the door and ran.

He staggered up the hillside, the cold air freezing the dripping blood on his face, his eyes wide open from panic. He stumbled and fell into the ditch, clawed his way up to the road and ran. He leapt the other ditch and almost fell into the snow face first, but he scarcely noticed it as he ran on.

He ran across the field, the snow a white nothingness, the trees a grey blur. He ran on like a puffing locomotive gone out of control, looking behind every instant for the blue Camaro. He ran until his legs failed him. Then he fell head first into the snow.

He lay there, listening. Listening for the roar of the Camaro when they found out they didn't have the letter. He heard nothing but the occasional crying of the wind. Maybe they were gone he thought. Maybe.

What was that? His head shot up. Was it from the road? No, it, it...was above him? He rolled over on his back and looked at the sky. Flying above him, too far to see him, was a helicopter. It was just below the fading morning clouds, heading for the suburb.

The copter moved slowly, as if it were searching for something or someone. Someone? Was it looking for him? Him and that letter?

Slowly he got up, raising himself up the

branches of a tree until he stood unsteadily on his aching legs. He gazed about him at the emptiness and the road, almost half a mile away. Perhaps the letter they wanted was really a bunch of welfare checks. That's it, it must be or they wouldn't have taken the whole bag. He started back to the car.

It was hard going through the half crushed snow. He tried tracing his old footsteps, yet he stumbled often as he walked back to the road. Finally he crossed the ditch and stepped onto the road. Slowly he crossed the other ditch to survey the shambles of his car.

From the back it looked almost normal, until you looked at the ruts it had made in the snow. They were smeared with oil. The car was a loss. From the side the hood was raised at a slightly drunken angle and steered hissed from under it. Gardner turned away from the car, walked up the hill to the road and began walking toward Roxbury Heights.

He walked slowly and painfully, the sweat pouring from his brow. His running made him walk slowly. It made him promise to start getting into some sort of physical shape. He thought, as he walked, about what had happened. Would anyone believe what had happened. Not likely. They would tell him he lost control of the car. What about the mailbag? Vandals stole it while he went for help.

He walked on, his mood turning to depression, the more he thought of it. Yes, his wife would make life even more miserable for him. She would say they were socially scandalized. He would never hear the end of that. She wouldn't let him.

The roaring of a car interrupted his thoughts. He looked down the road in fright. It was the blue Camaro! It was coming with a savage roaring anger. Anger of revenge. He stood there watching the trail of powdery snow as it approached.

As it approached he tried to run, but he couldn't run. His legs were stiff. He bent forward, and put his hands around his left foot and tried to lift it. It wouldn't move. He tried the right one. It wouldn't move either!

He looked at the advancing car, shaking in fear. It grew in size until it filled the road. He straightened up to face it. It stopped. He reached into his coat with a trembling hand for the letter. He held it in front of him.

The men got out of the car and started toward him, one carrying a shotgun. His eyes darted around in fright and he tried to move, but he couldn't. They were only a few feet away now. One was raising the shotgun toward him.

Suddenly he heard a helicopter overhead. Then the road was full of police cars. People were patting him on the back and calling him hero. He collapsed on the road.

Gardner looked at his wife in frustration. They were getting ready to go over to the Dicksons for the evening. Despite what had happened they were going, Janet insisted.

"Darling, it's perfect, you're the hero of the hour," Janet said, putting on an earring. "But it didn't happen that way, I tell you."

"Nonsense, you know what the radio and the papers are saying. You're a hero. Besides who are people going to believe - you or the press?"

"I won't do it," Gardner said crossing his arms.

"You will," Janet said glaring at him. "It's our one chance to become socially prominent in this village."

Gardner looked at her for a moment then dropped his arms. It was no good to argue.