

Initial impression – I’m really interested in Al and his world (which is rendered really vividly). “Terror,” however, feels like a strong word in describing the beginning of his day, as it all seems relatively benign. Is there a disconnection between his psyche and what’s actually occurring around him? I’d love to see more in-scene interaction with other specific characters. The absence of dialogue feels conspicuous... The prose, with its descriptive language and smooth momentum, has me engaged.

Al Gregory’s painful public life began every Monday at the Sung Po Chinese Restaurant. He liked the food. Every Friday he was offered General Tso’s chicken. When he came in, Mr. Ying said hello by mimicking his bearish mailbag burden. It was a form of love, a translation of the English he had not mastered. But for the 56-year-old bachelor postman it was the opening terror that began West 83rd Street.

Brook Barman 4/24/08 8:33 PM

Comment: Great way to start - engaging opening line!

His social ineptness was revealed every day on the three-block route. There were good spots. The bookstore left its outgoing in a box just inside the door. He sometimes liked to browse the photography section. No one bothered him there. But the dog walkers forced him into the street and he avoided the strollers.

Brook Barman 4/24/08 9:01 PM

Comment: Nice detail – I’m really in this...

He was four years from retirement and his longevity on this route was a record in his district. The only other fact on any record – professional or word-of-mouth - about the shy, awkward mail carrier was he liked to read the Sunday paper on a bench outside a coffee shop.

Brook Barman 4/24/08 8:33 PM

Comment: Excellent descriptive prose...

His route was half commercial and half residential. He tried as much as he could to avoid speaking to any maids and doormen. Besides the Chinese restaurant, he had but one permanent conversation on the street - the beauty parlor. They forced him to stay, to chit-chat, to listen. He demurred and deflected and denied having time. But they sat him down in a chair and someone seemed to always guard the door.

Why, Mr. Gregory, you look so fine today. Mr. Gregory, have a seat and some cool lemonade. When he first started the route, they put phone numbers in his pocket, smiling. Mr. Gregory, my daughter, she just loves hard-working men. He hated the still-present shame of a long-lost joke forgotten by them. They treated him as a shy boy who never kissed a girl even though his gray hair and warped face showed them differently. He hated the shame of the truth.

Brook Barman 4/24/08 7:42 PM

Comment: The joke is forgotten? Unclear...

The hell continued when he was forced to leave notes for the snowbirds. He was a professional postman and never let mail stack up. He would take a collection of four days out of a box and scrawl in his elementary script that the mail was being held at the central office. He hated his personality on paper and his notes were the source of the only complaint he ever received: a widow could not read one.

He tried to avoid gratuity but failed. When he didn't take the \$20 tip stuffed in a mailbox on the third of July, he was accosted from behind by a woman with a baby in a stroller two days later. She politely persisted and the shame became too much.

Brook Barman 4/24/08 8:34 PM

Comment: These little interactions are wonderfully revealing – speak volumes about this character. Well done.

His public torture was also the site of his private solace. He lived on West 83rd Street and often ate lunch in his apartment. The presence of his two-bedroom flat on his route was both a blessing and a curse. He often would notice kids slow in front, giggling about something they heard about him. He would notice the adults sped up as they passed.

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Brook Barman 4/24/08 8:55 PM

Comment: Maybe name or number these subsections?

She was standing at the mailbox on West 83rd Street. It was Tuesday. It was the first one she saw after a journey outside her hotel, the only one she saw on the neighborhood street. She had wondered whether to put a return address on it. Her hotel would redeliver it if it got lost. But she wondered more if the name – her name, the name her new family wanted to keep because it sounded angelic – would that name, Evelyn, become the obstacle to opening the letter?

Brook Barman 4/24/08 7:57 PM

Comment: Perhaps something that tells us she's an adult? "New family" and "angelic" made me think she was much younger...

She decided not to put her name on it because there might be other people there.

People who don't know about her. She had decided to write because she had decided not to call – the same reason for both. Someone might answer the phone who was not her mother. And she decided not to announce herself with a doorbell after hearing tales of shunned strangers on the doorstep.

She decided to write a letter. A letter in this age of instant communication, of keystroke intimacy and voicemail community, this age she was so connected in but untied to. She decided to write a letter to her mother, her birth mother. A letter from the lost to the found.

She was 24 on her first trip to New York City. It was not her first out of Nebraska. She went to college in Lincoln and graduated to work in Omaha. But she had been around the world, driven through 27 states (the 27th being Wisconsin when in Chicago she decided to drive into), and spent a summer in North Carolina last year.

That summer in North Carolina lit the match of maternity. Somehow, somewhere she was told she could and would find her mother. Outside Asheville, on a mountain path, she met a woman who had done the same.

It took her exactly six months to find Mrs. Rachel Kent of Manhattan. There were private investigators, internet searches, and the anxious but promising conversation with her family. She had a picture, provided by them, kept for her for this time, which wasn't very helpful a thousand miles away. But she also had a newspaper story about a pregnant woman looking for donations after her house burned to the ground. The story said the woman had relatives in New York.

Evelyn had always wondered ever since she was told she was adopted. She never pressed it with her family, never demanded to know. But after the encounter with the hiker, she finally asked out loud. The article was stuffed in her stocking that Christmas along with enough money for a plane ticket to anywhere.

The finding was less difficult than she imagined. And when she woke up from her nap on the plane, she thought she was waking from a dream. She had given herself a week

Brook Barman 4/24/08 7:52 PM

Comment: Lovely

Brook Barman 4/24/08 7:55 PM

Comment: This would be a great opportunity for a scene in real-time – a moment of dialogue would tell us a lot about her.

at the hotel. In the letter she asked her mother to meet her at the top of the Empire State Building on Saturday. It was so cliché, so Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan but it was the easiest landmark to get to from her hotel.

It would take a day or two for the delivery. And she wanted to give her mother a day or two to think it over. But at 10 a.m. on Saturday she would be waiting. She pulled back the blue door and slipped the envelope into the box. She held onto it for a few seconds, wondering what she was letting go of and perhaps what she might be holding to.

She nodded hello to a man in a suit who passed her and stuffed an envelope into the box. She smiled.

The week was supposed to be a vacation as well. She tried all the sites. But on the ferry to Ellis Island, in Row 16 watching Rain!, and even among the thousands at Yankee Stadium, she was disconnected, unaccompanied.

She wanted to call home, wanted to let them know what she had delivered and was waiting. They knew her plan, knew her lodgings. But she promised herself she wouldn't. She had cut herself off from the world, from the net, from the tower after tower after tower connecting voices across the country. She cut herself off because she was renewing old ties.

As she walked, she mused over the role of the postman in history – the Pony Express, the epistles. She wanted to meet the carrier who pulled her letter out of that box. She had a lone link to her mother, that letter. She knew her mother would bring the letter. That was the unbreakable link, the cognizant connection renewed after the cutting of the cord. Her mother, Mrs. Rachel Kent of Manhattan, would bring it with her. She would be waiting with it, folded in her pocket. They would look at each other, yes, but they also would pore over the letter. Its words signifying something of what they had known, and now of everything they would. Evelyn almost stumbled into the street as others waited for the light change, her foot excited as her mind.

On Saturday the elevator to the top of the world was not crowded at 9:45. She was a tourist with the other tourists. She fumbled through her purse for the old photo she had

Brook Barman 4/24/08 8:46 PM

Comment: I'm still not sure why she wouldn't call if she were desperate to meet her... Maybe this is a moment to say more about her choice to send a letter?

Also, the fact that she says it's a cliché, and makes the comparison herself, means that the reader might possibly think it's a clichéd move in the piece. So a beat or two of her saying why, in spite of this, she wanted to meet her mother this way feels important. It will keep the reader right there with her, gunning for the reunion to happen on top of the Empire State Building.

Brook Barman 4/24/08 8:47 PM

Comment: ?

Brook Barman 4/24/08 9:01 PM

Comment: Unclear. Her family knows?

Brook Barman 4/24/08 8:00 PM

Comment: This sudden thought of the postman feels...sudden. Maybe if it came at the moment she drops the letter in the box?

started keeping in the last plastic sleeve in her wallet. She pulled it out and then glanced around, thinking the uncanny.

Brook Barman 4/24/08 8:36 PM

Comment: Nice transition to the photograph. I really love these moments when you bring the action into super-clear focus.

She sat on a bench atop the world, holding the picture in her hand. She was hoping to give herself away. The next three elevator cars were filled but no one looking for someone else, no one looking for her. She suspected to recognize her mother right away. Evelyn was thin, lanky, with thick black hair. Her nose was stubby, her eyes as wide as her thumbnail. Her mother would be an easy spot.

Evelyn wanted to pace, but she also wanted to stay near the elevator. She pulled back the cotton sleeve of her jacket and looked at her watch. She did it again five minutes later. She did it again three minutes later. It was 10:11.

She stuffed the picture back into her wallet and pushed her hand into her purse. She found the cell phone buried at the bottom. She wanted to call the hotel, to see if perhaps someone had called, perhaps someone had come by. But she only held the phone closed.

With one perhaps came another, the other. Perhaps. Perhaps she was not coming, Mrs. Rachel Kent of Manhattan. It was a short river ride into a dam, a current of hope smashed against the wall of reality. Perhaps, a polite word, became anxiety. She thought again of the envelope that must be in her mother's hand. She saw the merry postman slip it into the black box outside her door. She saw it between the gas bill and the Macy's sales flier. She saw her mother, in her brownstone, opening the envelope, her face joyful at its contents.

Brook Barman 4/24/08 8:30 PM

Comment: I'd love to know a little more about her anxiety, what's at stake. She's gone a long time without looking for her, and the plan is kind of iffy...how invested is she? Is she determined? Curious?

Her doubt at the arrival of her mother became a certainty for a reason. There had to be a reason – an emergency, certainly not her own, a traffic jam, a stalled subway. It was 10:20. Twenty minutes into her new life she didn't have a mother. It was like being late for your own birth, the circumstances reversed.

Brook Barman 4/24/08 8:48 PM

Comment: Good

Her 24-year-old psyche – crippled by adoption, tweaked and twisted by junior high and all the elements of sorority teasing – began to wobble. She wanted to meet that postman and asked what happened to her envelope, the envelope, the only envelope in his bag that

Brook Barman 4/24/08 8:01 PM

Comment: Like this idea

Brook Barman 4/24/08 8:02 PM

Comment: It doesn't feel that her psyche is crippled. She seems pretty together...

day. Why hadn't he delivered the letter? Why hadn't he delivered her mother? In her last rational thought before her tears took over, she turned to the mail, to the letter. Perhaps it was lost, stuck in the bottom of his bag. Perhaps he did not deliver it. The letter – where was it? Why was it missing? It was 10:25. She sat on the bench, atop the world, waiting, crying.

Brook Barman 4/24/08 8:02 PM

Comment: Nice momentum here!

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It was the only way his mother would let him. In a letter. It was the only way he could contact his father. They would not drive upstate to Attica. No. Never. Not ever, she said. And she would not allow that man to have her phone number. So on his oversized lined paper, the 8-year-old boy wrote a letter to his father.

Brook Barman 4/24/08 8:36 PM

Comment: Great immediacy

The letter – all five sentences – was signed with love, slid into an envelope, sealed with his tongue, and stamped. She put it on the counter and he stood there and stared.

“Not tonight,” she said. “I’ll put it in the mailbox tomorrow.”

He remained, half an hour after his bedtime.

“I want to do it.”

“Do what?”

“Give it to the mailman.”

“Silly. No. He comes when you are at school. He’ll take out of the box. Then he will deliver it.”

Brook Barman 4/24/08 8:48 PM

Comment: This one line of dialogue feels a little stilted, not totally natural...

The boy dreamed that night of hugs from a man he had never met, a man who shared his name – God damn that name – and as his mother added, his stubbornness. The boy imagined his father holding the envelope in his hands. His elementary brain did not add anything else to that scene – no bars, no beds, no blue pants or blue shirt, or a postman with a gun. He only saw two things – those hands and that letter.

Brook Barman 4/24/08 8:49 PM

Comment: Why God damn that name?

As she promised, the envelope was picked up by the mailman when he was at school. He even looked into the box himself to be certain after he stumble off the bus. She told him it would take at least a week to get to there and then even longer for him to reply.

Brook Barman 4/24/08 8:04 PM

Comment: Good way to let the reader in on these circumstances

She had no hope he would, but held back the if. The boy spent the first week expanding that first dream - stuffed animals and birthday parties and being thrown in the air. She spent the week sleeping.

As a cautionary measure, she had switched the envelopes when he left for school. That man was not getting her address. She put the letter into another envelope, blank at the top left corner. The only identification left was her son's name. It might have made it harder for a reply, but that was a risk she was willing to take.

The letter arrived the day he was meeting with his lawyer about his appeal. It was a long shot – arguing the police forgot one signature on the 19th of 20 Miranda forms. But it was a shot, a reason for hope. He showed the letter to his lawyer and asked, “Can you find them?”

“You know you are not allowed contact with the victim in this case. She specifically.....”

“He wrote me.”

“Yes. But without a return address and without indication he wants a reply.”

“What little boy writes his father and doesn't want him to write?”

“Even if I get a judge to approve you replying, how do you? She obviously deliberately left off her address.”

“My name. He has my name. You can find the address that way. He has to be registered with someone. It's postmarked isn't?”

“She'll stop the letter. He'll never see it.”

“Get a signature. All I want is proof I replied. When I get out, I want them to know I am a good father.”

The lawyer consented and the man scribbled his reply onto a page from a legal pad. The lawyer folded it and stuffed it into his briefcase and left. When he returned to the city, he asked his assistant to find the boy's address.

She brought it to him as he was leaving the office that afternoon. He scribbled the

Brook Barman 4/24/08 9:00 PM

Comment: Excellent contradiction between the mother's feelings and the boy's. Great tension between the two of them – what he wants and what she wants (or fears). Well done!

Brook Barman 4/24/08 8:37 PM

Comment: Hooray for good dialogue!

Brook Barman 4/24/08 8:50 PM

Comment: Would he say he's a good father? What did he do? If his son were somehow a victim, it feels improbable that he'd say this (without more information, at least).

address onto an envelope labeled with his firm's logo. He pulled out his drawer to look for stamps. He pulled out another drawer, then another. She went fishing through her desk. In a rush to get home, he stuffed the envelope into his briefcase to await a stamp he had at home.

The next morning, heading out of his house, the lawyer spotted a mailbox on West 83rd St. He walked past a woman and open the door and slid the envelope in, quickly closing the latch. He headed to the subway to his office.

On both ends of hope, the patience of the son and the father began to slowly erode. The inmate – inside most of the day – spent his time writing more letters to his son, rewriting them, revising them as if he were completing a high school essay. He wanted to be ready for the reply. He had a lot to say. |

He wrote his lawyer each week, forgetting to ask about the appeal and inquiring about the receipt he desired. No reply came. He began to tell the other inmates about the letter from his son. He carried it to lunch, folded in four, in his pocket. He read aloud, read it in a little boy's voice. To keep it safe, he stuck in the safest place he knew – inside a crack in the wall of his cell. He hoped that slip – his mailbox – would receive another delivery soon.

The boy bounded off the bus everyday to his curbside mailbox. He eyed the dark tunnel each day, its emptiness reflecting his own. Two weeks went by, then another. On the fourth week, the boy asked if he could write another letter. | Holding back tears and happiness, his mother sat the boy on her lap. | She wanted to lie. She wanted to say the postman lost the letter. She wanted to say something about the system. But she wanted more to tell the truth.

“Your father is not a very nice man.”

She turned her face away from him and held her lips with one hand. I can't believe he would do this, she whispered. She was happy he did, but disgusted, too.

| “He did a bad thing to me and you were the result. It is hard to explain but one day you will understand. Your letter... He probably threw it away.” |

Brook Barman 4/24/08 8:51 PM

Comment: Like what? A good opportunity here to reveal more about their relationship and, in particular, who this man is.

Brook Barman 4/24/08 8:09 PM

Comment: “Happy” feels a bit too strong since her son will be pretty sad about this...

Brook Barman 4/24/08 8:10 PM

Comment: I feel like we need to know this earlier – the circumstances of the crime and his birth

Brook Barman 4/24/08 8:27 PM

Comment: Also, earlier it sounded like the boy was the victim, not the mother. That changes things in retrospect.

The boy began to cry. He hugged his mother, his face planted on her soft shoulders.

He wrote more anyway. Each night, as he was told to practice his penmanship with sentences about dogs and rockets, he wrote to his father. He signed each letter with love, folded it in four, put it in an envelope and licked the flap. He wrote as well as he could about his day, his mother, his friend Harold, and asked a thousand questions. The first line was always the same question: Did you receive my last letter? When each note was finished, he placed it in a wooden crayon box. That box sat in the safest place he knew – under his bed. Soon there were two boxes.

Brook Barman 4/24/08 8:11 PM
Comment: Nice

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She had to buy paper to write the note. She looked around the house – under the phone book in the drawer, in the printer, in Shelley’s room, and even on his office desk. No paper anywhere. There was construction paper in the closet, and wrapping paper in the Christmas box in the attic. And a handful of post-its she could make into one sheet. Even plenty of paper towels without designs.

But those would not do. She was writing a letter to announce her death – something that needed stock because it was important, something that needed lines because she knew her hands would shake.

Brook Barman 4/24/08 8:26 PM
Comment: Great

She wrote out for the grocery store a list – orange juice, juice boxes for Shelley, bread, a packet of fish and chicken, and a new mop. She added at the bottom “good paper.” She made the paper aisle her last. She had never actually thought about paper. She was surprised at her many choices. She wanted white – a color seemed silly. She stood looking at the Rydel brand. 500 pages, printer-ready. Ink won’t smudge, the package read. She remembered the lines she needed. The store brand of lined paper had a dollar discount today. She took the deal.

Brook Barman 4/24/08 8:13 PM
Comment: I love this whole section. You reveal a lot about her by letting us observe her thinking process...

She knew she could find a pen in the house so she resisted the register stack. She used a coupon for the mop and remembered to balance her checkbook as she waited for the

bags to be filled. When the clerk told her to have a nice day, she thanked her.

When she returned from the store, the soaps were on. The house was empty of silence but filled with stuff. They were looking for a bigger house. Today was bathroom day. That's why she needed a new mop. But instead she found a black pen in his desk. It was one of those pens that came in its own box. She remembered when he got it. She bought it, engraved, for his return from his first promotional tour. He never wrote with a pen, she knew. But the pen – the act of holding it in your hand and revealing your thoughts on paper – touched her.

She sat at the kitchen table, the bay window open to the yard and its privacy fence. On the patio was a plastic pool overturned and drying out. She had made herself a cup of coffee.

She wanted him to know where and when and how she was at the moment she wrote. The date was important. So was the time. She began: "I am sitting at our kitchen table."

She had decided to not to do it in the house or even near the house. The decision where took some research. She bought a map and spread it out on the table one morning. Out of the city, upstate, near her childhood home, she circled barren fields, roads where she knew the frames of new houses stopped, and interstate exits with no signs of life. She drove to those spots to scout them. She planned to put in the letter where to find her body and knew the mail would take at least two days to make the turn-around from her mailbox to her mailbox. She hoped her body wouldn't suffer too badly in the waiting.

Shelley would be home at 3. She never gave Shelley a key because she would always wait for her on the steps. She stopped writing her note and rose from the table to unlock the front door. She would leave a cut apple and a juice box on the table, hoping to keep Shelley distracted until he came home.

She never knew how he wrote. It was unclear to him most times how the faces he saw in his mind became the words and images on the paper. During the writing, especially

Brook Barman 4/24/08 8:14 PM

Comment: Nice detail

Brook Barman 4/24/08 8:56 PM

Comment: Powerful stuff

Brook Barman 4/24/08 8:16 PM

Comment: Wow! This is really intense – all this mundane stuff coupled with impending doom... Realistic too.

at the end of a book, she would hardly know him. Those times lasted longer each time. He always came back though, as if he had left on a trip, to tell her all that he had learned, all that he had seen and heard. It wasn't about the characters anymore, after the fourth one. He used to say in interviews they would lead, they would discover on their own where to go and how to be and what to become. But she picked up slowly at first but deeply and lovingly along the way that he was becoming, he was journeying, he was discovering. She loved him for that. She hated him for that.

Brook Barman 4/24/08 8:58 PM

Comment: This whole section about his writing process is fascinating and beautifully rendered. I like the detail about the interview and how his wife felt so far outside this. Great stuff.

This letter was her first writing, her first and final draft. After being his first reader, he would be hers. After the instructions on where to find her – she had chosen a field where she once kissed a boy just behind her best friend's old house – she began to write like him. It was all she knew – him. She didn't realize it at first but by the time she placed the period at the end of the sentence about the metaphor about love and a pool, she laid the pen down. She didn't want to start over, crush and ball up what she had. This was why he wrote on the computer.

Brook Barman 4/24/08 8:18 PM

Comment: Why? I mean, I can guess, but it would be nice to know her perspective...

Brook Barman 4/24/08 8:19 PM

Comment: I like the first-kiss detail. Maybe more about this field, what it looks like, etc.. Opportunity to reveal more about her...

The words were good, they were, she knew. He was good, she knew. But they were not hers. She was telling him she loved him and using his words. She was writing to him, about him, like him. It was then she started to apologize. She first wrote apologies for the obvious imitation. That was the whole thing, to her. She was killing herself because she could not take these journeys – these discoveries of himself – with him. She wanted to, but she didn't know how. He was alive, he was growing, and she was growing distant, dead. She ended that paragraph with a plea for understanding.

Brook Barman 4/24/08 8:54 PM

Comment: Wow. This feels like a really crucial moment in the piece, and I'm really into it. So I want to know what it was like for her when he was away. How did she feel? How did she spend her time? How did it get to be so bad that she's made a decision to kill herself? How did she make the decision?

She understood living with him, with his gift, required more than the usual work. But she was not a person of words, not a person of narrative. She was a list-maker, a soccer team party, a school play, a conversation. That last word was what he always said his writing never sounded like. His critics often agreed.

I'm not suggesting you answer all of these, but I feel like we need to know how she got to this point of desperation, how her life could evolve to such a drastic place.

Her rambles became sentences, flowing now out of her head and through the pen. She was writing. She was discovering all she knew but didn't really know. She was

thinking and comparing and dialoguing with unknown muses. The words became her

Brook Barman 4/24/08 8:20 PM

Comment: Great energy here

She said her apologies, she wrote of her love for him and Shelley, and she directed him to where she would be. She knew, from him, the ending – if it was more than just a note, if it was more than a letter, if it was a proper example of art – she knew the ending would be the last part of her masterpiece.

She put down her pen and walked to his bookcase. On each shelf were copies of his work. She took one from the first shelf and flipped to the last page. “*Josephine had discovered something of herself in those words.*” They were her last words, his words, but his words of her, her life, her life now discovered in words.

Brook Barman 4/24/08 8:58 PM

Comment: A title? A moment or two about its subject matter? Something to give the book due significance.

She quickly read over the two-page letter, inserting a comma and fixing the loop on the second letter in “apology.” She took an envelope from the drawer, folded her letter and inserted it. She sealed it with care, pulled a return address sticker from a page the March of Dimes sent, and stamped it.

She gathered her coat, the pills, and her purse. She walked out the door onto West 83rd Street and dropped her words into the first mailbox she saw. She looked at the blue sky for the first time in a long time, aware there were words that might have spoke them into place. She spoke some of those words to herself as she drove out of the city, alive.

Brook Barman 4/24/08 8:22 PM

Comment: Beautiful. But also a surprise – she changed her mind about killing herself? We need to know more about this!!

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Al set his bag of mail down in the living room and went to the hallway. He was home for lunch. He felt the shortness of breath as he stood in front of the bathroom door. As he grabbed for the door, the attack from his heart sent his other hand for his chest. He was humbled to his knees and then he fell onto the cold tile, his back to the floor.

Brook Barman 4/24/08 8:23 PM

Comment: This feels too fast – please give us more of this scene!

When he didn’t return to the central office someone was sent to West 83rd Street. As the police and the medical examiner came, so did the neighborhood. Some gathered outside his door as the body was carried out. A lady from the beauty shop with rollers in her hair wiped a tear from her eye. A baby in a stroller began to wail. The mail, many said,

was Al's life.

Brook Barman 4/24/08 8:24 PM

Comment: Same here – slow down.

The flashing lights were still there when the businesses were closing and the families gathered in one place that evening. Crowds re-gathered outside his door as the line of boxes grew wider and higher. There the members of his public hell saw their signed, sealed and stolen words. Postal workers had spent the afternoon trying to sort through some more than 300 boxes of mail stashed inside Al's apartment.

Brook Barman 4/24/08 8:25 PM

Comment: Woah. Didn't see this coming!

Inside the small living space, the boxes were used as building blocks. They acted as the foundation for his coffee table and TV stand. He put wooden planks between pairs and made shelves. He constructed a walk-in closet with others. Postal officials would spend the weekend loading large trucks with them.

While his apartment was filled with fliers, emptied envelopes, and opened boxes, much of the mail was neatly catalogued. He had labeled each box. Al was a thief meticulous as he was professional in delivery. Some boxes had dates – day, month, and year. The oldest was Friday, January 1987. Some boxes were labeled by type – undeliverable or junk. Two columns of boxes, apparently filled with mail he took from the only standing blue box outside his front door, were labeled West 83rd Street.

Brook Barman 4/24/08 8:59 PM

Comment: What? No! He stole the mail? Wait! He didn't seem like a thief! Not calculating like that! Hmm...

On the sidewalk, one widow put her hand to her mouth, covering the astonishment. Another tried to persuade her she knew all along. A businessman set down his briefcase and stuffed his hands in his pockets and shook his head. Who would do such a thing? That was our lives in that stuff, a young mother said. It was more than stuff to him, someone said. The mother agreed. Al was the mail, she said.

Brook Barman 4/24/08 8:59 PM

Comment: Interesting turn... Really surprising...

I like the line "Al was the mail.."

Dear X –

It's great to pick up a story that has so much life in it. And not just energy (it has that too – a winding current that pulls the reader along), but actual lives being lived. These are lives that have been made complicated or made better or made worse or made uninhabitable. These are real people here, and their circumstances and obstacles are familiar in a way that makes me care about them. In short, they're like us.

I enjoyed the movement from one section to the next, and the process of getting acquainted with new circumstances, new settings, new personalities. You have real talent for drawing out suspense (like in the piece with the woman planning her suicide), and for letting the quieter moments of relative inaction do some “heavy lifting” in the piece (I'm picturing the little boy writing a letter when he should be practicing his penmanship about dogs and rockets). I'm also compelled by the fact that, like these quiet moments, you let the characters' quandries simply exist – you don't try to solve their problems or answer their questions for them. It is in these moments that I find your storytelling interesting and really, really poignant.

It is, perhaps, the very fact that you fascinate us with the minute details of the characters and their psyches, that the less-developed moments feel imprecise and rushed. It feels like there are opportunities to let us know more about these people from this omniscient perspective. For instance, I really wanted to understand why the adopted woman was set on meeting her mother the way in which she'd orchestrated. She gives a reason, but it's not fully fleshed out – I didn't really buy it (and I wanted to). I feel like specifics of any and all kinds could only strengthen the piece. For instance: I wanted to know names. I

wanted to know what the little boy looked like. I wanted to hear the woman speaking with the hiker. Dialogue is always revealing, and you do it well. In particular, this would help Al come to life – especially since he’s so embarrassed by attention and human interaction.

Oh, Al...I had no idea he was a thief. Now, I’m not adverse to this idea – I think it’s really socially and psychologically interesting. But I was not prepared to find this out. We need more on him. Maybe he could show up at other points – maybe scenes of him going about his days and nights cross-cut with these other vignettes. But I really didn’t find him menacing in the first section. I had pity for him. I think this kind of clarification and character development would carry this piece further than anything. Al’s the engine that moves things along. We have to believe he’s capable of this.

A refreshing, engaging story. It’s really ambitious. You’re pulling it off, and it’s quite a feat. Stay at it. You’re really onto something good.

Best,

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