



DEAD LETTER

By Steve LaCheen

I work at the Dead Letter Office. Actually, it is now called the Mail Recovery Center. My job at the MRC is to open some of the 150,000 undeliverable letters received there every year, to try to figure out to whom or from whom the letter was sent, so as to be able to either send it forward or return it to the sender.

Mine is a strange but wonderful job, which fills all my social and intellectual needs, without the difficulties that often accompany actual personal interaction. It is truly a virtual life.

Intellectually, my job implicates all my puzzle-solving abilities, challenging me to figure out from the often-scant clues in a letter, the identity of either the sender or intended recipient. Socially, I am plunged vicariously into some of the most complicated and sensitive situations in which human beings can become involved, as revealed in the pages that my job as an epistolary voyeur requires me to read.

And, sometimes, the virtual reality becomes real, and I find myself involved.

Letters may be undeliverable because the address on the envelope is non-existent or incorrect, or the addressee has moved leaving no forwarding address; and the letter cannot be

returned to sender because the envelope bears no return address.

Sometimes such letters, when opened, indicate quite clearly that they were intended as anonymous communications, meant to conceal the identity and whereabouts of the sender. These are often love letters or hate letters. In either case, we make

very little effort to determine the addressee, unless the letter contains a threat of some kind, in which case we turn it over to the postal inspectors and let them worry about it.

Sometimes, quite the opposite is true; for example, when the letter contains a check or some other document intended for the addressee, and contains the names and address of either party. Those, of course, are readily deliverable, with an appropriate note explaining why the envelope had to be opened.

Then there are the “puzzlers,” which provide us with unintentional clues. About them, I could write a book; and, someday, I just might.

I am very careful about the way I do my work. Having been raised in an orphanage where the children were punished for every act of carelessness, I developed excellent survival skills,



But, then I noticed that, beneath the address someone had written: “Attention” with my name. “Oh my God,” I wondered. Who could have possibly done that?

the most important of which was to memorize the rules of the house and adopt them as guiding principles:

If you open it, save it; if you take it out, put it back; and, if you turn it on, turn it off.

I know that sounds very limiting and it is; but there are compensations. They said when I applied for this job that probably the most important trait they were looking for was the ability to be obsessive about details, so as to avoid ever mixing things up, which meant doing one thing at a time and being able to avoid being distracted.

I was perfect for the job, they said; but, being the only candidate, as I later learned, didn’t hurt either. As jobs go, it’s a good one. No one ever bothers me. I can work at my own chosen speed, and, unless I have a question, I never have to talk to anyone, ever. The down side, of course, is the other side of that coin. I work alone. I am alone. No one ever comes to me for anything, ever, unless I send for help, and that is so rare that it wouldn’t even make it onto the chart, if there was a chart.

And that’s how it went, for years, without variation. Once in a while, I had the happy experience of being able to redirect a piece of correspondence to its proper addressee; but, frankly, that didn’t happen too often. Most of the correspondence I read ended up in the shredder, because there was seldom sufficient evidence with which to identify the sender or intended recipient.

The sadness I experienced was due for the most part not to the sadness of the intended communication but the imagined consequences of its failure to be delivered. On the other hand, it was clear to me that it was not necessarily bad that some of the messages were never delivered.

Once, just once, I received a letter that was actually addressed “To the Dead Letter Office,” which was a surprise until I realized it was probably from someone looking for a letter that had never been delivered. Fat chance, I thought, of them ever finding some letter that probably hadn’t been delivered because the ink on the address lines had gotten wet and smeared beyond legibility, or a glued address label had been over-licked and lost its adhesiveness. Fat chance of finding that lost letter.

But, then I noticed that, beneath the address someone had written: “Attention” with my name. “Oh my God,” I wondered. Who could have possibly done that? I don’t know why, but my hands started shaking so badly that I dropped the letter opener twice, and had difficulty controlling the tremors in my fingers.

Finally, I managed to slit the envelope, and carefully extracted the single piece of paper inside. It was blank. I looked at the envelope. There was no return address, so I slid it into the shredder. I was about to shred the paper in my hand, when I realized it was only one-third of a letter-size sheet of paper, and that I had slit what had been a full letter-size sheet of paper, leaving two-thirds of it inside the envelope, which I had just fed into the shredder.

It was then that I noticed the markings at the very bottom edge of the remnant in my hand. They were very faint, as though written with the nub of a pencil and had been cut in half when I slit the envelope.

What I read was: My dear son ■

Steve LaCheen (slacheen@concentric.net), a partner with LaCheen, Wittels & Greenberg, is a member of the Editorial Board of The Philadelphia Lawyer.