

THE FEDEX MAN

by Marc Erdrich

Recently – within the past year or so – an elderly woman, with whom I had only a passing acquaintance, died in the home she had been renting for many years. When I say it was a passing acquaintance I mean it in the literal sense as her house faced head on into a three way intersection where I had to turn – whether on foot or by car -- in order to leave the small community where I lived. Often, I would see her sitting on her verandah in a rocking chair with her little dog by her side. She just sat there, never reading a book or talking to anyone, and no matter how often I saw it seemed she was always wearing the same house dress, though she never seemed unkempt. In all the years I lived in the neighborhood, we never exchanged more than a passing glance, a nod of the head in recognition of our mutual existence.

There was a man who lived in the house as well, and occasionally, I would see him standing at the bus stop at the top of the hill, dressed in dark pants, black shoes and a white shirt, and always carrying a FEDEX envelope. As far as I could tell he took the bus into town every morning. Sometimes I would offer him a ride. He appeared to be in his 50s or early 60s – it was hard to tell – he was very slim and hard looking as if his life to now hadn't easy. He seemed to appreciate the lift, as if saving the dollar it cost to ride into to town was a big deal. He never said much. In fact, as I think about it, I don't think he ever said anything unless I spoke first. I would comment on the weather or some other innocuous subject and he would grumble a response. I never questioned him or joke about the FEDEX envelope, which appeared tattered from repeated use. Somehow, it seemed as if asking him about it would violate some unwritten code, as if FEDEX envelopes have some inherent properties that put their contents beyond question.

After a time, I learned the man was not related to the elderly woman, but he lived there as a sort of caretaker – not a caretaker exactly, since there was someone who came to the house every day to see after the woman – but more as a man about the house, someone who could see to her in an emergency and be there if something went wrong.

When the old woman died, the man continued to live in the house for many months afterwards. It was as if nothing had changed, except she was no longer there. He stood at the top of the hill every day, with his FEDEX envelope in hand, and once, when I offered him a ride, he got in the car but said nothing about the woman and I didn't ask.

A couple of months later, workmen began showing up at the house, and it was soon clear the owners were remodeling. During the daytime hours, if he wasn't going to town the man sat for hours on a low wall alongside the house with his FEDEX envelope in hand, dressed in his usual black pants, black shoes and white shirt. He would sit there for hours at a time. I know this because on a few occasions I drove or walked by more than once in the course of a day and he was always there.

One day, he stopped me to ask if I knew of any lodgings to be had. From the tone of his request, I could tell he was asking about someplace he could stay for free, not a paid rental. I inquired about the house and he confirmed that the owners were indeed remodeling and he would soon have to move out. I lied and told him I would ask our neighbors about accommodations, but I knew no one was about to board a complete stranger who they knew nothing about, except for that fact that he had been in the neighborhood for years.

After about six weeks the house remodeling was completed and a "For Rent" sign appeared on the gate. For several days I didn't see the man and I assumed he found a place to live. But then, one morning, I was out for a walk and I saw him sitting on the wall, dressed as usual with his FEDEX envelope

in hand. I waved and he waved back. When I returned a couple of hours later he was still there, sitting in place, still holding the envelope.

I have since learned that an acquaintance who owns a car dealership in town lets him sleep in the office at night, but during the day he has to leave. And so, I presume he takes the bus out to his old neighborhood, perhaps the only place he knows or feels comfortable in, and he sits all day until it is time to return to the office.

I assume he has a bit of a pension, since he is able to afford the bus fare back and forth from town and he must eat somewhere. A few days ago I was in town, and I saw him – he didn't see me – about to enter the lottery office. He was carrying his FEDEX envelope. He could have been any office worker on a mission, and I suppose he was. As I watched him walk up the steps to the lottery office I thought of my father, who when he was alive played the Irish Sweepstakes, forever counting on that big day when he would strike it rich. He died counting. I hope the man with the FEDEX envelope has more luck.