

# Faith, Hope and Fiction

## **Rural Free Delivery**

**By Tom Sheehan**

The meltdown, in earnest, had begun. From his porch during the past few days he had seen the mailbox, inch by secret inch, protrude from the harsh mound of snow downhill from him in the dumping area. The red flag on the box, as if raised in signal by the mailman, quickly came into view as did the decorative bars and blue field of a hand-painted Stars and Stripes posing a minute mural on one side.

With both flags fully exposed, Danforth “Jazz” Colbere finally came to attention.

The March lamb had pranced away with much of the huge pile of snow where the town workers had dumped it through the rough winter, most of the snow coming from the center of Saugus during a half dozen storms. The melt, leaving map-like dark patches over much of the top soil, was now nearly complete, and Jazz Colbere sat on his porch watching the ultimate transition. When he closed his eyes the sun left slight tracks across his forehead in a path easily followed. A scented breeze with a mysterious musical note aboard carried him for an abrupt second to a distant post in his army days, *Reveille* about in the air. Somewhere south of the 38<sup>th</sup> Parallel he thought it to be, perhaps Mung-Dung-ni or Sae-pori, or off on one of the islands in the Philippines, but he could not lock it down.

For another full minute of staring at the mailbox, he was aware of maple leaf buds scrambling for a touch of the same sunlight. Continuity and life force worked their long fingers on him.

His last female company had been three full years ago. Maggie D'Urbenville, after a six month stay and after bitter testimony over the chance meeting of an old acquaintance, had gone off in a huff and never returned. She had been a soft presence against him all night long and fully known. Under covers her hand would often slide across his turned hip; that would be hours after her voice haunted him with her reading a story out loud, the rest of the kitchen dark, her chair by the woodstove creaking out snappy punctuation.

For a few months, on the sly, he asked questions around town about Maggie, but did not get answers. So one more time he let go of the past. Long ago he decided that he did not have time to argue, to hold a grudge, or even to give advice. Holding pretty well to those resolves, Maggie, as warm as she made the night, fell away from his mind; peace, intruding silences, comfortable memories, seemed sufficient. It was enough for him that he had not cast his net about for more company. He remembered his father saying some man once said he also serves who stands and waits. For these three years he held fast to that tenet. And the strange circumstance of the mailbox had surfaced as a minor surprise, him awaiting it, expecting it, or something like it, for a long time. It was, perhaps, a dream enacted.

Nearing sixty years of age, he was yet slim and somewhat wiry from decently good habits and long walks in black boots, jeans, and seasonal tops and outer wear. At a distance townsfolk could recognize him. Thick, dark hair hid the tops of his ears, and

made his eyebrows out as chevrons. Jazz Colbere, for thirty or more years, lived on the bluff above the old swamp, a semi-hermit to a good portion of Saugus. He appeared not to have had a steady job for many years. People who talked about him said he lived on “old money,” but never said what that money was. They knew he read a lot, had no television they knew of, and recycled all his paper waste so that his wide reading habit was well-known. What shopping he did, he did locally, but took a long time between trips.

The small log house with the wide porch had been his father’s home for forty years. Then, by a quickly enacted law, the town had appropriated the land below the house, the whole range of the swamp, for a refuse dump. The swamp, or The Pit as town youngsters had called it, once had been the source of rock iron ore for the first iron works in America, a short distance away. Suddenly the catfish were gone, the owls, the raccoons and the occasional fox, all as if obliterated. They had gone almost overnight, the way boyhood leaves, sometimes vague, unknown and unannounced, yet often offered up as a challenge to what comes after. And here, at least thirty years later, that site, capped off by new environmental demands, had become the sole place for town snow disposal. And on this new April day, after a ravaging winter people would do their best to forget, the final thaw had come in the silence of the night, like katydids from their long, deep sleep.

Jazz’s gait was unhurried as he finally ambled down the hill towards the mailbox. He could not see any vehicle on the incoming road for over half a mile. Alders and a few gnarly oaks in scattered copses threatened the skyline with their lumpy arms and their arthritic, bony fingers. Huge piles of snow had withered, stretched their liquid reach, and disappeared. Blue sky leaped past the horizon with bright signals and maple aromas

caught new edges at the far end of the loam-capped area. Spring, with all its signals, had a sure grip in place.

To his surprise, neither name nor address showed on the mailbox, a rugged iron dog of a mailbox, which might have been smithied in days of old. Heft freely granted its root of adjective. The mailbox had been, he presumed, uprooted by a plow, picked up by a front loader, dropped into a dump truck, and brought out here for the meltdown. Old Glory painted on one side came off clear and shiny in abbreviated contour. Traces of rust ran a slight patina on the other side, a patina with a moccasin texture. But there was no pole attached to the box and no mounting holes penetrating the bottom, so he wondered how it had served its owner. That curiosity worked him through and through. What appears to be one thing is often another, he might have said. A small amazement told him adventure might be at hand. Surprise and containment often mix well, he could have vouchered.

With an easy heave, he tossed the mailbox onto his shoulders and started back uphill to the house. Odors of residue snow and ice hung around him, particulates of the rough winter now done holding sway. And he felt that something was in the metal container. Probably snow, he decided, but other and choicer options came quickly to his mind, even as the maple odor climbed on the air, as winter let go its deep handclasp.

Atop scattered newspapers on the kitchen floor he propped the mailbox, but after thirty minutes little water flowed from it and he was sure it had not been full of snow or ice. Yet, with the sense of adventure, of apprehension, of surprise, all playing at the edges of his mind, he deliberated at opening the box. Time, he felt, had no measurements for him, no rush. Impatience had no place out here on the far edge of town, where a lone man

ambled his days away in observation, contemplation, now and then a piece of wood being whittled into another shape, a good book taking him deeply past sundown.

Acknowledging his comfort, yet feeling a sense of intrigue, he sat back and tried to resurrect the happening of the mailbox. No pictures or details came in a rush; only the smell of his own heavy coffee assailed him. He felt rooted. A third cup was still a celebration. The aroma cut off the maple advances, the winter departure.

He sipped his coffee, bit at the final taste, marked morning once again. When he tipped the mailbox on one end, popped the small door open, a flood of envelopes fell out. An unknown richness elbowed him aside, good as a late strike in an abandoned mine. Each envelope was protected by a plastic bag with fasteners, a grip of edges that fashioned a tight seam. Each envelope had writing on it, but no address, no stamp; there was a number and a small title on the face of each one. Branded. Titled. Distinguished.

The writing was neat, small, feminine, and left-handed at first glance. He inhaled a scent from the first envelope he picked up, which said, “No. 17, How Gardens Grow.” The scent was alive, was almost green and growing, and gave a hint of something he must have known before. He thought gladiola. It was only guessing.

Something else was trying to dictate to him. He struggled to find that dictation. It would not come clearly from its place. “No. 22” simply bore one word, “Moonplace.” All the vastness of possibilities crowded him, rushed at him in a torrent. Imagination’s sake. A neat, left-handed woman aware of aroma’s dodge, full of intrigue, energetic, romantic, perhaps a vegetarian or an environmentalist of sorts, came into being. One part of the message told him the mailbox was deposited in the snow during the winter, said that it was not accidentally knocked down and dumped out here at the end of town.

When the legend on “No. 50” popped up, “The Finding Man,” the barb of the hook went deep under his skin.

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*To You Who Finds My Messages:*

*I do not use a bottle cast out upon an irreverent sea. I use a factor of the USPS, believing in America, hope and attendant salvation forming around a lonely life. I painted the flag you have seen on this container. This box has not been torn up by a plow. It has been delivered. I am at the end of things and look for someone who can find me, some person who is keen and observant, and has firm beliefs. And someone who craves company the way I do, but sincere company. Know that my passion leaps for attention, and my curiosity.*

*Loneliness Itself.*

No. 37 was scribed, “Partial Delivery,” and said: *Some of me comes here from the end of things. If you listen there will be soft notes on the wind, musical notes that I send, that have transported me elsewhere.*

Jazz was mesmerized by a few of the messages, some much more lyrical than others, a few waxing almost prophetic, now and then one or more clawing for a scant sense of awareness, of recognition, not of the writer, but of the person.

For four days he studied many of the notes, found acceptance, joy, a sense of sharing. Finally, the natural hungers came upon him when he read No. 13, “My Poem in the Mix”:

*I am a gift to him who finds me.*

*I lie in wait.*

*The touching is terrible and lonely.*

*Please absolve me.*

*Please.*

Jazz Colbere felt the terror of that loneliness. The hunger tantrum, the awful needs, leaped through him, their passages wide and compelling. The whole concoction was an SOS sent out by a desperate woman. Surely, without a doubt, he was being sought, for he alone had a constant view of the old swamp area. Of all people, he would see the mailbox first. No known or forgotten friend filled the unknown.

That evening the street map of the town fell open on his table. Coffee aroma layered the air in the room so that the maple tendencies had trouble coming through to him. Stars moved across the windows in their endless cycles. He kept reading the words of each message, finding simple repetition coming to the front. That repetition was, at a sudden realization, *I am at the end of things*. He did not think it meant the last straw in life, but rather something physical, a clue of sorts. The repetition was marked, deliberate, and came in every seventh message. There were seven such messages.

For three days Jazz studied the map of the town. He wrote names of certain streets, grouped them in classes, by other distinctions, and found nothing. He looked for the merest opening. He found himself in the grip of an excitement. It pursued him at all hours. One day, just at the start of May, in bright sunlight, he walked streets of the town, under the popping maples, as if he were on a simple constitutional. Nothing came out of the walk. He trudged back uphill and returned to the map. He wrote more names, thought of some he had seen, trying to make connections. At the fourth list of names, one name leaped out in the repetition. *Old Terminal Road*. It too might have said, *I am at the end of things*.

As he passed down Old Terminal Road the next morning, his breath a bit heavy and expectant, sunshine falling all around him, coming down through tree limbs and new buds in a near-wanton laziness, his gaze fell on the last house on the road. He caught a kind of sparkle from its lines; a neat, weather-beaten, old Cape Cod cottage with clean, blue trim. A small porch was braced by four white columns. Four window flower boxes stood empty in perfect alignment across the front porch. A few fruit trees clustered in a side yard. The mail box out front, plain and austere, bore the legend:

*Maybelle Frond*

*49 Old Terminal Road*

From a distance, kicked unevenly by tantrum's languor and heady needs as identifiable as written words, the maple buds leaped their beginnings upon him all over again. At a significant pause in his step, at a critical turn of his head, he saw a curtain in a

front window move slowly apart, as if any moment, in full declaration, someone would step through the opening. Jazz Colbere could only hazard a guess that that someone might elicit a nightlong presence, a hand full of signals, a voice in the kitchen.

*Tom Sheehan's books are Epic Cures and Brief Cases, Short Spans, November 2008 from Press 53, NC; A Collection of Friends and From the Quickening, March 2009, from Pocol Press, VA. His work is in Home of the Brave, Stories in Uniform and Milspeak; Warriors, Veterans, Family and Friends Writing the Military Experience, both new issues from Press 53. He has 14 Pushcart nominations, Noted Story nominations for 2007 and 2008, the Georges Simenon Award for Fiction, a story in the Dzanc Best of the Web Anthology for 2009, and a nomination for Best of the Web 2010. He served with the 31<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment in Korea, 1951. His collection, Epic Cures, was an IPPY Award winner.*