

A Quick Trip to the Post Office

by Christy Noel

Jean could not have been having a worse day. Twenty people waited ahead of her; she was the last in a line that extended out of the main waiting area into the P.O. box room. She adjusted her load: four boxes; a shopping bag full of smaller parcels and Christmas cards; her red leather purse with its short brown handles. She wondered how long she'd been waiting. Her watch was out of reach, buried under the packages and covered by her thick coat sleeves, and no wall clock hung in the outer area. She was sure no one had budged for at least five minutes.

Why was she even worrying about the time? Was she in a hurry to get back to the office? Hardly! She had walked out just after 11, taking an early lunch on purpose, ignoring the stares of her busy colleagues. She just knew that she had to get some fresh air.

The door opened behind her, letting in the biting chill. A stout man crossed over to the far bank of gray mail boxes. He was a walking heart attack, the sort who hadn't exercised in twenty years and probably subsisted on TV dinners and take out. His drooping jowls and tired eyes reflected an air of apathy bordering on depression. He fumbled with his keys, and they slipped, clattering on the floor.

Sighing as he leaned over heavily, he scooped them up. Moving with the speed of an aged, arthritic bloodhound, it took him a moment to right himself. At last, he succeeded in opening his medium-sized box and peered in at the short stack of mail. With unexpected gracefulness, his pudgy fingers carefully flicked through the pile of small brown padded envelopes. His expression shifted somehow, and a flicker of forgotten youth seemed to touch his eyes. Satisfied, he closed the empty box and left, looking a little more cheerful than when he'd arrived.

A customer came out of the inner room and brushed past Jean in a blur of brown leather. “Excuse me,” he murmured.

She took little notice. The line edged forward a little, and Jean adjusted the weight of her load. She shivered as icy air came in with another customer and made a mental note to invest in a full length coat.

The morning’s events replayed in her mind.

The day began with her usual routine, nothing to warn her of the stress to come. She had spent the first hour sipping tea and studying the results of last night’s simulation. After pausing to check news on line, she had gone into her 9 a.m. meeting with Bao and Sam to review the project status.

Her colleagues jumped straight into an argument about how they were going to manage the system traffic. As they became more worked up over the issue, they started talking over each other, something that frequently happened when the two of them discussed anything. Jean listened quietly, knowing how difficult it was to get a word in edgewise. As their voices grew louder, an early headache tugged at the edges of her brain.

“How’s it going?” asked Victor, poking his head into the small conference room. Victor was her boss.

Sam blurted out the latest topic in a flurry of techno-babble, and Victor jumped into the fray.

Jean sighed. Back when she’d started at Apex she’d thought he was good at mediating. Now that she knew him better, she recognized that his comments usually just made things worse. He had a knack for complicating simple problems.

Victor was definitely not going to go down in history as her favorite manager. Every time she tried to discuss her concerns with him, he seemed to dismiss them. He thought her worries over the tight schedule were unfounded, that their algorithm would work wonders. After four months of development, she had her doubts. However, what did she know? The idea, now patented, came from the CIO, an MIT hotshot.

She grimaced when she remembered that Gary, the CIO, was the same age as her, twenty-eight.

Even if she worked twenty-four seven, she doubted she could make everything work in time for the summer demo. Her sixty hour weeks were already wearing thin.

A woman in a bright red coat and Christmas-motif scarf pushed past the line, and everyone moved forward a few paces. At last, Jean squeezed into the inner room. Now that the windowed wall separated her from the outer area, she started to miss the chilly air that continually pushed in through the front entrance. She began to sweat.

She glanced through the windows to check the weather. The gray sky promised snow, but the precipitation had not yet begun. Her thoughts returned to the subject of work.

After the morning meeting, Victor stopped by to see how things were going.

“This is excellent work,” he said, praising her latest design additions. “You’re doing an outstanding job.”

His praise bugged her. “But this is only the tip of the iceberg,” she said. “I still don’t know how to get everything working by June.” They’d scheduled an early demo of the product out at a convention in San Jose during the summer, and the deadline loomed, though it was still six months away.

“Oh, I’m sure you’ll manage,” he said optimistically. His brown eyes never reflected stress. Absently brushing his wispy blond hair back, he studied some of her notes. She had once thought his boyish enthusiasm seemed full of confidence. Now she only felt distrust.

“Just keep working on this simulation,” he suggested.

“But look at these results.”

“Oh, fuck, that isn’t what I was expecting at all,” he said, not sounding the least bit upset in spite of his choice of language. He used the “f” word all the time, treating it like “gosh.” It was odd: Jean wasn’t the sort to take offense at foul language, certainly not when it came in a fit of passion, but the way Victor frequently dropped that particular four letter word into everyday conversation grated on her nerves—another pet peeve to add to the growing list. “Well, keep working at it,” he added.

A loud thud startled her.

“Oh fiddlesticks,” said an elderly woman.

A white box with dog-eared corners and excess tape sat on the floor, the apparent source of the disturbance. A second box nestled in the old lady’s arms, while her large black pocketbook swung chaotically from her wrist. She teetered slightly, as if wondering how to rescue the fallen parcel. Her bluish-white ankles peeked out from dark trousers where anklet nylons had slipped down.

The man in front of her came to her rescue. He knelt down to retrieve the package, his black overcoat brushing the floor as he did so.

“Oh, bless you, dear,” she twittered in her high, fluttery voice.

The box label flashed under the overhead lights, and Jean read the name next to the “from”: Helen Ash.

The kind man gently slid the parcel onto her other box.

“Things aren’t as easy as when my Alex used to help me,” Helen said. “Thank you.”

Jean wondered how long it had been since the absent Alex had helped her. The old woman’s blue nylon coat looked like a leftover from the seventies, and a battered faux fur hat covered her scalp, letting only a few tufts of permed white hair peek out near her ears.

Helen’s rescuer nodded politely. Asian in appearance, he was unusually tall with a flat nose and high cheek bones. Jean recognized him from her old company, Wavefront Systems: a software engineer. What was his name? Jim? John? She remembered. George something. She wondered if he’d been laid off at the same time as her, six months ago. She only knew him by sight and wasn’t well acquainted with him.

The layoff had shaken up Jean’s life and sent her looking for a new job, which is how she ended up at the little start-up, Apex. She wondered if George had fared better, or if he’d managed to stay with the company through the cut-backs. She missed the place—both the job and the people. She’d been happy there, but the souring economy had changed everything pretty fast.

“I’m just trying to get these presents out to my grandkids,” explained Helen. Her demeanor and attitude suggested years of neglect and solitude, the kind of old woman who kept a small dog as her only companion. “They don’t get out to see me very often. Kim and Tucker live out in Phoenix, and it’s too far away for me to go visit.”

George nodded silently. He managed to look sympathetic and distant at the same time. Maybe he had family of his own who lived too far away to visit. He continually shuffled two envelopes, both addressed to China. Jean recalled the sign on the stamp

machine in the outer room—the notice hanging over the coin slot had announced that it was “out of order.” Her former colleague seemed to be thinking about the same thing, contemplating the wisdom of waiting in line for stamps. He frowned slightly at his letters and apparently decided they were too important to postpone.

Jean shifted her packages. Her arm muscles ached a little, and she tried to ignore them.

Her gaze turned inward again.

“If I had some help with the verification, it would be a lot easier,” she suggested.

Victor tilted his head thoughtfully. “I’m afraid you’ll have to make do. Our staffing budget is frozen until the next phase.”

“I could really use some help with this,” she pleaded.

Her manager nodded. “Well, maybe Annie can help you out.”

She closed her eyes in a moment of frustration. They’d just hired Annie, a technician, to help debug hardware in the lab. Though perfect for the lab environment, she lacked the technical skills and experience for doing logic verification. Jean decided she needed someone like Pat, the engineer who did verification on her last project at Wavefront. If they could get someone like him on the team, they might actually stand a chance of meeting the June deadline.

“No, someone with experience,” she insisted in a strained tone.

“Sorry, maybe later in the year.” Victor was apologetic, even sympathetic.

She sighed. “Any chance of some board design after this? A little variety would be good, too.” When she’d taken the job, Victor had promised her some board design in addition to her logic work, telling her that she’d get to do some within a couple months. His promise had sounded perfectly reasonable, not far-fetched. After all, people were supposed to wear many hats at start-ups. She had been specifically looking for a position that would broaden her experience a little, and this was one of the reasons she had accepted the job.

“Maybe sometime next year, when we start the next phase. I think Sam’s got everything covered with the board design for now.”

No matter how many times she brought up the subject, the promise of a new challenge remained in the vague future.

“Sorry, let’s continue this later.” Victor smiled politely, spotting Gary at the end of the corridor. He wandered off to talk to the CIO.

His nonchalance made her fume. Wiser now, she knew they had hired her for one specific task, doing the logic design. The rest had been a lie. Victor consistently ignored her concerns and dismissed her needs, all the while acting pleasant and wholesome—even when he swore.

She stared angrily at her computer screen for ten minutes until she was ready to explode.

When she couldn’t stand it any longer, she left early for lunch.

The old woman’s tremulous voice filtered through her recollection. “I’m afraid I missed the cut-off date for Christmas.”

That was an understatement, Jean knew all too well. The last day for mailing in time for the holiday had been Saturday. She’d seen it on the news, but she’d just been too busy to drag herself to the post office, so her own packages were going to be late, too.

“But maybe they’ll get there by New Year’s,” concluded Helen hopefully.

The reminder added to Jean’s stress. She chastised herself for being too involved with work. She’d only finished wrapping everything last night. She hoped no one would be disappointed.

She wondered if her sister, Lauren, felt homesick. Jean was just sending her a small box of Christmas goodies—cookies, her favorite candy, and the jar of peanut butter she’d requested. Lauren was in her third year of college, studying overseas for a year in Athens. Flights were expensive, so she’d opted to stay there and spend some time sightseeing with friends. One of the girls had invited her to spend Christmas with her family, so at least she wouldn’t be alone.

Jean gazed at the people waiting ahead of her, bundled up in their coats and scarves, looking bored and impatient. Greece sounded wonderful and exotic at the moment. She

envied her sister. Up to now, Jean's sole excursion out of the country consisted of a quick three day vacation to Aruba two years ago.

The larger boxes were for her family out in Fremont, California, and for her boyfriend's divorced parents, who lived in North Carolina and Texas. The smaller parcels in the shopping bag were destined for a handful of scattered friends, including Megan, a former co-worker who'd taken the spontaneous Aruban holiday with her. She figured they'd probably forgive her for being a few days late. She could always blame the postal service.

She hadn't even managed to get her cards out on time. She'd used her only stamps to mail bill payments last week.

The woman behind her sneezed. Her graying blond hair, neatly plaited, fell forward, brushing her maroon coat. White mittened hands clutched a neatly wrapped cardboard package, addressed to someone in Heidelberg. No makeup touched her pale complexion, and small-lensed glasses perched on her aquiline nose, lending her a slightly foreign air, as if she had only just come from Germany herself. Her faraway gaze suggested a sense of being lost, as if she had suddenly found herself with too much free time and no plans.

"Is there anyone here just to pick up packages?" called one of the clerks from the far end of the counter. "Anyone to pick up packages?"

No one stepped forward. The clerk disappeared into the back room.

Another customer finished at the counter and escaped the crowded confines of the waiting area, while three more people stacked up at the back. At last Jean reached the wide wooden railing where she could rest her packages. She balanced them and stretched each arm in turn, savoring the temporary relief.

Occasionally the counter conversations punctuated the subdued atmosphere of the post office.

"Do you need any insurance?"

"I'd like to send this priority."

"Do you need any stamps?"

A woman with her small child created the noisiest distraction. About four years old, the little boy fidgeted constantly. Jean, like most of the other customers, tried to tune out the mother's intermittent reprimands.

So, all of her packages and cards were inevitably going to be late. She fancifully wished she had a time machine, or maybe a clone. There just never seemed to be enough

time in the day to get everything done. She spotted the wall clock above the counter: 11:30 already.

The child swung on the wooden railing at the front, treating it like a jungle gym bar, while his mother filled out a form. Out of habit, she muttered, “Stop that, David.”

He took no notice of her and continued to rock more vigorously, oblivious of the people standing nearby. Snot dripped from his nose.

One man scowled when David nearly kicked him. The man stepped back, and the gleam of metal from his right leg caught Jean’s eye. It was an artificial limb, giving him ample reason to be annoyed by the boy’s careless behavior. He opened his mouth as if to speak to the mother.

Before he uttered a word, however, the harassed mother noticed the boy’s misbehavior. “Stop that!” Her hoarse voice strained against the effects of a bad cold. She reached down and yanked him away from the railing. He clung to her hand without looking up. The woman shook her head and frowned sternly at him. An unproductive cough issued from her throat and she clutched a crumpled tissue to her face.

At least Jean didn’t have kids to worry about. Of course, she wasn’t even married, a desired prerequisite for her. Admittedly she was living with her boyfriend, Dale, but it wasn’t marriage.

Of course, he had been dropping hints lately.

“A couple more weeks, it’ll be our one year anniversary,” he mentioned over dinner.

An anniversary, already? It felt like they’d only been together a few months.

“We could celebrate with a vacation,” she suggested. The month she’d had off after the layoff had been work, not play. She’d spent most of the time talking to recruiters, working on her resume, scouring the internet for jobs, and going to interviews—not her idea of a vacation.

“I was pricing package trips to Aruba,” she added. “There are some great deals right now.” Maybe a few days in the warm sunshine would mend her spirit and lift her low morale.

“Right now? I hate traveling during the winter.”

Her eyes refocused, and she looked through the window. Perfect. The first snowflakes drifted by, though nothing seemed to be sticking yet.

One of the clerks pulled priority tape over a large package, sending a crackling, ripping sound through the room.

“Could I get two books of stamps?” requested the woman being served.

“Any preferences?” asked the clerk.

“Santa stamps, please.” While the clerk fished some stamps out of the drawer, the woman chatted. “Can you believe this weather? Third storm in two weeks.” She shook her head. “Makes up for last winter.”

Jean pictured Aruba. She’d gone there with Megan a couple years ago, when she was still with Maplewell Consulting. She and Megan had become good friends while working together in Virginia for six months, and when they had finished the job, they used some of their comp time to dash off on a short vacation before moving on to the next assignment.

Aruba.

The warm sunshine penetrated her skin, while the trade winds kept her just cool enough. Condensation dripped from the plastic cup that held the frozen slush of a virgin strawberry daiquiri. Her towel billowed at the edges of the plastic lounge chair. Nearby, Megan quietly thumbed through one of her mystery novels.

Salt water dried on her legs from the brief dip in the glimmering water, and powdery white sand clung to her feet as she tried to brush it away before putting on another layer of sunscreen. The breeze whistled through the dried palm leaf roof of the palapa shelter. Down the beach, a dark-skinned local cried “Aloe! Aloe!” as he tried to interest tourists in buying some of the island’s healing gel.

“Anyone to pick up any packages?” The clerk’s call dismissed her pleasant memory.

Outside, the snowflakes thickened and flew down faster.

Dale never wanted to go anywhere, she silently lamented, moving forward and scooting her packages along the rail. He didn’t enjoy dining out; he refused to go skiing on account of his bad knees; he was reluctant to fly anywhere, for any reason.

He preferred to spend his spare time glued to ESPN. He adored sports—football, soccer, tennis—it didn’t really matter. When he talked to his dad on the phone, they seemed

to spend their entire conversation discussing various athletes, talking about current statistics, and pondering the outcome of next week's games.

She wondered how she had missed all of his faults during the first six months of their relationship. At first he'd seemed ideal; at least, he'd seemed a lot different from her last boyfriend, Troy.

She had met Troy during her first month at college and dated him for three years. Romantic and attentive, he seemed like the perfect boyfriend. His only major fault, occasional moodiness, didn't bother her much. On his good days, his boundless energy often rubbed off on her and charged her own enthusiasm for school and extracurricular activities. By their third year together, she easily pictured herself marrying him. They'd even talked about their future together on a couple occasions.

Their relationship changed abruptly at the beginning of their last year in college. He unexpectedly dumped her in October, soon after they had settled into their classes. His decision hurt her deeply, but her pain quickly changed to anger when she discovered he'd been two-timing her during the summer.

He later married his new flame—within a month after graduation—while Jean drifted through several minor relationships and found herself alone.

Being single made it easy for her to take the consulting position with Maplewell as her first job. It sounded exciting, and she thought that it would suit her, to get out and travel around the country. The assignments took her everywhere: Los Angeles, Virginia, Colorado, and finally Massachusetts. Virginia had been fun, when she'd worked with Megan. It was a pity Megan now lived across the country in Seattle.

The last assignment brought her to the Burlington office of Wavefront Systems. Contrary to her California-bred expectations, she felt right at home in the New England environment. When her contract expired, the project manager invited her to stay on in a permanent position doing logic design. She signed a year lease on an apartment in Chelmsford and settled into her new home. Soon afterwards, a mutual friend introduced her to Dale.

Dale, a graduate from MIT, showed her around the area. They visited the historic parts of Lexington and Concord and toured the famous places in Boston; on Saturdays, they watched movies at the theater; once, they stayed at a cozy bed and breakfast on the Maine coast. Soon they traded evenings cooking dinner for each other. Eventually, they started spending entire weekends together.

Six months ago, things started going wrong. First, Jean's dream job evaporated as Wavefront announced layoffs. While she hunted for a new job, she and Dale spent so much time together that it made sense for them to move in to one place to save money. They decided to keep her apartment since she had the long-term lease and bigger place. Right around the time when she found the job with Apex she began to discover her mistake.

Trivial things got on her nerves. He left his underwear on the bedroom floor for days, and she often had to nag him to put his clean clothes away after they did laundry. The potent scent of his dandruff shampoo permeated the bathroom every morning, turning her stomach. Toothpaste smeared the bathroom sink on a permanent basis. His unrinsed juice glass sat on the counter all day, its dried-on pulp annoying her when she came home. He never remembered to help with the household stuff—like restocking the stamps.

Dale acted perfectly satisfied with their relationship, but she wondered if she'd be happier breaking things off. If she was going to do something about it, the time to act was rapidly approaching. The lease, about to expire, reminded her that she didn't want to live in an apartment forever. Tired of throwing rent money down the drain, she longed for the luxuries of having her own house, where she could paint the rooms any color she liked and maybe get a cat. Sunday morning's breakfast conversation rattled in her brain.

“Let's get a dog,” Dale suggested, rather spontaneously. “Wouldn't that be great?”

She wrinkled her nose. “I don't know. Where would we keep it?”

“We aren't going to live in this place forever,” he said, also aware of the upcoming lease deadline. “Besides, a dog wouldn't be that much of a problem.”

“It just doesn't sound like a good idea right now. Dogs need so much attention,” she argued, not really sure what they needed since she'd only ever had cats.

His expression fell slightly. “Well, maybe later on we can get one.”

Returning to the present, she moved up to the next position, only a few more customers away from the front counter. Snow dusted the parked cars outside, no longer melting.

She imagined her future life, what it would be like if she had her own house.

Snow tumbled by outside, but the crackling fire kept things cheery and warm inside. The aroma of baking oatmeal cookies wafted through the rooms. The washing machine—she was so tired of using the laundromat—rumbled in the background. And at her feet, her old childhood cat, an orange tabby named Sunny, purred and rubbed against her shin, reminding her that he wanted dinner.

Okay, so Sunny was long gone, having gone to the great cat box in the sky years ago. But she was sure she could adopt a friendly cat from the local animal shelter.

More importantly, where did Dale fit into the picture?

The roaring of a cheering crowd emanated from the big screen TV. Dale leaned forward in his leather chair, engrossed in the current play.

“Touchdown!” he shouted.

At his feet, his German shepherd let out a single bark in unison with him, picking up on his excitement. Then the dog gazed over at her cat, thinking, “Mmm, lunch.”

Yuck! She quickly shook away the image of shattered domestic bliss and moved forward another step as Helen hobbled up to the counter.

11:45 now. She frowned. She wondered if Victor had noticed her absence.

The little boy ran by, cutting between the legs of the customers as he headed for the packaging supplies at the back of the room. His mother, finishing her business at the counter, realized he was missing from her side. She turned around and scanned the room; a flash of panic lit her eyes. “David!”

The boy picked up a poster tube and batted some of the flattened boxes in the rack. He grinned at the thumping sound.

“Stop that!” scolded his mother. She hurried past the gawking customers. “I told you not to run away!” She snatched the hollow tube from him and stuffed it back into the open case of supplies. Yanking David roughly by the arm, she dragged her son away. A whiny cry poured from his mouth as they departed.

A few of the waiting customers audibly sighed in relief to see them go.

Jean’s stomach rumbled, and she remembered that she’d left her bagged lunch in her desk drawer. She decided she would pick something up at the deli around the corner instead.

The snow fell more thickly now. Maybe she could go home early.

The back room clerk reappeared. “Anyone here just to pick up packages?”

A man pushed forward from the back, waving a slip. Jean glanced away, wishing she’d done something other than going to the post office.

“Jean?”

Startled, she turned to focus on the speaker, the man who’d just retrieved his mail from the front.

“Zach?” she replied, recognizing him from Wavefront. He’d worked in the testing group there.

“What a small world! It’s been, what, six months?”

They shook hands. The brief touch of his skin warmed her icy fingers.

She nodded and smiled in return—possibly her first smile of the day. “What have you been doing with yourself?” she asked conversationally. “Still at Wavefront?” She knew he’d survived the layoff.

He scoffed. “Nah. I changed about a month after you left. Ended up down the road.”

They exchanged summaries of their respective job changes.

“Listen, a bunch of us are getting together for lunch after New Year’s. You ought to come,” he suggested earnestly.

“I’d love that.”

“Here,” he added, handing her his business card. “Email me!”

“Thanks—I will!”

He nodded cheerfully and waved as he departed. Her eyes followed him out. It would be great to see some of the old gang again. It was just the medicine she needed.

“Next please!” called one of the post office clerks.

She carefully slipped the card into her purse, remembering his warm touch, and finally dumped her packages on the counter. Maybe it wasn’t going to be such a bad day after all.