INSPIRATIONAL FICTION

Len Tuttle's Postcards to Route 4

Len Tuttle carried the mail on Rural Route 4 out of Larkin Ford, Kansas, for thirty-one years. Before every shift he came into my hardware store at 6:40 in the morning, sat on the second stool by the register, and drank one cup of coffee so full he had to lean down and sip it before he could pick it up.

He retired six years ago. He kept coming in anyway. Same stool, same cup, same lean.

Then last January he didn't come in for a week, and then for a month. Bernice called the store to tell me it was pneumonia, and then it was more than pneumonia. He was on a breathing machine in Wichita for eleven days. After that came three weeks at a rehab place in Hutchinson, where they taught him how to stand up out of a chair.

I drove over twice. The second time he was sitting by a window with a pegboard on his tray table, the kind you'd give a kindergartner, trying to put little plastic pegs in the holes. Half of them ended up on the floor. I picked them up for him. He didn't say much. Len never did, but this was a different kind of quiet.

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He came home in March with a walker and a list of exercises. The occupational therapist, a patient young woman named Kendra, wanted him working his hands every day. Squeeze the putty. Do the pegs. Practice writing.

Bernice told me later that he did the putty and threw the pegboard in the hall closet.

“So write something,” she said to him one night.

“Write to who?”

“Len, you know every address in this county.”

That was close to true. He knew all 342 boxes on Route 4, in order, the way some men know the books of the Bible. So the next morning he sat at the kitchen table with a stack of postcards Bernice had bought at the drugstore and wrote to box number one, Ray and Lois Hollister, at the corner of Route 4 and Pell Road.

Ray brought it into the store a few days later and set it on the counter. The writing went uphill and back down like it had been done in a moving truck. It said, “Your cattle guard needs welding. Hope you’re well. Len T.”

“That’s him, all right,” Ray said. “He’s been telling me that since 1998.”

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He wrote three or four a day. He’d put them in his own mailbox at the end of the lane with the flag up, and Danny Ochoa, the young fellow who has the route now, would pick them up and carry them out to the same boxes Len used to fill.

The first week, getting to the mailbox took Bernice walking beside him. It’s about two hundred yards of gravel. By April he was making the trip alone with the walker, and by May he’d traded the walker for a cane off my back shelf.

People wrote back. That was the part he hadn’t counted on. Cards and letters started coming to the Tuttle box, more mail than it had seen in its life. The Yoder girls on Kiowa Road sent drawings of horses. Mrs. Ferrell, who’s ninety-one, sent a full page about her late husband’s tomatoes and a recipe for green tomato relish that Bernice says is very good.

Gus Lindqvist wrote back, “Who is this?” Len’s second card to him was a lot neater.

Folks kept bringing his cards into the store to show me, the way you'd show somebody a picture of a grandbaby. I got so I could tell where he was on the route by who walked in. The Hollisters in March. The Pruitt brothers, who run the grain elevator, in April. The ladies from Cedar Street Methodist, who live mostly on the stretch past the cemetery, all in one week in May. They'd had him on the prayer list since January, and every one of them came in to tell me his card was in her purse.

You could watch his hand come back in those cards. I don't know how else to put it. The early ones looked like a seismograph. By June, the letters sat on the line. By July, they had that little forward tilt Len's writing always had.

I'd know. He signed for his charge account at my store for thirty years, and I've been looking at that signature longer than I've been looking at my own.



My store is the last stop on Route 4. Box 342. It always has been, which is why Len used to come in at the end of his day too, for the second half of whatever was left in the pot.

Around the middle of August I did the arithmetic and figured my card was about due. Danny came in Tuesday with the mail, and there wasn't one. Wednesday, nothing. I'll admit I looked through the stack twice.

Thursday morning at 6:40 the bell over the door rang.

Len came in with the cane in one hand and Bernice waiting out in the car. He was thinner than he'd been last fall, and he took the step at the threshold like a man testing pond ice. He walked the length of the counter without holding onto it, sat down on the second stool, took a postcard out of his shirt pocket and slid it across to me.

"Figured I'd deliver this one," he said.

The writing was straight and dark and leaned forward. It said, "Fill it too full. Len T."

So I did. I poured it right to the brim, the way I'd done a few thousand times, and set it down in front of him. He leaned over and took the first sip without picking it up.

The card is tacked up by the register now, above the key machine. People ask about it. I tell them it came special delivery.