

## *Karl Harshbarger*

### THE MAIL IN THE MORNING

The adult population of the world can be divided into two groups: those who rush to their mail boxes and tear open and read the mail as soon as it arrives, and those who wait a dignified amount of time before collecting their letters, and then, even so, carrying them back into the house or apartment for later reading.

Peterson definitely belonged to the second group.

So on this day he didn't even get up from his computer when he heard the mailman's buzz. No need to buzz back. Experience had taught him that at least two or three, or maybe even four or five, ladies who lived elsewhere in the complex would take care of that.

Nor, half an hour later when he'd reached a logical stopping place in his work and took a little mini-break and walked down the four flights of stairs to the rows of mailboxes and inserted his key in his, did he open and read any of the letters right there in the hallway.

He certainly might have been tempted to. Right among the three or four bills and an advertising flyer from a travel agency, he discovered three letters from his wife. Three letters. That was pretty good for one day. And she used those nice blue envelopes she'd taken with her from Germany when she'd left for her three-week visit to the States. Each one was carefully addressed to him as *Herr* Chuck Peterson. Perhaps a kind of a little joke between them since "Chuck" was such an un-German name.

And, another reason he might have opened at least one piece of mail: at the back of the mailbox (he'd almost missed it) he saw one of those white envelopes edged in black and engraved with an elongated Christian cross. My goodness, the thought came to him, who had died? Hopefully no close friend. Well, no, certainly not, he decided. If a close friend had died, wouldn't he have known about it by now? So, in all likelihood, yes, surely, the deceased was a relative of his wife's, even probably a distant relative. Later in the day—after he'd finished this report for Berlin, of course—he'd write his wife and tell her about it.

He carried the mail back up the four flights of stairs (84 steps, he'd counted them) and deposited the little pile on the kitchen table.

He was already back in his office and seated at his computer, having adjusted his body by making his back straight, and was looking at the words on the screen which said, "We are able to confirm the receipt of the bill of lading. . .," when a slightly disturbing thought came to him. Had there been a return address on that black-edged envelope?

Although he reasoned it really didn't make any difference whether there was a return address or not since the deceased was surely a distant relative, Peterson got up and went back into the kitchen.

There, a bit of a strange thing. He couldn't find the black-edged envelope. That is, he found his wife's three letters and the bills and the flyer from the travel agency, but no black-edged envelope.

Peterson didn't quite believe this. He didn't quite believe this because he remembered very clearly taking the black-edged envelope out of the mailbox and placing it on top of the other mail. And then he clearly remembered carrying the mail up the four flights of stairs. Therefore, it followed, the black-edged envelope ought to be on top of the pile of mail, or at least in the pile of mail, or at least on the kitchen table. Only, it wasn't.

Peterson went out his apartment door again. No, the envelope wasn't out on the landing. Nor was it on any of the steps of the first flight, nor the second, third or fourth. Nor did he see it on the floor nor anywhere else down on the main floor near the row of mailboxes.

Peterson climbed back up the flights of stairs and looked carefully around his landing before he went in his apartment and closed the door. He also looked around the kitchen. But no black-edged envelope.

Clearly there had to be a logical explanation for this. Sooner or later, Peterson decided as he again sat down at his computer and straightened his back, the envelope would turn up. Things always did. Or they most always did. Once, to take just one example, he and his wife couldn't find the second key to their car. A somewhat serious matter since they both used the car at different times of the day. Both of them had looked high and low for the key. But they couldn't find it. Then, surprisingly, three months later Peterson had gone down into their assigned storage room in the cellar of the apartment complex and opened one of his suitcases and saw the second key to the car inside it. How it had gotten in the suitcase neither he nor his wife could figure out. But, you see, that was the way those things worked out.

So maybe this afternoon or by tomorrow morning the black-edged envelope would show up.

Peterson looked at his computer, touched the mouse—wiping the screen-saver from the screen—and tried to reinsert himself back into the report for Berlin, words which said something about a receipt for a bill of lading. By accident, when he'd first come to join his wife in Germany, he'd been offered a kind of high-class secretary's job with a firm that made washing machines and other appliances and exported them from Germany to all over the world. His job was to conduct some of the correspondence to and from English-speaking countries and to edit some of the firm's reports into English. He e-mailed his work back and forth to Berlin.

But now he couldn't quite concentrate on the words on the screen.

Actually, it *was* a little weird. This black-edged envelope thing.

At 10:45 Peterson always took a break from his work. This day was no different from the other days. So when 10:45 arrived, Peterson left the computer running (he knew the screen-saver would come on), locked the apartment door and went down the four flights of stairs.

Two of the older ladies who had lived in this apartment complex maybe since it had been built were gossiping in the vestibule near the mailboxes. It occurred to Peterson to interrupt them and ask if they had perhaps, by any chance, seen the black-edged envelope.

But, instead he said, "*Guten Tag.*"

"*Guten Tag, Herr Professor Doktor,*" said one of the ladies.

That address always jarred Peterson. He wasn't a Ph. D., but unfortunately some time ago his wife had told the ladies that her husband once taught at a university in the United States. The older Germans, especially the older female Germans, were so title-conscious that since that time the ladies in the apartment building always called him by that formal title.

"It's a beautiful day," Peterson said in German.

"Oh, yes," replied one of the ladies. "Isn't it. Isn't it just."

"But we need rain," said the other lady.

"But not too much rain," said Peterson.

Peterson smiled at the two ladies and pushed the door of the apartment complex open and stepped out into the street.

And, to Peterson's surprise, it really was a beautiful day, the sky clear and blue, no clouds, the air crisp, the trees beginning to turn toward reds and yellows.

Every morning at this time when Peterson took a break from his work, he walked around the corner to the local *Baekerei* for a cup of coffee. That is to

say, after exiting the front door of the apartment complex, he turned to his right and walked down to the corner, where he turned right again. But today wasn't quite like the other days. A lift. A brightness.

So Peterson found himself turning left. He would still walk to the *Baeckerei*, of course, but he would pass through a bit of the park before he turned to the left again and cut back down the other side of the block towards the *Baeckerei*.

But he had walked no more than one hundred feet up the sidewalk toward the park when a black cat crossed in front of him.

Peterson simply turned around and walked the other way.

Of course, Peterson didn't believe in that black cat business. And, anyway, he told himself, by turning around and walking the other way he had invalidated it. That is, the cat hadn't actually crossed his path. Not technically. It was only when you kept going and passed where the cat had crossed.

Peterson found himself back at the front door of his apartment complex. Perhaps he should play it safe today and simply go back to his apartment up on the fourth floor.

My goodness, thought Peterson. What was all this? Maybe as a child these kinds of things, black cats, walking under ladders, and so forth, had disturbed him. But not since adulthood. And not on a day like today—so unlike the typical dull and dark German weather.

So Peterson kept walking down the sidewalk in his normal direction toward the corner where he always turned right for the *Baeckerei*. But, even so, that certain sense of lift and brightness had disappeared. Well, he thought, probably because he had been working too hard, or, face it, the kind of work he did was boring and repetitive, not the kind of work for a *Professor Doktor*. Or because his wife had been gone for two weeks. Or, who knew what? But for some reason the beautiful day outside no longer delighted him. Well, that was the way these things sometimes worked out.

Nevertheless, as soon as Peterson rounded the corner and saw the little square in front of him with its fountain and cluster of businesses, he felt reassured: all the little shops, the green grocers, the newsstand, the meat shop, the pub, even the Greek take-out place, each with its own proprietor who actually owned and ran the store. That was one of the things that made him feel good about Germany. None of that jumble and confusion, all those 7-Elevens, Burger Kings, Qwik Shops.

"Good morning, good morning," Peterson said in German as he came into the *Baeckerei*, breathing in the smell of newly baked bread. He directed this

greeting both to Frau Kemper in her white apron-dress behind the counter and to the two older men who sat at separate tables, each drinking coffee. That was another thing Peterson liked about Germany. When you came into a business establishment, or, at least a small business establishment, you still greeted everyone. And they greeted you. When you left you said goodbye to everyone. You didn't have to know them. That wasn't the point. It was just how things had been done for hundreds of years, or, at least, for a very long time.

"Fantastic weather," said Peterson, now addressing Frau Kemper.

"German weather," said Frau Kemper.

"German weather?" said Peterson.

"Yes, of course."

This was a running joke between them. Frau Kemper took the position that cloudy and rainy weather was really English weather and that only fine weather like today was real German weather.

"Although we could do with some rain," said one of the men from his table. He was a regular, and Peterson saw him in the *Baeckerei* every morning. While this man drank his coffee he always read the same newspaper, *Die Welt*.

"But not too much rain," said Peterson.

"But some rain," said the older man.

Peterson was just forming the next words he was going to say, a combination of words, when a sense of lifting, a sense of brightness, happening so slowly, so terribly slowly, how interesting, is what Peterson now thought, far more interesting than words.

He simply was up there looking down. Why shouldn't he be up there looking down? Looking down at those people lying on the sidewalk with pools of blood beside them, parts of bodies here and there, an arm over there still twitching. How interesting. How very interesting, thought Peterson, as he also heard the clank and howl of the approaching fire trucks. He even saw himself. Or he saw the body of himself wedged into a hedge that ran between the square and the *Baeckerei*. The *Baeckerei*? thought Peterson. Wasn't that a German word? And weren't German words different from English words? And Italian words, and Spanish words? And all the rest of those languages, whatever you called them? So much splintering?

Then, it was almost as if he were sitting in an armchair having a good rest, perhaps getting ready to read a newspaper himself. Only it was clear he wasn't sitting in an armchair. For one thing, the sun stood bright in the sky.

Therefore, he had to be outside, not inside. And, for another thing, why were all these little twiggy branches poking at him? And look at his arm, the way it was covered with blood and how the hand hooked over at an impossible angle like that.

And even stranger, look at all that commotion out in front of him, the police cars and the ambulances and the fire trucks with their blue lights flashing and the burp and cackle of the radios, all those people, men in white coats carrying stretchers, firemen pulling at hoses.

What was all the fuss about?

A memory came to Peterson. Some years ago—although now he understood it didn't make any difference how many years ago because . . . well, he couldn't quite get that clear in his head yet—he had been out in California at a Buddhist monastery and all the people staying there had to rise at five in the morning to go into the *Zendo* to meditate. This man next to him kept falling asleep, and, as he fell asleep his head drooped, and, as a result, the shadow of his head passed on the wall right in front of Peterson. Then the man would catch himself, jerk himself up to a rigid approved position, then begin to fall asleep again, the shadow of his head again falling across the wall in front of Peterson.

Interesting, thought Peterson.

But now two men in white uniforms were disturbing this train of thought by bending over him.

"Hello, sir. Can you hear me, sir?"

The man said this in German. He had a fair complexion and blue eyes and blond hair. But he spoke in German.

"What is your name, sir?"

"Can you hear us?" asked the other man in white. Unlike the first man, this second one had dark, wavy hair. But he spoke in German, too.

How strange. Not that Peterson didn't understand German. Of course he did. He even spoke German himself. But what amazed Peterson is that these men spoke in German and in other lands they spoke in different languages.

The two men had him up on his feet.

"Careful," said one of the men. Or, to be accurate, the man said "*Vorsicht.*" What was it in Chinese? Peterson wondered.

As they were setting him down on a bench, Peterson wanted to explain it to the two men. You see, you could say it in Chinese or Japanese or Mongolian, or whatever, and it didn't make any difference. That was the thing. It was a kind of fracturing. Perhaps that was the word. Fracturing.

They were fussing at his arm—caught up in it. So was everyone else running around, the policemen, the firemen, the men in white—caught up in it.

Peterson looked over at the shop windows. That had been a bakery, hadn't it? In German, "*Baekerei*." And hadn't he been in there? Hadn't he gone in there for a cup of coffee? Hadn't he smelled the new-baked bread? Hadn't he talked to Frau Kemper about the weather? Something about English weather? And hadn't an older man said something about rain? Then what had happened?

"That'll do for now, sir," said one of the men. In German, of course.

Peterson looked over at his arm. They had put some kind of sling around it, but his hand still hung out at a crooked angle.

"Now, you just stay here, sir, and we'll be back as soon as we can."

Peterson watched the men step over the hedge to the square where they bent over more people lying on stretchers.

Yes, fracturing, thought Peterson. That was it. It wasn't just languages, you see. It wasn't just German and English and Italian and Chinese and Mongolian. It was everything on Earth. For example, the buildings. Take this building in front of him. The one with the windows blown out. It wasn't just one bakery. It was one of thousands and thousands of bakeries. Or hardware shops, or meat shops or warehouses. It all kept expanding, the trees or flowers, or stones or people, or anything you could name. It just kept expanding and expanding, but it never came to an end. Rather, it came to the center. Or came from the center. And the center couldn't exist without the fracturing. That was it. Because without the fracturing you couldn't perceive the center. So you needed the fracturing. It went on billions and billions, or trillions, of times, always away from the center. The center and the fracturing held each other in balance. The name of that balance was . . .

For a tiny moment, probably only for a fraction of a second, Peterson saw it. He understood.

But then the pain from his arm began to throb toward him and pulled his attention away from what he had so recently known.