

End of a day

Last day of the month when Mr. Mahan woke, he had a bitter taste in his mouth. After breakfast he checked his mailbox and found a letter, one with no sender's address. When he looked at the recipient's address he was puzzled, it was written in his own handwriting as it was written today. He really freaked out when he noticed the postmark. The letter was mailed over 30 years ago.

He wondered how he could have received a letter after all these years, a letter he'd sent to himself. He held the envelope with two hands before his dazzled eyes and murmured, "In the last thirty years, I've moved three or four times. Now I'm supposed to believe that the damn post office has tracked me down after all these years to deliver this letter? A letter I never wrote?"

Puzzled by the letter in his hands, he opened the envelope and warily touched every word of every line with his trembling fingers and when he was convinced the letter was real he dared to read it.

It was a chronicle of his life. His most intimate thoughts and ambitions were all written down, every childhood dream and youthful mistake and memories and events he'd never shared with anyone. For a moment he thought maybe this letter was a result of a hallucination but his simple explanation was not acceptable to Mr. Mahan. He then methodically folded the letter, slipped it back into the envelope and put it deep in his coat's pocket determined to decipher this mystery later.

Today was end of the month, the day he went to the retirement affairs office to receive his pension check, his only income. Not a lot of money but enough to keep his life running, to pay rent for his one-bedroom apartment, put food on the table and spare change for cigarettes and occasional newspaper.

When he arrived at the office, he faced a long line of retirees already formed. They always arrived an hour or two before time and stood in line. Waiting was their favorite hobby. They shared their life stories with total strangers, complained about their emotionally distant children, small size of their retirement benefits and missed golden opportunities in youth. And if the line was long enough, they bragged about their passionate loves, heroism in wars, and political activism.

In the company of his peers, Mr. Mahan always made up outrageous stories to dazzle his audience and on the way home, he laughed at his sizzling lies and the foolishness of others. Pulling their legs was his favorite pastime. Today he told everyone story of the letter he'd received but surprisingly, no one was amazed. He even took the letter out of his pocket and paraded it before their eyes and still didn't receive much reaction from his audience.

When he realized he couldn't convince them of the bizarre nature of this event, he turned his back and cursed them under his breath, "These idiots don't know the difference between reality and fantasy. The older they get, the dumber they become."

Finally it was his turn to receive his check. He stepped to the desk and stated his name, date of birth, and birth certificate number. The chubby clerk fanned through the checks and asked his name again. The patron made a funny face while spelling his name, "M A H A N". Once again the clerk went through the checks and searched the computer list and informed Mr. Mahan his name was not on the list therefore, he would no longer receive benefits.

"What do you mean you can't find my name? My life depends on this check? What do you expect me to do, lay my head down and die?" He shrieked.

City clerk politely responded, "Your name is not on our payroll. As far as we are concerned you don't exist, therefore not qualified to receive monthly benefits. Sorry, but there is nothing I can do. Next, please."

"Only government work can be this stupid! I'm standing in front of you and you are telling me I'm dead. I'll prove how alive I am." He turned his back to her, shook his butt, "Can a dead man shake his booty like this?" He asked.

Clerk took a deep breath and pleaded, "Don't waste our time. People are waiting!"

"I don't blame you for mistaking me for a corpse. But don't make a hasty decision based on my appearance. I haven't shaved today and look a little pale," Mr. Mahan surreptitiously continued. He then extended his hand across the desk, pinched her rosy cheek, "Honestly, have you ever seen a dead man this jolly?"

The clerk lost her temper and leaped out of her chair and slapped the rude client. Before Mr. Mahan had a chance to explain, two security officers showed up, grabbed him by the arms and threw him out of the building.

Embarrassed by the humiliating treatment, Mr. Mahan tucked his shirt into his pants, picked up his hat and whispered to himself, "Maybe I was out of line a little, pinching was out of order. I should've had a word with her supervisor instead. This is how the government treats its dedicated employees. After 30 years of service and paying tax, these bastards tell you you're dead right in your face to cheat you out of your money. This is not the first time either. Last time they pulled this stunt news leaked to the papers and created a scandal."

He gently tapped on his chest to feel the letter in his pocket thinking of a quiet place to rest for a while, "What a day, first this damn letter and now the fiasco over a lousy retirement check," he murmured.

The dazed man strode for a while in the labyrinth of bustling streets until he found himself in a calm and serene environment. At first he thought he'd entered a park, but to his right he noticed circles of black-clad mourners.

"Cemetery or park, they're both peaceful and green. The only difference is there are no benches in cemetery," he wondered.

He then noticed a tombstone on a fresh plot a few yards away. He walked to the stone and sat down. A shadow covered his head. He took a deep breath, removed the letter from his pocket and read it once again. Overwhelmed by the letter's enigma and the day's bizarre events, he suddenly lost interest in making sense of his day.

As he crushed the letter in his fist to toss it on the ground, he looked down and noticed the epitaph on the tombstone on which he was sitting. He stood up, took a few steps back and squinted to read the script. He read his first and last name on the first line and his date of birth hyphenated from today's date on the second.

"What kind of foolish joke is this?" Mr. Mahan murmured.

He then fixed his hat, shook his head in disbelief, walked away and vanished into the garden of stones.