

THE OLD MAN

He sits in the lobby of a modest retirement hotel. He is surrounded by others like himself, but he is alone, captive to his own thoughts and dreams. Time seems to sit inert as if in recognition that in

this place, it is a precious commodity to be passed as slowly as possible.

He awaits the arrival of the postman. Mail from whatever source is a lifeline to a world that still throbs with movement and change. Most of the letters are impersonal circulars with no real meaning for him but their arrival is still an affirmation of himself. If he is worth the cost of a stamp, plus the effort it took to prepare, send and deliver an item, then its receipt is welcome.

Each day he treasures the small packet of mail that he is handed and he summons up a residue of willpower to resist the urge to immediately open and read it. He learned long ago, in his youth perhaps, that denial of immediate satisfaction heightens ultimate pleasure. So he savors his anticipation and puts off discovery until after lunch when he is back in his room.

He has a ritual. Each envelope is sliced open neatly with a

paper knife. Each item is quickly perused and placed in its own pile. Mail marked “resident” or “occupant” is put aside in one stack. Some of the larger pieces in this category will receive greater scrutiny later. Most recognizable advertisements are doomed to the trash.

Magazine subscription offers and charitable solicitations are eagerly sought and placed in a second pile. It has been a long time since he has made a contribution or subscribed to a periodical, but these letters offer much good reading material for long, interminable afternoons.

Political materials are treated with greater care, and with a modicum of respect. One never knows when a phrase or sentence might engender an emotion stronger than a thin smile or, conversely, a modest snarl. Something he reads may even elicit an angry outburst vented gratuitously to an empty room. And sometimes — rarely in recent years, but sometimes — a particularly egregious item will elicit a written response, carefully, laboriously spelled out in a cramped, arthritic hand and mailed to the offending organization.

Those letters whose envelopes fail to identify their contents merit a pile of their



Jan Stamm

THE OLD MAN'S DAYS
PASSED UNREMARKABLY —
UNTIL THE DAY NOT JUST
ONE BUT TWO ITEMS IN THE
MAIL ENERGIZED HIM INTO
A BREAK FROM ROUTINE.

BY HANK ZIVETZ

*He learned long ago, in his youth perhaps,
that denial of immediate satisfaction heightens ultimate pleasure.*

own. Most of these are ultimately discarded as their “mystery” is eventually unmasked.

The final and most treasured pile consists of personal letters and postcards. Rarity enhances their importance and thus they are saved for last.

On this particular day an item from each of the latter two piles energizes him into an uncharacteristic break from routine. The first turns out to be an invitation to the annual celebration in Washington, D.C., of “Foreign Service Day.” It has been almost 40 years since he retired from the Foreign Service. Ordinarily, he saves these types of papers: schedules of speeches, dinners and special events, and even ads listing hotel rates for participants. This material is usually worth a scan over lunch, for nostalgia if nothing more.

It is the second letter, the one in the personal pile, that sets off synapses in a still-active brain. It is also an invitation — personal, but sent with no more anticipation of a positive response than was the first. It is an invitation to the wedding of the old man’s great-granddaughter. The event, in a Maryland suburb of Washington, D.C., is scheduled for the week-

Hank Zivetz was an FSO from the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s. He served in Duesseldorf, Berlin, Accra, Ghana, Bucharest, Tokyo and Washington. After retirement in San Diego he earned a master’s degree in international relations at the University of San Diego. He later worked as a research associate for the Institute for International Security and Conflict Resolution at San Diego State University, and lectured on world affairs for the Extension Division of the University of California at San Diego. Publication credits include a study of “The People’s Republic of China and the Law of the Sea” for the Naval College Review and an article on Romania’s Gypsies for the Journal.

end prior to the start of the Foreign Service gathering.

He doesn’t make the connection immediately. First of all, he knows that at his age — what is it, 97, closing in on 98? — a trip across the country is not in the cards. Still, it would be nice to see his family again, all together. Actually, to let them see him. It would also be nice, for a change, to be surrounded by young people for whom the future is still an unwrapped marvel.

The Foreign Service Day function is something else again. Of course he wouldn’t know anybody. Anyone he might have worked with is long dead. And despite his continuing interest and sometimes frustrated anger at the way things are being mishandled, he isn’t sure he could sustain attention to speeches and extensive conversations. On the other hand, it might be fun to actually see some of the foreign policy experts in person instead of on TV or in the papers. These youngsters think they know it all. He could tell them a thing or two.

Unlike other schemes that periodically percolate through his mind, this one won’t go away. He even reserves time on his daydream agenda to flesh out what it might be like to travel east to see family, to attend the wedding, and finally to present himself in public as a Foreign Service officer, retired.

The first action he takes is almost incidental. He is making out monthly checks and answering a few necessary notes when the wedding invitation comes to the top of the pile. He checks the box saying he will attend, and sends the thing off in its self-addressed, stamped envelope.

His second act is taken only after considerably more thought. He makes lists in his mind of all the arguments that could be raised against his traveling to Washington. For days he debates with himself. And after chewing over the issue like the last bites of a good meal, he fills out the formal response form

F O C U S

*It is the second letter, the one in the personal pile,
that sets off synapses in a still-active brain.*

saying he will be delighted to attend the Foreign Service Day reunion, including the major luncheon for the secretary of State. He encloses the required check and even puts an extra stamp on the envelope before mailing it, just to make sure it arrives safely.

The response from his family is prompt and unanimous. For a short while, he enjoys a rare deluge of phone calls and letters from sons, daughters, grandchildren and various other relatives seldom heard from over the years, all of whom assure him that they have his best interests at heart before launching into a litany of concern:

“What are you thinking? A man your age must not contemplate a long airplane ride. It is still cold in the east. Too much excitement is not good for you. We all love you. Of course we’ll miss you, but everyone will understand.”

He is touched but also slightly amused. How much stronger would the furor be had they known about his commitment also to attend the Foreign Service Day ceremonies?

Anticipation is the accelerator of time. The accustomed rhythms of a patterned life are suddenly discarded. New priorities dictated by the deadline of a departure date ride roughshod over the sane, safe habits of an old man. Even the formalism of the mail ritual is brushed aside. Except for the few personal letters, all else is tossed into one undifferentiated pile, to be read later.

He does not mention his plans to anyone at the retirement hotel. They wouldn’t be interested, even if they understood, which he doubts. Still, anyone with an observant eye could not miss the slight smile at the edges of his lips, and his new, livelier look. But the eyes of the very elderly are mostly focused inward, and no one sees, or remarks on any change in their neighbor.

Clothes are a particular concern. He has a few

suits in storage, but will they fit, and will they be fitting? He has not worn these clothes in a long time and surely styles have changed in the past 40 years.

First, the hotel handyman has to be suborned with a hefty tip to carry the boxes up from the basement mausoleum where they have resided for so long. Then the musty cloth must be examined for holes and hung in the open window to be rid of the smells of camphor and mold. Finally, two suitable outfits are chosen and, with trepidation, are modeled before a single judge and decision-maker, himself.

He is relieved to find that the clothes do fit, albeit loosely. Still, he is taken aback to realize how much he has shriveled and shrunk in his later years. It seems only a few years ago that he had to let these suits out from time to time to accommodate a more portly body. Well, who cares? He won’t embarrass anyone, leastwise himself. After all, clothes are a problem only for the insecure.

Lingering in front of the full-length mirror that hangs on the back of the wardrobe, he marvels at the person he sees. It isn’t a complete stranger, to be sure; he knows himself well enough. Yet the image that stares back at him is not what he expects. Unlike the normal occupant of this room, this is a man of substance. A man of respect.

It is remarkable, he thinks, how quickly the weeks pass. His mind is in a constant whirl, filled with a kaleidoscope of scenarios from travel to the airport to eating on the plane, to his impressions of Washington after so many years away. He imagines every moment leading up to his arrival at the State Department, and every detail of the Foreign Service Day ceremonies. When he is not too tired he even gets to the part where he makes his entrance at the wedding of his great-granddaughter. This part is not very well defined, however, as he is prone to dwell repeatedly on the earliest scenes of his mental script.

It isn’t that his ailments and age are in any way

He is touched but also slightly amused. How much stronger would the furor be if they knew what else he had undertaken to do?

mitigated. He still suffers his familiar aches and pains, and frequently needs to conserve his energies, but somehow, the inevitable end of the tunnel is not as apparent as heretofore. For the first time in many years he is able to replace the sense of a void that has been his constant sleeping companion with an optimism that even envisions a future.

The maid, assuming he is down at breakfast, enters his room to make the bed and tidy up as she does every morning. But today she stumbles over a small

suitcase just inside the door. And then she sees him. It is almost as if a stranger were resting on the bed. The old man is fully dressed in a dark blue pin-striped suit framing a white shirt and diagonally striped tie. His black, pointed shoes are cracked with age but polished to a high shine. The gray stubble which ordinarily masks the wrinkles and folds of an ashen face is gone. So closely shaven is he, in fact, that even in death, his face exudes the pinkish tone of a younger man — a younger man at rest just before embarking on a great adventure. ■

Factory-Set Discounts to Diplomats Posted Stateside and Abroad

*U.S., U.K. European, or Overseas Specs
Overseas and Domestic Deliveries*

 **Don Beyer Volvo**

1231 W. Broad Street • Falls Church, VA 22046
Washington Metro Area

703-237-5000
Fax: 703-237-5028

VOLVO

JERRY GRIFFIN
DIPLOMATIC SALES SPECIALIST
22 YEARS WITH VOLVO

Visit
Staybridge Suites

Spend **your time**
the way **you want.**

Do the same with your
per diem.

- Free Breakfast Buffet
- Fitness Center
- Laundry
- Sundowner socials

Your per diem goes much farther.
So the next time you travel,
spend some time here at **Staybridge Suites.**
And Make It
Your Place.

Tysons-McLean
6845 Old Dominion Drive
McLean, VA 22101
Phone: 703.448.5400
Fax: 703.506.0001

Owned by McLean Hotel LLC and Operated by Grand Duke Hotel, LLC

