

## The Envelope

No one in the Village remembers a time before the Envelopes. My grandfather, before he died, once told me that his own grandfather had heard a rumour that the Mailbox hadn't always been in the centre of the Village, that it had suddenly appeared centuries ago on a moonless night when the earth shook and lightening flashed down from a cloudless sky.

Other children in the Village had heard similar rumours from their Elders, but although we did sometimes whisper to each other our speculations about where the Mailbox might have come from or what life would be like without Envelopes, for the most part we just accepted them as a given, like the sun coming up in the morning, or the endless chores we each had to do on our parent's small farms. And in our Village, located in the furthest stretches of the Land, we don't talk much about the outside world. We somehow know that we are the only Village with a Mailbox that dispenses an Envelope for everyone on their sixteenth birthday. But, from the time that we could first toddle upright and start making intelligible sounds, we were repeatedly warned by our Elders to never, never ever, talk to anyone outside of the Village about our Mailbox or the Envelopes.

And it's not like we ever have much contact with anyone outside of the Village. The only outsider most of us have ever seen is the Trader, a hunched-over, mostly deaf old man who comes to the Village once a month, arriving in his rickety, mule-drawn cart. But the Trader only comes to the clearing outside the gate to the Village, where the Elders of each family bring the goods they want to trade: baskets of eggs or apples or beets or fresh vegetables; a lamb or kid goat tied up with a rope halter; or the elaborately carved wooden canes that Bob would bring to trade. And we children would stare through the slats of the gate as the Elders bartered with the Trader, using crude hand gestures and shakes of the head to exchange their goods for marvelous City items: calico cloth; sharp metal knives and hoes; shiny glass beads.

[I used to be so jealous of Bob's daughter Maggie because her father would often barter his carved canes for jewelry for her—exotic rings or necklaces that Maggie would wear on school days and haughtily flaunt in front of us. Then, one day, Maggie surprised me by giving me a bracelet with ivory bangles, saying that she thought it would look much better on my arm. We have been best friends ever since!]

On rare occasions a stranger would be spotted coming up the dusty road leading to our Village, but before he could get past the gate, he would inevitably be greeted by several Elders whose dour expressions and glinting, freshly whetted knives in their belts would convince him to turn around and take a different path.

And then there was the time when a young man wearing an incongruously out-of-place black linen suit came right up to the Village gate and in a loud voice said that he was Lynn's husband and that he wanted to see the Mailbox. Lynn was one of the few of us who had ever left the Village. Her family were Opens—the Village sect who believe that people would live better lives if they read what was in their Envelopes. [The Opens are strongly opposed by the Closedes—those who believe that it is best not to know what their Envelopes contains; in spite of their strongly held differences, there is no bad blood between the Opens and Closedes, united as they were as Villagers.] On Lynn's sixteenth birthday, she had gone up to the Mailbox, took the Envelope with her name on it that had just appeared in the Mailbox slot, and promptly opened it. Lynn took one look at the slip of paper inside the Envelope, and then proceeded to walk directly out of the Village gate, down the road and out of sight. And some four years later, here was her husband at our gate declaring that he wanted to see the Mailbox! As nothing like this had ever happened before, the Elders barring his path through the gate were flummoxed and didn't know what to do. The young man, who said that his name was James, then told the Elders his story: He had seen a beautiful young woman wandering around the City as if lost and immediately fell in love with her. He asked Lynn to marry him, but she refused, saying that she knew that she only had four more years to live; when James pressed her, Lynn told him that her Village had a mysterious Mailbox that produced an Envelope for every villager on their sixteenth birthday, and that inside the Envelope was a slip of paper on which was written the date when that person would die. Although incredulous, James said that he didn't care and that he wanted to live with Lynn for as long a time as she had on this earth. So they married, and, four years later, Lynn died giving birth to their first child. When James was mournfully packing away Lynn's belongings, he came across her Envelope and saw inside the slip of paper on which was written the date of the very day that Lynn had died. So James was determined to come to our Village and see this Mailbox for himself. After he had recounted his tale to the Elders, they held a confab and decided to let James into the Village. James walked right up to the shiny red Mailbox and, pulling a screwdriver out of his pocket, started to pry open the slot. Then there was a sudden

bright flash of light and James lay dead on the ground, an unaddressed Envelope on his chest. Before they buried James in the cemetery that lies on a beautiful little bluff above the Village, one Elder opened James' Envelope and read aloud what was written on the slip of paper inside:

“TODAY”



I come from a family of Closededs, and as a little girl I was often told the story of Lynn and James as a warning about the dangers of touching the Mailbox or of opening one's Envelope. Another cautionary tale that was often recounted to me was the one about Lynn's cousin, Henry. As an Opens, Henry had read the slip of paper in his Envelope on the day that he got it. Apparently, Henry was destined to live a long life, as the date on the slip of paper was some fifty-five years in the future. Henry felt like he was indestructible and as a young man he would always volunteer for any dangerous job around the Village, like hunting the wild boars that come out of the woods to ravish our farms. One winter day, when he was twenty-one years old, Henry had volunteered to clean out an ice jam that had formed in the gutters of the Village meetinghouse. Henry climbed up the old wooden ladder he had brought for this task, and after he had hacked away for a few minutes at the ice in the gutters, the top rung of the ladder broke and Henry fell twenty-five yards to the ground, landing on his back. Paralyzed from the neck down, Henry has been confined to his bed for more than forty years now, his family having to feed him by hand and to clean up after him when he would soil his bedclothes. He is still there, in a house that we children try to avoid going near or speak in whispers when we do have to walk pass it.

Another event that made a big impression on me as I was growing up was my grandfather's funeral. Old John, my father's father, had been one of the staunchest Closededs in the Village, always sneering at the Opens who chose to learn how much longer they had to live. "You should live each day as if it were your last" he would frequently say to me. And Old John certainly followed his own advice. He ate and drank heartily, yet he never seemed to put on any extra weight and his smooth face never displayed the wrinkles of his advancing old age— although his snub nose was usually a bright red! After Grandmother died, Old John married Rebecca, a girl who was younger than my Father. They seemed happy enough together, although

behind their backs people would say that Old John looked more like Becky's father than her husband. On their tenth wedding anniversary, Old John and Rebecca put on a big party for everyone in the Village square. The wine flowed freely and as Old John was doing a jig in the middle of the square, he fell over dead right in front of the Mailbox, his heart having given out. At his funeral, Becky tossed Old John's proudly unopened Envelope into the grave, and as soon as it hit the coffin the Envelope burst into flames, its ashes mingling with the dark earth we shoveled in to fill up the grave.



“Nancy, time to wake up! Get out of bed you lazy girl, and come help me get ready for your birthday party!”

I cracked open my eyes as I heard Mother yelling up the stairway. I could see that it had just dawned a bright sunny day. It was my birthday! I was sixteen years old! No longer a child! There would be a birthday cake and presents from all my friends and family, and then I would walk up alone to the Mailbox and get my Envelope.

As a girl I had been, for the most part, a dutiful and respectful child. I did my chores, studied my lessons, and listened to all of the warnings my Closed Elders drilled into my ears. But ever since I hit puberty, I seem to have developed a stubborn, ornery streak. I still say “Yes Sir” and “Yes Ma’am” to my parents, and take care of my younger brother when Father and Mother are out at the farm. But, increasingly, my blood seems to be boiling as I go out to the henhouse every morning to collect the eggs. “Is this all life has to offer” I often resentfully mutter to myself.

My rebellious streak seems to have grown stronger ever since I met Mario. I had of course seen him around the Village, but as his family were Opens, we had little occasion to talk, much less hold hands and stare into each other's eyes. Besides, Mario's family had the reputation of being outlandish, and his two older brothers were notorious for constantly contradicting their Elders. But there was something about the mischievous twinkle in Mario's blue eyes and the ridiculous fuzz he was beginning to sport on his upper lip that drew me to him. So we started to find ourselves alone in the late afternoon, sitting on the shelf out behind the

Russell's old abandoned barn, watching the sun rosily set in the distance. And yes, we held hands and stared into each other's eyes.

But of course Mario was not invited to my birthday party. So after the candles were blown out and the presents opened (a new bracelet from Maggie!), and everyone stood at the doorway of my parent's house waving red handkerchiefs, I set off up the hill to the Mailbox. I tried to walk demurely but my heart was pounding and every now and again I broke out into a skip, as if I were still a little girl. After I rounded the bend and was out of sight of my family and friends, I slipped off my shoes and started to run in my bare feet, my lacy white dress billowing out behind me. And then, out of the corner of my eye, I caught a glimpse of Mario heading off to the old Russell barn. I slowed my pace, put back on my shoes, and walked up to the Mailbox as if I didn't have a care in the world. I stood in front of the Mailbox and there in the slot was an Envelope with my name on it

Clutching my Envelope to my breast, I twirled around and headed off to the old barn. Would Mario urge me to open it? I certainly hoped that he wouldn't try to force me to follow his family's Opens ways. But did I want to keep my Envelope closed until I died, like Old John? I wasn't sure.

With such thoughts swirling in my head, I came around to the back of the abandoned barn and my heart skipped a beat when I saw Mario sitting on the ledge overlooking the valley below. He patted at the paving stone next to him, and I sat down. "Whatever am I to do?" I blurted out. "Do what ever you want to do, my little darling" he calmly replied. I looked into his bright eyes, took a deep breath, and opened my Envelope. I took a quick glance at the slip of paper inside. Then I smiled and, for the first but not the last time, I kissed Mario.