

Bonus: Stamps Arouse Suspicion!

(EDITOR'S NOTE: The following is a long email note to my sister Lindsay, who came to visit us in Florida and left behind a pretty white summer shirt.)

Hello Lindsay —

You may be wondering by now what has become of your pretty white shirt, which you left with us in Fort Pierce.

Yesterday, after our return to Minoa, we received in our mailbox the package I originally sent to you back in February, containing your pretty white shirt. The package was torn, creased and smudged as though it had been through a demolition derby. It was emblazoned with stickers which might explain the situation.

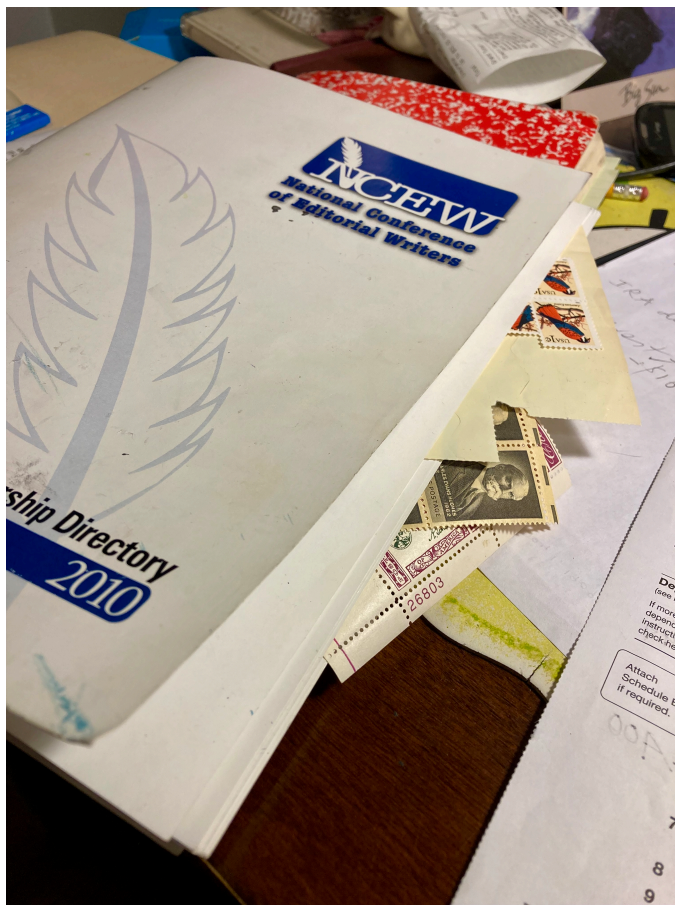
However I was disappointed. What's this? My package to Lindsay never got through? How far did it get on its path from Fort Pierce, Fla., to Vashon,

Wash.? Did the Pony Express pick it up at some point?

That would be consistent with the sticker mandating "Surface Transportation Only," illustrated with an ominous symbol of a jetliner in a red circle with a red line through it. However, if the express rider had set off, his pony must have been waylaid at some point by a homeland security posse, because it never reached its destination.

A second sticker on the envelope was more informative. "Attention Mailing Customer," it read. "We regret to inform you that your mail was not collected or is





being returned to you due to heightened security concerns.”

It was dawning on me that I may have played a role in this drama. You see, for years I have fancied myself something of a postmaster-in-my-own-right. That is, I maintain a “local post office” in my home. This includes an old directory I use for stamps — each page dedicated to a specific value, from one cent to, well, Forever and beyond. The stamp ledger reminds me of the binders used in actual post offices around the world. The binder also features in my recurrent dream of visiting my local post office and watching while the postmaster leafs through the pages, which contain mint stamps from around the world, all miraculously on sale for face value.

Another post office accessory of mine is a hand-

held scale I inherited from my late mother. Using the scale, I weigh my envelopes, check online for the proper cost of mailing, and assemble the right combination of stamps to stick on. Then I can put the envelope right in the mail without having to go to the post office.

It is this process, I now discover, which prevented my package from arriving at its destination. The blue sticker told the story: “The following must be presented by the customer to a retail service associate at a Post Office™ location for shipment: Any mailpiece over one-half inch thick that uses POSTAGE STAMPS. ...”

Are you getting this? It seems that in this post-911 era of mail bombs, weaponized airplanes and other “heightened security concerns,” you are supposed to hand over any thick package (“mailpiece”) directly to a “retail service associate” of the Post Office™. Don’t try and mail it yourself! And for heaven’s sake, don’t use POSTAGE STAMPS. (Wonder why the USPS didn’t try to trademark the term — POSTAGE STAMP™.)



Of course, avoiding the Post Office™ was exactly what I had been trying to do. First, I found a mid-size (6x8) envelope that would accommodate Lindsay's pretty white shirt. Then I weighed the package with my handy-dandy scale: less than 5 ounces. I looked up the mailing cost on the USPS website and picked the right postage from my stamp binder. I stuck the stamps to the package, addressed it and left it for the letter carrier at our rented condo in Fort Pierce, Fla., where we spend the winter.

The package got collected OK. It would be interesting, if not particularly useful, to know how far it got on its way to Vashon, Washington, before it was intercepted. Apparently it met the criteria for a suspicious package, unusual enough to warrant "heightened security concern." Ultimately, someone (a robot?) made a decision to return the package to the sender. But not by airplane — "Surface Transportation Only." That would explain why it took from mid-February to early April for the package to boomerang back to me.

I noticed belatedly some hand markings in red ink — the same color as the lines boldly "cancelling" the stamps on the envelope. I couldn't make out the scrawl, but wonder if it was an early effort to flag the package as suspicious.

Now returned from Florida, I went to my local post office to send off Lindsay's pretty white shirt again — this time as a priority package. The postal clerk confirmed that you have to present packages like this at the counter before you can mail them. She asked me the usual questions: Anything perishable? Hazardous? Priority mail cost \$11.60, using a soul-less mailing label. I kicked myself for not sending it regular mail, at one-third the cost. Then I figured, Priority was OK — Lindsay had waited long enough for her pretty white shirt. Plus, I have learned invaluable lessons about mailing packages in this post-9/11 era. It's still OK, for now, to be my own postmaster for letters and flat envelopes, but if I try to send larger, thicker packages on my own, they may well be intercepted — particularly if I use POSTAGE STAMPS. This last lesson is particularly distressing for me, a stamp collector, because it seems to link philately and terrorism. Sure, I get that a person up to no good might use stamps so as to avoid the postal clerk. Still, the fact that the use of postage stamps should set off security alarms suggests how these cultural artifacts are moving out of the mainstream.

One bit of consolation is that this unsettling incident provided material for another FMF Stamp Project essay. Love, FMF p.s. I hope you get your pretty white shirt back without further obstruction or delay.

(EDITOR'S NOTE: I sent an early draft of this essay to Lindsay, who replied: "Thank you so much for following through on all this. I am so sorry I caused so much trouble with my forgetfulness. I hadn't missed the shirt yet because it's been too cold to wear it. I'm still in turtlenecks and fleeces. I'm certainly glad you put Syracuse on the return address as I really will be wanting it this summer."

Epilogue: The shirt arrived OK a few days later.)