

Going Postal
by **Michael Babbitt**

I'm not sure when I recognized that things had changed.

It could very well have been the first time I reached into a mailbox and knew that there was a letter from my Grammy in Michigan.

She lives in a town called Stillwater. It's got like a gazillion lakes and during the summer it's one of the best places to be because the swimming is awesome and the guys are almost all cute and it's easy to make friends because everyone is friendly.

Grammy is funny, she collects lots of old dolls. She's turned her whole basement into this colossal doll museum. Now, I know I'm a girl, but I never really got into dolls that much. Even when I was little. But being in Grammy's basement, checking out all the dolls is amazing. You'd never dream that so many different types of dolls existed. She goes to these doll conventions all over the world and she brings home one or two dolls she finds there every time she goes. They keep adding up and adding up. But it really is a sight to behold. I mean, it's not really a museum; she doesn't just let anybody down. But I get to whenever I want. I go down and maneuver my way through all of the aisles and cabinets and spot one specific doll and Grammy tells me all about how she got it and then I make up my own story about who or what the doll is.

I like that about visiting Grammy.

But I think the change happened the day I realized there was a letter from her in our mailbox.

I wasn't expecting anything in the mail. Mom and Dad weren't either. But it happened nonetheless.

"JJ, go out and get the mail, will you, hun?" Mom's voice echoed up from the basement. She had decided earlier in the week that it was time to change the shelving units that held up my brother's ancient and long-forgotten beer can collection. He'd started collecting them about three years ago when some friends of his decided that this was the next cool trendy retro thing to do. Don't ask me why. It lasted one and a half summers but he'd amassed a huge collection and my mom was too soft to recycle them like I suggested. I also suggested that he should have taken them with him to college. No one ever listens to me.

"Sure, Mom!" I yelled back, licking peanut butter from my fingers and setting the knife down on the kitchen counter top. I love peanut butter and jelly; it's the best food ever. I was on my second of the afternoon. I eat all the time. Mom says eventually my metabolism will catch up with me but my Dad tells her if I stay on the track team when I get to college it's not likely going to catch up soon.

As I tromped down the stone walk from our front door to the mailbox, the sun was shining bright. Mr. McKidrick was out mowing his front lawn for, I think, the third time this week. Granted, we get a lot of rain in these parts but I know his grass doesn't grow that fast.

I was about five steps away from the mailbox when I felt it.

It started like a little thrum in my head, like someone had figured out that the little stringy muscles that go up the back of your neck could be plucked and then turned into a weird vibrational music of dissonant tunes. Not knowing what I do now, I thought it sounded remarkably like really bad rave music; like a DJ who didn't know bass from his anal pucker.

I stopped, dead in my tracks and looked around as if expecting to see someone standing behind me smacking me in the back of my head. I was rubbing my temples and working my eyes open wide and then squinty, back and forth, trying to massage the feeling out of my brain.

And then it changed.

It was still like music, and for the most part, it still felt the same, but now I could understand it. Like it was a coded message by some alien race beaming it directly into my skull. And that was just the stupidest thing that I could think of at the moment. Mr. McKidrick was still mowing away, up and down, back and forth on his lawn in nice neat little rows, but I couldn't hear the mower. All I could hear was the sound, the music, the understanding.

I could feel Grammy's address. Not see it, or remember it or hear it. But feel it. Like the feeling you get over a memory after someone has brought it up. Like when Carly, one of my best friends, talks about how much she loves fries, especially Mickey D's fries. Whenever she does that I no longer think about the word, but the memory of the hot potato and the grease and the salt and licking my fingers and all that.

It was the same way with this. The music or whatever it was that suddenly jumped in my head to a different level. I don't know. But it was there. Seriously. And I found myself staring at the mailbox like it had just turned into some horrible piece of road kill.

I took two steps back and started running for the door. I made it about half way and ended up puking the first pb&j into my mother's favorite set of azaleas. The music was fading and seemed to fade more and more as my stomach became emptier and emptier.

Once my stomach seemed done with its flip-flop, I stared at the contents of my lunch amidst all the bright little purple flowers of the bushes. The purple and the light brown bark and the mottled color of my vomit.

But my head felt fine.

I looked over my shoulder at the mailbox again and I had the most terrifying realization that I couldn't put my hand inside of it. I just couldn't. There was a certain morbid curiosity that for a minute made me think, "Well, why the hell not?" But as I felt my stomach churn again it went away. A lot like the first time someone asked me if I wanted to take a hit off a cigarette. It was an old boyfriend of mine and I took one look at him and threw up in his lap. I can't look at a cigarette in the same way anymore. Just like I couldn't look at that damn mailbox. It had a surprise for me, I just knew, and it wasn't just a letter from Grammy.

That's day life had changed. For better or worse, I didn't know it then but I do now. It was the first time I felt 'the pull.' Carly is the only one who knows everything about the pull and she gives me dirty looks anytime I bring it up. "Okay, Carly, time to 'pull' my weight." She thinks my nickname for it is stupid. But I don't know what else I'm supposed to call it.

I told her about three days after the incident. It was hard, and it was actually the first time I voiced what I already knew deep inside but if I told my parents they would have taken me to a doctor and there was no way that was happening. Doctors suck. Well, mine do at least.

She said she'd help me. She was my best friend, of course she would and she didn't even flinch the first time I walked down to a mailbox with her and threw up all over the sidewalk.

My hands shook as I punched numbers on my cell. They were like little washing machines of nervous energy. I had this funny thought that if I'd been as techno-geek as my friends, I would have programmed voice activation and this wouldn't be an issue. But I hated anything to do with technology. My parents think I'm weird because apparently every other teenager is supposed to be smitten with gadgetitis.

Carly answered on the second ring, "Heya!" She always answers on the second ring. Even if her phone is like on the other side of the room. She's, like, hyperkinetic that way.

"Hey, Carly, it's me." My nerves were really shot. I felt like I was in a tunnel. "It should be today, I think."

I heard her draw in breath and then there was a long pause. I almost asked if she was trying to turn blue but before I could get it out she sighed. "JJ, this is totally weird, you know that right?"

I rolled my eyes and then realized she couldn't see me. "Well, duh! But it's happening to me. I don't want to be a freak but it keeps nagging at me, Carly. If you don't want to know I just won't knock."

"No, that's not what I meant. Geez, you're touchy today."

"Touchy? Yeah, no shit, you could say that."

Another pause. "Look, JJ, I'm here, I sent the letter like you asked. Go see."

I nodded again and realized she couldn't see that either. "Okay. Now just to be clear, so we're on the same wavelength: I get off the phone, walk down to the mailbox, then I get to your house and you time me. Right?"

"Yeah, that sounds like the plan."

"Okay." I took one last deep breath. "Thanks, Carly, you're the best..."

"...that ever was." She finished our little slogan.

I hung up the phone and stared at it for a few seconds. This was a lot harder than I thought it was going to be.

Okay, feet, time to get moving. I picked up my soda, the trickle of the condensation on the outside of the bottle feeling cool and comforting in my hand. I remember thinking about my mom and dad, my little brother, about our cat, Momma Bear - my brother got to name it - about my race coming up on the weekend.

I bit my lower lip till it hurt and that jarred me enough to get my feet moving. Out the door and down the same stone walk; the mailbox waiting like some grim reaper of penal punishment.

Three steps away from the mailbox the pull kicked in. Over the past few days, since it had first happened, my stomach had started to adjust to the feeling and didn't threaten to evacuate on me every time I got near a mailbox. I'd only puked once yesterday and that was a lot better than the seven times the day before. I guess running through my neighborhood, passing all those mailboxes, house after house, had started to build up my tolerance. My coach would be proud.

The music started in my head and faded quicker this time, replaced with that utter certainty that that black metal box, on its wooden pole, not only contained a letter, but it contained a letter from a specific person and I knew who that person was without opening. Not because I'd told Carly to send me a letter three days ago but because the understanding in my head conjoined into a vivid picture, no, not a picture, but a feeling of who had penned it.

My mouth was dry. And my tongue was stuck to the roof. That was pretty funny, all things considering and for a moment I thought about turning around and getting a glass of water, I didn't want to get dehydrated. And that was even funnier because I'd been upchucking for days and weird things were happening to my brain and yet I was worrying about dehydration. Carly would have told me to get a life.

I reached out and flicked open the mailbox door. It dropped down, providing a little perch.

There were three envelopes resting up right inside. Two of them were junk mail, impersonal, I could already tell...fell that without even looking the third was the letter I wanted. It was the be all and then end all.

With two fingers and a thumb, I grasped its purple edges.

And time stood still.

The world seemed to explode around me, or as another ex-boyfriend used to like to say, exploded - guys can be such dumbasses. This time it wasn't my stomach doing the flip-flops; it felt like my whole body. In the instant it happened, I could visualize, inside my body, this myriad of crisscrossing kaleidoscopic lines and they all connected somewhere. The one that stood out was the one I was following. It stretched and curved and ran at the speed of thought, sliding and arcing through an invisible world of lines and colors and sensations. I had a vague feeling of being scared so bad that I thought I was going to pee on myself, something that hadn't happened since first grade when Mark Cooke had pulled on Mr. Iggy's - the class' pet guinea pig - ears. Mr. Iggy had screamed so bad I'd peed all over my new dress. I was so mad, at recess I went out and kicked Mark's butt.

Then it was over. Just like that. My eyes adjusted to the new, normal, light of the day's sun. I blinked once. Twice.

The letter fell from my hand, completely forgotten, Carly's spidery scrawl face up for the sky to read.

It was true. My instincts had been right.

I was standing in front of her house.

I was standing in front of Carly's house, directly next to her mailbox and only two seconds ago I'd been in front of my house at my mailbox.

I did the only thing I could think of. I threw up all over the letter.

It all came up at once, everything in my stomach and in my head. I dropped to my knees, not worrying about the scrapes from the concrete sidewalk. My hair hung down covering my face. My breathing felt like iron lung, or what I guessed iron lung must feel like.

This shouldn't be possible.

This couldn't be possible!

I was aware that I was making a little moaning sound, bubbling at my lips in a gross vomit-like parody of a baby's cooing. But I couldn't stop myself. The pull had just turned into something...something...

What the hell was wrong with me?

I wiped the vomit from my mouth and climbed to my feet. I needed Carly. I needed to hold her hand and cry. The tears were starting to well and I knew if I didn't get to her door soon, someone would find me laying here in the street gutter, balling my eyes out, covered in puke and babbling incoherently.

I stumbled in my first few steps as I ran for the door. My elbow scrapped against the metal of the mailbox and I recoiled in horror at the touch of it. Mailboxes were suddenly the most terrifying things on the planet. They were horrible little metal shapes of menacing unknown.

When I finally reached the door, I leaned on the doorbell, my connection with life, with Carly. It was the lifeline I needed.

The door opened and all I heard was Carly's surprised voice and then the tears came like hot steam. The moans turned into sobs and she put her arms around me and pulled me into the house.

I don't know how long it took me to calm down. Carly says that I cried for at least an hour and kept moaning. She held me the whole time. It's a good thing her parents weren't home yet or they'd most likely start some stupid rumor that I was pregnant or something. Damn, now that was funny. Compared to this, me being pregnant might actually be easier. At least if you were pregnant you were normal.

"Carly, I have to ask, to be sure." I finally sputtered out after drinking my second coke. Carly sat patiently, her head in her hands as she watched me from her side of the couch.

"Two minutes and thirty-one seconds from getting off the phone until you rang the doorbell."

I stared at my hands. "And that's only because I started slow."

I felt the burning in my eyes again but this time I forced it back, I was done crying. I didn't want to cry forever and if I started again, I knew I would. I think I had enough tears for this that I could cry at least till my next birthday.

"You live 7 miles away. 7 miles! What am I gonna do, Carly?"

She thought for a moment and I suddenly realized that this was the first time in a good long while that one of her hands didn't have her gameboy in it. Technogeek. It actually

made me feel better for some reason. "I don't know, maybe figure out if it was a one-time thing," she said, as she pulled at an eyebrow.

Oh God. "I don't know." A little moan escaped my lips, I couldn't help it, and I was so scared I didn't feel in my body. "I don't know if I can face that again." I looked at the huge pile of tissues that were strewn about the coffee table in front of the sofa. My eyeliner and mascara was dotted on various crumpled bundles. Each one looked like one of those weird little drawings that you see in movies when shrinks are trying to find out if someone was crazy. They all said bonkers as I stared at them.

I lifted my head from Carly's lap and sat up. She reached out gently and took my hands. Carly's hands were interesting. They were so soft. Even my little brother's hands, when he was born weren't as soft as Carly's. I don't know how she kept them like that. But anytime I touched her hands it was always comforting, like I had a safe place to rest. I needed that now more than anything.

"JJ, this is weirder than weird. We both know that. But, don't you want to know? Seriously? I mean, if you can do this, it would be like so cool. You could go anywhere you want to."

"Yeah, I guess." My voice was so little even I could barely hear it. I just stared at her hands as they held mine. "You aren't scared of it? Of me?"

I heard her draw in a quick breath. "Are you kidding? You're my best friend in the whole world."

The tears came again and she reached up gently and let me lay my head back in her lap. My eyes hurt so badly but for the first time in over a week the knot in my stomach was gone. I wasn't alone in this. I didn't have to hide it completely. I could tell her anything about it and she was going to be there.

My head started to jiggle in her lap as she let out a laugh. "What's so damn funny?" I sniffed, trying to stop the tears but realizing it was about as pointless as trying to figure guys out.

"I just realized that you figuring out your cell phone is going to be a breeze compared to this." She laughed again, this time fully in her little high-pitched hiccup-sounding laugh. When she let loose like that I couldn't stop myself from giggling. She had the most bizarre laugh you ever heard, it made dogs cringe.

"Very funny, ghoul."

This made her laugh even harder, and I was beginning to feel much better. It was the sound I needed the most, Carly, laughing, without anything getting in her way. Maybe this wasn't going to be so bad after all.

"Thanks, Carly, you're the best..."

"...that ever was."