

The Face Up Table

Kevin Roberts

Keep at it! Keep at it! Smoko in ten! Keep at it! The young supervisor with the neat white shirt and GPO tie walked slowly down the left side of the row of workers seated at the Face-Up Table. Lotsa blokes want the work, he called, Keep at it! Speed! Accuracy! He turned and sauntered down the right hand side. The vast Christmas mail came in cascades from the input shaft – letters, cards, manila envelopes, all shapes and sizes pouring like an avalanche in slow motion. I sat transfixed. Would I survive this tsunami?

The Face Up table at Adelaide GPO was about eight feet wide and maybe forty or fifty feet long. The Christmas mail moved at glacial speed on top of a conveyor belt. Our job was simple but mind numbing. We had to select mail from the pile and build three piles of envelopes – small, medium, and large, directly in front of us, pulling out the letters from the endless heap, setting them upright with the stamp on the top right hand side. Sounds easy but it isn't. The young supervisor walked up and down behind the rows of workers seated at the table, exhorting us, threatening us, cajoling, menacing, repeating that Her Majesty's Mail required both speed and efficiency. He'd call out the time for the next smoko when we could get off the table and walk about and relax and smoke for ten minutes, refocus eyes that were glazing and a mind that was frozen solid. We'd stand up away from the chairs, shake our heads like unleashed dogs or horses, stretch like cats, light up a Capstan, and sip at a Woodroffe's lemonade bottle.

What kept the three of us at this brain-deadening work was the dream of a graduation trip to Surfers Paradise in Queensland in January. Keg had worked it all out. Or a part of it. Third-class rail fare sitting up only on the train – Adelaide, Melbourne, Sydney, Surfers – for about twenty eight quid. Working nights 8pm-4am at the Adelaide GPO for four weeks before Christmas at twenty quid a week would do it no worries. Eighty quid was lots. We could still go to uni during the day. Five hours sleep was plenty. Besides we only had morning lectures two days a week. Catch up on sleep on the train, suggested Keg. So we were all three in like Flynn no sweat.

Keg had an older uncle Curly Barnet who was a personnel manager at the GPO and Keg, also known as Bernard to his family, got all three of us interviews. As per Aussie ironic nicknaming, Curly was as bald as an emu egg – his domed head shone brilliant white as he looked us over. We filled out the application forms and then stood there in his office as he glowered at us from over his glasses, flipping through our applications.

Well you don't look like criminals, he muttered, but you have bugger-all work records. God knows what will happen to Her Majesty's Mail if I let you lot at it. He sighed. We're short of hands so we'll give you a tryout. Give your particulars to my secretary. Punch in before eight pm on November 27. And you, Bernard, are in my sights if this mob turns bad. Give your mum my love.

We started our duties at the Face Up Table but before that we had an Orientation Session. Probably about thirty of us new recruits standing around on the main floor near the Face Up table – mainly older blokes. Not a woman anywhere. And us three in a group. At the Face Up Table, about a dozen or so old fellows picked

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away slowly at the pile of mail moving at caterpillar speed past them. Some looked a bit worse for wear. Like alkies from the parklands with grey blue stubbled faces and shaky hands. The clatter of machines and conveyor belts overhead and all about was pretty loud. The place was in full Christmas swing. An abundance of white-shirted GPO supervisor blokes wandered about doing something or other – though most of the older ones just seemed to float here and there, chatting to the workers. But our supervisor was young and enthusiastic. He had to yell over the noise but he went on about efficiency and flow rates and production cost cuts. I sort of recognised him from uni – but two years ahead of us – Business faculty – played footy. But I didn't let on. That'd be too forward, too familiar, too brown-nosing.

You new blokes follow me, he yelled.

He strode off and we followed like a mob of straggling sheep. I noticed a couple of older blokes in our group simply peel off and disappear. The next stop was the entrance landing downstairs. Red GPO vans pulling in. Incoming bags of mail tossed on to conveyor belts taking all the letters upstairs. Then the Face Up Table. The same blokes sat there picking even more slowly at the mail, which was gathering in a huge heap at the end. The old stagers seemed totally unperturbed by the growing heap, some of it now spilling on to the floor. They picked away at the heap with shaky hands like half-blind chickens. Had to feel sorry for them.

This, the young super pointed to the table, is a major flow rate problem. You, he waved at us, have all been hired to improve the production level here. Ok. Follow me.

We walked to Prime Sorting, then Fine Sorting. These Sorter blokes sat in front of twenty or more pigeon holes and flipped letters into the appropriate hole. They looked very confident as they held a handful of mail and dispatched it. One or two wore those shade caps. Our super stopped and cried out over the noise — this too is a major flow rate efficiency problem. But not really your concern.

One Sorter bloke gave our super the finger behind his back. We went on to Parcels. Registered. We were not allowed past the glass partitions containing those last two.

Security of HM's mail is a very high priority in the GPO, our super announced.

We looked in through glass panes at a group of men tossing parcels to each other and dumping them in huge wheeled bins. They dropped a few, but didn't seem too worried about it, though at each failed catch our super winced. Then we went on to Final Sorting. This looked like Re-sorting as well, given the big number of blokes tossing mail into holes. Then the Delivery Landing. More GPO vans and trucks arrived to take the mail out for delivery. It all seemed to be well planned and efficient. Funny though that as we walked about the GPO, in the dark edges and sides of the big rooms and halls, figures seemed to dart away or disappear as soon as we went by.

Our last stop was the Mail Bag room, heavily secured with padlock and deadbolts. Our super stopped before the door and harangued us about HM mail's integrity, outlining the heavy criminal penalties for stealing HM's stamps, the sacred nature of mail bags and the heinous crime of reading private letters. While he was on this criminal topic he went on about not using more than ten minutes in the lavatory once a shift and offered dire warnings about penalties for bludgers and slackers and clock watchers.

What about reading postcards? some old bloke asked.

You can't stop that. But confidentiality is key, our super cried. We are the keepers of the integrity of HM's mail. Let us always remember that.

He unlocked the big doors to the Mail Bag Room and turned on the lights. It was a huge room. A massive pile of grey canvas mailbags filled the far end. Our super ran up the mountain of mailbags. Just as he was about to speak the mountain erupted. Like a rabbit warren when the ferrets are put into the holes; here, there, everywhere, men disgorged themselves from the pile. A head first, then an arm there and finally a body leaped out from its hidden cave deep in the mail bag mountain. They all ran for the open door. Too quick to count them or recognise any one of them. I reckoned damn near a dozen. Our super was stunned.

Stop! he cried. Stand still there!

But they were all long gone. I thought our super was about to cry. Silence. Muffled giggles from our group. Had to hand it to those blokes. Sleeping off a night shift in peace and quiet under mailbags beats working, though how the hell they managed it, locked doors and all, I couldn't fathom. Our super recovered.

That is the end of orientation, he announced, ignoring what we'd just seen. Please report to the Face Up table in ten minutes.

After a couple of nights at the Face Up Table I felt my mind was slowing. The mail came in endlessly, a huge pile moving ever so slowly past us as we sat and sorted – stamp in top right hand corner – three sizes. But the real trouble was the decision about size – small, medium, large. After a few hours I would hold a letter up and be unable to decide for the life of me, whether it was small, medium, or large, or on which of the three piles in front of me it should go. I would freeze up for a few seconds and then drop back into the deadening routine. What was soul destroying was the fact that like Sisyphus rolling his rock up hill, we never made any headway on the never-ending avalanche of mail, which came at us like a wave all night and was still coming when we knocked off at four am and left the Table for the early shift. Also depressing was that the moment when we did build three respectable piles of envelopes roughly in three sizes, a worker would walk by and take them off to Primary Sorting. That job was called Pick Up. Looked real easy by comparison with Face Up. I was just about at my wits' end at the Face Up Table when I got a break. I felt a tap on my shoulder. The young supervisor.

You can go on Pick Up, he said, You've worked well here.

I grinned at my mates who shot envious glances my way. I leaped up. For three nights I gathered mail from the right hand side of the table and took it to Primary Sorting. But it was not the cushy job it appeared. My mates accused me of sucking up to the super.

Bullshit, I said. All I did was keep up my side of the Table.

I think he's a poofter, declared Keg. Don't bend over.

No way, said Kitbag. I saw him at a party snogging away with Anne Lucas. We all digested this. Anne Lucas was a dark curly-haired, baby-faced, porcelain-skinned, green-eyed doll. From a rich family. She was taking Arts at uni. We all lusted after her, but she was private-school-only apply. We were all State High School proles.

The work dragged on. The young super grew visibly in our grudging esteem, though not in our affection. Turned out my promotion wasn't all it was cracked up to

be.

The blokes working at Primary Sorting certainly did not want any mail to sort at all. That seemed to be their basic aim. And they were wary of any possible extra work I handed down at their side. Their main concern was to avoid any work, to make sure they did not get any more letters than the next bloke to sort. So they watched like hawks the size and nature of the piles I brought from the Face Up Table. They were rude and aggressive about the whole process. So I worked out a system. I told all of the Primary Sorters I'd bring them each a mail pile as big as their wanger. They thought that was funny and for a couple of hours joked freely about the various sizes and height of the mail I handed out, and taunted each other, especially when I dropped a two inch pile of all small size mail in front of the biggest whinger, a fat bloke called George. Actually he took it pretty well and kept his gob shut after that.

But after a couple of hours we dropped into a dull routine and a bored silence rose. They continued their monotonous work, though I could tell that after a couple of hours they were just tossing letters willy-nilly. It couldn't have been too tough to distinguish between Australian states and the other big continents like Asia, or Europe and so on but very quickly I realised that most of these blokes couldn't or wouldn't bother to distinguish Tuvalu from Timbuctoo and simply tossed any mildly challenging mail into Foreign, thus passing the buck nicely on to the next lot of sorters. As long as I was fair and open with handing out the mail the Primary Sorters were happy, though every now and then I'd throw in a big or small pile of letters just for a giggle.

I got promoted yet again a few nights later. The young supervisor, hearing laughter from the Primary blokes, cruised over to see what this unusual noise was. Actually I'd dumped a very large pile of extra-large mail on George as a joke to break up the monotony.

What's so funny? he asked.

Silence. He looked at me and at the sorters who put their heads down and worked stolidly away.

Ok, he said. I have an extra job for you. Come with me.

The Face Up Table loomed in my mind as punishment, but instead we walked a few yards away, and he turned to me.

If you are interested in management, he said, Don't get too familiar with the workers.

I am a worker, I said.

You could move up. I've watched you, he added. You've dealt well with distribution here.

I'm just a temp, I said.

He looked at me for a long second. Ok. Here's your extra work. Up there. See those conveyor belt crossovers? Where the two meet?

I followed his finger. Letters were piling up, bending, crumpling, and crushing at the junction. A small pile of mail lay on the floor. More fluttered down as we watched. Yeah. I see the problem, I said.

Maintenance was supposed to fix this yesterday, but they haven't. So we improvise. Take this broom handle and every couple of minutes give it a good prod and poke to clear the junction. Place the spillage in the in-bin for re-sorting.

Two jobs? I said. I keep on handing out the mail as well?

He was silent for a second or three. Ok, he said, I'll get you relief every hour. And someone else on the sorters now and then. Ok?

Suits me, I said.

And so began my third promotion at the GPO, standing with a stick and poking at overhead conveyor belts when they got jammed up, and distributing piles of mail to the sorters. Every hour I got a good long break when some poor addle-eyed wreck from Face Up took over the poking for me. Maintenance never seemed to fix the problem. In fact some nights it was visibly worse. My job as mail deliverer continued. Actually I learned Primary Sorting on my sixth night just for something to do. It was not rocket science, though I picked up the info that Primary Sorter positions at the GPO were jealously guarded, and required an entry form, an exam, and an interview. But it was not too tough to pick up the rudiments of Primary mail sorting. Australian States were specific pigeon holes and all they had to do with the rest was shove it into pigeonholes labelled Asia, Europe, Africa, America, and about another six or so large continents. There were also a few common countries, like England or USA. The biggest pigeonholes and most used were either Foreign or Misc. They copped the lot every night. From what I saw the bulk of the sorted mail got tossed in there, either through ignorance, or laziness, boredom, or sheer caprice. Some blokes got so jacked off with the whole sorting business that when faced with Bhutan or even Burma/Myanmar they gave up the ghost, filed the whole pile of letters into Misc. or Foreign and sat back waiting for their next batch to arrive. A map of the world hung above them but it was clear that for the majority of primary sorters places like Maldives or Miquelon were far too specific for their expertise, and demanded far too much of the average Primary Sorter. The GPO hierarchy of rank and expertise became clearer to me after my fourth promotion. It was a big one and the green envy of my mates, two of whom seemed stuck on the misery of the Face Up table. Strangely, Keg liked the Face Up Table. I just sit here, he said, and think of girls swishing by in bikinis and the surf curling in on golden sand and the bikinis ripping off in the surf and time just flies by.

My fourth promotion was to the position of mail-deliverer to Secondary Sorting. These blokes thought themselves a cut above the other workers, having passed two tests and an interview for their seat on the Secondary Sorter tables. They loved to scornfully call out the errors of previous sorts, though their corrections were not always much better.

What bloody idiot put Tuvalu in India? Got to be Europe!

What nitwit shoved Bhutan in the USA? Everyone knows it's in Russia!

Ha Ha! Lithuania in Asia? Any clot knows it's Middle East!

I thought I'd rectify a few of these errors by looking over the piles beforehand, particularly the Misc. which always overflowed. I fixed a lot of errors there, on the quiet, mainly the simple obvious ones. Again the young supervisor somehow picked up on what I was doing. He took me aside again.

The GPO doesn't mind, he said, in fact they applaud what you're doing. I thought it was a bit thick him talking for the GPO, but he went on. But the union'll have your head if they catch you and we'll have to fire you.

Well, the sack wasn't an option for me, so I began to paddle along at the mediocre pace of the Secondary Sorter blokes. The nights began to drag. We all got

more and more tired. Sleeping from 4 am till 8 am began to take its toll. Kitbag got bitchy and Keg was always dozy. We began to look for ways to sneak off and sleep. Like everybody else we took an hour for our half-hour lunch breaks and half an hour snoozing on the toilet in the lav. At any given time a snorting cacophony of snoring men came from the row of toilets. We stretched out our ten-minute smokos every two hours and generally put the gear in low. But that wasn't enough. Keg and Kitbag found a row of largely unused mail bins on wheels in a dark corner and whenever the young supervisor was away or on another shift, they jumped inside and curled up in blissful sleep. Amazingly they got away with this for three nights.

By bad luck, an old Supervisor, out of his normal route, probably lost or pissed or both, tripped in the dark on the bins. Both Keg and Kitbag's heads shot up. But all he did was bellow at them, Face Up Table! Right now!

Kitbag and Keg ran out of the dark back to the table while the supervisor stood in the dark holding his aching shin. It was clear he hadn't recognised them at all. I don't think he had a clue that they were temps and simply punished them as if they were full time union malingerers by sending them to the Face Up Table of Horrors. I couldn't try anything because the supervisors somehow seemed to know me, or maybe I was too chicken to take chances. Surprisingly they didn't seem to recognise anybody else, even the permanent blokes, or maybe they didn't want to. The full-time blokes knew the bosses didn't have a clue who each individual worker was, and took advantage of two-hour lav breaks and even three-hour lunches. Some just seemed to disappear into dark corners for hours at a time.

Somehow HM mail got through. I pondered the mystery of the triple-locked Mail Bag Room rabbit warren but couldn't work it out.

One of the Primary blokes put it to me this way at lunch. Listen, we're all small potatoes in the stew and no one misses a couple of tiny spuds. Especially if your name is Mr B.A.Nonymous. Get it?

I found out no union bloke ever actually got fired. Usually they got told off and a strip torn off them which went like water off a duck's back. In fact they laughed about it. Some got nasty Bad Report letters in their files. Some were suspended for a day or week, usually with pay. Sometimes they got demoted, some even back to the Face Up table. Turning up drunk at work got them docked one day without pay I was told. Some blokes took a day off a month that way, usually a Monday or Friday to get a long- weekend. They had to be careful not to turn up pissed too often or they got a rehab week with the GPO chaplain. That apparently was regarded as really bad news.

Despite all this HM mail got through. Even if the workers pinched loose stamps, a heinous crime which was supposed to bring the Federal Police in on the act, they were always given the benefit of doubt. Everyone it seemed nicked a few loose stamps but they stashed them in the cuffs of their trousers or rolled up shirt sleeves or in their shoe tops so it always looked like accidental flutter-ins.

The GPO work looked like a real soft touch for ten months of the year, except for Christmas, and even then they brought in lots of temps. Most of the permanent blokes adjusted readily to the sloth-like GPO pace and a good number of them were cunning malingerers and total bludgers. We were beginning to fit into this ethos ourselves, though I didn't feel right about it.

My next and fifth promotion was in the last week before Christmas. Kitbag and Keg had finally got off the Face Up Horror and were handing out mail to Sorters.

Despite our slack efforts and bludging ways we had all out shone the permanent blokes. A bunch of permanent union blokes, recusants and recidivists, were now chained like galley slaves to the Table. But, again led by the young Super, I was now promoted downstairs into the cool quiet air of the Outgoing Landing. This was a big move. The responsibility of the job was drilled into the gathered workers. This was usually a Senior GPO job. Security was the keyword. HM mail must be protected at all costs. I was now on the front line.

The landing itself was an elevated concrete curve, a road really, a landing for the red GPO trucks and vans to pull up and pick up their specific load of mail for delivery. Behind us a series of a dozen or more numbered metal chutes rose up into the sensitive bowels of the GPO building. Down these chutes at specific times would rumble HM's sealed mailbags. I was given a two-wheel trolley and told that three chutes were my responsibility. G, H, and I. When one bag came rattling down the chute I was to put it on the trolley and wheel it to the exact corresponding spot on the landing where, about ten yards apart, G, H, and I were painted in large letters. G to G, H to H, I to I. I repeated the mantra to the young super who nodded his approval.

And one bag only at a time, he said firmly.

One bag at a time, I said.

But how do I know which van is the right one for the bag? I asked

You don't. The driver does, he said flatly.

I kept quiet but I thought of the general state of GPO Union blokes' efficiency and reckoned how easy it'd be for anyone in a red van or blue or white or any van to just pick up a bunch of mailbags and zoom off with the precious and sacred mail of HM. He seemed unperturbed by this possibility and walked off to the stairs leading upstairs.

We were fairly busy for the first couple of nights, though it was hard to tell how many blokes actually worked on the Landing. Every night it was a different number and blokes'd disappear here and there and re-appear at the knock-off whistle. We carried their mailbags for them. There was a lot of grumbling about the lazy bastards and a few set- tos now and then, but nothing serious because we all sneaked away when we could, and the kettle calling the pot black was pretty silly.

The red GPO vans arrived more or less on time and seemed to know which numbers they had to pick up. One driver was called the Cowboy. He wore his telegram pouch slung low like a six gun holster and had a Stetson on his seat ready to wear out on the road. He drove his van as if it was a coach and six horses calling out appropriate commands like 'whee up' as he came in and 'geddy up' as he took off. Another was called 'Never' because he was never on time. Another 'Well I'll' because he kept saying 'Well I'll'. I thought he was called Walleye for a bit until I caught on. Another 'Thallium' because he was a slow working dope, another 'Killer' because he stuttered and glanced about with nervous darting eyes and crouched down in a paranoid stance ready to run. Another 'Shadow' because he was rumoured to be frightened of his own shadow. I reckoned anybody who stayed on at the GPO would end up with one of these juvenile nicknames, though none of the so-named drivers seemed upset when answering most cheerfully to their uncomplimentary nicknames. The last thing I wanted was a nickname born of GPO boredom and over-familiarity. The one I already had – Shorty – because I was a bit tall, did me fine.

Kitbag and Keg had another run-in with an old bald super. They were in the

big mail bins in the dark corner sleeping after lunch when the bins started to move. When the long row of bins entered the glaring fluorescent lights of the main floor they woke up. They immediately leaped out of the bins, and with the old super roaring after them, ran and dodged their way past Primary Sorting to the Face Up Table. There they began to zealously build their piles of mail. The young super downstairs with us on the Landing missed the event. The old super who caught them couldn't work out who was who anyway, and went off muttering. Relieved, the pair dropped their letter-sizing down to the slothful pace of the other drones seated next to them, and when no Super was around, went back to delivering letters to Primary. The letters were decreasing in volume anyway and the pile of mail on the table had fallen to a mere dribble.

The last couple of nights the Christmas mail dropped right off. For the first two hours when new blokes first arrived we were all pulled in to the Mailbag Room to feed strings through the necks of the bags and attach lead crimpers to the tops. Then we went back to normal jobs. Down on the Landing we filled in time between the rare arrival of a mailbag down the chutes, standing by our trolleys and pretending we were idling diesel trucks. Or singing carols. Or Abdul the Bul Bul. Or telling jokes. Anything to break the boredom. Someone'd pretend to have a flat tyre or a dead battery. We'd gather to consult. When the super was upstairs we had imagined drag races with our trolleys, up and down the landing.

The last night I had an unexpected visitor on the Landing – the young supervisor. There were no bags dropping down the mail chutes at all. Upstairs was apparently also very quiet. Most blokes'd found a sleeping spot and the supers were nowhere to be seen, though the rumour was they were at a big piss-up in the offices on the fourth floor. The young super had brought a small bottle of Drambuie.

Christmas drink? He asked me. The others wandered off a bit miffed. We sat dangling our legs over the landing, sipping on the Drambuie. Chris was his name. He was very reflective. I reckon he'd had a couple of drinks beforehand.

You don't want a job here? he said. I could put a word in.

No. Sorry. Not interested, I replied.

Can't blame you, he said. I have to move on too. This job is going nowhere. We could be 100% better if we tried. But it's a fluster-cluck. You've seen it. Slacking off, sleeping. Incompetence. No one cares. All of it just rolls along like a...slug...that's it, like a slug. The time-wasting scams. Blokes sleeping in the mail bag room.

Yeah, I said. How the hell did they get in there past all the locks?

I reported that incident, Chris said. Wrote it up in detail. It got ignored. I found out those blokes probably slip one of the supers a quid or two and he locks them in for the whole shift. They never touch a letter but get paid anyhow. I couldn't prove anything.

But aren't the unions the problem?

No, said Chris very sadly. It's not just the unions. We can negotiate efficiency and tighten all the details with them. A lot of the union blokes are embarrassed by the goings on. No, it's just old tired management. Encrustation. Everything's stuck in old spider webs. Management rust and decay and no one cares. It's rotten. I hope it's better elsewhere. Maybe a private corporation. Ok, so we got the mail out again this Christmas. The supervisors are all upstairs celebrating, he said, waving the bottle up

at the ceiling, but it was a really a disaster. A shambles. The three monkeys. See no bludgers hear no bludgers. Definitely never see a bludger. I'm moving on.

Chris got up, shook my hand, wished me Merry Christmas and walked off. Then he turned and said, Oh, by the way, Anne says hello - Anne Lucas.

He smiled and left. I was a bit thunder struck by the last message. But I started to wonder where I was going. Surfers Paradise, yes, bikinis and surf. But after that? After graduation? Somewhere better? Elsewhere? I sat on the Landing, thinking.

I knew Chris and I would never be friends but we had a connection of some kind I couldn't quite fathom. It had to do with encrustation and a better elsewhere. Where I was going after uni blew into a vast blur – maybe into dark abyss. It was frightening. Maybe out there it was all a stuffed up fluster-cluck like Chris said, no matter what you did for a living. I didn't want to think about it. I hoped, like Chris, things would also be better elsewhere, wherever that was.

At knock-off time I went upstairs to line up with Keg and Kitbag to collect my pay. The three of us waved our pay cheques about like flags and danced and whooped. We went down to the market pub which opened fruit and vegetable stalls at five am. At just after five in the Public Bar we downed four quick shots of rum and milk. After which I slept like an innocent without a single care for the GPO, HM or her endless mail rolling in like mindless surf or the three blind monkeys awaiting us all.