

Over the Back Fence  
For Friday December 19, 2008  
Approx 630 words

Charitable donations  
By Alva Wood

Last March, when Gerald Newbery finally started preparing their income tax returns, he discovered a whole grocery bag full of charitable donation receipts.

“Louise!” he bellows. “What the hell’s all this stuff?”

“You told me to keep the receipts together for you,” Louise explains.

“But why are there so many of them?” he demands.

“They keep on sending me reminders,” Louise shrugs, “that it’s time to send another donation. I do find it quite tiresome,” she admits, “so I send smaller and smaller cheques,” she goes on, “hoping that they’ll get tired of me and stop sending letters.”

Gerald smacks his head. He explains that her solution is as useless as the “Click here to unsubscribe” line in spam e-mails.

“All you’re doing is letting them know they’ve got a live one!” he splutters.

So they agreed on a system. Louise won’t even open unsolicited mail. She’d put it all in a cardboard carton. When the box overflows, the two of them will go through the accumulation together and decide what to give, to whom.

At the beginning of December, Louise gets the box out.

She and Gerald light a fire in their fireplace and settle down for a long winter’s night of sorting the mail into piles.

“We’re not going to support all of these,” Gerald decrees. “Let’s start a discard pile for the ones we won’t even bother opening.”

But Louise’s curiosity keeps sidetracking the process. She knew the ordinary envelopes would contain the usual heart-rending personalized form letter, begging for a donation. But she couldn’t resist the odd-shaped packages.

“This one feels like it has money inside,” she says to Gerald. “I thought you weren’t supposed to send coins through the mail.”

She rips it open. “It’s a nickel,” she says. She glances at the enclosed letter. “But the letter says they’ve sent us fifty cents, and they hope we’ll multiply it.”

“Must be from the Dyslexia Society,” Gerald guesses.

Louise checks the pledge form. “How did you know?” she wonders.

Another package comes enclosed in bubble-pak. Two warm winter gloves fall out as a promotion gimmick. Louise tries on the left glove. “Nice glove,” she says. She tries the second glove. It’s also for the left hand.

“Who’s it from?” asks Gerald. “War Amps?”

Louise checks the letter. “Nope,” she replies. “Something called the One-Armed Paper-Hangers’ Benefit Foundation.”

“Maybe the Right Hand of God Society will send the matching gloves,” suggests Gerald.

His next envelope comes from the Toenail Fungus Survivors’ Association. “I suppose it grows on you,” he mutters, tossing it onto the discard pile.

Louise is about to add an envelope onto the growing pile from wildlife and environmental associations. Then she stops. “What are naturalists?” she wonders, staring at a grainy photo of a nude woman.

“Bird watchers?” suggests Gerald.

“Naked bird watchers?” she replies.

This time Gerald takes a look. “That’s just a name that nude sunbathing clubs use sometimes.”

Louise is still staring at the illustrated cover letter. “They can’t be bird watchers,” she says. “According to this, they’re all visually impaired.”

Gerald lets his imagination play with that one. “They probably play Blind Man’s Buff at meetings,” he grins. “And I suppose they could select their members by Braille.”

He goes back to sorting. "We sure got a pile from Hospice House," he complains. He tears the first package open. It contains Get Well Soon cards. A second has "To Do" note pads. With some words of wisdom printed at the bottom: "Never put off to tomorrow what you should do today; tomorrow may never come."

"That's sick," he says.

Louise is still opening random letters. "Are we going to support the Firefighters' this year?" she asks.

"Of course," says Gerald, shovelling handfuls of junk mail into the fire.