Local Mail Bomber, Still at Large

Lucinda Franks

April 8, 1996

Postal Inspector Gregory Rhatigan, who tracks bombs sent through the U.S. mail, learned Thursday morning that F.B.I. agents in Montana had discovered a pipe bomb, all wrapped and ready to go, in the cabin of the suspected Unabomber. As they were defusing it, Rhatigan put New York post offices on a reinforced alert for the city's own comparatively obscure purveyor of postal carnage: the "zip-gun bullet" man, as he is called by Rhatigan and other members of the special task force that has spent twelve fruitless years trying to stop him.

This elusive individual likes to send invitingly wrapped packages to random victims, who open them only to be shot by .22-calibre bullets aimed at the vital organs. He sent four of the packages between 1982 and 1995, killing one woman and injuring five other people in the New York area. Very little is known about him, but what small suppositions have been made bear a sobering resemblance to the Unabomber. His devices have a grisly elegance. They are tiny jewels of construction that have no known precedent in the annals of mail bombs; their incorporation of zip-gun elements recalls the Saturday-night specials of the sixties, which leads investigators to put the bomber's age at perhaps fifty-five. Like the Unabomber, the zip-gun bomber is clearly a loner who refrains from bragging to his neighbors or friends, leaving authorities in an inforimation vacuum. F.B.I. databases have registered more than twenty thousand leads arising from the newspaper publication of the Unabomber's manifesto, but New York's zip-gun bomber has inspired none.

"We don't have a face, we don't have a signature. We've never had a communiqué—we haven't had one tip," Rhatigan laments. "We put out ads for a fifty-thousand-dollar reward and we didn't even get called by the crazies. The problem is New Yorkers are straightforward: if they have a score to settle, they'll throw a bomb through your window or put a gun right in your face."

The zip-gun bomber first struck in May of 1982. His first victim, a high-school guidance counsellor in Brooklyn, thought she had been sent a cookbook for Mother's Day. But the cookbook had been hollowed out to house batteries attached to light-bulb filaments that sparked the gunpowder in the bullets and propelled them out of three steel tubes. Two bullets penetrated her kitchen wall and the third her heart. Like the Unabomber, New York's mail terrorist took a rather long rest and did not strike again for eleven years. Then, each year for the last three years, ingeniously wrapped bullet bombs have injured a variety of people whom investigators simply cannot link: An elderly woman opened a little blue velvet box promising a medallion from the National Multiple Sclerosis Society and was shot through the liver; a Staten Island family of three was sprayed with bullets after the father opened another medallion box. And last year a pregnant nineteen-year-old in Queens opened a package advertising a managed-care health plan. Inside was a black book that resembled a church missal: the bullets within misfired and burned her legs and abdomen. She was not seriously injured, but the next day she gave birth two weeks early.

Rhatigan and the members of his zip-gun-case task force— including agents from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms as well as police detectives from the

arson-and-explosives squad—spent years tracking the various bomb components. They chased down medallion boxes made in Canada, pored over the records of battery sales in every Radio Shack in the Northeast, and traced brake-lining tubes and electronic switches to stores in the metropolitan area. They encountered only dead ends. Rhatigan is mindful that the F.B.I.'s investigation was also going nowhere until a family member provided a direct link to the suspected Unabomber. He is both hopeful and worried that the publicity about the Unabomber will flush out his local counterpart. "Look at how the Oklahoma bombing set the Unabomber's juices flowing," Rhatigan says. "He had to do something to win back the limelight. Our guy has that same psychopathic profile. Of course, the goal is to get him before he gets us."

Posters picturing a mockup of a typical zip-gun package have been hung in all New York postal-processing centers. Employees from mail sorters to carriers have been alerted to look for a telltale package: a Jiffy bag or padded envelope the size of a stenographer's notebook with a typed label, official stickers such as "Priority Mail," the return address of a charitable organization or a business, and stamps for the exact postage down to the penny rather than a postage-meter strip. Rhatigan explains, "There will be packages pulled, and we will X-ray them, and if we're lucky nobody will fall asleep on the job and deliver a package that we really don't want anyone to receive." ☒

Lucinda Franks
Local Mail Bomber, Still at Large
April 8, 1996

The New Yorker, April 15, 1996 issue, pages 37-38.
<www.newyorker.com/magazine/1996/04/15>
As the Unabomber dominates headlines, Gregory Rhatigan hunts New York's meticulous "zip-gun" mailer—an anonymous, seemingly motiveless killer.