Neither rain, nor sleet nor gloom of night

Canada Post and I have been playing cat and mouse ever since a local letter carrier lost his mind a few years back and emptied the contents of his satchel – which included two cheques addressed to Yours Truly – into the muddy Petitcodiac River before vanishing into the night, never again to be spotted in these environs.

For weeks, the poor fellow’s whereabouts framed the subject of much curbside speculation in my neighbourhood. Some said he had packed it in to become an ice-road trucker on the Mackenzie Delta. Others had heard that he’d signed aboard a crab trawler in the ice-blown Bering Sea. All agreed, however, that whatever trade he now plied must be far less stressful, and more rewarding, than delivering the daily mail.

But, I digress.

When I say Canada Post and I have been playing cat and mouse ever since, I mean I’ve been setting careful watch on the condition of those who have replaced him. I make it my business, whenever I can, to strike up a meaningless conversation about the weather with the sole purpose of gazing into the new guy’s eyes.

If he responds with something like, “Oh sure, it’s cold, but that’s what winter’s for,” I nod enthusiastically, bid a cheerful adieu and return to my work.

If, on the other hand, he begins to twitch and rant about his dental plan, which doesn’t cover the cost of removing the transceivers in his mouth, I smile, wish him on his mumbling way, and, when the coast is clear, dash out to rent a box at the nearest post office.

I’ve done this several times, and though it has cost me a pretty penny, the strategy has guaranteed the Bruce household reliable, virtually uninterrupted mail service for at least four years.

Until now.

Late last year, and without much fanfare, the Crown corporation everyone loves to hate announced “Postal Transformation,” an initiative its website describes as a “multi-year program that includes major investments in equipment, technology and processes that will provide reach and access to our customers, across both physical and electronic channels, more targeted communications and opportunities to build customer relationships.”

By January, the transformation seemed stalled as customers began to complain about late delivery and no delivery to both residences and boxes. So furious was one Moncton city councilor, he lambasted Canada Post in the local press, stating that if it can’t function efficiently, it should be sold to the private sector. “This is a serious issue,” Pierre Boudreau fumed. “It affects the economic well-being of our citizens and our businesses. There is no justification — none — for having a letter mailed from Moncton, to Moncton, arriving 10 days or more later.”

For its part, the corporation attributed the glitches to growing pains. In a letter published by the Moncton Times & Transcript and Saint John Telegraph-Journal, Gilles Volpe, Canada Post’s director of NB/PEI operations had this to say: “In late October, we made some changes to our delivery routes in Moncton. These changes were required to secure service for the long-run, but they have led to some short-term challenges. Why are we making the changes? Because the amount of letters we deliver has dropped by more than 11 per cent over the last four years. Our costs are going up, while our revenues continue to drop.”

With this last statement, Mr. Volpe nailed the problem, albeit unwittingly, in one: Canada Post is, as it’s currently configured, uncompetitive. And now its sanguinely uncompetitive response is to reduce the quality of its service for the “short-term,” rather than improve the function of its business and the perspicuity of its oversight and planning. No private enterprise in the world would acknowledge such an approach as anything but a prerequisite for bankruptcy.

If this once-venerated service expects to survive amid instant electronic communications and bargain-basement couriers, it had better figure out what value it can offer the marketplace, apart from the dubiously edifying spectacle of workers driven to distraction and customers forced to negotiate around its incompetence.

It may be a dog eat dog world, but eventually cats also get their mice.