

Surprise Package

(A memoir by Dale Kelleher)

Operating a small packaging and private postal box business was never dull. My clientele and their businesses were interesting, informative, lucrative and, sometimes borderline legal.

Box 343 was rented by a young, wiry, creepy guy whom I seldom saw. My storefront was open 24 hours a day to allow my box holders access to their mail. There were many customers that only came in after regular hours to gather their correspondence. If they had packages too large to fit in their box, I would leave a note to come by during working hours and ask at the front counter for their parcel. I would also leave notice of rent monies due.

It had been six months since Mr. 343 had been in to gather his stuff, which included a past due notice of monies owed.

“Close out 343. Any mail that comes in, toss it,” I instructed my manager Leslie as I reviewed the contents of his box.

One week later, a small 10” by 12” package came in addressed to Suite 343. My customers often used a ‘suite’ number instead of a box number to create the illusion of having an office. The return address on the bundle was from the Philippines.

“Can we open it?” Leslie and Marty were holding the package, grinning with anticipation.

“No. You both know the rules. Just throw it out.”

“But Dale, it’s from the Philippines. It could be jewelry. It could be a beautiful silk scarf. It could be a great treasure.”

“All right, but take it to the back of the store and wait till we close.”

I sat after closing, trying to balance the day’s receipts while Leslie and Marty were in the rear of the store opening the mystery gift.

“Oh my god. Dale, Dale come here. You are not going to believe this,” they shouted in unison.

I walked to the rear of my store, shaking my head thinking, “I hope it’s not a snake or scorpion.”

“Lookie, lookie. We found a big, yummy cookie.”

There on my packaging table, amidst the bubble wrap, corrugated boxes, assorted tape and packing peanuts, was a plastic shrink wrapped bundle, approximately 1 ½” thick, by 8” long and 6” wide, of weed. I was totally ignorant of any type of drugs, but even I knew this was not oregano.

“Holy s*#%*!”, I exclaimed. “What the hell do I do now?”

“Are you sure it’s what we think it is?”

“What do you think it is?”

“We think it’s the same thing you think.”

“Marty, go next door and get Maureen.”

Maureen owned and operated the barber shop next to my Mail Boxes Etc. We had become friends and would often go for cocktails after work. Maureen was only a few years older than I but a much more savvy woman, in all manner of real life.

“What have you got?,” Maureen asked as she entered my backdoor.

“Come see for yourself.”

“Damn girl, that’s some mighty fine stuff.”

“Oh god, I’ve got to call the police.”

“Oh no,” Maureen moaned. “Don’t call the cops. This stuff is primo.”

I told my employees to go home and Maureen and I agreed to meet for drinks at the local pub in our strip mall as soon as we finished closing up shop for the night.

After three hours of drinking and discussion, Maureen still insisted that I was being stupid and to not call the cops. I telephoned the next morning as soon as I opened for business.

Local law officers showed up at noon and asked to see the merchandise. After taking one look, they started making plans for a “sting.” First they said they had to document that the stuff was indeed what it appeared. They brought in dogs - yes, dogs. I was to hide the 8 x 6 little bit of love and let the dogs sniff to see if they could find it. They did.

The police contacted DEA and they sent two men to stake out the store. They instructed me to put a notice in 343 informing him of the arrival of mail. Even though I told them he had not been in the store for six months, they said, “Oh, he’ll be here.”

One DEA agent stationed himself in the back of my store and the other stayed in the parking lot in an unmarked vehicle.

I had a meeting with all my employees to let them know what was happening. My Pakistani employee Atayi was scared out of her mind. I assured her that she would not have to deal with Mr. 343, just let me know when and if he showed up.

The second day after I had placed the notice in 343, he came in. Atiya was at the counter and quickly stepped into my office, white faced as a Pakistani can get, and said, “Dale, it’s him. He’s here. I am going home.”

“Atiya, before you leave, go to the back room and tell the agent that 343 is at the counter.”

I calmly went to the counter and, I don't believe I had the nerve to do this but, I asked for my back due box rental of \$120. He immediately pulled out his wallet and paid me. I walked to the back, retrieved the package, all rewrapped in the original newspaper, brown paper, and string. I handed my customer his prize.

As he walked to the front door, the DEA agent was right behind him and literally collared him as he stepped out the front door. Forcefully the agent guided him to the unmarked car waiting in the parking lot.

Maureen had been watching out the front window of her barber shop. She stopped in the middle of a haircut, ran over to my store, stuck her head in and hollered, "Meet me tonight at Sullivan's."

I toasted to a narrow escape of trouble with the law. Maureen raised her glass and with a lopsided, wicked grin, said, "Fool!"