

THE PACKAGE

or

A STORY THAT COULD HAVE HAPPENED EVERYWHERE IN THE WORLD BUT HAPPENED ONLY HERE

A DOCO-DRAMA IN TWO ACTS

Dramatis Personae (In order of appearance)

Tamir - a benevolent doctor of mathematics from UCLA ('I' in future reference)

Dafna - a D.M.D from Seattle, friend to Tamir

Nancy - A secretary in the UCLA math department

Rico - The Westwood neighborhood post office clerk

Manny - The person in charge of the xerox-room in the UCLA math department

She - a nameless woman of color

ACT ONE

Scene 1: A quiet evening at my home

The ringing of the phone pierced the tranquility of the evening as well as the heavenly beauty of Schubert's impromptus. Picking up the phone, I heard from the other side the jolly voice of Dafna. After the basic chit-chat and weekly update ("Nu, az ma kore? ... A..., Ahha..., Walla!...") our conversation took the following course:

Dafna: I need to ask you a favor.

Me: Aha. . .

Dafna: I ordered by mail expensive medical equipment and I would like to have it sent to your UCLA address because ... (here came a boring and irrelevant explanation about taxes). When you get it, just put my address on and send it to me.

Me: OK, sounds easy.

Later on, the words "just put my address on and send it to me" echoed in my head in a pounding beat: "just...send...", "just...send...". How could I be so naive?

(Two weeks later)

Scene 2: A quiet afternoon at my office

The bip of the screen pierced the placidity of the afternoon as well as the dubious beauty of the loud Chinese conversation that took place in the adjacent office. The bip denoted the arrival of a new Email. The Email from Nancy told me that a package for me had just arrived. Downstairs, looking at the strange package, I tried to think very hard what could it be (I forgot, of-course). Nancy, who seemed to be even more eager than I was to find out what was the content, offered me scissors with an alluring smile. Seeing the scary apparatus that peeked from inside, I remembered and closed the package hastily. Nancy couldn't control her curiosity ("what is it?") but I had neither the time nor the will to explain. I was on a mission! "just...send...", "just...send..." whispered the inner voice in my head like a mantra.

ACT TWO

(The next morning)

Scene 1: In the little neighborhood post office

Rico: Good morning, sir .

Me : Good morning, I would like to send this package to Seattle .

Rico: Very well, that will be 3 dollars .

Me : And I would like also to insure it .

Rico: What is the value of the content?

Me : X dollars .

Rico (with his Panamanian accent): Ahh, no good, no good. You should use brown paper wrap if the value of the package is over Y dollars .

Me (smiling in disbelief): Excuse me?

Rico (not smiling at all): Yes, a brown paper and paper tape, no scotch-tape .

Me : I don't understand, what's wrong with this nice wrap?

Rico: It's not brown. These are the rules: over Y dollars - brown paper and paper tape only !

Me (in a succumbing tone): OK, OK, can I please buy here brown paper?

Rico (in an offended tone, combined with his melodic Panamanian accent): Come on, my friend! If I had here brown paper wouldn't I give it to you?

So I took back the package, left the office and went on to work. I was determined to complete that mission. No one could stop me, not even the mighty postal service. "Must find brown paper, must find brown paper" was for me the order of the hour .

(Later on that day)

Scene 2: In the xerox-room in the math department

I entered the xerox-room with the package under my arm and asked Manny:

"Hi Manny. How are you? Great. Do you have here brown paper for wrapping?" .

Manny replied:

"I'm fine and how are you? Just look behind you".

I turned around and, WOW, I saw the huge brown monster. I tore a piece in the size of a wall paper and began my 'Operation Wrap'. The wrapped package looked 'like my troubles' - as we say in Hebrew - but it was brown! Holding the edges with one hand, while leaning over it to shelter it with my body, I reached behind me with my right hand and signaled Manny to hand me a paper tape, as though I was a brain surgeon who's asking the nurse for a knife .

Manny gave me the paper tape .

I sealed the package hermetically and left the room .

The color of the paper tape was cream .

(5:30PM - same day)

Scene 3: Back in the post-office

Just when the people in front me finished their business and it was my turn, entered She, the black woman - tall, elegant and self-confident looking. But for me she did not exist: there were only Rico, I and the brown package, hidden in the plastic bag in my left hand. It was like a duel between the two men from either side of the counter.

I planed to draw the package and then shoot with the sentence 'I would like to send this B-R-O-W-N package to Seattle'. Alas, I was too young and inexperienced to play that tough game. . .

I drew the package and opened my mouth to shoot. But Rico was faster than me. His shot was painful: "Ah, No Good, No Good!!! I told you BROWN paper tape" !

My mouth remained open for a second; I managed to shoot back - "Say What???" - but it was a shot of a wounded man. Rico, whose victory by hippon was confirmed, took pity on me and said gently "I told you, man, brown paper and paper tape. This is not a brown paper tape". "What difference does it make, for crying out loud; it is a paper tape!" - I renewed my attack with vigor. "What difference does it make?", Rico repeated mockingly, "What difference does it make? I will show you what difference does it make". He then took a rubber-stamp and began stamping (or should I say stabbing) the package on the paper tape again and again, savagely (I couldn't help thinking about the shower scene from 'Psycho'). Then, using his thumb, he showed me that the ink does not stick to the cream-colored paper tape.

When he saw the tears in my eyes, he softened and said "Don't worry. I have here brown paper tape. I'll just peel off your paper tape and put the right one. I see that if I don't do it, no one will".

I wiped the tears from my eyes and, noticing the woman who witnessed the whole thing (that took about one minute), I asked Rico to attend her first so she wouldn't need to wait (am I a gentleman or what?). Rico said that it would take him only 3-4 minutes and began working on it.

The woman was not pleased and suggested that I'd take my business "to The Federal Building" (where the main post office is). I, a bit surprised by this rude and senseless suggestion, told her that "I get all the service that I need right here". The woman, whose up-bringing obviously never introduced her to the concept of "minding one's own business", tilted her head to examine the writing on the package. And then started the following incredible conversation:

Her: Wait a minute! Is that package from Doctor Tamir Tassa?

Me (hesitantly, not knowing what to expect): Yeees. . .

Her: Are you Doctor Tamir Tassa??

Me ("what the hell is going on; does she know me?"): Yeeeeees. . .

Her (attacking): I don't believe it! A medical doctor and you can't follow simple directions! ?

(The last 5 empty rows stand for the 5 seconds of silence in which Rico and I stood mute with eyes and mouth open wide)

Me (recovering): First of all, you mean to say "instructions" and not "directions"; Second - I am not a medical doctor ; and Third. . .

Her (cutting me abruptly with ever-growing passion): So you must be a PhD! That's even worse: it

means that once you did a research thesis, but still, you make such simple mistakes!

Me: Give me a break, the man told me "brown paper and paper tape" and I didn't realize that also the tape must be brown, is it that unforgivable?

Her: Well, I wouldn't expect it from a PhD! (all her sentences ended with exclamation marks).

Me: Being a PhD doesn't mean that I cannot do mistakes. Do you see here (pointing to my forehead) the words 'God' or 'Omnipotent'? (This last word surprised even me).

The amazing woman kept preaching like those Sunday-morning-TV-preachers. You may wonder why I bothered to speak with that horrible creature. Well, she was there and so was I; and I had to wait there until Rico finished de-wrapping and re-wrapping the package. But there was one more reason: There are two kinds of people that really fascinate me - those who are very wise and knowledgeable and, perhaps even more, those who are very stupid and ignorant. And the woman in front of me was a rare specimen of the second kind.

After a minute or so when I saw that Rico is about to finish, I decided to put an end to this pathetic display of stupidity and said: "All right, I had enough fun for one day; now listen to me. The great actress Sarah Bernard once said - 'To err is human, to forgive is divine'. Well, I can tell you one thing: I am very human, however, YOU are far from being divine".

That was like pouring water on the witch in "The Wizard of Oz". She didn't scream "I'm melting, I'm melting" but at least she shut her big mouth up. I turned to Rico who just finished his work of art and looked at me with great pride like a father who just saw his beloved son scoring in a soccer game. He handed to me the all-brown package and said "...and now, take this home and come back tomorrow morning. "

Me: ?????

Rico: Well, they already picked up the mail today and I can't leave here expensive packages over night.

T H E E N D