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THE FUNNY PAGES: II: TRUE-LIFE TALES; Death, Etc.

By WENDY SPERO

The guy at Mail Boxes, Etc. had owned the place for 10 years and was a very angry individual. You would walk in the door, the little bell would ring and he would roll his eyes and emit a thunderous "Ugh."

He would typically be on the phone screaming at his cellphone provider, stabbing his ergonomic mouse pad with a letter opener. Or else he would be admonishing his bony teenage assistant for being the dumbest person to have ever worked at a Mail Boxes, Etc.

"Why are you ringing up those Post-its one by one? I told you not to do that, idiot. I've never worked with someone so retarded."

There would usually be a customer standing in shock, or storming out.

I went into his store at least once a week to use the fax machine. I work from home, and I don't have the mental capacity to set up a home fax machine, and I don't go to the FedEx Kinko's a mile away because I'm in Los Angeles, and I recently moved from Brooklyn, and I've yet to learn how to drive.

So last week I dragged myself to the store to get a form notarized. I had seen a sign on the door that said, "Notary comes every day from 10 a.m.- 4 p.m."

After I walked through the door and the bell went off and the guy said, "Ugh," I asked, "Um, so, you guys have a notary?"

"Yes. Can't you read the sign?"

"I can. May I have this notarized then?"

"It's 1:45. He's back after 2. It's the lunch hour."

I walked out the door, spent 25 minutes pacing around the small strip mall and returned at 2:10 p.m.

"Is the notary back?" I asked.

"What do you need notarized?"

I handed him the pages.

He then picked up a pen, asked me for my ID and ferociously signed on the dotted lines of my paper.

I barged out, and for the rest of the evening all I could do was rant to my friends, ". . .and then it turned out that he was the notary. He was the notary!"

Two days later, I found myself with yet another insurance form to fax. I headed to Mail Boxes, Etc. -- but this time I was determined to stand up to the man. I'm the most anxious person I know, and I barely have perspective, and I desperately need to take yoga or get on some form of medication, so what do I know? But I fantasized about telling him that he was creating too many bad vibes and that life was too short to carry around that much anger.

I approached the door alongside a bearded man in his mid-40's holding a large brown box. We noticed that the store was closed. It was 3:30 p.m. How dare the guy close his store early when he's the one so obsessed with time?

Then the bearded man and I simultaneously saw a small yellow Post-it note stuck to the window. In messy, intimidated, boyish handwriting it said:

"The owner of this store died yesterday. There will be a memorial service tomorrow at 3 p.m. at the church down the street. I guess we will not be having normal hours until things get organized. Later." It was signed by the bony assistant.

The bearded man and I stood there, dumbfounded.

"He died -- that guy died?" I said.

"Huh," the man replied.

"Jesus. That's so crazy. Horrible."

"God, he was a jerk."

"I know," I said. "Such a jerk."

"But, yes, it is horrible. Yeah."

We stood there for a while. It was as if we were both trying to figure out how we were supposed to feel when a regular background player in your life, a miscellaneous acquaintance, dies. But not someone benign, like the eerily flexible jogger who stretches in front of your window every morning. Someone you actively didn't like very much.

Oh, God, had he been sick? I wondered. If he was sick for a really long time and that's why he was so angry at the world, then, wow, that is the saddest thing ever. But if he was suddenly hit by a massive truck, well, that would be sad, too. But slightly less sad.

Then the man fumbled with his box and said, "FedEx is just a mile down the road."

"Yeah, I know, thanks." But I went home.

When I entered the store the next week and the little bell went off, a tall man with a small round head was busy collating behind the counter.

He smiled and purred, "Let me know if I can help you with anything."

I know I should have felt calm and welcome, but I didn't. Instead I thought: He wouldn't have wanted you to treat people this way. It was his store. Ten years. Have some damn respect.

Wendy Spero is the author of "Microthrills: True Stories from a Life of Small Highs."

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