Forever and a Day

by Todd Maupin

“It's time.”

The simple postcard addressed to Waylon contained only this message. There was no return address, naturally, because postcards rely instead on the image on the reverse side to identify the sender's location to the recipient. In this case, the reverse side was equally mysterious. It was a photo of a nondescript building that could have been anywhere, even in Topeka.

Being that Waylon lived in Topeka, no one living in Topeka should have been sending him postcards from there. And yet, clearly unclear as a hazy day, a postcard postmarked in Topeka.

Was the message itself a warning? A statement of fact? An act of courtesy? A lament? A prank? The most confounding aspect of all was that all of the writing on the postcard was handwriting. Careful, accomplished and legible handwriting, but having the unmistakable quality to differentiate the text from print or something printed to feign handwriting.

As if the mystery needed to be shrouded in another enigmatic layer, now it was even peculiarly italicized, sort of. Like a Turducken, the multitude of layers made Waylon queasy. Someone or some thing was both haunting and taunting him.

The nearest post office was not one of Waylon's old haunts, but it was there that he decided to start his search for answers. When he entered, the lobby was empty aside from the bored clerk standing behind the counter. The daily rush of people shipping their junk to the highest bidder on eBay must have already passed. As he approached the counter, Waylon noticed that the clerk was gazing at him expectantly and suspiciously.

Available online at *«http://fictionaut.com/stories/todd-maupin/forever-and-a-day»*
Copyright © 2021 Todd Maupin. All rights reserved.

Waylon brandished the postcard and placed it on the counter. “Hello, what can you tell me about this?”

The clerk picked up the postcard and scrutinized it. “Well, it was postmarked here and one of our carriers delivered it to someone - a Waylon - in this zip code,” the clerk explained thoroughly in his best Emilio Estevez voice.

“Thank you. Is there any way to know who sent it to me?” Waylon asked.

The clerk pursed his lips, apparently ruminating a thought.

“I'm Waylon,” Waylon added.

“Oh, well, in that case. No, sorry,” the clerk stated apologetically with a tone that bordered on sincerity. “Postcards are very much cut and dried. Unless they get wet in the rain, because our mail carriers also deliver in the rain. You know the saying.” He paused and scanned the lobby and looked over his shoulder to ensure that he and Waylon were alone before continuing in an almost whisper, “That rain, snow, gloom of night thing is not an official motto, but it's still true.”

“I see,” Waylon said, nodding. He did not see at all. The veil had not been lifted nor had it shifted at all.

“The thing about postcards is that they hold no secrets. Anyone can read how much fun someone is having on vacation or when your next oil change is due. Even this - “ the clerk glanced at Waylon's postcard again “ - it's time. It means what it means, and nothing more.”

“There's no way I can reply to it?” Waylon asked hopefully.

“I'm sorry, sir. No, the mail does not work like an email, as much as we'd like it to. Lord, we wish it would,” the clerk remarked ruefully employing anything but a hushed tone.

A word of agreement emanated from someone in the rear of the office who must have heard. “Truth.”

Waylon was forlorn. His shoulders slumped. The clerk perceived Waylon's precipitating mood and put his hand on Waylon's shoulder.

“Listen, um - ” the clerk glimpsed at the postcard again “ - Waylon, I suggest that you contact friends and family, anyone you know who may have sent you this thing. Maybe your doctor, dentist, gynecologist. Ask them what it means. No doubt, the sender did not want to delve into details when anyone could read them. All of us certainly read each and every postcard that passes through our facility,” the clerk suggested with supportive nonchalance.

Waylon was not totally convinced but he nodded again. “I can do that,” he replied.

“Oh, but - “ the clerk lowered his voice again “ - they don't like us telling customers this, but don't use the mail for this. It will cost you too much, it's too slow and you will be able to reach more people faster using email, group texts, and whichever invasive social media platform you use.”

“Thank you. That is good advice. I appreciate all of your help. Really,” Waylon said, managing to project some optimism as he spoke.

“No problem, Waylon. That's why we're here. Can I do anything else for you?” The clerk asked with confident buoyancy.

“Not today, but thank you. Thanks again,” Waylon said, as he retrieved his postcard and turned to leave.

“Just a second, Waylon, while you're here, could I tell you about some of our other services? It will take only a moment and you might be surprised by what we are offering now.” The clerk was preying upon Waylon's sense of politeness and praying on the obligation of reciprocal kindness. The latter probably had some more awkward name that was cobbled together by some behavioral psychologist in search of notoriety.

Waylon had already half turned toward the exit but pivoted back in the clerk's direction. The clerk smiled again, assured that he had regained Waylon's tenuous attention. “Okay, I suppose in this era of technology and changing communication, the postal service has to adapt too. What do you recommend?”

Still beaming, the clerk appeared to be on the verge of cracking his knuckles, but opted to stroke his goatee instead before launching into his appeal to Waylon's patronage. “Have you heard about our change of address program?” The clerk's palpable enthusiasm seemed more appropriate for a question about magnetic levitation.

“Of course, but I am not moving,” Waylon shrugged.

“Most people say that, Waylon, and all of those people are wrong. No offense. It's not about changing your physical address, but how people address you,” the clerk clarified with gleeful pleasure.

“I'm not sure I am following,” Waylon admitted.

“No worries, Waylon, the concept is rather novel and ingenious. Let's say for example, you decide you'd rather be called Lonnie. We can make that happen. Everyone will address you as Lonnie. Or even some other haughty sobriquet.” Waylon started to open his mouth to

interject, but the clerk continued. “Or, maybe someone wants to become a Ms., a Mr., an Esquire, a Sir, a Ma'am, or change their pronouns completely. Whatever a person wants, we can satisfy his/her/their needs, you see? And without any of those other messy requirements, like knighthood, law school, some courthouse, or surgery. I can see that you are impressed.”

Waylon was indeed speechless. Before he could recover, the clerk jumped into the introduction of another service.

“Mail forwarding. You think you know what it is, but trust me, Waylon, you do not. If you sign up for this service, we will make your mail more forward,” the clerk declared proudly and a little pompously, but felt the pomp befitted the circumstance.

Waylon just shook his head. He refused to give the clerk the satisfaction of telling him how incorrect he was about what he had thought mail forwarding meant.

“Let me elaborate, because I can detect that you are not tracking. We can do that too, by the way. Tracking, but I don't know if you could handle the gravity of that one yet. Anyhow, our new mail forwarding service. It works both ways for all of your mail. We open what you send and what is sent to you, and we make it more forward. For example, a grandmother sends a birthday card. We infer that she wants to be visited more often, so we'll add a line to that effect. Inversely, a grandson sends his grandfather a birthday card. We'll add a line asking Gramps to send little Billy or comely Janey more money. This works just as well with utility bills. Obviously, your cellular service is horrible so we will help you convey that message for each bill you pay. And the service providers don't care about your business. You are just one of billions who depend on their mediocre product. They will cut you off in a heartbeat if you stop paying. We help these companies with that outreach.”

“Outrage is more likely there,” Waylon observed. “That service seems rather intrusive and dangerously subjective. I am afraid to ask what it means to ask for a mail hold. Does that mean the carrier has to hold my mail by the tip of her fingers, or only use her left hand, or tweezers or even her feet?”

“Waylon, don't be absurd. This guy,” the clerk chuckled and gestured at Waylon for the benefit of no one. “No, a mail hold, just means that we hold your mail while you go on vacation or something. I always thought this one was pretty obvious. Now, can I interest you in a P.O. Box?”

Waylon actually had been considering one of those. “Well, now that you mention it, I have been considering that… what are my options?”

The clerk perked up and scrutinized Waylon carefully. “Step back from the counter a second, please, Waylon. Just a few feet. Good, stop there.” Waylon did as he was asked. “Okay, I would guess that you would be a welterweight or a middleweight. What do you know about the noble art? Have you fought before? We have gloves with our logo that we can sell you, but maybe you have your own?”

“Umm, actually, I think I will wait on that one. Not weight, hold off, I mean. Err, really, just, no thank you, no P.O. Box at this time,” Waylon stammered.

“Fair enough, Waylon. It is not for everyone. Some people spike the punch and others punch the spike,” the clerk affirmed with empathetic emphasis, if not rational logic. “Okay, this is a good one. What about an ebook of stamps?”

“That sounds very useful actually. Do those work like regular stamps?” Waylon asked, preparing himself for the inevitable nonsense that he expected to follow.

“Well, no. These are just concept art. Anyone can generate an ebook of stamps. They have no value or utility. There is nothing tangible about them. You can view them on some e-reader or tablet, or even your phone if that is your thing.”

“So, these are just like any other ebook? Caveat emptor, stamps that you can only look at, but are not valuable like those with misspellings of Rosevelt, or the stamp that Richard Pryor mailed.”

“That's right, Waylon. And, yes, some of them might have Latin on them, I don't know. You just look at them on your Kindling, or that other one that no one uses anymore because people only use the stores for coffee while their kids abuse the playground.”

“The Nook?” Waylon offered, but the clerk shook his head.

“No, that's not it. What a stupid name for a product though. Oh well, it will come to me later. So, what do you say, Waylon? Can I sign you up for any of these? Or maybe just a standard book of stamps. We have some commemorative stamps featuring post offices from around the country.” The clerk started to reach behind the counter, possibly to pluck some of the aforementioned delicacies.

“No, thank you, but earlier, you mentioned something about a tracking service. Could that maybe help me find out who sent me this postcard?” Waylon cringed and braced himself as he asked. He anticipated belittlement or another ridiculous notion. Instead, the clerk nodded, apparently considering Waylon's question and situation carefully.

“Waylon, I like the way you think. That just might work. Hold on, let me see if the equipment is ready. I'll hook you up with a free trial. How does that sound?” Without waiting for an answer, the clerk disappeared into the alcove behind the counter. Waylon waited patiently and nervously.

The clerk rematerialized. “Okay, we're all set. Initially, they - “ the clerk gazed upwards - “ wanted to go with computer chips, but thankfully they decided that these are too impersonal. And people are a little paranoid about them, am I right? So, in the end, the real debate was whether to call it tracking or rebranding. The marketing team eventually flipped a coin. Are you right or left-handed, Waylon?”

“Left-handed. Why?”

“Okay, good. It doesn't matter, really. The searing pain does not really affect mobility, at least not after a few weeks. Roll up your sleeve. I'll get the ointment ready.” The clerk put an unmarked medicinal tube on the counter, then produced a red-hot brand. “This also doubles as one of our more personalized Forever Stamps,” he stated proudly, in a more amenable than menacing tone.

Waylon could feel the heat emanating from the fiery glowing iron poker that the clerk was waving around like a sparkler. He immediately shrieked back and unapologetically scurried for the exit. “This is crazy. You are certifiable!” Waylon slammed the door behind him.

“Yes, Waylon, we will also certify your mail!” The clerk announced to a newly empty lobby. He noticed that, in the mad dash to leave, Waylon had dropped his postcard.

The clerk retrieved it and proceeded to certify it for free. When he finished with this, the clerk noticed that the certification drawer was

low on Wintergreen AND Spearmint. In order to be ready for the next customers, he opened a few new packages of Certs and crushed those. The clerk enjoyed the minty scent wafting in the air until it dissipated.

Copyright 2021 by Todd Maupin