

LEDMAN PICKUP
by Tom Lichtenberg

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One

"Your package has experienced an exception."
Zoey Bridges stared at the words on her laptop screen, puzzled and confused. Packages don't have experiences, she thought, and in any case, how can an exception be experienced? What does that even mean? It was some moments before she realized what the shipping company was telling her. They had lost her box. It was gone. Missing in action. Misplaced. Disappeared.

"Oh no!" she exclaimed, "It can't be! Not now! Not this!"

"Oh no!" she repeated herself, backing away from the laptop in fear of unleashing her rage on the thing. This was worse than 'oh no'!

She backed up all the way to her living room window, which was open to the street two stories below and caught her backside just enough to keep her from taking the plunge. Frantically, she scanned the room for any small objects that had the potential to be smashed or thrown or stomped on without causing too much damage to anything else. It was times like these that she wished her mother was still alive and still giving her those hideous little glass animals for Christmas. "I could use a little glass animal right now," she thought. "I'd snap its ears off."

She took stock of the stuff she did have in her fairly Spartan apartment: a couple of desk lamps on fragile side-tables, some lousy Inspector Mole paperbacks, a notebook and pens, the laptop on her kitchen counter, a large bright green stuffed boa constrictor draped from the coat hanger hook on the door, her four identical pairs of sneakers, the ancient princess telephone. And that, as she often liked to say, was that.

"The books could go out the window," she considered, but by this time her initial panic had passed and she was capable of breathing again. Cautiously, she approached the laptop. The calamitous email was still there, glowing at her with impunity in the early dusk light. Bla bla bla, bla bla bla, we're sorry to report, bla bla bla, your package has experienced an exception bla bla bla, tracking number, well that's something at least. She clicked on the tracking number and the browser leapt to another page, this one displaying a list of the places where the package had been scanned until its untimely demise. The very last place was not too very far away. Wetford, Arizona. A twelve hour drive or so, Zoey thought. I could get there by morning if I hurried.

It was helpful to be thinking in terms of a plan. This was her typical modus operandi. Planning and control. Taking responsibility. Setting out and getting it done. Fulfillment. Finding the package was a must. No two ways around it. What would Chris

say? How could she face him? She couldn't, at all, and that was that. He didn't even need to know, ever, as long as she found it. She was relieved she hadn't yet informed him of its request.

The truth was she had been putting it off all day and had only just now logged back into the computer to take the plunge and send him a note. The device had asked to go home. Literally. She was trying to think of a way to express it better than that, but hadn't come up with the words. She felt guilty, as if she had let the thing down. Maybe it was homesick. Who knew? The whole project had been wearing her down, causing her more anxiety than any other job she could remember, and when you came to look at it, that made no sense at all. There was no rational cause for all the fretting and worrying, unless you attempted to calculate the actual shape and size of the utterly unknown.

Zoey was a freelance black-box tester, and was damn good at her job, or at least she was until now. She had worked for W.W.A. before, and many other important companies as well. She was even famous, in her own obscure way, as an elite device tester, someone with an uncanny talent to find the most intractable software and hardware bugs, with a tremendous ability to reproduce and report them in a ridiculously timely manner. She had saved device makers possibly millions of dollars, and carved out a nice little niche for herself. Most recently she had worked on several top-secret state-of-the-art gizmos

and gadgets whose impending future releases were bound to transform the nature of human reality itself. Only a few months earlier she had tested, and put her stamp of approval upon P.M.S., the Personal Muzak System (tm), which would revolutionize the entire on-hold experience by playing only music tailored to the specific personal tastes of the physical customer at the other end of the line.

She had lists of professional relationships. She had a sterling reputation. She kept her socialnet tidy and clean. You could not find a single thing against her online. She was forty-one years old, single and yet not burdened with cats or dogs or even a parakeet. She had no distracting personal interests, at least none which required much time. She was centrally located in Austin, Texas, and absolutely devoted to her craft. Never before had she even lost sight of a device. Never before had she failed to fulfill obligations. This was possibly the end of the world as she knew it.

"Taking deep breaths," she reminded herself, as she sat back down on the bar stool she loved to swivel around on while working. She swiveled a few times and gathered her thoughts. It's all about control, she chided herself, personal control and alignment. But all she could think of was the package and asked herself several extremely important questions: Did I make sure the device was completely secure inside of the box? It won't

get damaged, will it? That would definitely be bad. The package itself, was it sealed up properly? Did I do something wrong with the labeling? It was clearly marked, was it not? Next Day Air, Priority One. As she recalled the steps she had taken in packing it up and shipping it off, she realized that she had not done anything wrong. This could not have been her mistake. It was theirs.

As the evening came on, Zoey didn't even get up to turn on a light. Soon it was just her and the laptop alone in the dark, glaring at each other and giving off heat. She remembered her last conversation with Chris.

“Why does he always make me so nervous?” she wondered. Other people she'd talked to about him reported the exact same responses - anxiety, nervousness, stuttering, and a tremendous desire to please. Certainly he was tall and handsome, had a wonderful, deep confiding voice that drew you in and made you feel special and important. There was something unnatural about his charisma, though, as if he himself were somehow embarrassed about it. People were always giving him things, sending him things, wanting to do things for him. He never asked, never had to. He was one of those people who always seem to get whatever they want while not even lifting a finger. Had she ever said no to the man? No. Did she know anybody who had? Again, no. Could she stammer out a complete sentence when talking to him? Once

again, no. He would call up every once in awhile to check on a project, ask if it was going okay. It was, every time, and still she found it difficult to say so.

With most employers she would write up a contract, a tedious document full of complete and precisely detailed requirements, understandings and instructions, which she would follow to the letter and insist that they do also, but with W.W.A. it was always "whatever." Nothing in writing. Nothing at all. You want it, you got it. Most of the time that was fine. They would deliver the product with enough information to get her going, but this time it was totally different. They had given her almost nothing to go on. The thing came in the package - the same one it left in - with a single piece of paper enclosed, on which was written, in pencil, these words: "please put the device somewhere in your clothes, take it wherever you go, and check periodically for further instructions."

That was it.

A normal project would be something like a cell phone. She would make calls on it, to make sure that she could. She would download data, send text messages, whatever the functionality of the gadget. She would try to do everything the device could possibly do. This device seemed to do nothing. It was shaped like a cell phone - small and black, rectangular with a screen - but it had no removable casing, no apparent battery, no input or output jacks, no buttons, no keyboard, nothing at all you

could push or click or switch or press or pull or do anything with. It was a lump of plastic weighing approximately twelve ounces.

For ten days she carried it around. She'd put it in the pocket of her jeans. She'd put it in her shirt, in her jacket. She'd placed it inside of a woolen cap and wore it on her head. She'd considered stuffing it into her bra. She'd put it into each of her sneakers. She'd worn it in a headband. She'd carried it with her all day, every day, and taken it to bed in her pajamas at night. The device made no sounds and gave off no light. This utterly useless gadget did nothing at all, or so it seemed.

No wonder she was fidgety. The thing had gotten on her nerves. "What is it?" she couldn't help but wonder. What do they want from me? What am I supposed to be doing? She assumed it was a challenge, a puzzle, a test. You don't just give an inert piece of plastic to one of the world's finest and most expensive quality engineers and expect them to not try and figure it out. It made her wonder even more than before about that company, W.W.A.. There were rumors about those people, their inscrutability and the fact that no one seemed to really know anything about them. Some people said they were a secret branch of the government, but Zoey had done enough government work to tell the difference between genius and that. Others said there was a billionaire behind the scenes who was working on some fantastic quest, to discover the

fountain of youth perhaps, or some other well-worn fable. Still others believed there was simply a mad scientist at work behind the pleasant facade that was Chris. Zoey herself suspected that Chris was some sort of Jekyll and Hyde, but tended to think, deep inside, that what was really going on was some sort of combination of all of those notions - a team of scientists employed by a billionaire in cahoots with some government somewhere, possibly backed by big oil money.

She had worked on some of their projects besides P.M.S.. There was the transitory laser tracking device that had once made a local splash in the news, when a toddler was found by somebody using it. The incident had caused a minor uproar of privacy concerns, which blew over quickly as most of those do. There was a device that purported to enhance one's romantic desirability, for a limited time only, but the after effects were unpleasant enough to raise questions of "beer goggle lawsuits." There was the virtual taste bud tester, which Zoey had found quite remarkable, learning and gauging her own tastes in food to such an extent that she used it to scan restaurants before entering. Trickiest of all was their "caller undo," which claimed to be able to erase unpleasant telephone conversations from everyone's memory. Zoey could never quite remember if that one had worked as expected. But a device that did nothing, well, that was a piece of work she had never expected to encounter.

It must have been doing something, though, for after a week and a half of her toting it about in every conceivable wearable location, the screen suddenly flashed on one morning and blinked with the phrase, "I would like to go home now, please," in a pleasant Calibri size forty four font.

Zoey was touched by the "please." She carefully packaged the thing in its original container, labeled it for the attention of Chris at W.W.A. headquarters in San Francisco. She took it to her customary mail services location - Gone Postal - and saw the thing off, with a bit of relief. Two days had gone by and still she had not contacted Chris. She was still trying to think of what she would say, and now this, the package gone missing. She was out of ideas. Her mind felt as blank as the device's screen had once been. I'm going to have to do something, she thought, but that was as far as she got.

"Okay, calmly now," she told herself, "Calm is the word, because I do not panic, at least not much beyond the initial shock. I'm a professional, after all," she concluded. She had become that way through a special training of discipline and rigor, years of practice and routine. One step at a time, one foot in front of the other. Plan first, then plan again. Be precise, be methodical, be thorough. Control.

"I am now officially calm," she decided, though remaining motionless in the darkened apartment. "I will now turn on the lights," she claimed, and as she

thought it she did it. She stood up, took two steps to the wall, reached out and clicked the switch. The kitchen light came on. She retreated back to her bar stool and swiveled some more. One thing at a time.

"I will make a plan," Zoey noted, and turned her attention to the computer. She opened a plain text document and began to tap out an outline. First things first is the way.

First. What the heck am I going to tell Chris?

No. First. Should I even get in touch with him?

No.

Ok, then.

First - complete the documentation on the testing, such as it was. Complete the list of the articles of clothing within which the device was contained. Complete the calculations of the mileage obtained transporting the device here and there. Complete the daily diary of the device's activities.

She noted all of the above in the text document, and then proceeded to check off each item, because they were already done. She had finished this part the same day she'd sent back the device. She filled in the details from the tracking records provided by the shipping company. The device had been logged in San Antonio, Sonora, Balmorhea and Las Cruces, before its final entry in Wetford, Arizona.

'Who am I fooling?' she nearly said out loud. "This is a terrible report!"

"I could do a word count," she reflected, and discovered that her official document now comprised nearly one thousand words. Not bad. Considering it had nothing of interest within it!

I don't even know what the device is, or what it was supposed to be. I didn't do anything with it, not anything I could describe. I just did what they told me to do. I carried it around. It wanted to go home. I tried to send it home. It got lost. And that is that.

"Why can't I just call up Chris and tell him the truth?"

Because the truth was not good enough. Zoey knew from experience that devices like this were probably precious and rare - it was quite possibly the only one of its kind, potentially priceless. Unless it was a joke. Would they do that to me? Is someone out to get me?

"I do have enemies," she told herself, mostly other testing houses who were jealous of her reputation, but Chris would never, no, it was out of the question, impossible. The device, she considered for the ten thousandth time that week, must be of tremendous importance. It has to be, or else they would never have given it to me.

"I should call up that place," she decided. "The last known docket." She checked the browser again. The place the package was scanned was a warehouse called Ledman Storage and Pickup. It had a phone number listed. Zoey picked up the phone and called.

They were closed.

Of course.

Already it was past eight o'clock on a Thursday.

"Oh no, not Thursday!" she shouted. "What else could go wrong? If I don't get there by tomorrow, they will probably be closed until Monday!"

Calm. You are calm. You will now be calm.

Ok.

Much better.

I am calm.

I can research that place.

She searched them online and found a few items of interest. Ledman Storage had a single location. They were only in Wetford, nowhere else. They were small, or at least had the lousiest website. It displayed a few links to other warehouses and some shipping lines, but all of those links were defunct. It seemed to be a sort of transitional spot, a place where nothing was intended to stay, but merely pass through on its way somewhere else. It was not clear at all why the package had even gone there in the first place. It should have gone by plane. She had paid enough, certainly. Next Day Air, she recalled. So why was it going overland, and why had it taken two days to go a measly six hundred miles? Something was not making sense. Someone had made a gigantic mistake.

"I wish I knew more about shipping," she thought, but already she knew, in the back of her mind, there was only one thing she could do. She would have to go on the road. She couldn't risk waiting all night for some scruffy young deadbeat to finally show up in some seedy old warehouse in the middle of a tumbledown desert just to tell her "shucks I dunno ma'am, it sure ain't around here no more," if he even would answer the phone. She had a picture in her mind of the man and it wasn't a nice one.

The package was her responsibility. That much was clear. If you want something done right, you do it yourself. Take control. She was already in the bedroom packing her bags when the phone started ringing.

"Don't answer," she said to herself as she picked up and said,

"Hello? Zoey Bridges."

"Hey Zoey, it's Chris," said the voice at the other end of the line.

"Oh hi," Zoey melted. She sat down on the bed.

"Just thought I'd check in," he continued. There was a long pause.

"Everything going okay?" he finally asked.

"Oh yeah," she replied, "just fine. Nothing new. Nothing, really"

"Oh, okay," he said. "Do you mind if I ask you some

questions?"

"No, no, go ahead," Zoey told him, and thought to herself, "I can do this. I can handle it. I am calm."

"About the device," Chris went on. "I know we didn't give you much to go on. Sorry about that. Really, I am, but it's all for the best, as you'll see."

"Oh?" She couldn't conceive of any more syllables.

"Yeah," he said, "it's actually quite an intriguing experiment. We're hoping to learn a great deal. Has it said anything yet?"

"Said?" she muttered. "No, no. I haven't heard a peep."

"It ought to be telling you something at some point," her employer informed her. "I can't tell you what or even how that will happen, but you can definitely expect some feedback," he said. "Until then, I suppose, it isn't very interesting, is it?"

"Oh, no, not at all," Zoey said, "I mean, not in that way, or in a usual way, or, oh, I don't know what I'm saying. It doesn't do anything that you can see that it's doing."

"Oh, it's doing something," Chris told her. "All of the time, I can tell you that much. It's a busy little bee, but it's all self-contained, as you know. It will tell you, when it's time, so don't worry. I just thought that it might have, you know, already done so by now."

"No, no," Zoey said, "nothing yet. I'll tell you, of course, as soon as it does, as soon as I have anything to tell you, that is."

"Of course," Chris replied. "Nothing but the best for this box. That's why we sent it to you of all people. There isn't another, I can tell you that much. It's the only one of its kind."

"That's just great," Zoey sighed. "I guess I kind of guessed that already."

"Well," said Chris after a pause. "I'll wish you good night, then."

"Good night," she said quickly, and hung up the phone.

"I am calm," she reminded herself. "Very calm. I know what I'm doing, exactly. I am packing my clothes and then I am getting into my car. And then I am driving all night. And then I am finding that package. And when I find it, I am going to take it, in person, all the way to San Francisco. Yes I am. And I am doing it calmly every step of the way."

Then, as calm as a winter tornado, she threw all her clothes in a bag and ran out the door.

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