

The White Woman

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If I was to fly back to Australia from the coldest winter New York had seen in decades, I needed to lighten my load. The suitcase I was packing was full to overflowing with some unnecessary items. Edith, my landlady, gave me directions to the Central Harlem Post Office.

‘Not hard,’ she said in that drawl that made me trust her implicitly. ‘People will be happy to help you.’

I’d learned quickly in her fair city to first introduce myself as a tourist, and then to ask my question: ‘I’m new here. Could you please give me directions to the subway?’ And so forth. Even the faces of African Americans in East Harlem relaxed a little when I announced my visitor status during a night of freezing blizzards.

‘Oh! I understand,’ their faces seemed to say. ‘You need help,’ they said, pointing the way on a dark night lit only by snowflakes.

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With Edith’s instructions in mind, I gathered my books, summer clothes, and lace-up sneakers of no earthly use on these sodden streets, and headed for West 125th Street.

Initially I missed the post office altogether, not noticing the American flag flapping under its grey awning. Next thing, I

was on my way to the Hudson River and had to retrace my steps.

Already by ten in the morning there was a long, quiet queue of customers stretching from the counters at the front to the entrance doors, where I joined it.

We all shuffled along in crocodile formation while I kept a surreptitious eye on the display cabinets for a correctly sized box. United States Postal Service's marketing was at a minimum in this cavernous building, vaguely reminiscent of 1970s East Berlin.

Finally, my turn came and I was summoned to counter number 6. I spoke through a circle of meshed wire cut into Perspex, which I took to be a speakerphone. On this day, my 'I-am-a-tourist' routine didn't wash with the lady behind the counter.

'What do you want?' she asked with a sigh, weary before the day had begun.

'A box to go internationally – to Australia,' I announced in my best tourist voice, lifting a motley bag of possessions in the hope that the mention of a far-off land would get me off the 'white trash' hook.

She mumbled something unintelligible, which could have been addressed to me, and thrust a flattened cardboard box through the narrow slot at the bottom of the grille.

'Does it have directions for assembly?' I didn't want to sound too spoiled by my own country's postal system.

She shrugged and did some hand signalling to indicate that unless I was a half-wit, assemblage should be easy, then looked past me to the person behind. I'd been dismissed.

The box she'd selected was unnecessarily large for my goods, but asking for a downsize was out of the question.

I slunk off to a standing-room-only table by the wall, positioned under a high set of windows that allowed in just

enough light for functionality, and origamied my piece of cardboard into a three-dimensional shape.

With the box put together in awkward fashion, flaps in all the wrong places, I decided that Scotch tape would do the trick, and I waited at the side of the counter to get her attention.

‘Yes?’ my lady called, looking more distracted than ever.

‘Here’s the box,’ I said, ‘but I do need some Scotch tape.’ She rolled her eyes, muttered something more to her colleague, and handed me an industrial-sized roll of tape. ‘Don’t share it with anyone,’ she said. ‘When you’re done, bring it straight back.’

At the table I cut the tape with my teeth – these being the sharpest instrument to hand – and stretched its sticky side around the edges. The ruptured tape created a ripple effect on the box making it look like sunburned skin on an Australian summer’s day. Despite the tape being blistered and puckered, there was no going back.

‘Say honey,’ a woman beside me crooned. ‘When you’re done with that tape, could you pass it over to me?’

I replied sotto voce: ‘But she,’ I nodded to my lady at the counter, ‘told me not to share it with anyone, that I should give it back immediately.’

‘*Who* told you that?’ Her voice was loud enough to fill Carnegie Hall. ‘She told you that?’ she cried, pointing an accusing finger at my assistant. A baby in the pram beside us started up a squall.

‘We’ll see about that,’ she said, stomping off to counter 6 where general gesticulating ensued.

Soon these words emerged above the babble: ‘But you gave it to the whi-i-ite woman.’

Everyone looked around, including me. Who was she talking about? My God! I thought. *The whi-i-ite woman?* I’m

the only white person in the place. Curious heads turned in my direction. Even the baby temporarily ceased its holler.

My co-conspirator returned to the table brandishing a fresh roll of tape. Pretty soon it was being passed around; people seizing upon it as if it were money fallen from a moving truck. I'd not realised how hungry we all were for a good roll of sticky tape.

Leaving some time to pass in the hope of gaining anonymity, I took a seat beside the baby and its mother. After a cooling off period, I was beckoned forth. The goods in my box rattled as I stood up, but I was well past the bubble-wrap stage.

My lady gave more mumbled instructions to which I responded with a blank look, seasoned with terror. She turned to her colleague, presumably to comment on the dumbness of Australians, tourists in general, all of humanity or me in particular.

A young man at the counter next to mine leaned towards me and whispered: 'She wants you to weigh the box – *here*.' He pointed to a metal slab at the bottom of the grille, which magically doubled as a weighing machine. It moved under the weight of my box. We were in business.

'Do you want insurance?' the lady asked me.

'I guess,' I shrugged. 'Is it worth it?'

'Depends on how much you value your goods,' she shrugged back, reading the customs form aloud: 'Old books, used shoes, t-shirts'; items announced to the crowd in a 'why-would-you-bother' roll call.

'Do you want them to *get* there?' she said. We both recognised the threat in her voice. I agreed to the insurance.

'That'll be sixty-three dollars.' Her tone intimated that it was totally not worth it 'but I've got you now'.

I told her that was fine.

‘Just sit over there,’ she said, pointing to my previous seat, ‘while I serve other people.’

I sat back down. I had no pressing engagements and it was freezing outside.

Then out of the blue I heard a sudden commotion up ahead.

‘Wha-ar-t is the *matter* with you?’ There was an older woman at my counter 6, wearing a mauve hat with a felt bird wired to the top of it.

‘It’s a sunny day, ain’t it?’ she asked my lady, her southern drawl reverberating throughout the room.

‘You’ve got your health, ain’t you?’ Her interrogation was gathering pace.

‘You’ve got a job, ain’t you?’ My lady nodded back dumbly.

‘Then wha-ar-t in God’s name are you *complaining* about?’ Her crescendo too was worthy of Carnegie Hall.

Couldn’t have put it better myself, I thought.

My lady at counter 6 paused for a moment, muttering something further to her colleague, but this time in a lower key.

Then her new customer in the mauve hat, scooping up her clutch bag and paperwork, tripped off towards the exit, the bird bobbing triumphantly atop her hat.

I was beckoned forth again, and asked to lift the box to verify it was mine. I rather thought we’d established this by now. I passed the box through the grille, wherein my assistant slapped an insurance sticker on it and swiped my credit card.

Emboldened by the recent morning’s uprising, I told her that I looked forward to seeing my goods arrive safely home in Australia. She shrugged. It was false bravado on my part and we both knew it. I was entirely in her hands.

With the transaction complete, she looked straight through me to the customer behind. My time was up. I went back to Edith's to pack my suitcase, and await our fates, mine and that of the box.

