

I Drove Four Nights for Kindred Parcel Co.

Part 1

[The following pages were found folded behind Kindred Parcel Co. route sheets.]

My name is Dale. I've worked dispatch for twenty five years. I've never taken a day off. I've never had a paycheck either, not one I could spend anyway. I sit at a desk with faded grain, a phone, a radio, and a stack of Kindred-branded route sheets and blank stationery to keep me company. I talk to the new drivers. I tell them the rules. Most of them don't make it past the fourth night.

I'm not supposed to be writing this, much less on Kindred Parcel stationery. But there's a new driver on the schedule this week, and I recognized his name. I can't sit by and let it happen again, especially to him, my younger brother.

Every word I say on the phone, they hear. But nobody checks the route sheets.

That's my job. That's why I'm writing this down. I must tell anyone who finds this how it started, and maybe you won't make the same mistake I did. And if my brother is reading this quit now and never accept a job from them again.

Here's the first thing you need to know before I write anything else:

If Kindred Parcel Co. calls you, don't accept their job offer.

You never applied, and no one recommended you.

They aren't hiring.

Night 1

In the fall of 2001, I was twenty six, out of work, and living out of my car. It was a 1967 Mini Cooper, faded green, bought cheap from a guy who was sick of hunting down parts for it. It ran. Mostly. And sleeping in a Mini is as bad as it sounds.

Most nights I parked behind a closed laundromat on Route 66, next to a payphone. That's where I was at 11:47 PM when the payphone started ringing.

I let it ring. Payphones randomly ring from time to time. Wrong numbers, bored kids. But it. just. kept. ringing. Ten rings turned to twenty. Fifty. I counted over a hundred before I got out of my car. The ring became louder, as if it was ringing for me. It must have been. There was nobody on the whole strip, and somehow I knew it wasn't going to stop until someone, until I, picked up.

"Uh... hello?" I said, not even sure why I'd answered in the first place.

"Good evening, Dale." A man's voice, warm and unhurried. "I'm calling from Kindred Parcel Co. I hope I didn't wake you."

I never told him my name. I looked up and down the strip. Nobody. Just the Mini, the laundromat, and a buzz from a nearby streetlight.

"Who is this?"

"Kindred Parcel Co.," he said again, patiently, like I had not heard. "We have an opening for a night courier. Cash every morning. No questions."

"How did you get this number? It's a payphone."

As if he'd been waiting for me to ask, he quickly added, "You came highly recommended."

"By who?" I said, confused.

He laughed like I had told a joke only he understood.

"There's a sign-on bonus, Dale. A thousand dollars, tonight. All you have to do is say yes."

Who referred me? I thought to myself.

"So?" he said, breaking my thoughts.

Apprehensive, but desperate for the money, I said, "...Yes."

"Wonderful," he said. "Welcome to Kindred."

Then the line went dead, and I was left with nothing but the silence of the night. Even the buzzing streetlight had gone quiet.

I dialed *69 to call him back. It rang once, then nothing. I stood there in the cold. Surely this was nothing more than a prank call. Elaborate, I'll give them that, and I was the butt of the joke.

"Great."

When I got back to the Mini, defeated, there it was: an envelope on my seat. I had locked the doors.

Heavy cream paper, with a logo in the corner: a small house with an envelope for a roof. Under it, in tiny print: Every Package Finds Its Way Home.

I opened the envelope, and out slid ten hundred-dollar bills, so crisp they stuck together, like they'd come off the press that night.

I took a room at the Sunrise Motel. First real bed in months. I was so grateful I didn't stop to ask the questions I should have.

How did they know which payphone to call?
How did they know I'd be sleeping next to it?
Who recommended me?

The next night, the address printed inside the envelope flap brought me to the depot: a sheet metal building far down Route 66, with one light on and no other cars in the parking lot. Under the light was a folding table, and on the table, my first delivery: a package wrapped in brown paper, and next to it, a single typed page. Across the top, it read: Every Package Finds Its Way Home.

I have it memorized. I read it to every new driver now.

Kindred Parcel Co. — Driver Rules

- 1. Signal before every turn, even if no one is behind you. Especially then!**
- 2. Do not stop on Old Mill Road for any reason whatsoever.**
- 3. If someone is standing on the shoulder, do not slow down. Do not flash your lights.**
- 4. Do not adjust the mirror. It's already set correctly.**
- 5. The customer will sign for the package. Do not read the signature.**
- 6. Dispatch does not call after 2:00 AM. If dispatch calls after 2:00 AM, do not answer.**

I remember thinking how strange rule four was amongst the others... but it was also the only rule I broke the first night.

The package label said 1847 Juniper Ct. Underneath, someone had handwritten: Follow Old Mill Road.

I didn't know the street, and apparently neither did the map in my glovebox. Old Mill Road was on it, though. It ran out past the edge of town and stopped abruptly at a line of trees, like whoever was drawing up this map had simply given up.

I signaled every turn, even though I was the only car on this entire road. I felt silly, but rules are rules, and I needed the money.

The streetlights went out as I passed them. It felt like each light was waiting for me to pass before losing power. I told myself that they were on a timer, some county ordinance to save power.

Eventually, I bought this lie I told myself.

About two miles in, I noticed someone standing on the shoulder. Who was out this late at night for a walk down a poorly lit road?

As I got closer, I noticed odd features. Tall, thin, with arms past where knees should have been. The figure stood there, unfazed by my headlights, its head turned towards them.

Rule 2: Do not stop on Old Mill Road for any reason whatsoever.

I didn't slow down. I didn't flash my high beams. I white-knuckled the wheel and kept my eyes forward. When I passed the spot, nobody. Nobody was there.

That's when I broke rule four.

I reached up and tilted the rearview mirror, just a little. I don't know what I was expecting. An empty road, I guess.

The road behind me was empty. My backseat wasn't...

There it was, folded up in a space barely big enough for a child, all knees and elbows, its head bent against the roof liner. It wasn't looking at the road. It was looking at me in the mirror. We locked eyes for just a moment.

I put the mirror back exactly where it had been. My hand was shaking so badly it took three tries. I quickly turned my head around. The back seat was just a back seat, with a fast food bag and a jacket I'd forgotten about.

The mirror was already set correctly. I understood that now. It was set so I wouldn't see. I guess there was no looking back now.

Old Mill Road led to Juniper Court, a cul-de-sac with one house at the end and one porch light on. Someone was standing in the doorway, waiting, as if I'd miss the only house on this cul-de-sac.

An old man in a maroon bathrobe and slippers. I looked down to grab the package and he was already at my door.

Tap. Tap. Tap. How did he get to my car so quickly?

He had a clipboard. He smiled the whole time, a patient, grandfatherly smile, and he didn't say a word. I handed him the package through the window. He held the clipboard against the glass and signed, then handed me the paper. The color of the paper looked similar to the Kindred stationery, but I didn't want to examine it.

Rule five said not to read the signature. And I wasn't about to break another rule.

I kept my eyes forward, looking at anything other than the signature.

I put the paper in the glovebox. The old man was gone quicker than he arrived.

The porch light went off. I sat there in the dark with my heart racing like a hummingbird, and that's when the radio crackled.

The warm voice of Kindred Parcel came on: "Delivery complete. Good work, Dale. Go home and get some sleep."

I didn't call it in. I couldn't. The Mini didn't have a radio that could transmit, only a barely functioning AM receiver.

I drove back to the Sunrise Motel, never looking in the rearview mirror.

At 2:47 AM, the phone in my motel room rang.

It rang the way the pay phone had. It didn't stop. Through the curtains I noticed a tall thin figure walking towards the door. They didn't knock. They just stood there while the phone kept ringing. It got louder and louder, until I almost thought it was all in my head.

I didn't answer. Rule six.

In an instant, silence. The tall, thin figure was gone. I guess whoever, or whatever, was calling me gave up.

In the morning there was an envelope under my door with five hundred dollars in it, and a note in neat cursive: "See you tomorrow night." Was it that figure who left it?

The night clerk told me it would have been impossible to receive a call. The switchboard shuts off at midnight, he said. Room phones can't ring after that. In fear of sounding even more crazy and possibly getting kicked out, I kept the tall, thin figure to myself.

That wasn't the first night I pictured. But I couldn't think about that now. 500 dollars is 500 dollars especially to a guy who was barely scraping by. Night two was about to begin.

I'll attach night two to a route sheet tomorrow. If they let me.

Every package finds its way home.

Part 2

Night 2

With all these unanswered questions, I guess I should, at the very least, explain why I even went back after the first night.

Before the first night I didn't know where my next meal would be or where I could park my car with the little amount of gas that was left. But now I had a little over a thousand dollars in my pocket, even after paying for a room at the Sunrise Motel through Friday. And at that point sleeping in my mini cooper was off the table now. It really didn't even feel like my car anymore.

I spent that day convincing myself whatever happened that past night had a logical explanation. The lights on a timer, the person on the road was exhaustion, the thing in the back sea... no that was definitely there. I saw it, and it saw me.

Was I going crazy? God, I hoped not.

Here's something I forgot to mention. One of the parts failing on my Mini was the starter. At times it would take two, maybe even, three tries to start. For the past two months it had barely run. Now it ran like it was 1967 again. Like I said before this was starting to not feel like my car anymore.

At 11:47PM I was back at the depot. The light was on and under it, another package on the folding table.

1847 Juniper Ct. Same as the night before.

The rules were mostly the same. One had been struck through on the typewriter, and two new ones were typed underneath.

KINDRED PARCEL CO. — DRIVER RULES

1. **Signal before every turn, even if no one is behind you. Especially then!**
2. **Do not stop on Old Mill Road for any reason whatsoever.**
3. **~~If someone is standing on the shoulder, do not slow down. Do not flash your lights.~~**
4. **Do not adjust the mirror. It's already set correctly.**
5. **The customer will sign for the package. Do not read the signature.**
6. **Dispatch does not call after 2:00 AM. If dispatch calls after 2:00 AM, do not answer.**
7. **If someone is in front of you, use your high beams. They do not like to be looked at directly.**
8. **Stop at the Nite Owl on Old Mill Road for fuel. Do not speak to the clerk.**

Rule seven made me uneasy. Who are “they”? There’s more than one?

The crossed-out rule also bothered me, but I also wasn’t going to complain about one less rule to follow especially since they are adding rules over here.

Old Mill Road felt shorter the second time, either that or I was laser focused on the road thinking about those extra rules.

The streetlights died as I reached them, same as before. Eyes glued to the road.

I almost didn't notice the Mini's gas needle slowly reaching for E. Then the light came on, and there it was: a little 24-hour station on the right, the only lit thing for miles. NITE OWL FUEL in bright red letters, two pumps, a brick store, and a long front window begging for some windex.

The unsettling thing is that I didn't notice this gas station the first night.

The door was locked. A sign directed me to the night window, thick glass with a steel drawer underneath. Taped to the glass was a handwritten sign: WRITE YOUR PUMP # ON THE BILL.

The clerk was a woman, maybe in her 30s, in a red uniform shirt. She sat on a stool behind the counter with her head buried in a magazine she clearly wasn't reading.

I wrote a 2 on a twenty with the pen from my pocket and dropped it in the drawer. The metal drawer slid in and pump 2 was turned on in one motion.

I filled up with my back to the store. I could feel her presence through the window the whole time, like she was inching closer and closer.

When I turned around, I was greeted by the drawer containing my receipt and change. Her head still buried on the first page of her magazine.

I didn't read the receipt until I was back on the road. I could feel deep indentations from a ballpoint pen on the front, and it wasn't until I flipped it over that I saw what she had written.

DON'T COME BACK TOMORROW.

I forgot to mention the disposable camera. That afternoon I purchased a cheap camera at the Sunrise Motel gift shop. Twenty three blank photos on a roll waiting to be filled with proof, proof that I wasn't going crazy.

I tried to get everything on this roll. The street lights. The gas station.

Past the station, someone, or something, was standing in the middle of my lane. I hit the high beams like rule seven said. The road was empty again. I was able to get a photo of the empty road, albeit slightly distorted from my shaking hands.

Back at Juniper Ct. Tap. Tap. Tap. Same bathrobe, same smile. He signed and handed me the paper, and it went in the glovebox with the first one. I didn't take his picture for obvious reasons.

The next morning I took the camera to a one hour photo.

The guy at the counter had questions before he handed me the envelope.

“Is this for some kind of art project?”

Saying whatever I could to get those pictures, I lied:

“Oh yeah, I have a big project coming up.”

“Well whatever the case I printed them anyway, since you paid.”

It wasn't until I looked through all the pictures that I understood why he was so curious.

The figure was in every picture I took. As tall and thin as I remember.

In each of the twenty three photos, it was a little closer. In the last shot I took, the empty road, it was standing at the edge of my high beams' reach, back facing me, avoiding the flashing light.

I checked the receipt.

“Twenty four prints.”

I had taken twenty three. There were only twenty three on the roll.

That's when I went pale as a ghost. The twenty fourth was me. Taken from the foot of my bed while I was sleeping. With the flash. The thought of someone else in my room was unsettling enough.

How long were they there?

What was going on?

I decided to quit. Or at least I tried.

I had no way of contacting Kindred, the warm voice never gave me one. But I had the pay phone behind the laundromat, the one where I got the call that started this nightmare. If they could reach me through it, maybe it worked the other way. It was worth a shot.

I made sure to drive during the day, the photos on the passenger seat. Speech ready.

"I appreciate the opportunity, but I'm going in a different direction."

I picked up the receiver and...

The phone rattled in my hand, I fumbled it before putting it to my ear and the warm voice of Kindred Parcel was right on cue as if waiting for me to answer.

At the time, I thought this was impossible. A pay phone can't ring while it's off the hook. But looking back now, this was just how Kindred worked.

"Dale," the voice said. "You're not thinking about leaving us, are you?"

In a panic, I hung up. Sat on the hood of my car for the better part of an hour watching the pay phone. It didn't ring again and my resignation speech was never delivered.

That night there was a third package on the folding table. But this time a new address. Somewhere I'd never even heard of, called the Holloway Collection.

I'll attach night three to a route sheet tomorrow.

Every package finds its way home.

Part 3

Night 3

I almost didn't write this part. I'm sure whoever is reading this thinks these are the ramblings of a person going crazy. If I were reading this, I'd probably think the same thing.

The third package was bigger than the first two, the size of a shoebox and weighed as much as a couple bricks. The label didn't contain any form of an address. It just said THE HOLLOWAY COLLECTION, typed in the center, like it was on a headstone.

The sheet that would usually contain the rules had directions typed at the bottom instead.

Take Old Mill Road to its end. Where the road ends, turn left. There will be a road there. Leave the package on the top step. Do not go inside.

I'd driven Old Mill Road twice. I knew where it ended: a wall of pine trees and a reflector post that was visible from the old man's house on Juniper.

I went anyway, deviating from the rules wasn't something I wanted to test.

I still had half a tank from the night before, so I didn't need to stop at the Nite Owl. But I didn't want to chance it so I pulled in.

The canopy lights were on, but the store was dark. The closed sign was lit. But as I came up on pump 2, I saw her.

Standing, hands pressed against the glass like she had been in that position for hours waiting for me. For the first time, she was looking at me. At me, in my car, eyes locked on mine.

She was mouthing something over and over again but I was never good at reading lips. I've thought about that for twenty five years and the more I thought about it, the more sure I was that she was saying "turn around".

I didn't, of course. I slowly drove off watching her through my side mirror until the station was overtaken by the darkness, she never once lowered her hands. I guess I didn't need gas after all.

Old Mill Road ended at the pine trees, exactly where I remembered. The reflector post was there.

So was a road to the left. Freshly paved. It had not been there two nights ago and there were no signs of construction happening.

The road continued through the trees until I was met with a building that stuck out like a sore thumb. Stone pillars adorned in bronze and wide marble steps, the building looked like a lost relic from another time. Carved right into the stone over the front doors: THE HOLLOWAY COLLECTION.

I parked at the bottom of the steps and carried the package up. I set it on the top step and turned to go.

As I was walking down the steps I could hear the doors open behind me.

Nobody was there.

They swung in slow and silent on their own. Automatic doors didn't seem like technology this place had, warm red lights spilled out across the steps. They reminded me of the Nite Owl sign. I didn't go inside. But the rule never said to not look, and I've never been able to stop seeing it.

The first room was a gallery that was visible from outside the entrance. Two rows of glass cases seemed to stretch further back than the building should allow, and in each case stood a person.

Not wax figures. People. Actual people. Perfectly still like they had been frozen in time, looking straight ahead at the case in front of them, all dressed for work.

Exhibit 11: A bicycle messenger in a flat cap and slacks.

Exhibit 12: A milkman in a white uniform.

Exhibit 13: A man in a dispatcher's headset with a kind face turned slightly towards the door. Every one of them had a brass placard at their feet.

I noticed there was an empty case closer to the door. A warm glow from an orange light illuminated the nonexistent contents. The placard looked like it had been freshly polished.

Exhibit 14. The Night Driver. Kindred Parcel Co., 2001. Acquisition pending.

At the end of the hall was a giant oil portrait of an old man. The old man. He had the same bathrobe and patient smile.

I could barely make out the writing on the placard.

“H. Holloway, 1889”

The old man in the picture was the same old man I'd delivered to the two previous nights. This just wasn't possible.

The empty case, the oil portrait. This was becoming some fever dream I was slowly sinking more and more into.

I bolted as fast as I could.

In one fell swoop I was down the steps and into the Mini, keys rattling. The engine caught on the first try. If it was going to give me trouble, now would have been the time. Thankfully it didn't. I threw it in reverse without the use of my rearview mirror.

The headlights swung across the front of the building as I turned around, illuminating the still-open doors. In the light from the hall, the exhibits were no longer in their cases.

They were standing on the steps. All of them. The messenger and the milkman were at the front, the rest stood behind them in two neat rows, as if to see me off.

I drove until I met up with the sun. I needed that night to be over.

When I finally pulled into the Sunrise Motel, the night clerk was leaving. When I got out of my car I noticed there was an envelope containing my pay tucked under my windshield wiper. Written in neat cursive on the envelope, the ink still drying.

“See you tomorrow night, Dale.”

I'll attach night four to a route sheet tomorrow.

Every package finds its way home.

Part 4

Night 4

I didn't go back to the steel depot on the fourth night. I didn't pick up the package. I wasn't going on Old Mill Road, I was done.

I left the next day at noon, in broad daylight, I stashed every single dollar Kindred had given me in my back pocket. I went to a gas station. A real gas station, with a real clerk who talked about the weather. I filled up my tank and got on the freeway and didn't plan on stopping until I reached an ocean.

The first exit sign that came up said Old Mill Road, 1 mile.

I must have been seeing things. Old Mill Road was nowhere near a freeway much less this one.

The next exit said Old Mill Road, 1 mile. So did the one after that. Every green sign, every off-ramp, OLD. MILL. ROAD. Eventually the miles started counting down.

The sun went down quicker with every sign I passed. When I finally looked at the clock on my dash, it read:

11:47 PM.

When I looked back up, the road was different. I never took an exit. I was driving straight the whole time. But the interstate was gone, streetlights went out as soon as I passed them. I knew what road I was on.

I had more than three-quarters of a tank. The needle fell anyway. It was in slow free fall to E.

The Mini sputtered and rolled to a stop under the Nite Owl's canopy.

This car had never failed me since I took this job and made the deliveries. I understood now that this was no longer mine to drive. It was driving for them.

Every light was off except for a very dim red hue coming from the Nite Owl's sign.

Behind the glass, the dim red light let me make out the clerk's uniform, folded neatly like a flag on the counter next to a magazine and an empty seat.

The steel drawer was pushed out toward me. There was nothing in it.

I sat there with my hands on the wheel. Not sure of my next move. I looked at my fuel gauge and somehow it was full again.

And so I just kept driving. Old Mill Road became a never ending stretch of repeated road and scenery.

I started to doze off when I almost veered off the road. My head hit the mirror in a panic as I swung the wheel around to regain control. I went to fix the mirror and it was then when I saw it staring back at me. I ripped the mirror off and threw it out of the window.

Problem solved. Another lie I let myself believe.

I heard the back seat creak. I refused to look back. What sounded like joints cracking and popping, slow and deliberate like something unfolding out of a small space, drowned out the sound of the road in the car's cabin. I felt this large presence behind me. Whatever that thing was, just wanted to make sure I knew it was still there.

Then the radio came on by itself and changed to the only station that ever seemed to work.

The warm voice began speaking. "Dale, you missed your pickup."

I couldn't answer. My voice was gone.

"That's all right. Everyone runs on the fourth night. It's practically tradition." He seemed fond of me. That was the worst part. "But the road always brings you back. You understand that now. So let's talk about what happens next."

He explained it the way you would present a great opportunity. There was a case waiting for me. Exhibit 14. Warm light, freshly cleaned glass, a polished placard. I would stand in it, and I would be looked at, and I would never be cold or hungry or worry about money ever again.

"Or," he said, "we have a brand new opening at dispatch."

A desk, phone, radio, stack of route sheets. Someone has to read the new drivers their rules.

"I've been doing it since 1967," he said.

It was at that point the warm voice had been replaced by a tired and weathered one.

"I'm ready for a rest, Dale."

I finally understood whose voice it was. The man in the dispatcher's headset, in the case marked Exhibit 13, with his kind face turned toward the doors was the one calling me all along.

"You'd be helping people," he said. "In one way or another."

The presence behind me didn't move. I could hear what sounded like something imitating breathing as it pressed against my seat.

I saw the people in those cases. Forever in suspended animation. I imagined strangers coming to The Holloway Collection staring at me in the case and me forever still.

I picked the phone.

"Wonderful," the warm voice said, suddenly coming back with a sense of relief.

"I'll have them set up your desk."

The rest of the night was a blur. When I came to I remembered warm light, the smell of floor polish, and a hand fixing my collar.

Then I was at a desk with faded grain, a phone, a radio, and a stack of Kindred branded route sheets and blank stationery. The chair was still warm as if I had always been sitting there. Inside the desk

drawer were the signed papers that I had put in my glovebox. I quickly closed it before looking at the signature. Something in the back of my mind still told me the rules applied.

That was the last time I ever heard the warm voice. Some nights, when the phones are quiet, I think about Exhibit 13, and hope he's finally resting. But I don't think he is.

I found out later what picking the phone meant. The case was always in the cards. It just meant they'd let me keep my voice.

Part of me is standing in that glass case right now, Exhibit 14, in a work jacket and a headset, my face turned a little toward the doors. The rest of me answers the phone.

That was twenty five years ago. I don't sleep. I don't eat. I've read the rules to more drivers than I can count. I tell them to signal. I tell them about the mirror. I tell them don't stop. Most of them don't make it past the fourth night, and I'm the last voice they hear before they do.

I realize now, more than ever, that I'm powerless to stop whatever is going on here. But...

Tonight there's a new driver on the schedule. He's never been on Old Mill Road, he's probably never heard of it, but the road has been waiting for him for a long time, much like it waited for me all those years ago.

Everybody calls him Bear.

In a few minutes, I'll leave him a voicemail. I'll welcome him to Kindred. I'll tell him the rules. And I'll try to tell him more than that, for as long as they let me. Not that it will do anything.

So I'll say it one last time.

If Kindred Parcel Co. calls you, don't accept their job offer.

You never applied, and no one recommended you.

They aren't hiring. They're collecting.

Every package finds its way home.