

‘Hello, I’m Calling From the IRS’

That’s not a phone message you want to hear

By Fay Jacobs | Illustration by Rob Waters

My fifth book was titled “Fried & Convicted.” Just a fun title, meaning nothing. But could that become my reality?

Last March the IRS contacted me, saying I owed them over \$3,500 plus big fines and accumulating interest. They accused me of failing to report \$60,000 in income in 2018. Failure to pay up could send me up the river to the Big House for tax evasion.

Whoa. Not only do I look terrible in orange, but trying to hide \$60,000 in income would have required the Amazing Kreskin. In 2018, my entire freelance writing biz made only a fraction of that amount. I know, pathetic, isn’t it? And the 1099 document they were citing reported my gargantuan earnings from a client as a mere \$600.

So this raised the \$60,000 question: What \$60,000?

Instantly, horror stories of the relentless IRS completely ruining innocent lives played in my head. People losing their homes, their careers, and having their paychecks garnished. Do you also picture sliced lemons and limes when you hear about garnishing wages?

Or how about those slick TV ads for companies that are paid handsomely to get the IRS off customers’ backs? I’d watch

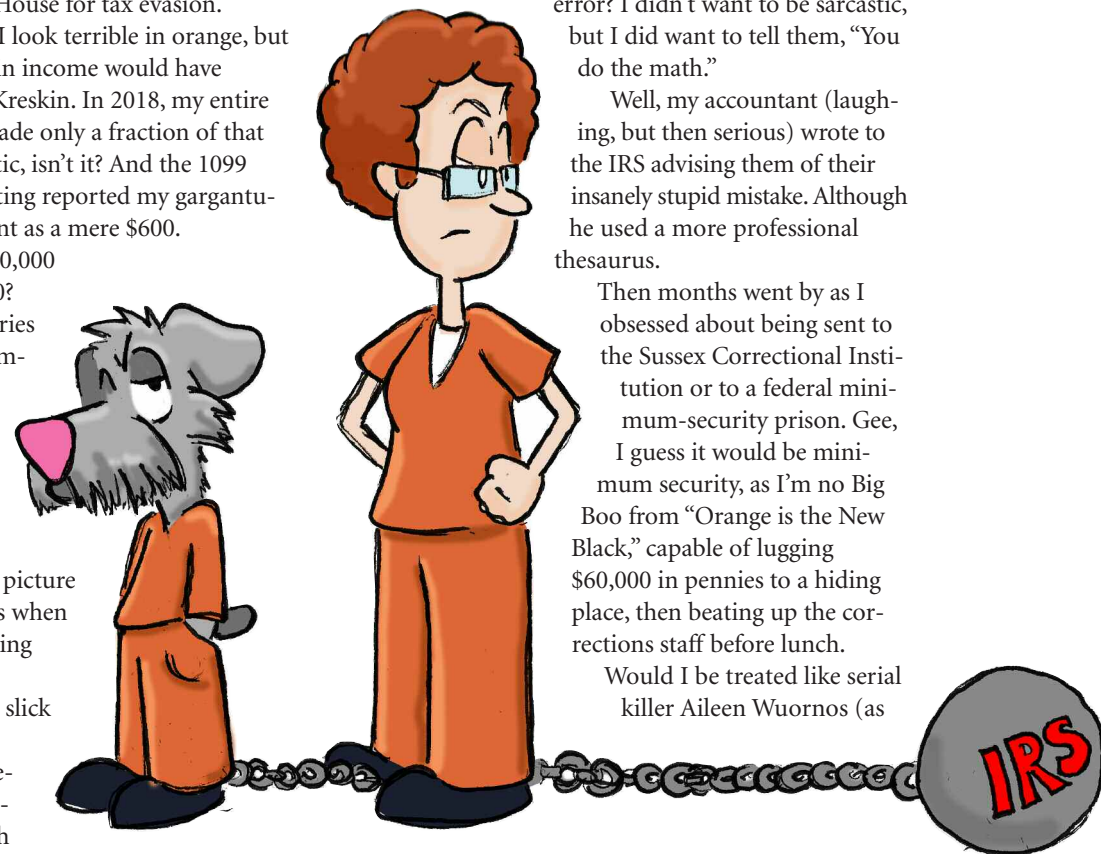
those and cluck my tongue thinking the customers should have paid the tax in the first place. Now I feel awful. Maybe their wretched \$600 in income was also turned into \$60,000 by IRS auditor Mr. Magoo.

OK, keep calm. How do you tell the IRS they’ve diddled with a decimal point and their bean-counters perpetrated a ridiculous \$59,400 error? I didn’t want to be sarcastic, but I did want to tell them, “You do the math.”

Well, my accountant (laughing, but then serious) wrote to the IRS advising them of their insanely stupid mistake. Although he used a more professional thesaurus.

Then months went by as I obsessed about being sent to the Sussex Correctional Institution or to a federal minimum-security prison. Gee, I guess it would be minimum security, as I’m no Big Boo from “Orange is the New Black,” capable of lugging \$60,000 in pennies to a hiding place, then beating up the corrections staff before lunch.

Would I be treated like serial killer Aileen Wuornos (as



played by my crush Charlize Theron), or suffer like Tim Robbins in the “Shawshank Redemption,” excavating the concrete prison wall with a spoon? Did he use a teaspoon or a soup spoon? Do people really hide shivs in cakes? Why do I even know the word shiv?

For months, my imagination ran wild. Then, when I had run out of prison films to obsess over and nightmare scenarios to envision, I finally got another letter from the IRS. They told me they received my CPA’s letter (good), and (wait for it) they’d decided nothing. Bupkis. Nada. It was still under review. By whom? A fourth-grader with arithmetic issues?

They’d used a postage stamp to tell me they’d done absolutely zip. But here’s the kicker: If I thought I would owe them money when they finally did get around to making a decision, they warned me to pay up now because the clock was ticking on interest. Beasts!

I wrestled with what to do, but ultimately did not send them one more cent, though I’m sure they thought I had 59,999 more pennies stashed in my shed.

Time marched on, when finally, this morning, thanks to a 9 a.m. email from USPS Informed Delivery Service, I learned I would have an IRS letter in my mailbox today — at about 4 o’clock. Now ordinarily I don’t mind this teasing service, but today it just made me nuts. Should I troll the area, hunting down my mailperson to hijack my delivery? Should I knock myself out for the next seven hours?

Well, finally, nearing cocktail hour the mail arrived. The official IRS missive said simply, “We are pleased to tell you that the information you provided resolved this tax issue. You owe \$0.00 and this case is now closed.” The good news was if they screwed with the decimal point this time, the amount owed would remain the same.

Whew! No fines. No interest. No jail. I’m going to pour myself a large cocktail. I may get good and fried, but at least I won’t be convicted. ■

Fay Jacobs is the author of five award-winning humor books, including “For Frying Out Loud — Rehoboth Beach Diaries,” “Time Fries — Aging Gracelessly in Rehoboth,” and “Fried & Convicted — Rehoboth Beach Uncorked.”

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