The Red Suitcase

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“Hannah, don’t touch that!” My voice raised above the shrill cry of my niece as she reached for the plate of cookies on the counter. “You can’t have any until after supper.”

I slid my hand over the ceramic dish containing the chocolate chip treats that were the object of desire for the now screaming child, and moved them out of reach. “You can have one after…” but my compromise was interrupted by another piercing yell. Hannah fell to the floor in a heap as her arms and legs flailed everywhere.

Annoyance surged through my veins as I viewed this spectacle. Red splotches began to appear on her wet, sticky face as Hannah’s tiny fists pounded the floor simultaneously with her stomping feet. How long could she keep this up? I didn’t want to find out.

With a quick, fluid motion, I thrust a cookie into the undeserving child’s hands. “Just one,” I said through gritted teeth.

She was up and bouncing away with a gleeful grin as the sandy blonde hair clung to her tear-stained cheeks.

“Spoiled brat,” I muttered, returning to the mess on the stove that was supposed to be dinner.

The edge of the pan was crusted with dried Ragu sauce that I had somehow single-handedly managed to ruin. The noodles lay in a massive, soggy clump at the base of the next pan. How does anyone mess up spaghetti?

“Good girl. You eat that up,” Hannah’s voice cooed from the other room.

“Hannah, what are you doing?” I peeked over to see her feeding the entire plate of cookies to their dog, Jezebel. Drool seeped from Jezebel’s gigantic jowls as she devoured the entire contents of the dish.

“Hannah! Stop! You know you are not supposed to do that!”

“But Jezi likes it.” She looked almost innocent with her wide angelic blue eyes gazing up at me as if she were doing nothing wrong.

“Yes I know she does, but you will make her sick.” I could just picture the effect that this would have on the old dog’s stomach. Jezebel stared up at me with clouded, half-seeing eyes.

The dog was ancient. Patches of black fur were missing all over her enormous body, leaving what was left in little scattered tufts. Her ears drooped with the rest of her bagging face. She looked like a pile of wrinkled
laundry. My sister, Mabel, should have put the dog out of her misery years ago, but Hannah was too attached to it.

Hannah’s hands draped about the dog’s neck in a possessive grip. I realized my effort was futile and turned back towards the disastrous kitchen. I had my work cut out for me.

The next few hours ticked by with a rapid pace. After some serious coaxing, Hannah had relented and gone to bed, and I was enjoying the peaceful, quiet atmosphere of her absence. I leaned back in the wooden chair cradling a soft, plush pillow in my lap. I massaged my temples in an effort to soothe my nerves.

“Three more days,” I chanted to myself. “Three more days and you can leave this awful city and go home.” My mind rejoiced happily at the thought of my sister and her husband returning from their vacation.

Traffic buzzed outside and there was the sound of sirens going off in the distance. Crime was a constant companion in the Big Apple. My senses seemed heightened, and I felt a prickle of unease move across my spine.

I surveyed the floral print wallpaper with the matching crème colored curtains and lampshades that created a yellow haze about the room. My eyes started to flutter as I felt the sweet release of sleep come to consume me.

That is what I needed… Sleep. I needed to sleep away the tension of the past few weeks. Drown out the bustling noise of the city and pretend that I was back home with nothing but the sound of crickets outside and the wind whistling through the trees. A sentimental smile spread across my face as I thought of the clear blue sky that was not misted over with a layer of smog. A place where time seemed to slow down, and people were not always in a hurry to get somewhere.

A resonating thud echoed about the room dragging me out of my day-dream.

“What the…” Startled, I shot up to see what was the matter. Jezebel lay in the center of the cold, tile floor; her long bony legs splayed out from under her. Fear welled up in the pit of my stomach doing tiny somersaults. “Please don’t be dead,” I begged.

The stench lingering over the animal made my slender nose wrinkle in disgust. A pool of vomit dripped out of the slack mouth, and the milky eyes stared up at me without blinking. A few quick jabs of my big toe in the dog’s stiff side confirmed any suspicions: Jezebel was dead.

I raced to the phone, and with rapid speed began to dial Mabel’s cell phone. “Come on, come on,” I chanted, waiting anxiously for her to answer. “Uh… hello.” The sound of salsa music floated in from the
background, muffling Mabel’s soft voice.

“Mabe, it’s Jess.”

“Hey, Jess! What’s up?” Her tone had an edge of concern in it. “Is everything alright? It’s kinda late. Hannah okay?”

“Hannah’s fine, she’s sleeping.” I waved a hand over my face to fan out the smell hovering in the room. “It’s Jezebel. I think she’s dead.”

“Oh, no! You sure?”

“Of course I’m sure!” I retorted in an irritated huff.

The music seemed to get even louder as Mabel drew in a long, deep breath. The obvious solution was that the dog had to be taken care of. I tried to scribble down most of the directions she gave to the nearest veterinary clinic that would dispose of the body. It was hard to understand her over roar of the background.

“Oh and Jess,” Mabel said with an air of sadness. “You know how much Hannah love Jezebel; I would appreciate it if you could do this with out her knowing. I would like to break it to her myself when we got back.”

All I could do was agree with the terms and conditions. I began to rake my brain for any possible solutions for concealing the large dog. My thin fingers slid through my tangled curls as I tried to think. What could be large enough to hide a Great Dane?

My eyes fell upon a red, tattered suitcase lying in the back corner of a crowded closet. A thin layer of dust coated the surface, as I tugged on the worn, black strap.

“This could work,” I mumbled to myself.

There was a steady stream of cars on the road as I darted in and out of the swarms of office workers congregating on the sidewalk. It was early morning, and a combination of pink and yellow outlined the edges of the buildings. The concrete was crowded with moving bodies trying to walk to work. The distinct smell of exhaust smoke wafted through the air as lines of traffic bustled about the street.

My arm was tired and the muscles were screaming for release from lugging around the suitcase containing the body of Jezebel. Somehow I had managed to contort her large frame to fit inside the bag. The knuckles on my hand began to turn white and lose feeling. It had only been two blocks and I was already exhausted. I would have to break down and hail a taxi, something that I was not accustomed to doing.

The sooner I got to the clinic and back, the better. Mrs. Griffith, the sixty-year-old neighbor, was not overly thrilled to look after Hannah while I was out. Her shriveled face furrowed into a deep frown, making the crows
feet around her caked-on blue eye-shadowed lids deepen and crack. An unlit cigarette hung loosely in her thin, pursed lips as she unwillingly consented, rolling those over-done blue eyes of hers. I gave her specific instructions to tell Hannah that I was taking Jezebel for a “check-up,” and that Mabel would be picking Jezebel up when they got back. That should buy some time before they had to break the news to Hannah.

I stepped to the side of the curb, glancing around to find the familiar sight of the yellow taxi cabs. With a hesitant pause, I raised my fragile hand and waved gingerly when one came into sight. The cab veered to the left, and the driver ignored me completely.

“You’re not very good at that,” a deep luring voice said behind me. I turned around to see a tall man standing behind me. His dark hair was combed to the side and his coal-black suit was clean and pressed. A wide, crooked smile radiated across his attractive face, and the teeth behind his plump lips glowed with a luminescent light.

“Excuse me?” I asked stupidly, transfixed by his presence.

“I said you’re doing it wrong. You have to be more assertive.” His large hand shot up with a hard, brisk wave, and in a matter of seconds a cab appeared magically. “Come on, I’ll share this one with ya,” he said with a polite nod towards the cab door, indicating that I should get in.

“Um, thank you,” I stammered back, apprehensive about sharing a ride with a complete stranger. A shiver began to tease the hair on the back of my neck. His smile seemed genuine enough, so I pushed the little pangs of doubt away, and headed towards the cab.

“Where you headin’ to?” he asked indifferently.

My mind went blank for a second. “Uh… DeLancey Street.”

I didn’t want him to know where I was really going. Besides, the vet clinic was just down the street, I could walk a little ways.

His smile widened in excitement. “Well, what a coincidence, I just happen to be going there myself.”

For a moment that struck me as odd, but I shrugged it off. It could happen, couldn’t it?

The driver popped the trunk, and I lifted the heavy suitcase into it, relieved to be able to put it down. The man’s gaze shifted from me to the suitcase, then back again. A flicker passed over his eyes that I couldn’t quite place. I just prayed that he wouldn’t ask me what the content of the bag was.

My hands gripped the grimy trunk handle and I pulled it down hard to make sure it latched. When I heard the click, I turned towards the man holding the door open for me. He’s a gentleman, I thought to myself in awe.

“Here you go.” He held onto my arm with a firm grip to steady me
as I got into the cab. I slid over towards the window, and he followed in behind me.

“I should introduce myself.” His charismatic expression enchanted me. “I’m Guy Cohen.”

“Jess.” I sputtered out, feeling a blush creep over my cheeks.

“That’s a nice name.” His comment made me flush even more.

“You’re not from around here, are you, Jess?” That wasn’t really a question.

“No, I’m not,” I answered in a meek voice.

“I could tell,” Guy said with a laugh. “You’re much too timid.”

“Oh?” He made it sound like a character flaw.

“I can tell that you haven’t had much experience being in the city, thought I might help you out.” Guy faltered for a second then regained his composure. “So what brings you to the Big Apple?”

“I’m watching my niece while my sister and her husband are out of town.” The anxious feeling began to gnaw at my insides. The cab driver’s greasy eyes flickered to the review mirror. A worn-out pine tree air freshener swayed with the movement of the car. Sweat was rolling down his thick neck as his head inclined towards our conversation.

“You doin’ a little shopping today?” Guy asked casually, his body turning towards mine in an inviting manner.

I thought about the dead dog in the trunk and the wheels of my mind tried to come up with a logical lie. “Yeah,” I said louder than I intended to, adverting my eyes from his calculating gaze. I was never good at lying. There had to be department stores that were opening about this time, so the lie had to be somewhat believable.

“Yeah, there are some good shops down DeLancey Street… If you don’t mind spending the extra money.” Guy’s tone was nonchalant as his body swiveled closer to mine. I could feel the heat rising off his skin, and color flooded my already crimson cheeks.

“I…I don’t mind.” My fingers wrapped themselves around the door handle as I scooted closer to the window. “I like shopping.” I shuddered at the sound of that stupid response.

Guy gave a low rumble of a chuckle that seemed to vibrate in his muscular chest. He bent his head closer towards my retreating frame. “I thought you would. Most women do.” A roar of laughter ripped through his lush lips.

His smile did not seem as charming and alluring as it once had been. His grin looked like razor sharp teeth poking out of a menacing snarl. The snarl of a predator about to devour his prey.

An unconvincing laugh forced its way to my mouth. Blood pumped
with an iron force through the throbbing veins, and my heart took on the rapid speed of a jackhammer ready to pound its way out of my chest. I drew in a couple of shallow breaths of musty air. The cab seemed more confining now. The intermingling smell of mildew and perspiration and Guy’s exotic cologne was playing havoc with my unsettled stomach.

The driver pulled the car over towards the curb with an abrupt stop. His ruffled brows knitted together and his watery lips hung open under his matted beard. I reached in my pocket to pull out a crumpled wad of money.

“I got it, don’t worry about it.” Guy handed the driver a crisp twenty dollar bill. “Keep the change.”

The driver grunted in response. I wondered where Guy had gotten the money from. I didn’t see him pull out a wallet or dig through his suit pockets. Maybe I was seeing things.

The door opened with a hesitant nudge, and my feet fell to the pavement. More people seemed to file out on the side walks, dodging each other. The cold, harsh buildings loomed before me. Guy was already at the open trunk removing the old suitcase.

“This is pretty heavy. Seems like you already have quite a load!” His strong features strained under the weight of the lumpy bag. He dropped the bag to my feet with a deafening crack.

“Well, thank you for the ride,” I tried to say with a polite smile as I bent over to grab the ragged strap.

There was a sharp snap against my face. My head twisted backwards in a disoriented fit. The sidewalk scraped against my body as I plummeted towards the dirt-covered ground. Blood began to swell around my eye and sting with intense pain. There was a distinct hand print on my face where the contact had happened.

My head seemed distended from the rest of my body as I tried to raise it from the foul sidewalk. Guy Cohen’s fleeing figure looped through the cluster of people walking on by, his hands clutching the red suitcase.

I forced myself up to a sitting position; objects were blurred and faded into one another. People were stepping over me in disgust as I tried to regain my senses. With all the strength that I could gather, my reluctant body heaved itself to a stance. My hand grasped the inside of my empty pocket, where my money should have been.

“Bastard!” I slurred with anger.

One foot moving in front of the other, I slowly propelled myself forward. I would walk the rest of the way back. A bruise started to form around my eye, and a grimace covered my face in a mask of agony.

I pictured Guy greedily opening the tattered case, thinking that he
had pulled a fast one on an unsuspecting victim. His eyes would gleam with the anticipation of the amazing find he had. He would tear away at the zipper with groping fingers, and then stop. His face would fall in torturous disbelief as he beheld the lifeless dog with its hefty body twisted in the confined parcel.

A slow, little smile tugged at the corners of my mouth. My steps picked up speed, and a laugh of retribution soared out of my lips. A light breeze caressed my inflamed face, and a single thought crossed my mind.

Serves him right.

Renae Oakes says this was the first story that she wrote for a creative writing class. She found it to be quite humorous, because it is based on true events.”