**The Suitcase**

For what seemed like months, I’d been feeling overwhelmed by life. This had been further aggravated by an email from my condo tenant.

The air conditioning had stopped working and what should he do? And, while he was in contact— the waste disposal had been making a strange whining sound for a couple of days, and, he’d just noticed, the fridge was leaking water. Could I arrange to have the problems sorted quickly— he had guests arriving in a few days?

Of course— sod’s law— it was late Friday afternoon and everyone had taken off for the weekend. So on impulse, I decided to run away from it all.

After taking several cold beers out of my fridge, which I notice isn’t leaking. I clambered into my old pickup truck and drove to a friend’s, hoping for a relaxing chat and unwind.

When I arrived at his place, it was deserted. That’s when I remembered he was out of town, which didn’t do a lot for my mood.

Making my way back down the long gravel trail, my phone beeped. My eyes left the track for only a few seconds, as I briefly scanned the message.

*‘To avoid service interruption, phone payment is due immediately.’*

Tossing the gadget into the glove compartment, I looked up and saw a woman thirty meters ahead, walking down the trail with an old suitcase on her head.

Carrying stuff this way is not unusual in this part of the world but what struck me was how suddenly she’d appeared.

Her faded jeans and white jacket stood out like a beacon amongst the lush green foliage of North Borneo. And that grubby case perched on her head only made her more conspicuous.

But where on earth had she come from?

Driving slowly towards her, I scanned both sides of the track but the vegetation was far too dense, there was nowhere she could have come from.

Pulling up alongside, I opened the passenger window, which let in a faint but distinct fragrance of jasmine.

“Hi there, would you like a lift?” I asked.

She was a local Kadazan, slender, medium build, probably in her early fifties with a worn wrinkled face, from which I received a brief smile of gratitude.

Opening the back door, she struggled to push her case onto the seat, before climbing into the truck next to me.

I suddenly realized I was staring at her.

She had black shoulder-length hair with a natural easy curl. Her dark eyes, a reassuring warmth. Her crooked teeth looked whiter against the tanned complexion and that brief smile I’d received when I had first stopped, was pleasant.

But now sat next to me, her face radiated a tender openness that was beautiful and her eyes sparkled with the excitement of a small child. One who’s been told they’re going to the seaside to buy ice cream.

This sudden transformation was what made me stare. She looked younger and happier than a few moments ago.

Over the next ten minutes, we had a light-hearted chat as I drove.

She was moving back home, to the other side of the city, so needed to catch a bus in the small town close by. I said my journey would take her near but not all the way. She thanked me for the lift and said she could walk the last kilometre with ease.

When we arrived at the crossroads, I decided to take her to the bus station. After seeing her struggle with the suitcase, I’d have felt bad, if I hadn’t helped out.

But now, this is where things became rather confusing.

At the bus stop, I jumped out to unload her bag, remembering the expression on her face when she’d loaded it into the truck.

It wasn’t a very big case; one a guy would take for a three week holiday, the same size a woman would use for a three-day trip.

What flashed through my mind as I retrieved her case was — It’s empty. Then— She’s played me for a sucker!

But moments later, she struggled to lift it onto her head before picking up her plastic bags. The smile I received when we shook hands was meek.

As she walked away, I gazed after her, mystified.

This was the woman I’d first met on the gravel drive. Not the bubbly person I’d brought into town. This transformation left me with a nagging question, I had to find her and ask.

I found her sitting in the primitive bus station, tapping a message into her phone.

“Excuse me,” I said— then hesitated. Again, I was looking into eyes filled with excitement, making me forget what I was going to say for a second.

“I know this is going to sound crazy, but you handle that case as though it’s heavy— I found it extremely light.”

Her face shone with such a warm caring smile, I wished I hadn’t asked.

“Of course you wouldn’t find it heavy. It contains things that don’t belong to you. You know nothing about them.”

I gawked at her for several seconds, not understanding.

“You said you were moving back to your family’s home, so I presumed it would be full of clothes and stuff.”

She grinned and pointed at her case. “It contains all the things I don’t need to carry around in here,” tapping her head. “It’s always the last case I move. Why would I want to carry around my problems and troubles? They take up so much time, energy and space.”

There was a subtle aura of confidence about her. She transmitted compassion that was endearing and soothing that captivated me.

“If that’s true— why not leave the case here?” She shook her head slowly, her eyes glinting with intrigue.

“That won’t work— you can never forget or rid yourself of those things. But you can stop carrying them as a burden.” She paused and glanced at the case.

“They're all part of what makes you who and what you are. You’re a collection of lessons and tests from a life’s journey.

A flawed business decision makes you more astute. The early death of a family member shows time together is precious. A failed love affair— maybe you chose for the wrong reasons.

All these and more were painful but gave you strength. You wouldn’t want to lose precious knowledge like that.” She stood up and rested a hand lightly on my arm, then whispered.

“Everything goes with you to the end— but it shouldn’t be a burden to your everyday life. Unload your troubles, make peace and move on,” she added.

⇹

Later that evening I sat on the veranda with a glass of wine, rocking back and forth in my favourite chair, mulling over my odd experience.

The local woman’s idea was bizarre but oddly, the more I thought, the more intrigued and inquisitive I became.

Minutes later I arrived back from the garage with an old shabby suitcase I’d retrieved. Its scruffy condition made me grin. What was I thinking? How could something like that work? What a ridiculous idea!

As time and wine slipped slowly away, a light breeze carried the fragrance of jasmine over the veranda. Breathing deeply, I nestled back into my chair, enjoying the therapeutic effects of wine, scent, and solitude. And— I also listed several memories I’d willingly dispatch to that case.

With wine glass empty and mind suitably mellow, I decided to turn in for the night. But as I stood to go inside, I laughed out loud— and that felt rather refreshing.

I’d gone to move my case but found it so heavy, I struggled to lift it.

⇹

I woke early the following morning. Nothing unusual there but the odd thought at the forefront of my mind was totally unexpected.

For the last few months, I’d been plagued with a complete lack of enthusiasm. Simple tasks had become a chore. I’d wake and lay there thinking, why should I get up? In what seemed like a few hours, I’d be getting back into bed. Then before being transported off to oblivion, I’d be thinking: Where did the day go? What was the point of it all?

But this morning, I’m thinking— let’s go for a walk!

I pushed my head under the pillows and mumbled. It’s only six o’clock and walking is physical exertion.

Then told myself it was motivation, the force that I’d lost.

Ten minutes later, I strode up the hill away from my cottage, part of me still wondering why.

On impulse, I turned to look at the view.

It’s breathtaking— surprising me, as though this is my first viewing.

Gazing at the lush canopy, I could see subtle textures and shades of individual trees, enhanced by the still crystal clear air.

Smiling, I turned to continue my walk but stayed rooted to the spot.

I’d caught sight of the suitcase sitting on the veranda. Could last night's detox have really worked? Surely in the real world, that’s not logical?

But my mind feels less full, less busy. I’m not looking back at stuff I’ve failed at over the years— issues I’d drag up on a regular basis, confusing my everyday life.

Oddly, the issues I’d earmarked for that case don’t appear important anymore.

I walked on and smiled— there’s a noticeable spring in my step.

Do I have a plan? No, not really. I’ll stop taking life so seriously. No point in worrying about things I have no control over. And— I’ll take each beautiful day as it comes.

Issues that do crop up, which don’t go to plan— I’ll treat them as tests, to reinforce my newly acquired mindset.

So Yes! — I *do* have a plan.

***Shared Adventures***

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*Award Winning Short Story 2018*

*Published by Hammond House in their book,* ***Precious***

Toby and Scott had been friends for several years. In fact, they’d been buddies ever since Toby had moved in next door.

Scott’s house was a big, old, rambling place with creaky polished wooden floors, which were great for sliding on and even more exciting when they chased each other. But games like this were stopped quickly because they got too excited.

They were both seven years old and enjoyed doing the same sorts of things, usually playing for hours in the huge wood across the road.

This area became their own personal playground, where they enjoyed some of their best times together. Usually, when they returned home, they’d be worn out, grubby and sometimes in need of a bath.

On adventure days, Toby would sit on his front porch and wait until his friend arrived. On this particular day, they found a great place to hide.

It was a small cave but as they investigated, it became an extended tunnel, which was scary because it was very narrow in a few places.

It also smelt like a fox or badger had lived there and they both knew, a badger was something they shouldn’t tangle with.

Putting those thoughts to the back of their minds, they’d ventured in and what they found kept them entertained for hours. It was huge inside with small tunnels heading off in all directions, but most were too dark and some smelt very strange.

Walking home later, they came across a lake, so decided to take a rest. However, they soon became captivated by a large bird that circled the expanse of water at a great height.

Sometimes the bird looked as though it had stopped in mid-air, but moments later, it dived down at great speed and tried to catch something hidden in the water.

The last time it swooped there was a great splash, but the bird flew away towards some trees, so they couldn’t see what it had grabbed.

⇎

Toby didn’t see Scott over the next few days.

He’d wandered over to his place but there was no sign of him. There was no music playing as there often was and the yellow car that usually stood outside wasn’t there either.

A day or so later the car was back, so Toby sat waiting on his porch to see if his friend would arrive.

There was still no music but he thought he could hear the faint sound of crying. It crossed his mind to go and investigate because he sensed something rather odd.

Then the phone in his house rang. A moment later the porch door opened and someone arrived at his side.

A hand rested lightly on his head, gentle fingers played with his ear, followed by a soft voice.

“Scott won’t be coming over anymore— sadly he died yesterday.”

Toby didn’t really understand, so just wagged his tail. Then thought he’d wander over to see if he could find his friend.

**The Gift**

Firstly, let me thank you in advance for your generous gift. For someone of my unique persuasion, it’s a lifesaver.

I realize for the moment you’re unaware of what I’m saying. It’s a situation that will change shortly but, to be truthful, this one-sided conversation helps me prepare for, as *you* would view it, the unsavory part of the evening— I’ll divulge more later.

As its Friday, you’ve planned a movie and pizza to help you unwind.

I can sense you’re uptight about some work-related issue and you thought this evening’s outing would help.

Sadly your film was full, so here you are watching ‘Brides of Dracula’.

Being of a nervous disposition, do you think this is a wise choice? Or do you suddenly have aspirations to become more adventurous?

I only mention this in passing, but do you remember the large creature you thought lived under your bed that terrorized you for days? Until your frustrated landlady, found a large cockroach trapped inside a plastic bottle.

Ah! I sense you’re starting to relaxing and losing yourself in the content of the film. Good, that will ease our encounter shortly.

The movie is a little over the top for my taste but please don’t be misled by the innuendoes about my species.

Vampires are nothing like what’s portrayed in this melodramatic visual entertainment.

Those of my persuasion would like to live in harmony with you. Take our meager sustenance a few evenings a week, by targeting community members that don’t fit in. Bring them over to our side, so to speak, get them out of your hair.

*Of course*— I’m not suggesting for one moment that you fall into this category.

But you have been living alone for some considerable time and, you haven’t had a partner for as long as I can remember.

I only mention this because the odd friend you do have wonder about you. As do the people at work— which brings us back to your stress issue.

Have you considered changing your job?

As you’re a solitary person who doesn’t mix well, maybe *our* line of employ would suit. Okay, I grant you it's nights but we have no need for transportation or medical insurance and it must be noted, regaining one’s youthful looks does come at a price.

And that brings me to your new hairdo.

I must compliment you. The bob works wonderfully— it makes your neck look so much more desirable for someone of my ilk. But now I pay more attention. Is that a few fleshy folds and a double chin I can see?

Oh dear! That is disappointing. Sadly my approach will have to be a little more aggressive.

I really think your friend should’ve advised curtailing your consumption of chocolate and ice-cream— it’s making some bodily areas very noticeable. And duping yourself that manufacturers have changed their sizing strategy is a nonsense. You are not a 34 and haven’t been for 15 years — you’re a very tight 40 and growing fast.

But as my stomach has started to grumble, we must turn to, as I said before, the unsavory part of the evening.

Of course, initially you’ll be startled, so I’ll place a hand over your mouth to restrain your scream.

Normally I’m not averse to this type of self-expression. I truly believe it brings inner growth and greater fulfillment, which should be fully embraced— but as the man two rows ahead has a hot coffee near his groin, his shrill outburst will obviously alert others— and between you and I. I’d planned on having a dessert this evening, because the youth sat on row ten, looks *absolutely delicious*— but I digress.

You’ll feel a slight stinging sensation, followed by lightheadedness and maybe an urge to vomit.

At this point, it affects people differently but I am reliably informed, that fear and terror do tend to well in abundance.

Gosh! I do miss those human emotions— and with my growing anticipation and appetite, I can almost taste them.

Ah! — You shivered, how touching.

Silly you — No, that wasn’t something in the movie or a cold draft around your feet.

No — *I’m perched on the seat behind you.*