

The Old Man's Briefcase

By Scott Cimarusti

He was just an old man sitting toward the back of the bus, a worn brown leather briefcase on his lap, but once I'd spotted him, I couldn't believe I'd never noticed him before.

There was nothing remarkable about his appearance, mind you; he was just another typical frail-looking old man that blends into the crowd like everyone else in a bustling city of millions. But still, something drew my gaze to him one day, and every day since then, as I boarded the bus on my morning commute to work, I found my eyes seeking him out—sometimes, seemingly of their own accord.

If I had to guess, I would have estimated his age to be somewhere in his late seventies or early eighties. And even though I couldn't help but think of that as being old, it wasn't as far off for me as I would have liked; I'd already weathered the better—and worse—part of forty years at that time. The old man served as yet another reminder of just how quickly those first forty years had slipped by for me, prompting me to wonder if the next forty would pass just as quickly beneath my notice.

The old man with the briefcase always sat in the same seat on the right-hand side of the bus, second row from the back. Clutching the scuffed brown leather briefcase almost lovingly to his narrow chest, he was always neatly dressed in a coat and tie, his silver hair slicked back off his pink and wrinkled forehead, his keen eyes peering out from the wrinkled parchment of his face as he watched the world outside scream past his window.

Seeing him on the bus day after day, week after week, quickly became a strange source of comfort for me. Finding his wizened frame hunched over that briefcase was one of a dwindling number of constants in my tumultuous life.

That was the same time period when Susan had filed for a divorce, threatening full custody of our two children—with minimal visitation rights for me. On top of that, I had also found out I was going to be downsized out of my department at work. Alimony...child support...unemployment... The world had quickly become a very hostile and unstable place for me, and I can still remember entertaining thoughts that one really shouldn't; those forbidden, self-destructive thoughts for which they have twenty-four hour hotlines.

That was when I discovered the old man with the briefcase.

I never saw him break physical contact with the briefcase even for a moment—much less open it—so I had no idea what he kept in there, but I figured it must be quite valuable, even if only to him. And as one day blurred into the next for me, and my tenuous grip on sanity began to slip even more, my casual curiosity about the briefcase's contents gradually mutated into an obsession. I can even remember asking myself at one point why I was so interested in what some old coot lugged around with him; then fearing for my emotional state when I couldn't come up with a reasonable answer.

In retrospect, I think it had been a convenient distraction while everything else in my life seemed to be crumbling around me. Whatever the reason for my fixation, one thing was certain: I needed to know what was in that briefcase, and there was only one way to find out.

The problem with approaching the old man and asking him about it was that he might misinterpret my intentions and think I was someone in desperate need of therapy or Thorazine—or that I was trying to steal it from him. And who could blame him?

But it was with these trepidations in mind—and over a month's worth of deliberation—that I finally mustered up the nerve to do it. It was at that point, I think, that I felt like I was finally reaching the end of my rope with my imminent divorce, the threat of separation from my kids, the impending loss of my job, and my dwindling bank account. I can still remember passing by the pawn shop near my office building on my way home from work one day, my gaze lingering a little too long on the handguns displayed in the window. Standing there with my forehead pressed up against the glass, my fellow commuters a reflected blur of unfamiliar and oblivious faces behind me, I realized—in the immortal words of Bob Dylan: “When you ain't got nothin', you got nothin' to lose.” So when I boarded the bus the following morning—after yet another fitful night's sleep—I marched straight down the aisle and plopped down into the seat right next to the old man before I could talk myself out of it.

As the bus lurched forward, wheezing and groaning back into the herd of morning traffic, I swallowed hard, took a deep breath, and finally addressed the keeper of the mysterious briefcase that had consumed my thoughts for the past month.

“Good morning.”

The old man didn't respond right away. Perhaps, like the rest of us in this increasingly impersonal society of ours, he had become unaccustomed to even the most generic greeting from a stranger. So I repeated myself. This

time, he swiveled his head in my direction and favored me with the first genuine smile I'd seen in quite some time—it almost brought me to tears, actually (which should give you some indication as to my emotional state at the time). His eyes beamed, and he replied in kind.

"Mornin'." His voice had a clarity and timbre to it that betrayed his age. And though his tone was friendly and unassuming, it hinted at considerable wisdom. I noted the unmistakable scent of Old Spice aftershave about him—the kind that came in the cream-colored, ceramic-looking bottle; the stuff that my dad used to splash on his cheeks and neck before heading off to work.

I tried to keep the small talk going. "Nice day..."

He nodded appreciatively in return. "Not too bad."

I figured I'd better get to the point quickly before he decided that I wasn't worth his time or his breath. "That's quite a briefcase you have there."

He patted it with obvious affection, and I could see the glimmer of pride in his eyes. "Indeed it is."

I pretended to examine it casually. "Looks like it might be time for a new one, though, don't you think?"

The old man smiled wanly. "I don't think so. This one's pretty special to me."

"So you've had it a long time, then?"

He shook his head slowly and thoughtfully. "Not really...only a few years..."

I wanted to get to the bottom of this mystery before my stop came, so I screwed up my courage and forged ahead blindly, not really sure how I was going to lead into the question I really wanted to ask—hell, *needed* to ask—even though I had rehearsed this exchange countless times in my head during many a sleepless night. Now that I was actually face to face with the old man, I was experiencing what could only be described as stagefright.

"I hope you don't mind my asking," I stammered, "but I was wondering if you could tell me where you got that briefcase." Time for an improvised white lie. "This may sound strange, but I'm a collector of sorts, and I've never seen anything like it." I almost winced at my pathetic attempt at slyness.

The old man's eyes bore into my soul. I knew instantly that he saw right through my obvious lie. I had revealed myself to be the obsessive, emotionally unstable person I think I had truly become at that point, and thus our conversation would end. My hands fidgeted nervously in my lap like restless birds as I braced myself for either a withering glare or a harsh dismissal from the old man, but I surprisingly received neither.

"I'd be glad to tell you where I got the briefcase—though I'm afraid it won't do a *collector*..." he put a slight emphasis on this word "...like you any good." Then he chuckled knowingly. "I found it right here on the bus."

I blinked in surprise. "Really?"

He patted the briefcase with conviction. "Yup. It was about three years ago, during a particularly bad patch in my life, as I recall... I sat down here in this very seat, and there it was—no owner in sight. I left it alone for most of the ride, expecting that someone would eventually claim it, but no one ever did. So, I took it home with me. I figured that the owner was probably a regular rider, too, and if I brought it back with me on the bus the next morning, he would see me with it and ask for it back. Well, sir, I've had it with me every day since then and no one has ever claimed it. No one's even asked about it..." he paused for a heartbeat, his eyes searching mine, "Until now."

I had been so enthralled by the old man's story, hanging on his every word, that it didn't dawn on me until that moment that I had yet to ask the very question that had prompted me to approach him in the first place. "So what did you find in the briefcase?"

His response was quick. "I didn't find anything in it."

I stared at the old man in disbelief. "Nothing? You mean the briefcase was empty when you found it?"

He gave it a gentle shake. "No, it's not empty."

"So what's in it then?"

He shrugged. "I don't know."

This was starting to sound like an Abbott and Costello routine. "How could you not know what's in the briefcase that you've been carrying around for the past three years?"

The old man smiled patiently, as if he were addressing a toddler. "I don't know what's in it because I've never opened it."

I had anticipated any number of responses to my query about his briefcase, but this one completely blindsided me. I had no idea how to proceed—none of this was making any sense to me—so I blurted out the next question that came to mind. "Is it locked?"

He inspected the latches. "It doesn't look like it."

I gaped at him incredulously. "Let me get this straight: you found this briefcase about three years ago, and you've carried it around with you every day since, and you've *never* opened it to see what's inside?"

He held his head defiantly. "Nope. Never felt the need to."

“But...there could be important papers in there,” I stammered, “contracts or other legal documents...” My eyes widened. “There could be cash in there—thousands of dollars!”

The old man nodded. “I know. That’s why I’ve never opened it.”

I was beginning to think that I had been hasty in my presumption that the old man would question my motive or my sanity when I approached him about his briefcase—perhaps I should have been more concerned about *his* mental state. “I don’t understand...”

The old man sighed as his calloused and bony finger traced the edge of the briefcase’s latches. “As long as the contents of this briefcase remain unknown to me, I can imagine that there are all sorts of remarkable things inside. But if I were to surrender to my curiosity and open it, I would probably find something completely ordinary—like outdated and meaningless paperwork left behind by some careless, absent-minded businessman. Then my grand expectations would fall terribly short of the truth.” His eyes twinkled daringly. “This way, I’m not disappointed, and I always have hope.”

I was speechless. I didn’t know which was more disconcerting: the old man’s reason for not opening the briefcase, or the fact that it was actually starting to make sense to me. Still, I couldn’t believe I had waited this long to finally bring myself to ask him about it, and this was his answer.

The old man didn’t seem to have anything more to say on the subject, either, and we both sat in silence until my stop came. As the bus squealed to a halt, I rose from my seat and looked back over my shoulder at the caretaker of the mysterious briefcase and its even more mysterious contents. “Hope, huh?”

He nodded.

I held his eyes a moment longer. “Thanks for the story. It was nice to meet you.”

He nodded again. “You take care.”

Then the tide of passengers eager to disembark toward their respective destinations swept me away down the aisle, past the hissing door, and out into the street. And as I navigated through the bustling sea of morning commuters, I couldn’t stop thinking about the old man and his briefcase full of hope, and I couldn’t help but smile a little—relieved that my face hadn’t forgotten how.

When I boarded the bus the following morning, my eyes immediately seeking out the familiar stranger in his customary seat, I discovered a surprise instead.

The old man’s seat was as empty as a toothless smile.

Stunned, I stopped mid-stride, causing a pile-up of surly and surprised passengers behind me. Then I dashed for the conspicuously vacant seat, and when I got there, my eyes widened in surprise.

The seat wasn’t as empty as I had initially thought.

There was the old man’s briefcase, unattended.

I slid into the seat next to it as the bus jerked forward, my eyes darting from one face to the next, searching for the old man. I even went so far as to spend the rest of that day riding that bus in the hopes that on one of its stops, that familiar face would emerge and he would claim his briefcase.

But he never showed.

I decided to bring it home with me, thinking that I might be able to return it to him the following morning. But that seat continued to remain empty the rest of the week—and the rest of the month, for that matter.

It’s been almost two years now since I found the orphaned briefcase—almost as long as the old man claimed to have it before me. And several times I’ve come close to actually opening it and finding out, once and for all, what’s inside.

But I can’t bring myself to do it.

My ex-wife, Susan, thinks I’m crazy; sometimes she even teases me good-naturedly about it when I come to pick up the kids every other weekend or the occasional evening during the week. It gives us both a much-needed chuckle.

And even though I now ride a different bus because my new job is in a different building across town, I still bring the old briefcase with me on the bus each day. Not because I expect to finally find the kind old stranger who left me something more than a battered old piece of luggage—besides, even if I could find him, something tells me that he doesn’t really need or want it anymore.

No.

I keep the briefcase with me for the same reason that I think he did: for that one person who crosses my path and looks as if they could use a little hope from a stranger.