

The Old Man's Briefcase

by Scott Cimarusti

He was just an old man sitting at the back of the bus with a battered brown leather briefcase on his lap. There was nothing remarkable about his appearance; he was just another typical frail-looking old man that blends into the crowd like everyone else in a bustling city. But something still drew my gaze to him one day; and ever since then, I found myself seeking him out every time I boarded the bus on my morning commute to work.

I'd been recently divorced and was ostracized by my two teenaged children, thanks to their spiteful mother's brainwashing. Whatever lies my ex-wife told them about me proved to be enough for them to gradually distance themselves from me, to the point that I'm not even sure I would recognize either of them if they took the empty seat next to me on my morning bus ride.

The gradual withdrawal of my children from my life had been the most painful outcome of the divorce for me; moments shared with them had been my one salvation. So, I was feeling increasingly disoriented and helpless. The world had become a very bleak and lonely place for me, and I was beginning to entertain darker thoughts.

That was my mental state when I first noticed the old man with the briefcase.

Whatever the weather, he was always neatly dressed in a coat and tie, his silver hair slicked back off his pink and wrinkled forehead. In the wintertime, he usually wore a salt-and-pepper wool overcoat and a gray fedora. In the spring, it was a beige trench coat with an umbrella hooked over one bony forearm.

And on his lap, his arms wrapped around it almost lovingly, was that battered brown leather briefcase.

As the months marched by, my natural curiosity about what the old man kept inside that briefcase mutated into a strange obsession. In retrospect, I think it was a convenient distraction from the rest of my life unraveling around me. Whatever the reason, one thing was certain: I needed to find out what he kept in there.

Almost a year had slipped by before I finally did it. It was right around the time I was feeling like I had reached the end of my post-divorce rope: exile from my children, a dead-end job, dwindling finances... My darker thoughts had developed into an unhealthy fascination with the handguns displayed in the pawn shop window near my apartment.

Maybe I had nothing to lose by asking the old man about his briefcase.

So when I boarded the bus one morning in late May, I marched down the aisle and plopped down into the seat right next to him. I swallowed hard, took a deep breath, and finally addressed the keeper of the mysterious briefcase that had consumed my thoughts for the past year.

“Good morning.”

He didn’t respond right away. Then he slowly turned to favor me with the first genuine smile I’d received in quite some time—it almost brought me to tears, actually. His eyes beamed at me, and he replied in kind.

“Mornin’.” His voice had a clarity and timbre to it that betrayed his age; light and friendly, yet hinting at considerable wisdom beneath.

I nodded. “Nice day.”

He returned his gaze back out the window. “Not too bad...”

I figured I’d better get to the point quickly before he decided I wasn’t worth his time or his breath. “That’s quite the briefcase you have there.”

He patted it appreciatively. “Indeed it is.”

I tried my best to mask my unhealthy obsession as mere innocent curiosity.

“Looks like it might be time for a new one.”

He shook his head slowly. “I don’t think so. It’s pretty special.”

“So you’ve had it a long time?”

“Just a few years...”

I raised my eyebrows in interest. “Really?” The mystery for me deepened. “I hope you don’t mind my asking, but I was wondering if you could tell me where you got it.” Time for a small white lie. “I wouldn’t mind picking up one for myself; I admire its classic look. I haven’t seen anything like it in ages.”

The old man leveled a knowing gaze at me. I'd overplayed my hand, and he would now politely (or impolitely) extricate himself from my interrogation.

Instead, he chuckled knowingly. "I found it right here on this bus."

"Really?"

"Yup. It was about three years ago... I sat down 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. I took it home with me, planning on bringing it back with me the next day, to see if I could reunite it with its owner. I've had it with me every day for the past three years and no one's claimed it."

"What did you find inside of it?"

"Nothing."

"It was empty?"

"No, it's definitely not empty." He shook it and something audibly shifted inside.

I arched an eyebrow. "You've never opened it?"

"Nope. Never felt the need to."

I blinked at him in disbelief. "But there could be important papers in there... Hell, it could be filled with cash for all you know!"

The old man chuckled. "I know. And that's why I've never opened it."

My eyes narrowed. "I don't understand..."

He traced a calloused and bony finger around the edge of the briefcase's lock, almost caressing it. "As long as whatever's inside remains a mystery to me, I can hang on to the hope that there's something remarkable inside. If I open it, I may find something completely ordinary like some absent-minded businessman's paperwork." His eyes developed a daring twinkle. "This way, I'm never disappointed. And I always have hope."

I was speechless. I didn't know which was more disconcerting; the old man's reason for never opening the briefcase, or the fact that it was actually starting to make sense to me. It was still hard to digest that after all that time wondering, that was the answer to my self-created mystery.

We rode in silence until my stop came. I stood up and peered back at the old man.
“Hope, huh?”

He nodded once.

I shrugged my shoulders. “If you say so.” The bus slowed to a halt. “It was nice to meet you. Thanks for the chat.”

“Nice to meet you, too. Take care.”

Then I was quickly swept away down the aisle by the crowd eager to disembark. As I exited the bus out into the bustling crowd of fellow morning commuters, my thoughts lingered on the old man and his unopened briefcase, and I couldn’t help but manufacture a smile.

The following morning, I stepped aboard the bus on my way to work, my eyes once again seeking out the old man.

But this time his seat was as empty as toothless smile.

I came to a shocked halt before quickly heading for the conspicuously unoccupied seat where the old man usually sat. As I closed the distance, I discovered the seat wasn’t really vacant.

His briefcase was there.

The bus resumed its route, and I slid into the seat next to the briefcase, still looking around for the old man. I even went so far as to spend the rest of that day on that bus (calling in sick to work to do so) in the hopes that on one of its stops, that now familiar face would emerge into view and claim his abandoned briefcase.

I wound up taking the briefcase home with me that evening, thinking that I could return it to its rightful owner the following morning. But the old man’s customary seat was vacant again the next day, and the rest of the week, too.

It’s been almost three years now since I discovered the orphaned briefcase—about as long as the old man had it—and several times I’ve come close to finally opening the damned thing and finding out once and for all what’s inside it.

But I can’t bring myself to do it.

I still bring it with me on the bus each day, though, in the hopes that I can someday return it to the kind stranger who left me with something more than a battered old piece of luggage. But with each day that passes, the chances of that seem less and less likely.

And that's not a bad thing. I get the feeling that the old man doesn't need it anymore; and that maybe he left it for me because he suspected that I'd needed the briefcase more than he did.

And for that I am eternally grateful.

I hope someday I can do the same for someone else who might be in need of a little hope.