**When I was Little, I Hated Brown Paper Bags**

By M. Page Jones

When I was little, I hated brown paper bags.

Whenever one appeared, I knew I was off to a new foster home. At the tender age of 2 years old, I was taken from my father who had badly neglected me and placed into the local children’s home. There were about 20 of us ranging from infants to pre-teens, all wards of the state either due to loss of parents, given up for adoption or being forcibly removed from home.

When a foster home became available, a staff member would come get you from your room and take you down to the basement. There were large tables covered with plastic bins filled with donated shoes and clothes. We would walk over to a large sign on the wall, find your age, and a list of what you were allowed to take with you.

“Girl 1-5 years old: one pair of shoes, two pairs of pants, two shirts, two dresses (if there were any which often there were not), three pairs of underwear and two pairs of socks,” they would read aloud.

No toys or stuffed animals were permitted to go with you. Just the basics.

 They would open the brown paper bag and unceremoniously dump all of it in. They then would hand it and me to a case worker who would chauffeur me to my new home. The ride would be accompanied by the case worker overly reassuring me that I would love my new family and home while I stared in silence out the car window.

After the first two foster homes, I grew to hate the sound of the bag being opened, the crackle it made when it was being filled, and even the feel of it as it was placed beside me in the car going to somewhere I knew nothing about, knew nothing of its occupants and didn’t know how long I would be there.

I would arrive at my new home, meet the people there and go help unpack the bag. Five foster homes in 3 months later and just when I’d got the routine down, I was adopted by a very kind man and a very unkind woman.

The crinkled brown bag I arrived with was thrown away and I no longer needed one as a substitute suitcase. I was home.

I then grew up in a very small town of about 100 people in Chesterville, Ohio. The family I was adopted into had a lot of relatives in this town. My grandparents (my new father’s parents) who I adored. A few aunts and uncles and several cousins made up about 15% of the town’s population. It wasn’t a bad place to live. It was safe and everyone knew everyone and everyone’s business.

By the age of 14, I had gotten over my hate for paper bags and began to hate brown cardboard boxes instead.

I got my first job at the local nursing home across from my grandparents’ house. When you opened the front door, a waft of impending death hit you in the face. It smelled like mothballs, ammonia, urine, and something I could never put my finger on.

I loved old people and hated children. This was for 2 reasons. One is that when you spend time in a children’s home that is understaffed, children run free, and infants never seem to stop crying. Second, I had started to take care of myself when I was 2 1/2 because my father was drunk a lot and not feeding me. I would eat peanuts or pretzels and sip soda from the bar that we lived above. My teeth started to turn black, and my hair began to fall out. Eventually, the bartender couldn’t take it anymore and called the authorities.

So, I hadn’t really been raised as a little girl should be with tea sets, nighttime stories, and lots of hugs and kisses. I was an old soul stuffed into a youngster’s body. That’s why I preferred older people.

I had been going to the nursing home on my own on Saturdays for months before being hired to play the old worn-out piano they had in the dining hall. I would play hymns and some classical music. When the first notes were played, residents would begin shuffling in. It made me feel happy to make them feel happy.

I soon had my regulars. There was the old woman who would sit beside me on the bench and place her hands over mine while I played as if she were playing instead of me. Then there was the singer. A rather large woman in a wheelchair who would sing and hum her way through the songs. She would close her eyes and sway back and forth to the music. Then came another woman who looked like if you talked too loudly, it would blow her over. She loved to walk over to the piano bench and would touch my hair and call me Susan. I imagined that would have been her daughter who must have had long blonde hair like me. A rail-thin man would wander in and out of the room. Sometimes he would yell at one of the ladies then with a dismissive wave wander back out.

My favorite was the “Yip!” lady. You could often hear her coming down the hallway. As she rolled her wheelchair closer, she would yell “Yip!”. Then randomly in the middle of a song she would yell it again. I asked the people who worked there why she did that. They said she had dementia and seemed to have lost her vocabulary so “yip” was her go-to word for everything.

At the end of every song, some residents would clap, some would call out a request, but I always got a good loud “yip!”.

One day, my grandmother told me that they were looking for someone to deliver meals to rooms for those residents who couldn’t or preferred not to leave their rooms for dinner. She encouraged me to apply. My parents had to sign paperwork since I was under the age of employment but soon, I was hired.

They gave me a large heavy metal cart that was 3 shelves high and a good foot and half taller than me. At the top were the beverages, then the other two shelves were full of plastic trays topped with clear plastic covers to keep the food warm. Just like the walls, they were this hideous shade of pea green that made every meal look unappetizing beside the fact that all the meals were in fact unappetizing. Everything was colorless and had been mashed and was often covered with a watery pale gravy.

Soon I had my routine down and had met the colorful characters that I delivered dinner to Monday through Friday. There were two main hallways with about 10 rooms to each of them and all were double occupancy.

I liked to get Mr. Frank’s delivery done first to get it over with. Mr. Frank had a habit of trying to corner the women who worked there and touch them. He preferred breasts but being in a wheelchair it was harder to reach them if someone was just passing by. And honestly, I was a late bloomer so there was really nothing to grab.

At dinnertime, he would wait just behind his bedroom door. You had to almost sprint into the room and try to time it so that the tray was set on the table beside his bed, race back to the door and just make it through the narrow crack that was rapidly closing, or he would grab your butt or hip or whatever he could reach. I might add that no one warned me of this on my first day.

Soon I was doing almost a dance with him in and out of his room. He got frustrated that I caught on and started to wait behind the main double doors leading down the individual hallways. I wasn’t as quick with the heavy cart so sometimes as people heard the creaking of the wheels on the cart coming down a hallway, it would be followed by a loud cackle of delight.

Then there was the lovely Miss June. Her roommate had died recently so she was delighted when someone came to her room since she was now so lonely. She would take your hand and stroke it when you placed the tray down and tell you how pretty you were. Her room was full of pictures of family and on top of every surface was a white crotched doille.

My favorite room was Mr. David and Mr. John. They had been roommates for over 5 years and were best of friends. Mr. David was wheelchair bound and had the kindest eyes. He always wore a button up cardigan and a plaid shirt. His silver hair and dark rim glasses made him look quite handsome. His face would light up when I came into the room.

Mr. John who was still slightly mobile would jump up as fast as he could and insist on helping me with the trays. He wore suspenders every day that strained a bit to keep his pants up just under his large round tummy. I would slip them both an extra pudding or dinner roll and we would all put our index fingers to our lips and vow silence.

As I would swing back around to collect the now empty trays, I would go to their room last. We would sit and talk while they pulled out the chess board and began to set up the pieces for their nightly chess match. Mr. David would torment Mr. John with jokes about how bad his playing was. He would say things like telling him where to put the pieces because he said he played so badly he must not know how the game worked. He would then wink at me, and we would laugh.

“Miss Melissa, do you know how to play?” he asked me one night.

“No, but I would love to learn,” I replied.

“Come some weekend and I’ll teach you. I’d have him teach you but I’m not quite sure he knows how to play.”

Mr. John grunted at the comment and reminded him that he’d won the last 2 games.

“Playing with David is like playing checkers with a toddler. No mind game, just sloppy moves!”

It was about 2 months of working there when I had rolled the cart outside of Mr. David and Mr. John’s room to retrieve their trays. Mr. David was coughing a lot and hadn’t really touched his meal. The extra pudding was sitting untouched by his tray. I looked over to Mr. John and his face was somber and his eyes full of concern. I watched them start to play a game, but Mr. David soon put his black king piece down and forfeited.

“Finally conceding that I’m the better player?” Mr. John asked trying to get a rise out of him.

“It appears so, my old friend, “Mr. David replied. “Who knew that day would every come!”

They both laughed and I laughed along with them, but we all didn’t feel any joy behind it. As I went to leave, Mr. David grabbed my hand. He smiled at me and said, “We need to get you playing chess. Mr. John’s got too good for me.” I vowed to make it soon, gave him a hug and left the room.

That was on a Friday and since I didn’t work Saturdays and Sundays, I didn’t get back to the nursing home until Monday night. I did all the other deliveries and then headed off to Mr. John and Mr. David’s room. I wheeled the cart to the right of the door and grabbed two trays. I walked in and stopped.

There was only Mr. John in the room. Mr. David’s bed had been stripped of the linens. A large cardboard box with his name written on it with black marker rested on the bare mattress.

I didn’t want to look at Mr. John because I knew when I did, I’d see the truth. I set Mr. David’s tray down on the small table they used to share between them. I then slowly turned and put Mr. John’s tray on his side of the table. We both sat silently and still and stared at the empty seat next to him.

As I arranged the silverware and the water glass, a tear fell right into Mr. John’s mashed potatoes. Then another one on his napkin. His hand reached out and took mine and we both quietly cried.

I hadn’t even known he was sick. Yes, his appetite had been off for a couple of weeks but to my 14-year-old brain it just didn’t compute. And up to that point, I’d only lost relatives that I really didn’t know and who had lived far away. This was my first real taste of death right in my young face.

“You know he cared about you a lot. You were such sunshine when you came to our room. Something to look forward to in this place where we all come to die,” he whispered to me.

“I-I never came to learn chess. I let him down. And now—” I whispered back.

“Oh, honey, you’re young and have things to do and a life to live. He understood.”

I was glad he did because I didn’t.

The next day as I came back to the room, a woman wearing lots of jewelry and with long brightly painted nails was there. She was tossing all his clothes onto the mattress and left all the drawers open and the hangers on the floor. She called one of the workers in. “Just give his clothes to someone here. I’m not taking that stuff with me,” she ordered.

She began to toss Mr. David’s books, his small model cars that he hand painted, a hairbrush with shiny silver hair in it, and a framed photo of his beloved wife into the box. She apparently was in a big hurry and didn’t even speak to Mr. John or me.

I put the tray down for Mr. John and ignored her as well. I could feel my face getting warm as I fought to hold in angry words. I wanted to scream at her. I wanted her filthy hands off of our friend’s belongings.

After much mumbling to herself about how everything in this family was always her responsibility and she was sick of it, she looked around the room and saw the chess set.

“Was this his or yours?” she spat at Mr. John.

“It was David’s,” Mr. John softly replied.

With one fell swoop, she lifted the board and callously dumped the pieces into the box. All the plastic black and white pawns, knights, bishops and more seemed to fall in slow motion. This was followed by dramatically snapping the paper board shut and shoving it inside the barely filled box. She looked around, sighed heavily and then grabbed it and briskly walked out of the door leaving a cloud of heavy perfume as she went.

We both looked at each other in a bit of shock and around the room where no sign of Mr. David remained. How could someone, a stranger, come into this lovely room full of memories and laughter and friendship and hours of chess and just throw all of that into a box like it had no meaning?

I don’t know if all families have one, but I call them the “Vultures of Death”. That one family member who never or rarely visits an elderly aunt or uncle or mom or dad, but the day they die, they start to pull together dozens of cardboard boxes. The very next day, they arrive and start putting items in boxes marked “trash”, “donate”, or “keep”. The keep pile always ended up at their house where they would promptly sell everything they didn’t like and retain the rest.

I discovered this when my Great Aunt Linnie passed away. I adored her and spent hours sewing and piecing together quilts. I loved listening to her stories of growing up in a West Virginia coal mining town. I found her tiny trailer that often smelled of gas fumes and moth balls to be a haven from my house where the unkind lady lived.

She passed and the day after, this Aunt Vulture of Death swooped in and began to reenact what that other woman had done. Tossing in knitting needles, scraps of fabric and little glass figurines. Pulling out housecoats and dresses and throwing them in the “donate” box. Deciding what was trash and what was going home with her even though she had never visited my great aunt. Not once that I knew of.

Great Aunt Linnie had promised an antique doll to me that had been hers for decades. This vulture grabbed it out of my hands and tossed it into a box and stating loudly that I was not allowed to take one thing. I began to quietly cry and began to walk out of the door where I had spent so much time. My grandma took one look at me and asked her daughter to go get something for her in the back room. Then she snatched the doll out of the box, shoved it into my hands and whispered “run”!

Over the next few months, I saw a few more boxes at the nursing home before I had to quit the job. I accidentally bumped the cart into a heavy hallway door that Mr. Frank had started to push open. The hot beverages that were on the top shelf fell over and scalding hot water went down my back and legs and into my shoes. I came out with second degree burns. The nursing home freaked due to my age and fear of being sued.

But honestly, I was sort of glad. I could never get past all this death. I know, it is a nursing home, and its sole purpose is to comfortably house people until they die. But one moment a soul would be there, and the next it was all over but the box in the room.

Over the years, brown paper bags brought groceries and cardboard boxes meant moving to a new apartment or house. The bad connotations faded, after all they were both just vehicles to carry things around. Things we can’t take with us when we die.

It’s the memories of chess games with charming insults between two old friends and quilting while listening to stories of growing up from a sweet great aunt that remain. Everything else is just meant for brown paper bags and cardboard boxes.