

My Vacation

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My teenage brother sent me on a vacation

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I was sitting on the sofa trying to remember what I did with the dollar I had remaining from my allowance. My mother and sister had looked in my chest drawers where I thought I had put it but they couldn't find it. I had to give it back to my mother as a fine for forgetting about the letter she gave me to mail on my way to school.

I was stuck on the sofa, my mind wandering. I kept giving up trying to find the dollar. It had evaporated. But my mother kept coming back to ask me where it was. I can understand now why she wouldn't believe me. After all, many times I had lied about losing things, and many times she found them hidden somewhere, like the letter today. I told her I mailed it, but she found it in the bottom of my book bag. This time the dollar really had vanished.

My brother came home, surprised to see me in the same place as when he left. I gave him sad eyes and he winked at me. He was trouble. Our mother said so. He would think of a way out of this. He sat with me and I assured him that I didn't know where the dollar was. He believed me because I never lied to him. Our mother found him sitting with me and chased him out of the room. I returned to my daydreams of hanging out with my friends.

I ate dinner there on the sofa, and even had to sleep there. My mother meant it when she said that I would stay there until I found the dollar. When everyone had gone to bed, I lay on my back and tried to get comfortable. I listened to my family's sounds as they used the bathroom and moved around in their rooms. The sofa smelled like my mother's cigarettes. I liked it. I heard the traffic on the avenue splashing in the rain. Light speckled the ceiling in stripes that fit between the slats of the blinds. I guessed which sign each color of light came from as my eyes closed and I fell asleep.

The next morning, my mother had to let us go with our father for visitation. She let me take a shower and change my clothes, and warned me that I would come home and sit on the sofa again until I found the dollar. My brother's eyes sparkled. I knew he would help me.

The three of us, my brother sister and I, walked to the subway station. Our mother didn't go with us any more. We were grown up enough to go alone, and she really didn't want to see our father. She didn't want to hear anything about him or what we did while we were with him. As soon as we turned the corner on the way to the subway station, when we were completely out of earshot from our mother, my brother let our sister walk ahead of us. She usually walked ahead. She liked to arrive early wherever she went. Then he let me in on his plan.

He handed me an envelope full of money with a map. He told me I was going on a vacation. He explained how I was going to get there and where I was going to stay, but it all sounded like gibberish to me. My ears clouded shut. A vacation? By myself? My head reeled, but I had to refocus now that we were at the stairs to the subway station. Our father was by the turnstiles waiting for us.

It was my sister's turn to choose where to go, so we sat on the platform bench while she looked through the magazine and newspaper listings that our father brought. My brother and I rolled our eyes as she gradually narrowed down the possibilities. My brother pestered her, begging her to pick one of the places she was choosing between, but she never gave him his choice. He winked at me and I knew that he really wanted to go where she finally chose. I laughed to myself. He was always on top of things.

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So, we went to the New York Public Library. You know the big one with the big lions. I scowled the whole way, but when I got there, I enjoyed it just as much as if I had been the one who chose it. I would have enjoyed it more, but I got a feeling of lead in my stomach when I thought of the envelope my brother gave me. I couldn't get lost in any books. I turned pages of books from the history section, and flipped through pictures in art books. I started to go to the Travel Book section and then didn't dare get near it. What if someone caught me and found my envelope and figured out what I was doing? I didn't even know what I was doing. Surely my brother knew what he was doing. I was counting on it.

When it was time to go home, my brother told me to stay close to him. No problem! He was always fun to be with when his friends weren't around. We got on the train. I went to sit, but my brother told our father we were going to walk to the back car, so we did. We watched the red and white lights go away, and stared into the darkness of the tunnel. I liked feeling the rumble of the train and the gentle swaying. When the train stopped, he told me to get off. What? He was absolutely serious. He told me I'd be alright and I decided to believe him. So I got off.

The train doors shut and I watched it pull away. I got out the map. It said I would start at Grand Central Station. Yup. This was the Grand Central Station stop. It said to get a ticket to Boston, Massachusetts. So I went to the ticket counter and got a round-trip ticket to Boston. I looked at the board and saw that the next train left in 30 minutes. That gave me enough time to buy something to eat at Zabar's. I looked at the dark soft pumpernickle, the shiny fruit fillings, the flakey and crumbly crusts, but nothing appealed to me. How strange. I went to the platform and found the train waiting so I got on and settled into an empty seat. I was due in to Boston just before midnight. It would be a long ride in the dark. I read the next part of the map, trying to have fun with this. I was going to stay at a hotel that was a few blocks from the train station.

A woman plopped down next to me. Oh no! What if she asks questions? But she opened a paperback novel, read for a while, and fell asleep.

The train rumbled along. I had chosen a seat on the left side of the train so I could see the Hudson River. Even at night, I liked looking at it. I liked the lights reflecting on the river. We passed a couple bridges. They twinkled in the dusky light. We went by old train stations. I imagined ladies in long dresses and men in suits with children dressed like them standing on the platforms. They had suitcases like the ones my mother stored in the "attic" closet. I pretended to be sitting on one of the old wicker bench seats. Those must have been prickly like the old wicker chairs at home.

Finally we got to Boston. I wanted to look around on my way to my hotel room, but I was tired and just wanted to settle in. If my brother was there, we would have walked all over until dawn. In the morning I would walk around so I could tell him what I saw.

I got to the hotel and checked in. I gave a fake address and phone number so they wouldn't call home. I went up the elevator, found my room, and got ready for bed. I lay on my back staring at the ceiling. I was a million miles from home. I listened to the people in the hallway and the muffled traffic below. Some people came off the elevator and made a lot of noise for a while. I didn't like when they banged on my door, but then all was quiet out there. I rolled on to my side and fell asleep.

I woke up and saw that it was bright outside. I was starving. I washed up, put yesterday's clothes back on, and looked in the envelope. I had lots of money left. The map said to get back on the train in time to be home for dinner. I went to look for something to eat. In the lobby I saw tables set up and a breakfast buffet. It had everything I would normally like for breakfast - eggs, toast, waffles, sausage - but that lump of lead was still in my stomach. I went back to the elevators, got a candy bar and a soda from the vending machines, and went back to my room to eat. The candy bar went quickly so I got another one, and then another one. I lay down on the bed trying to figure out what to do. I needed to know what time to be on the train, so I jumped up and went

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to the station. I had 3 hours. I sat in the station for a while watching the people. I went to the platform where my train would be to make sure I could find it. I had 2 ½ hours left. I decided to walk for an hour and then walk back. When I got to the street, a car stopped and the driver asked me for directions. I told him I didn't know how to get to where he was going. He offered me a ride and I said no thanks. He persisted, following me along the street. There must not have been much traffic yet that early in the day. I kept telling him that I didn't need a ride, that I lived just up ahead. Suddenly he took off. Someone tapped my shoulder. I turned around and a cop stood there.

â Is that man bothering you?â Was he going to go chase him?

â No. He just offered me a ride.â I just wanted to be left alone.

â Show me some ID.â I opened my wallet and handed him my Social Security card.

â How come it isn't signed?

â My mother told me not to sign it until I've grown up because my signature will change.â My teeth were chattering though I wasn't cold.

â Have a seat.â He opened the back door of his car. I got to see Boston out the window; its brownness, dark windows and quiet streets.

He took me to the police station and led me to a seat in a room with a man sitting behind a very high desk.

â Where are you from?

â New York City.

â Manhattan?

â Yes.

â Where are your parents?

â Home in Manhattan.

â Do they know where you are?

â Yes.â Maybe I didn't lie. Maybe my brother told them.

He asked me a bunch of other questions like my phone number and my mother's name. He called her and got a busy signal.

â Why is the phone busy?

â Someone must be talking with someone.â All I saw was the front of the desk. It was a tall dark wood wall. I didn't want to be there. Something felt comforting about it until I realized they could put me in jail.

He called a number to verify the phone listing and busy signal, then got an operator to interrupt the call and say that she had an emergency call to connect. He talked with my mother, reassured her I was alright, and made arrangements for her to meet me at Grand Central Station when the next train arrived. That was awful.

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She was going to be so mad at me, but how else could I get home?

The police officer took me to the Boston train station and waited with me for the next train. He was surprised I hadn't done any sight-seeing when I was there. He told me about the places I should go to the next time I'm in Boston. His voice blurred but I smiled and nodded.

He watched me get on the train, and stood by the door until it left the station. He looked much nicer now. His face was round, pink and shiny. His head was shaved like his face. His pants bulged from his billy club, gun and radio. He was otherwise tall and slim like my father.

The scenery went by as a blur. When I had to change trains at Albany, my Uncle George was there. I was afraid to cry and didn't. He just walked with me to the train that would take me home, talked about nothing, and waited with me until my train left.

When we got to the tunnel as we approached Grand Central Station, I strained my eyes to see where my mother was waiting. I jumped each time we got to a platform. I never realized how many platforms we had to pass before we got to Grand Central. At last we arrived at our platform. I walked out the door and saw her running toward me. I ran toward her, our arms open. We held each other, sobbing.

I didn't have to sit on the sofa until the next time I got in trouble.

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