

The Shopping Bag

© by Dorothy Winslow Wright

Her eyes were good. Ma Crowder, for all her sleepy-eyed presence, didn't miss a thing. It was her way of relaxing. With eyes almost closed she watched through slits-- watched her cart, her bags and, most of all, her precious space. She'd had it a long time and those in her environs had learned to let her be, except for a newby every now and then, who thought he or she might encroach on Ma's small protected corner. The wall of a storehouse was beside her. To its left, a cement three-foot wall extended to a side street. Above the wall rose a heavy wire fence, allowing a modicum of air in the heat of summer. It was enough. She could rest when the headaches came.

It had taken a while to create her own domain, having figured out its potential while Liz and Tony, a hippie couple occupied the packing crate in the corner. They were so drugged out they didn't care what their surroundings were or how much closer Ma Crowder moved her belongings to theirs. At night they curled up in each other's arms like puppies or kittens—innocents unaware of what the world could do to them. Ma felt compassion for them but didn't let it show. It wasn't wise to show compassion. Not in her world. But she felt it. That she wouldn't deny.

She respected their privacy. If they spoke, she conversed, but didn't encourage closeness. All she wanted was to be kind, and next in line when they vacated the premises, which they did when Liz became pregnant. Back when Tony took off. A few days later Liz left and that was that. In parting, Liz said, "It's all yours, Ma," then added "Thanks for keeping me safe."

Ma Crowder puzzled over that as she moved into the packing crate. It wasn't much, but was sturdy and had a pair of ribs, a decided plus, offering stability when it rained. It didn't take her long to replace the shredded plastic. She was shrewd. Kept her eyes on the dumpster. When someone tossed in a Hefty trash bag, she wasn't above shaking out its contents and making use of the bag.

Settled in, with the plastic tucked in place, she had a home. Others who lived around her recognized her stability. To them she was mother, grandmother, "the elder," and even though they weren't above pilfering from each other they left Ma alone. She didn't bother them and they didn't bother her. Although she had a speaking acquaintance with those nearby, she kept the talk impersonal. No one would know of her past and she didn't want to know theirs. It was safer that way.

From her signature semi-sleep posture she watched a sleek gray Taurus stop at the curb. The driver looked around, slipped out of the car and tossed a shopping bag into the dumpster—a Saks Fifth Avenue Outlet bag. Ma tried not to show too much interest, but she couldn't wait for the woman to leave and snatch the bag before someone else did. In her younger days, she had walked by Saks, dreaming of buying a pretty scarf when she could afford it. She wished they'd had an outlet store then.

But that was the past. This is now, and there had to be something interesting in that bag. The woman who left it had class. Probably in her thirties. Maybe a mother of a couple of kids. Who knows, maybe it was lingerie she'd bought to entertain a lover, then had second thoughts. "You're back in dreamland, Molly," her mother used to say when she went off on flights of fancy.

When the car turned the corner, Ma Crowder limped to the dumpster and grabbed the bag. A recent deposit, it hadn't picked up the dumpster smells. Walking back, she hugged the bag close to her chest. It was soft and quashy—a beautiful somewhat new pink-flowered flannel blanket. Why did the woman toss it out? It was high quality from some fancy store. But that wasn't Ma's concern. The blanket was hers now, and she thought of how comfortable it would be under her head that night.

Then she felt the hardness. She reached into a fold and touched a gun. Stunned, she pulled her hand back, trembling as flashing memories clouded her thinking. She left it right where it was until dark. Later, as her neighbors settled down in their own fuzzy worlds, she slipped the gun into her sack of clothing and tossed it aside. She would dispose of it tomorrow and that would be the end of it. With her well-honed discipline, she put thoughts of the gun aside, plumped the blanket into pillow shape and laid down to sleep.

The blanket smelled like Downy, the softener she used in her washing machine. She hadn't thought of that in years. Wished she hadn't now. Her past wasn't worth remembering. But this blanket was. She drifted off to sleep enjoying the softness.

Sometime in the night, a husky voice said, "Wake up, Ma." It was Brian, the red-haired policeman on the beat, poking her with his night stick. "The blanket you're sleeping on. Where did you get it?"

She sat up and saw two people standing beside the policeman. One was the woman who had dropped the bag in the dumpster, shivering like a scared rabbit, the other an angry-looking Wall Street type who looked as if a blood vessel was about to burst.

“From the dumpster,” Ma said, “and I didn’t steal it. You know me better than that, Brian. I don’t steal.” She felt her temper rising. In all the time she’d lived on that block, no one had ever accused her of anything, and this was down-right humiliating. And right here in front of her neighbors.

In their hierarchy, those who had no problems with the cops were on the top of the social ladder, and Ma wasn’t about to be toppled. She might not have much in material things, but she had earned her position of respect and this brash policeman was bringing her down.

“Calm down, Ma,” he said. “I know you didn’t steal anything. We’re just looking for a blanket, and this woman recognized yours as the one she lost, along with some other items. She said she threw away the bag with the blanket by mistake, instead of the one full of disposable items. All she wants is the bag and its contents.”

“I threw everything away but the blanket. That’s all I wanted. What would I want with a bunch of fancy duds from Saks.” As she spoke, the woman closed her eyes and mouthed the words “thank you.”

“Thanks, Ma,” Brian said. “Go back to sleep. Sorry to have bothered you.”

“Want the blanket?”

“No,” the woman said. “You keep it. It’s the least we can do for disturbing you.”

Ma Crowder tried to settle down, but she couldn’t forget the woman’s eyes. Terrified eyes. She didn’t know what her connection was with the gun, but she felt the woman hadn’t done anything wrong. Ma may have messed up her own life, but it wasn’t from doing wrong. It was for doing the right things and accepting the consequences for

her acts. She felt a kinship with this woman—Katie Bronson was her name, and she was in some sort of crisis.

She could hear Brian talking with the couple telling them that he would check the dumpster in the mornng, and it would be sealed until then. Mr. Bronson didn't see why it couldn't be done then, but Brian was adamant. He'd have it guarded. It was the best he could do.

Mr. Bronson grabbed his wife by the arm and led her back to the car. He opened the door and shoved her in, saying something Ma was glad she couldn't hear. That young woman was in trouble. She closed her eyes and shuddered. Hoped that Kate wouldn't feel the pain she remembered from her own past. Instinctively, Ma lifted her hand to her ear, as if to ease the pain from the punch that had knocked her out. It had taken weeks before she was well from the injuries suffered at the hands of her once-husband.

It was still so clear in her mind. Her husband Stanley had come home with a gun. Had spun it around on his finger and shot at the light in their bedroom. What Stan was high on, she wasn't sure. She also knew that he might shoot her, or the children, so when he fell asleep, she buried the gun in the garbage pail. She knew he wouldn't think of looking there. He might tear the house apart, but coffee grounds and eggshells were repellant to him.

Stan never found the gun, but beat her senseless trying to worm the truth out of her. When the police came, he never mentioned the gun. He said she'd gone beserk. Said she threw a lamp at him. Threatened to kill him and the children. That she was a mental case, and had been for years, but he had taken care of her and hoped no one would find out.

By the time she was well, the divorce was underway. She was given a lump sum payment and alimony for two years, hoping as the judge said, “to put her life in order.” She was allowed visitations once a month.

She visited them just once, and wished she hadn't. Her children were shy, holding back, obviously afraid of her. In the few months she was hospitalized, she assumed they had been told that she had tried to kill their father, and possibly them, but they were saved by their father's quick actions. It was a stupid story, one Ma was sure they would see through when they were older, but she saw that they were happy with their grandparents, who didn't know the truth of things. She also knew she was in no shape to fight for them, or to care for them should she win. For her babies' good, she gave them up. They would be reared well and could possibly be happy, as her husband was before he fell into his drug habit. As for him, the judicial system acted fairly. They felt his abuse was excessive, even if done in self-preservation, and was not given custody. He, too, had supervised visitations.

Ma stayed in a rooming house for a while, but couldn't hold a job. The headaches recurred, her concentration was poor, making her an unreliable employee. After having lost too many jobs, she turned to shelters. She could have had help had she gone to the right people, but she was sick and tired of the questions, the preaching, and all the pep-talks. She knew they were meant kindly, but all she wanted was to be left alone.

One morning she walked out of a shelter to a nearby park, sat on a sun-warmed bench and watched woman walk by with a shopping cart of her personal belongings, Ma Crowder followed her. She discovered where and how homeless people lived. Where there were toilets; where she could get a shower; where there were free meals; how to

garner a little money without heading into theft or prostitution. In other words, she learned how to live on the streets, as she had been doing for the last ten years.

The day after the blanket incident, Kate reappeared. She handed Ma an envelope with five and ten dollar bills, her soft hand enfolding the older woman's for just a second. Kate said, "When we went home last night, I told my husband I had thrown the gun away because I was afraid of what it might do to our marriage. I told him a story I wasn't sure he'd believe ... but he did. He also promised never to bring a gun into our home again." She paused, then added, "My mother and father were divorced over a gun. He nearly killed her, and she was too shattered to expose the truth of things, so she walked out of my life and that of my brothers." Her eyes glossed with unshed tears, she said quietly, "I couldn't let that happen to our family. That shouldn't happen to any children."

Ma Crowder looked at this beautiful woman dressed in clothes from a Saks outlet store. She was solid; she had a strong sense of values. She could be her daughter, but she wasn't about to explore that possibility. It was best left unsaid, but when she went to lie down that night, her cheek soft against the pink-flowered blanket, she had no trouble falling to sleep.

The next day, after the police had completed their inspection, Ma Crowder wrapped the gun in an old MacDonald's bag and tossed it into the dumpster. It was where it belonged.

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