

THE MISSING SUITCASE

by

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What do you pack when you have four minutes to leave?

After various treatments of chemo, surgery and radiation, Alice's breast Cancer had been in remission. The family was prayerfully thankful and happy to hear the good news. But three years later, in January 2022, the family learned that the disease had returned with a vengeance and spread to other parts of her body. Alice was flown to a cancer treatment hospital in Albany, New York to obtain a second opinion and run additional tests. There were few remaining options. Alice refused to continue with any additional form of chemo treatments. She became upset, fearful and angry. She was in a terminal state and entered Hospice care.

Despite her grim prognosis, Alice was bent on fighting the disease. After returning to her home on Saint Thomas in February, she became weaker and weaker each day. Many prayers were offered on her behalf. When her Aunt Lucinda received the news of Alice's rapid deteriorating condition, she promptly researched flight reservations, on line, with thoughts of visiting Alice.

American Airlines, Flight 2294 was scheduled to depart from Austin-Bergstrom International Airport at 7:16 am. It was now 4:30 am, and Lucinda, a retired, but active woman in her early seventies, was still in bed. "Oh, my Lord, the alarm did not go off," she mumbled, reaching for the dependable, General Electric clock on her night stand. This clock had served her for over two decades and had faithfully awoken her for work, on time, over the years. Had it reached the end of its life cycle, she wondered. She had made a long grocery list and did some shopping the day before, to insure

there was enough food in the house for her spouse's meals, while she was gone. By 9pm, the night before her flight, Lucinda had carefully packed a small carry-on suitcase before retiring early, in preparation for her flight in the morning. An early morning, low-traffic, drive to the airport normally takes about forty-five minutes. The perfect planner, always allowing extra time for the unforeseen, she reminded her spouse, Virgil to set the alarm to sound at 3 am.

Get some rest and don't worry, instructed Virgil, a late night person, who usually watched the Sports channel before going to bed at midnight. I'll wake you at 3 in the morning. What happened? Did he fall asleep and forgot to set the alarm? Am I dreaming, Lucinda mumbled, turning on the lights. Did I ask Virgil to set the alarm? Maybe I forgot to set the alarm! Was I experiencing the beginning stage of Dementia? She was at the likely age for this to occur. Her mother, who passed in the summer of 1980 at the young age of 64, had suffered from the onset of the disease. Could this be happening to me, she wondered. "Virgil, It's 4:30 am! I'm going to miss my flight!" Virgil, still half asleep, but conscious of his back problem, turned slowly before getting out of bed.

It was a mid- February, Winter morning in the Hill country of Liberty Hill, Texas and the air was chilly. The CBS Austin early morning weather channel reported unusually, icy road conditions. Of course there was ice on the windshield and windows of the 2010 Dodge Caliber, which was parked overnight in the driveway, and usually requires a little boost on cold days. Virgil exchanged his PJ's for a pair of old warm-up pants. "I'll scrape the ice and turn on the windshield defroster, and we can be on our way to the Airport. How long will it take you to get dressed," he asked calmly. I'll be ready in about ten minutes, Lucinda instantly replied, as she hurried to the bathroom.

Lucinda was frantic. I don't have time to take a shower, she thought out loud, as she quickly brushed her teeth. She started to get dressed, but suddenly turned and pivoted to the Den to grab her suitcase which she had packed hours before, or had she? She remembered the few contents of the suitcase...medications, a bathing suit, slip-on sandals, a set of casual interchangeable clothes and a few

toiletries. After all, she was going to visit with family in her childhood home, and didn't need to take much of anything. What she didn't pack could be obtained at the family's home on the island.

"You took my luggage to the car," she shouted, more in a statement than a question form. "Not yet," Virgil calmly echoed. "Where is my suitcase, then?" she asked. I don't know, he replied. Where did you leave it before going to bed? I thought I left it here in the Den, but it's not here! Ok.

I'll look for it, while you get dressed. It has to be here somewhere. Virgil looked in the Den, in the bedroom and again, in the hallway. The suitcase was no where to be found. We must leave the house in four minutes if you hope to make your flight. Ok. I'm just about done, as soon as we locate the suitcase we can leave. It's already packed!

This was going to be a short mission trip to visit her sick niece on the picturesque island of Saint Thomas in the U S Virgin Islands, a top rated Caribbean Resort. Since it's a U S Territory, American citizens are granted the opportunity and flexibility to enjoy a Caribbean vacation without ever needing a passport. Except for the current Covid-19 protocol, requiring a fully vaccinated visitor to present a Negative test taken within 24 hours, anyone who visits Saint Thomas will find an idyllic island vacation destination with warm, friendly inhabitants, excellent food, incredible resorts, with many beautiful, sunny, romantic, and sandy beaches. Lucinda could use such a relaxing beach day, especially on a cold winter's morning, like the present.

This trip was not going to be the usual excursion to Lucinda's native home, where she grew up before relocating to the US Mainland in the early 70's to pursue a college education. Two of her siblings, nieces, nephews and other relatives still live on the island. After several unrelenting hurricanes devastated and damaged numerous homes and structures on the island in recent years, the family's three-story home is still standing, and livable, although needing some repairs. The 2,170 sq ft

home was built by Alice's grandfather, her dad, and expert contractors in 1964. As a pre-teenager, Lucinda lived on the third level of this beautiful home with her parents, and siblings. The second and third floors each consisted of four bedrooms, two baths, living room, dining room, kitchen and a front porch, overlooking the downtown, waterfront highway. The first level was initially the family's Mom & Pop Store, operated by Lucinda's parents. After both parents passed, the first floor was later converted to an efficiency unit and became a rental along with the second floor. Relatives are always welcomed to stay on the 3rd level of the family's house, when they visit home.

Happy images of her beloved brother's daughter flashed before her. A vibrant, strong, opinionated young woman in her prime, at age 50, Alice was Lucinda's maternal grandmother's namesake. As was family tradition, many of Lucinda's siblings and their offspring were named after grandparents, uncles and aunts. As the story goes, Alice's dad, David (Lucinda's late brother), was named after one his paternal uncles, but because other cousins carried the same first name, David was called by his middle name, Lanswell. He was the most loving and caring of Lucinda's four brothers. Alice, most likely, inherited her father's loving and caring personality. You couldn't help but love her.

It's hard to believe, once strong and dependable, Alice was terminally ill. As soon as her aunt Lucinda received the heartbreaking news, she knew what had to be done. "I must visit Alice as soon as possible," she informed her spouse. After checking online two days later, Lucinda found a flight with a connection via Miami, Florida. She realized winter months are the tourists season and airline rates are expected to be high, but it didn't matter. "I need to visit Alice as soon as possible!" Lord, please help me find my suitcase she prayed silently.

Where could my suitcase be? We have to leave, now exclaimed Virgil. But I can't find my suitcase! Just throw a few things together and let's get going! Ok! Ok! Lucinda grabbed her Bible and

tucked it in her shoulder bag. She was going to be one solo traveler armed with the Holy Bible! An image of the islands' beautiful Magens Bay beach flashed before her. A soft, still voice whispered, "You know what? You really don't need the suitcase. What you really need to pack is This Holy Bible! It has everything that's needed for your journey."

Likewise, the voice of Jesus brings peace and calm during our hurried days. Psalm 95:7 challenges us to listen to God's voice. John 10:27 declares that "my sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me." Just as that still, soft voice spoke to Lucinda, letting her know that she did not need the suitcase, after all, because God (in the Bible) is traveling with her on her journey to visit Alice.

Despite the provoking thought of jumping into the refreshing azure water, laying under the warm sun, and the enjoyable time to be had on the island, Lucinda tried to refocus her thoughts. She imagined the smell of the salty, soothing water on her skin. But bringing her thoughts under control as she turned the pages of the Holy Bible, she said to herself, "I'm going to be with Alice in her final days. Besides, what else could I need for such a time as this? But, boy, there's a big part of me that wants to give it a shot!"