

## The Zip Lock Bag

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From her frosty apartment window, Tracey looked down onto the parking lot to watch Wayne. He blew clouds of condensation as he loaded the last vestiges of the six months they'd lived together into the back of his Jeep — his stereo system and a box of shoes. Even though it was freezing outside, his red ski jacket hung open from his broad shoulders, and she could see the black belly of the expensive crew neck that she had recently given him for Christmas as he carefully closed the door. Tracey waited until his car disappeared out of the lot before turning away from the window and then looked around her apartment. With his clutter gone, her hodge-podge of furniture looked even shabbier than before they'd met. Every single room now appeared bigger, and the effect of the extra space was definitely bleak. To escape it, the next weekend Tracey flew to Baltimore to visit Emily, her old college roommate who was still her best friend, even after almost twenty years.

Emily showed her the town, and even though Tracey appreciated the distraction of some new scenery, she spent both days bitching and moaning about Wayne. God, she missed him. Even the sublime taste of crab-cakes at *Stella*, one of Emily's favorite restaurants, only erased him for an instant. The first bite was great. The second only reminded her that not only did Wayne love crab-cakes, but the warm spicy taste also reminded her of his kisses, equally as sensuous. She supposed the truth was that they actually hadn't had that much in common, but there was something so male, so primal, she'd found herself unable to resist him. Sensuality they had. Wayne had been one big crab cake.

Both days with Emily were spent reviewing what everything that led to this disaster, and then determining if he'd dump his new girlfriend and beg her to take him back. By Sunday, they'd decided that he'd eventually tire of the little slut, but Tracey still had lots more agony to exorcise. There were

more details to bring to light and consider, but she had plane reservations and Emily drove her to the airport. There would be no one to pick Tracey up in Boston, no strong arms to hug her and to take her suitcase. No, she was depleted and would have to take the subway back home to her flat in Brookline — the one Wayne had fled.

Now, after waiting in the line of travelers that circled around itself to go through security, it was finally Tracy's turn. She removed her laptop from its quilted powder blue case. She'd sewn it with her machine on the kitchen table while Wayne drank beer and watched the Patriots on TV. She set it in a container and centered it on the conveyer to travel through the security scanner, its homey printed kittens looking oddly out of place surrounded by the industrial-looking, terrorist-prevention equipment. Then she slipped out of her clogs and placed them next to her purse, silver bracelet, and heavy fleece jacket in the molded plastic container. She'd learned what was necessary to avoid having some female airport security guard scan her from head to toe with an instrument that resembled a dildo, insuring that Tracey wasn't stashing a gun in her underwear. As her gray tray rode through the scanner, she waltzed through the x-ray doorway herself, confident that there was nothing that would cause the alarm to buzz, indicating hidden metal and insinuating her as a potential terrorist.

Of course after 9/11, care must be taken, but honestly, but Tracey was an observer of faces and character – a writer, a creator of sleuths, and confident that she would be able to spot a terrorist. Actually, she was a copywriter, but she was aspiring to transition into writing mysteries. The problem was that she was just stuck at the moment with all of this mishigos with Wayne, and couldn't think of a story. In fact, all she could think about was him. Still, she knew she had keen powers of observation. She suspected that she might be able to discern a terrorist in a crowd by using her eyes in place of all of this sophisticated scanning equipment, and felt this mundane, unintelligent scanning, not only insulting, but a waste of time. She had no choice but to participate in this folly unless she drove everywhere or rode trains instead of flying. And what was to stop terrorists from blowing up trains? One bomb at

Grand Central or Penn Station alone could equal the disaster at the World Trade Center or worse. One bomb on the Brooklyn Bridge, or the Golden Gate for that matter, could make an entire mockery of all the hours wasted in line at the airport security check-in. She could write a book about what could happen, but she didn't want to give terrorists any more ideas. She tried not to think about these things, though she was sure the scanning was false security, and would never make the country safe.

It was a surprise for Tracey when upon reaching the far side of the walk-through, she was stopped by a guard. "Miss? Could you step over there?" he asked, pointing a meaty finger to an area by some chairs.

Tracey noticed that his fingernail was dirty. She always noticed things like folds on someone's neck on the subway, or the way toenails peeping out of sandals in the summer. Toes told so much about their owners. Sometimes a mousy-looking woman had hers painted flaming red. Tracey thought what one did with her toes was very telling. Now she focused on the guard. He was tall and had a pink, just-past-pubescent pimply face, incongruous with his khaki uniform and he spun his little radio around from its curly cord as if he was doing "around the world" with a yo-yo.

A black woman who was scanning items on the conveyer came over to him and whispered something in his ear. His sandy eyebrows inched up towards his crew cut as he spoke.

"Stay here," the guard told Tracey and he followed the other guard to the monitor where she looked towards the screen. Her dreary, dark, lined face reflected light blue from the fluorescent lights as she pointed to the monitor that showed an x-ray of the contents of what passed through the conveyer. She narrowed her eyebrows into a V, looking suspiciously at Tracey. She stopped the conveyer.

"Lookey here," she said, pointing out something on the monitor to the man. Had Tracey forgotten to remove the army knife Wayne had given her? No, she was sure that she'd left it on her kitchen counter, although she should have thrown it out or stabbed him with it. She felt a little anxious, even though she knew she'd done nothing wrong.

“Come over here, Miss,” said the woman. Tracey walked over to the monitor as the woman guard pointed up to the monitor where the innards of Tracy's purse were displayed and there was an embryo-like sack containing little objects. The man removed her purse from the conveyer and held it as the woman unzipped it with long dark fingers that were surprisingly white underneath as if the bottom of her hands had been dipped in bleach.

“What you got in there?” she asked, pointing a ruby nail at Tracy's shiny, plastic zebra print make-up bag.

Tracey restrained from replying, Oh those. *They're my chemicals which upon being airborne, I will combine in the plane's bathroom and blow everyone up.* Instead, she stretched her eyes wide to appear completely sincere, smiled sweetly, and replied, “My make-up.”

“Better see she what she's got,” said the woman, glaring at Tracey. She removed the bag and handed it, holding it only by two pincher-like fingers, to the red-faced guard. He accepted it as carefully as if it was a bomb needing to be detonated and she went back to her monitor.

“Step over here, miss,” he said, heading for a table, just behind the conveyer. He unzipped her make-up bag and removed the contents, lining each item up on the table. “What's all this stuff?”

Had he never seen make-up?

Her embarrassment of vanity was outstretched on the counter. “You know the rule, don't you?”

“What rule?”

“All this stuff has to be in a zip-lock plastic bag. Nothing can be bigger than three ounces or I have to throw it out, or you have to check it through with your luggage.”

“I don't have any luggage, just my carry-on.” She pointed to the black bag on the conveyer, which had arrived through without suspicion.

The guard held up her new bottle of moisturizer which Tracey had splurged on, hoping it would, as promised, prevent the deepening of her tiny crow's feet that had recently appeared. It had cost her a

week's grocery money. "What's this?" he asked.

"Moisturizer."

He looked at her oddly, searching her face. Tracey wasn't sure if he was looking for wrinkles or lies. God, did she look like a terrorist? His forehead furrowed and Tracey noticed some folds under his chin. Maybe he was older than she'd thought. He could be almost her age — forty. How could he be so brainless at forty?

"I have to throw this out. Or, like I said, you can check it."

Tracey gritted her teeth. "Toss it." She didn't have time now to go through this nonsense again.

He obliged and threw it into the trash can under the table. Tracey imagined the airport cleaning ladies looting the trash cans after hours for bounty.

"What's this?" He held up her foundation, turning the bottle around and reading the fine print. His blue eyes caught the light as he looked up. Tracey had spent a half hour at the department store cosmetic counter and almost as the same amount of money as she'd pay for a weeks carfare on the 'T' to get to her last freelance assignment at a bank, just to have a foundation that would perfectly blend her fair skin and freckles.

"It's just make-up. Foundation. You use it to even your skin tone."

He looked at her closely. "Are you wearing it now?"

"Yes, of course."

"It doesn't look like you're wearing any make up." Tracy thought his look had a little shy admiration. Maybe it was the way he angled his head and one of his dimples deepened. Was he flirting with her? She couldn't believe this.

"That's the idea," she said.

"You don't need this stuff," he said, gruffly and tossed it.

"It's not for you to say," she said. When did the security guards become beauty consultants?

“If you thought you need it so badly, you should have put it in a small plastic containers and inside a zip-lock bag.”

“What difference does it make if it's a bag with a zipper or a plastic freezer bag? It's what's inside that counts and this is just my make-up, not explosives. I paid a fortune for this stuff. Give me a break.”

“Hey, I don't make the rules,” he said. “I'm just doing my job. You should have checked the airline website. The rules are all there.”

“You're joking. Look, not to give you a hard time, but this isn't common sense. No one questioned me when I flew down here out of Boston. It's obvious that this is just make-up and you're telling me that you have to throw it out because it wasn't in a plastic bag?” Tracey had never heard of anything so moronic. All together, it would cost her a quarter of what she usually earned every week- just to replace it.

“Look miss, you don't even need make-up. You're pretty without it.” He rolled his lips into each other and jutted his chin.

He looked so sincere but still, where was his brain? But his eyes, which were now smiling into hers, were searching for forgiveness. She sighed. There was nothing she could do. She'd have to buy replacements at the drug store at home before her interview tomorrow.

God knows she needed the job. It was just editing the local paper, but still, freelance jobs were hard to come by. Not that she was trying to look glamorous for her interview, but the tiny crow's feet which had landed and rooted next to her eyes had to be dealt with. Everyone had told her she had the perfect girl next door look — sort of a blonde Mary Tyler Moore, which was good for an interview, as long as she didn't look Mary Tyler Moore's mother.

“And this?” he held up a bubble gum pink tube with a lime green top.

“Mascara. It's for my eyelashes.”

He shook his head and tossed it too. Then he picked up her lipstick. It was French — a splurge, and just the right shade of pink. It somehow made her lips poutier, and she pouted them now in horror. The lipstick had cost twenty dollars. “Honestly, this isn't a cream or liquid. Don't throw that away!”

He considered this and had a moment of gallantry and bowed a little as he handed it to her. This jerk thought he was doing her a big favor. Tracey slipped it into her handbag.

“I guess that's about it,” he said. “You can go.” He nodded and deepened his dimples.

Tracey, took her purse, which seemed pounds lighter, and walked to the end of the table to retrieve her other things, awaiting her in the plastic container. She tossed her head as if trying to shake off her indignation, and took her laptop and carry-on bag, shoes, and coat and headed to the chairs provided for those who had passed security to re-dress themselves. She took a seat next to a woman who was leaning over her knees, zipping up her high-heeled boots. The woman smelled like stale smoke and perfume.

“That was unbelievable,” said Tracey, turning towards her as she slipped into one of her clogs. “Did you know about the zip-lock bag thing?”

“Yes,” the woman sat up and said, “But a few months ago I lost all my make-up.” Her voice was flat and low.

Tracey looked at her closely. The woman had evidently bought replacements. Her exotic brown eyes were lined and shadowed, and were like opulent jewels on her high-cheek-boned face. Her lips, lightly glossed, were a pale shade of pink, just slightly darker than her perfect skin, the sublime shade for her taffy hair that fell on the shoulders of her fur vest. Tracey thought it might be real mink.

“What a drag. I can't believe that it matters what kind of bag you have. If I'd had that same stuff in a freezer bag instead of a zippered bag, I could have saved myself a hundred dollars in what it's going to cost to replace it.” Tracey was in both clogs now and standing up. She adjusted the long handle of her laptop case on her shoulder and balanced herself by widening her stance to take the

weight of it. The woman was zipping up her other boot.

“Have a good trip,” said Tracey, and she turned and headed towards the gate. She lumbered, slightly off-center under the weight of her laptop hanging from one shoulder while wheeling her carry-on bag behind her. She stopped at a newsstand for a paper. Maybe she'd do the crossword and keep her mind off Wayne. He was probably in bed with that little slut right now. Best to think about something else. Maybe if she got the job tomorrow, she'd lots of other things to focus on. She paid for the paper and tucked it in a pocket in her laptop case and trudged to D-6 for her flight back to Boston.

At the gate, she sat in the row of empty seats facing the window and had just filled in six down on her crossword when she smelled heavy perfume and stale smoke. Tracey looked up; the woman with the mink vest stood a couple of empty seats down from her.

She lowered herself into a chair. Tracey watched her until she caught her eye. “Looks like we're on the same flight.” she said.

“Oh, hello.” The woman's tone was polite, but cool.

Fine. She had her crossword and was just being friendly. Still, the writer in her was a little curious. “Are you from Boston?” she asked.

‘No, I'm just going up there for a job.’

“What do you do?” Tracey knew this would have to be her last question unless the woman became more conversational.

“I'm a model,” she said, flatly.

That explained her clothes, and maybe her coolness. She was probably used to people drooling over her. She probably didn't want to appear to talk to yet another stranger. Oh well, this might have been a nice distraction. She could have even interviewed her for an article. “Nice,” said Tracey. “That must be fun.”

The woman shrugged and Tracey noticed a couple of men standing next to the window

watching them. The men were wearing suits, but didn't look like businesses men. The suits couldn't disguise the fact that they were brawny guys. Their jackets were open and the ties were loose, as if they were ready for action. Tracey went back to her crossword.

She was all the way to 42-across when the stale smoke and perfume smell became strong and then its owner was standing in front of her. "Hey listen, I have to run to the bathroom for a minute. Can you watch my bag for a second? You look trustworthy," she said. Her enormous brown eyes were steady on Tracey.

"Sure," said Tracey. She knew that you're not supposed to do this at an airport, but this woman was obviously not a terrorist. She could tell that by looking at her. Maybe when she returned, this might have earned her an opening to have a conversation. Maybe she was some famous and Tracey would get to do an exclusive personal interview. The woman brought the bag over and set it by Tracy's feet. "Thanks," she said. "I'll be back in a couple of minutes."

Tracey was on 62-down, practically the end of the puzzle, when she felt someone standing over her. Oddly, there was no perfume smell. She looked straight ahead into four grey suit legs, belonging to the two men she'd noticed. One of them flashed a badge at her from inside his jacket, revealing his upper body, which even under his white shirt looked solid as a wall. "Excuse me ma'am, but is that your bag?" He pointed to the woman's black carry-on, which was almost identical to hers. "No, it's this other woman's. You must have seen her. She was sitting here just a minute ago." Tracey looked around. "She just went to the bathroom. She should be back any minute."

"We need you to come with us," said the other man. Tracey looked around frantically for the bag's owner. She didn't have time for this! She could miss her flight! He took Tracy's bag and the other man took the woman's. They wheeled the bags down the concourse to a door and led Tracey inside. They each hoisted a bag on a long table and unzipped and rifled through both bags. Tracy's bag was messy, with her dirty clothes just tossed in there, but the other bag was neatly packed with some

clothes and a cosmetic bag. Underneath the stack of what looked like perfectly folded t-shirts and jeans, was a zip-lock bag. The cop – was he a cop? Was he FBI? Tracey wasn't sure, but he held up the bag and turned it around. “Fascinating,” he said.

She was only sure that she was terrified. The bag was filled with a white powder.

“Which carry-on is yours?” asked one of the cops. “That one,” said Tracey, pointing to the messy bag. “The other one is that woman's. I know you saw her. She was sitting right next to me and I saw you watching us.”

The cop nodded. “Do you know her name?”

“No. I just met her. I mean I didn't even meet her. She was putting on her boots at security at the same time I came through. She said she was a model. Look, I don't have drugs. I barely take Aspirin.”

“Harrington, get the passenger list.” said the taller of the two. He spoke into a walky-talky and put out an alert for the woman, based on her description.

“I'm sorry, Miss. We're going to need to hold you until we can prove which bag is yours.”

“Does she have her make-up in there?” asked Tracey, pointing to the cosmetic case.

The cop opened the bag and removed another zip-lock bag, this one full to the brim with little tubes and bottles.

“I can prove this,” said Tracey excitedly. “I can prove that's not mine. The guy at security made me throw out all my make-up because it wasn't in a zip-lock bag. You can ask him. All I got to keep was a lipstick.”

The cop nodded and called security. “What did the guy look like?”

Tracey described his red face, his bad skin, and his dirty fingernails. The cop repeated it into his radio and within minutes, the red-faced guard was there in the room.

“Hello,” he said to her.

“Hi,” she said, now happy that she hadn't called him an idiot, even though she'd thought it. Now he stood between her and a jail sentence. “Remember me? The one with all the make-up?” She smiled sweetly.

He grinned at her. This was going to be okay. “Yes, I do. Of course.”

“Tell him,” said Tracey. “Please tell him how you threw out my make-up.”

The cop waited. Tracey waited. “Yeah, sure,” he said and shrugged. “She had all this make-up that wasn't in a zip-lock bag. I had to throw it out because it was against regulations.” He looked a little wide-eyed, baffled by being there and having to say this, and when he finished, he just stood there and shifted his weight from one big black boot to the other.

Tracey beamed at him. “Thanks,” she said. “See?” she added, turning to the cop.

“Okay, thanks,” said the cop to the guard. “You can go.”

The guard gave Tracey a lopsided grin and left.

“That's lucky for you, but I still want to hold you for a while,” said the cop.

“But I'll miss my flight,” said Tracey. “You know I didn't do anything.”

“I'm sorry, ma'am but we'll get you on a later flight. Might as well make yourself comfortable for a while.”

“Do I need to call a lawyer or something?”

“You can if you want, but there's no charge yet. Just hang on, okay? This will probably be fine, but I just want to see if we can find the owner of that bag.”

“So you know it's not mine, but you're going to hold me here anyway?”

“Yes, just to double check.” He gave her a slit-eyed look and Tracey knew not to ask any more questions for a while.

All she wanted was to go home. She didn't care if she didn't have Wayne any more to pick her up when she landed and if she had to take the subway home from the airport. All she wanted was to

get there. God, her cat was waiting for her. She had to get ready for her interview, and oh yeah, she had to go to the drug store for make-up.

She thought about the owner of the other suitcase. So much for being a good judge of character. She didn't deserve to be a writer. She was just a hack who wrote marketing copy after all, and right now, that sounded pretty good. She knew they'd eventually let her go, but she wanted to go back to her apartment and she wanted to go now, Wayne or no Wayne.

One of the guards ordered a pizza and sodas. After they ate it silently at the table that still held the two black carry-ons, they told her she could go. They'd decided that there were no grounds to keep her even though they never found the woman who belonged to the other bag. One of them went out with Tracy's ticket and came back and returned, handing Tracey a boarding pass for the five o'clock flight. When her plane landed, Tracey took the subway and walked from the station. On the way, she stopped at the drug store and stocked up on replacement make-up.

In the morning, she used all her new goodies, which based on her reflection, worked just as well as her expensive department store make-up. She was wearing her grey pantsuit and smiled at herself in the bathroom mirror, happy with the image of the blonde woman with the big, pink-blushed cheeks and creamy-looking skin. She took the subway to her interview which went well. She was sure they'd call her back for a second, and she stopped in the coffee shop next door to buy herself something special to celebrate. God, she deserved it with all that she'd been through. She stood in the line, behind a woman with short dark hair, and studied the menu. Maybe she'd get one of those huge lattes — the ones with the mile-high whipped cream.

Then she smelled a strangely familiar aroma of smoke and perfume emanating from the woman in front of her. Tracey looked down at the woman's shoes, and recognized the high-heeled boots peeking out from the hems of her jeans. She shifted her weight to the side and angled her neck to better see the woman's face. Her heart pounded in recognition. The long taffy-colored hair the woman had at

the airport must have been a wig, but Tracey would have recognized those incredibly huge eyes anywhere. As if responding to the heat of Tracy's stare, the woman's dark eyes met Tracey for just a second, but she showed no recognition. Her face was expressionless as she quickly slipped out of the line, and started to walk briskly towards the door. Tracey instinctively turned to run after her, but then what? Would she yank hold of her collar and drag her to the police? And how could she prove anything? No, it was pointless and she stopped herself from chasing her. Still, she couldn't just let her walk away without doing anything.

“Stop!” said Tracey. The woman hesitated for a second, but she just a few steps from the door and started again towards it. She was just a step away from walking through it, probably never to be seen again. Tracy felt the eyes of everyone in the coffee shop upon her, but she didn't care. She leapt out of line and lightly took hold of the sleeve of the woman's jacket white ski jacket. Her magnificently made-up brown eyes grew even larger with wild fury.

“Excuse me, didn't you leave your bag with me at the airport?” demanded Tracey.

“I don't know what you're talking about.” the woman replied. It was that same low flat voice Tracey remembered.

She shook Tracy's hand from her arm and proceeded to the door.

“Why did you do that to me?” yelled Tracey. “You almost got me arrested and made me miss my flight. I know who you are.”

“You know nothing,” hissed the woman. She met Tracey's eyes for just a second then she turned the handle, walked out the door, and disappeared unto the street.

There was no point in following her. No, she'd have to let it go. She took a deep breath and slowly let out the air. She shook her head and her heart was still racing. The man who had been behind her in line looked at her strangely, but let her reclaim her place and she stepped up to the counter, since she was next. She felt a little dizzy, but she took a deep breath. The coffee shop, which had seemed so

quiet a moment ago, had resumed its buzz. That moment had felt like an hour, but she was no longer the focus of anyone's attention except the girl behind the counter who was now watching Tracey expectantly. "What would you like?" she asked as if Tracy's actions just a moment before were completely normal. The normalcy of ordering a latte now seemed so bizarre, so out of context to Tracey, but she replied, "I'll have a latte with extra whipped cream."

The girl nodded and she rang it in on the register without comment. Tracey paid and stepped over to the end of the counter to wait for her drink and tried to imagine what the heroine in one of her imagined sleuth stories would have done. She'd already decided that her detective would be a woman — someone tough with a big heart. She imagined that her detective would have followed the woman and gathered clues to eventually make a huge drug bust. She'd have to think about how it would happen. Even better, she would write about it and watch it evolve. Yes, it could be a whole story, maybe a series. She suddenly felt elated that she finally had an idea for a story and couldn't wait to get home and write. She also realized that she hadn't thought about Wayne in about five hours, but now she remembered him with a pang, which felt like a little stab in her heart. Maybe she'd have him become a character in her novel, but it would be so satisfying to first thing, have somebody pop him. The pang dissolved as she watched the the clerk swirl sky high whipped cream on her drink, and Tracy's lips, plumped and assuredly pink with her favorite French lipstick, spread into a smile.