

THE RED RAINCOAT

By N.E Moone

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I don't allow myself to buy a doormat for my home anymore. I lived in an apartment complex about five years ago right in the heart of New York City. I was living alone at the time, my family was in Rhode Island, and with me being new to the area, I didn't have many 'friends' to speak of. I moved into Shallow Reed with my backpack and two large suitcases. Boxes from home were on the way, but it couldn't be anything too big to not fit in the mail and had to be light enough for me to not go dirt-poor in fees. My family helped...but they've already helped me enough. I was fresh-out-of-college looking to be an editor, this...lifestyle didn't come with the highest hope, just an immature energy that will push your loved ones away from you but will fulfill your personal aspirations. My apartment was small but fulfilled more than enough. The rooms were clean and the utilities worked, I was stressed but happy, excited even.

The area was, well, pretty rough. I had to grow a pretty thick skin to not take it personally if someone was calling me something or trying to hassle me. Crossing the street was once stressful but it's nothing now. The bus station was only down the street and it took me everywhere I needed to go. I didn't take my car with me, so walking and public transport was my way to go.

It was about two years into my job at a publishing house that I... I had to leave. I had recently gotten a few shelves, a few wall decorations...and a welcome mat for the entrance to my apartment. It was a tufted mat with a rainbow and under it was a white lettering of WELCOME. Something sweet, subtle queer pride, you know, a homey feel.

The day of the incident went about as expected, I woke up for work, did what I had to do, and came home. I didn't go out to a club or a bar that night. I liked the nightlife of the city, I had a few people over every now and again, but no one really stuck around.

I had a relatively defensive disposition with where I lived, there were a few times that I had to fend off a few solicitors. I always kept my door locked and bolted, I didn't take any risks especially when I lived on the first floor.

I was pretty pissed off that night, to be honest. The unit above me was blasting music and the couple in the room next to me was...enjoying their relationship just a bit too loudly. It was a little after 8 PM and I was watching something on my TV. I didn't really watch a lot of tv shows, I read what I needed from my phone and heard office gossip at work. I did watch the nightly news though, got into that habit from my parents. I had to be in the know about literary news, not so much local news.

Suddenly, I heard the faintest sound of a knock. I perked up from my seat on my couch but didn't mute the show I was watching, it could have just been anything. There was a knock again, this time sounding more firm. More confident. Immediately I stood, some panic starting to rush through me, who would be

knocking on my door at this hour, the police? Maybe a neighbor? I walked over to my door quietly, sneaking up to look through the peephole.

The person was looking down at the floor and had a red jacket on with the hood obscuring their face. They looked small though...like a child? They nervously shuffled as they waited for me to respond.

I cleared my throat and put on my 'man voice' trying to sound somewhat intimidating, they were knocking at *my* door after all. "Hello, who's there?"

The person turned to look at the door, I could see the tears running down the young girl's face. I barely even gave it a second thought as I opened the door. With her being what, no more than nine? I was concerned for her rather than myself.

"Hi, little one. Uhhh, are you looking for someone? Is someone out with you?"

"I can't find my mom." She sniffled and wiped her eyes, she was wearing a simple red raincoat that was soaked from the rain outside. I peeked down each end of the hall and saw no one else there.

I knelt down to be closer to her height, I'm not a big guy but I towered over her.

"When did you last see her?"

"She was here but then she was gone," she continued to talk but her words came out as a blubbering mess.

"It's alright, listen we will find her. Do you know a phone number we can call?"

She nodded and wiped her face once more.

"Come inside and we will get you dried off."

I gently offered her my hand which she took after a moment. She wiped her shoes on my dormant and when she looked up her eyes were wide scanning around the

apartment. Not that I felt embarrassed at the time, but my house wasn't really geared toward young children. I had a nice little cart of different alcohols and various collections strewn about that I used for decoration. I led her to the living room where the TV was. She took off her raincoat after I asked if I could leave it on the doorknob outside the apartment. Anyone that knew her would recognize it, and I doubted anyone in my building would steal a children's raincoat.

I quickly rushed to my bathroom to grab her a towel. She was standing in the center of the living room staring at the tv. I offered her the towel and grabbed my phone

"Here you are, I'm Derek. Can I get your name?"

"I'm Cho. I'm calling mom," She said in her small voice.

I offered her my phone which she quickly snatched up, dialing the numbers. She turned her back to me as the dial tone rang. I stepped away to the kitchen to give her a moment. A small marble island separated the two rooms which allowed me to peek over at her while I got her a cup of water. After a few moments, she spoke in a different language which I only knew enough about to know it was some Asian language.

She turned to me as I handed her the water, "What is this place?" she asked.

"Shallow Reed apartments, I'm unit five. First floor." I clarified.

She spoke again to the person on the phone. She was quiet for a moment, looking around the room as if someone could be listening to her. She briefly made eye contact with me and flicked her gaze away. I felt a bit awkward standing there.

Despite knowing the fact that this little girl could do absolutely nothing to harm me, I was still a bit on edge.

It was a few moments later before Cho handed me my phone back.

"She'll be here soon," was all she said to me looking down at the floor.

I looked at my phone, thinking if I should report this to the police or not.

Yeah her mother is on the way, but why was she missing in the first place?

"How come you knocked on my door and not unit one? Sorry, the first door in the hall."

"Your carpet."

My carpet? I thought. What did she mean by that?

"There's a rainbow. No one else had a rainbow." She said simply, like it was obvious.

I realized then she was talking about my doormat. Shallow Reed's wasn't exactly the most queer-inclusive, but I didn't worry about someone knocking down my door for having a rainbow on my mat. I hoped to show a bit of friendliness, didn't expect it would lead a kid to my door. I moved on and asked another question,

"How did you and your mom get separated?" I asked her in the most peaceful tone I could. She didn't answer, she just kept staring at the ground.

Her eyes darted to my tv when the opening theme for the news started playing. "Can you change this please?" she asked.

I mean, it felt out of the blue that she asked me that, but then again I don't think the news is the most popular children's show.

I found the remote right where I left it on the arm of the couch and put on a kid's show starring a Blue Heeler family. Figured that would be better than the nightly news. She didn't really seem open to talking much anyway. Well, the quicker she's out of here the better I thought.

It was maybe five minutes later that a hurried knock sounded through the apartment. I immediately stood up from where I was on the opposite end of the couch from Cho and rushed to the door. I instantly opened it up and found a woman clutching the red raincoat in her hands. Unlike Cho, she had long black hair and a slight hunch on her back. She looked younger than what I expected to be walking with a hunch, she was maybe in her 30's to 40's.

Cho cried behind me, "Mama!"

I quickly stepped to the side as the woman moved past me and into my home, I kept the door open expecting them to be on their way shortly. The mother started talking to Cho in the same language I heard over the phone. She cupped her face in her hands and did a thorough look over of her child.

"She arrived maybe ten minutes ago, she hasn't said much," I spoke up, but the mom didn't indicate if she heard me or not.

"Would you mind if we use your restroom? She has a cut on her arm that I want to clean," said the mom.

"Oh, sure. It's down the hall and to the left. First aid kit is in the closet." I pointed in the direction she had to go. My bedroom was right across from it. She led her daughter to the bathroom, looking a bit too curiously into my bedroom for my liking. They've seen the whole apartment by this point. I didn't remember

seeing a scratch on the kid, but I didn't search her, to begin with. While they were in the bathroom, I went to change the tv but couldn't find the remote. I found that a bit odd, seeing as I placed it in the same spot I did earlier. The great thing about today's day and age is that everything is digital. So, I pulled up the TV app on my phone and changed it from there. When changed the channel back to the news, I was met with the video of a roaring house fire that happened earlier in the day. Well, I didn't miss all of the nightly news coverage.

I could hear them fiercely whispering in the bathroom which I didn't find surprising. I'm sure the mom was giving the kid an earful, but I was under the impression that improper adult supervision was the cause and not the child. But I'm not gonna intervene.

"And in our last update of the night, we have a local alert brought to you by the police department. We are on the lookout for a group of individuals wanted for home invasion and murder."

On the screen, they flashed a few images of men that all looked like basic figures, none of them really stood out in any remarkable way. They all wore black masks and all had thin figures. They've been breaking into homes and stealing electronics, jewelry, and anything that could be sold off easily. It was what came next that caused my stomach to churn. "In their most recent attack, the homeowners had a camera system installed that captured the entire event all on film."

On the TV screen, there was someone standing.... in a bright red raincoat. The recording had audio and subtitles to go along with it. "I can't find my mom."

I could feel the blood draining from my face, I quickly lowered the TV volume, looking behind me to make sure no one was there. The bathroom light was still on but the whispering had stopped. I turned back to the screen and they had fast-forwarded the clip, the same woman in my bathroom was there on my screen. I quickly dialed 911 and turned off the TV, I kept my eyes locked on the bathroom as I rushed to the front door.

When I was about to reach for the handle, A heavy knock banged against the door. I froze in place, my finger hovering over the call button.

From the bathroom, I heard the lady call, "That should be my brother! He's our ride home, can you tell him we will be right out?"

"Sure thing, let me just... turn off the oven," I responded. Panic coursed through me, I slowly locked the door. I even grabbed some mail to make an impromptu door stop. As I shoved it underneath the door the person knocked again. I jumped back and tip-toed to my bedroom. They pounded the door again. I held my breath as I passed the bathroom, neither the girl nor the woman made a sound. I locked my door behind me and called 911.

"911 what's your emergency?"

"My house is being broken into, it's the people from--"

I was interrupted by a sudden slamming. They were breaking down the front door.

"They made it into my home, " I whispered. I stepped away from my door.

"Sir, what is your location?"

There were shouts from the men who busted the door down, they were smashing my stuff and God knows what else. I knew my door wouldn't hold long

enough for the police to get here, I had to do something now. Without a second thought, I ran to the one window in my room.

I heard the woman cry, my doorknob twisted as she did.

She was crying for help, she yelled that they would kill her if I didn't help, they would kill her child.

I opened the window and pushed the screen out the frame. The walls shook as someone started to pound my bedroom door.

I stepped out my window, only to have a hand grab tightly onto my shirt collar. Someone was standing outside waiting. I dropped my phone as I was pushed to the ground. I could hear the 911 operator yelling through the phone as it dropped, breaking against the small rocks that lined my building.

There were hands around my throat before I could even react. The person on top of me dropped all his weight onto my hips, straddling me and keeping me pinned.

I struggled in his grip, I didn't even have time to panic. All I could do was react. I'll never forget the look in his eyes, the utter disregard for humanity. I could see, I can still see the smile stretched across his lips. I could see myself reflected in the black of his eyes. I tried to knock away his arms, tried to scratch at his face. My head was pounding, my vision getting darker and darker. I couldn't hear him, but I could see him bending closer to my face. Spit hit my cheeks as he laughed just inches from me.

I grabbed the ground under me and used the last of my strength to aim for those dark pools. The blood hit my cheek before his laughter turned into screaming.

Air rushed into my lungs as the man clutched his eye, or what would be left of it. I could only wiggle away from him as he dislodged the small rock from his eye socket. He pulled out more than the rock.

I finally picked myself up and left the man behind me, I ran. I ran as fast as I possibly could and didn't look back. I ran across the street and started yelling at the top of my lungs for help. There were a few businesses, one of which was a pizza joint that still had its lights on. I ran to their door and yanked it open, I quickly found the lock for the glass door and turned it. The employees immediately started yelling at me, getting ready to defend themselves I'm sure. I turned to face them and they stopped trying to shoo me away after they saw the dark red handprints around my neck.

Everything was a blur of movement from that point on. The pizza place ended up calling the cops which is where I was able to give them more information, the cop cars took a few minutes to arrive. Long enough for me to know that if I didn't go out my window...

By the time they arrived there wasn't anyone left in my apartment, even with the officers by my side I was worried about going in. They had a team come in to try and get samples of anything you could think of, they swabbed the man's blood that got on me and took photos of everything. My apartment was an utter disaster, whatever they couldn't take they smashed.

The police took me down to the station in order for me to write up a formal report, I told them about Cho and the woman who came to my door. Hours later, they gave me an update. They found a man fitting the description I gave them, he

was missing his eye and was dumped in a garbage bin twenty minutes from where I lived.

Even after I spent a week in a hotel and another week at a co-workers place, there was no sign of the people who attacked me. The cops weren't any help either, without anything to go off of, all they could do is wait. I asked the cops why they came after me and they responded by asking me if I owned any firearms, which they would have known the answer to already, but I told them I didn't. They told me how the other homes they have been suspected of breaking into all had something in common. The first family they attacked worked closely with a local church, another home was just an apartment of college students, the last home, the one that got footage of the woman from their security cameras was a family who didn't have their citizenship in the States yet. It didn't take much to connect the dots that none of these people would have owned any guns or would have turned away a young child. We were all targeted as an easy mark. The police said they couldn't know how much the group knew about us until they were able to catch the culprits but, they knew enough about me.

I've since moved and taken some self-defense courses, even bought myself a handgun that I touch once a year to bring to the range. I jump every time I hear a knock at the door. But I'll be ready for when they come to visit me again. At least that's how I felt before I came home today, and on my doorknob there was a red raincoat.