

The Bag Man

Summer is gasping its last breath.

he meets the morning of Saturday, September third, with a large erection. Beside lays the still sleeping object loosely referred to as wife, who's dreams have all come true. The wife. And.

The end justifies the means, by which all manner of peculiar delights are forever within his eager grasp. A grasp firm and unyielding. A holding of vengeance.

A clock, glowing in the room's half light, taps out its mechanical secrets in coded click and coded clack, of future insult and shame, horror and pain, of disaster, to those of a mind to listen; but, for him at least, there is an over abundance of noise in the room, in the world, and neither word nor hint of word is heard. A thick, sticky, and very personal layer of loud confusion covers his mind, and there is no exit. It is eight ten a.m.

The arm moves across, and he begins to fondle a fist full of breast. Even though the body sleeps the nipple becomes erect, hard to the touch. Even though.

The minor pain of over zealousness brings the other body to life. There will be little competition in this game: the result forecast by ten score victories previous.

"What time is it?" murmurs a soft female voice. The wife, still in a state of semi-slumber, turns towards the other, who chooses silence as response, and begins to pull and twist on her nipples, in a distorted tug of war. he imagines his erection beneath the covers, in a three dimensional image of passion and want, of strength and

weakness, of dominance, and pushes his snout between her breasts. Of dominance he bites, and she cries out, believing that this is love, and pain is pleasure.

The sun struggles behind clouds of gloom. Struggles to give its warmth to the tangled mass of fools who cluster about bus and train and car, clinging tightly to imagined walls of sanity, adhered to misconceptions of self importance, like small crustaceans fixed to a universal rock. Within each shell a world unto itself. England, with its traditional lack of will, is beginning to stretch and come alive—for all that it's worth.

Meanwhile, the animal grunts have subsided. There is an empty tranquillity in the room. There is a comfortable feeling of satiation. The two bodies lie as if in death, unmoving, entombed in their own strange thoughts, mummified by certain perpetual wants.

With the passage of time, she leaves their bed of nails, and dresses quickly. A woman of leisure—working hard on happiness—she glances back at her man on the way out, and is undaunted by the prospect of perpetual toil. The kettle is filled, toaster fed, table set, and all seems well in love or war. On the counter sits a brown paper bag, tall and erect; a supermarket bag with a blank expression. She wonders what might lie within, and peers down its wide open mouth to see it is empty, hallow, void of substance, greatly lacking in content.

The kettle begins to puff and pant. Steam. Shriek in agony.

"Tea's ready, darling," she calls. Clad in a bathrobe, he makes his entrance.

"It looks like a rotten day out there," he says, staring out of the window at the rotten day out there.

"Yes. You have any plans?"

"Why?"

"No reason."

"In that case, there's no reason to answer."

And it went on:

" "

"And pigs might fly."

" "

"It would to you."

" "

"What difference does it make?"

" "

"And you really mean it!"

They are all accusations. She has no defence. Her words are never heard.

"By the way," she begins, feigning indifference. "Where's that bag come from?" It is a singularly unimportant object, as is its presence, though to the Housewife Queen, in her bleak realm of sterility, a captive in her own domain, the smallest of change provides opportunity for wonder. It is magnified through the lens of her mind, and the mystery becomes worthy of investigation. The one that she is not, indeed, that he himself should never be, feels a flush take hold, and for several seconds it refuses to let him go. A warm wind of guilt blows out through the open windows of his eyes. The hairs on the back of his neck stand up like untidy rows of thin soldiers, toy soldiers, for they can do no real harm. The legs move nervously beneath the table, hidden from scrutiny, and he glances

over to the counter and brown bag, pulling on an expression of perplexity. The shoulders offer a shrug. The offer is refused.

"i don't know," he lies. The lie comes easily. Lying is easy. Truth is hard. She knows he is lying. Bags do not appear of their own accord.

"Has the morning paper come yet?" It is a new paragraph, indeed a new page.

"I suppose so. I'll go get it for you." She leaves, returns with The Times, hands it to him, and sits herself back down to watch him read. The funny thing is, she loves him. he may not be perfect, but who is? It is funny, and yet no one laughs.

he reads in silence, slurps on the hot, sweet drink, and munches on toast. It is perhaps some thirty minutes later that words once again break surface. During this time, breakfast things have been cleared away, and the kitchen has once again taken on its antiseptic hue.

"I have to go shopping soon."

"Oh," he offers.

"I'm supposed to meet my mother at eleven." She leaves the rooms and prepares for the outing.

"What have you decided to do then?" She is ready for the off, wearing a grey raincoat which does not stand out in a crowd.

" i don't know. i guess i'll take a walk or something."

"See you later then." The two kiss, and off she goes, humming a tuneless melody, and leaving the faint feminine scent of her subservience lingering in the room. The moment

she is gone, he throws the paper to the table and dresses hurriedly.

Ready, just before going on his private way, he glances at somebody in the bedroom mirror. he does not like what who he sees.

There is a certain prospect which fills him with a certain anticipation which causes perspiration to bleed from his pores. The steering wheel grows slippery. Soon the nice neighbourhood has shifted, and the town centre is within sight.

he finds a parking space in the darker side of town. It is almost noon.

he walks, watching the girls with sly eyes, turning away quickly when they look back, looking back when they turn away. he walks over the shadows they cast, treading them underfoot, into the dirt. The sky is half insane, with a conspiracy of clouds holding the sun to ransom, a serious and deadly game of cache cache in which only the people below can ultimately lose.

There is a deceptive air of prosperity about the place, a smell which purveys throughout the town; indeed, the country. The working class is not fooled, the middle class is fooled, the ruling class are fools. And so, with the sun doing its utter most to avoid that dank smattering of mean clouds, he goes on that solitary way.

Strangeness of mind leads him into a dingy side street. There are few people about, and he begins to relax. Why do they always stare at him? Especially the girls. They always stare.

On the corner is a Turf Accountant, whose door is ajar. Through it he can see the dark irony within, where strangely shaped men fall pray to their own strangely shaped weakness'. It is a windowless world of poverty and shame, of middle age disappointment. On the floor lies a mass of paper, betting slips tossed down with contempt, the messages of love and promise they bear no longer of any worth. It is a moment between races and the loud speaker hangs in silence. The only sound is the deep rumble of gruff punter voice and the feminine whisper of chance. he walks on.

Next door, from within, comes the harsh cry of laser gun and the thunder of exploding space craft, the laughter of teen and the clank of money. Space invaders march on, are cut down in their thousands, worlds collide, and the black fabric of the video universe is torn by vessels travelling at the speed of light, captained by punk rockers.

he crosses a small street, a mere alley running away to his right, reaches the other side in five small steps, and glances in at the Pawn Broker's display, where other people's things are for sale. The exterior of the shop is grubby, with ten years of filth giving cover to ten more years of filth. There is no reason to make change. Desperation drives them there. People with empty stomachs care little for aesthetics.

Just next door, part of the same sad building, is a small door. Above that door hangs an unobtrusive sign which reads "Gallery", and nothing more. he opens it and is met by the smell of damp age and decay from a building long dead. A narrow stair case climbs steeply upward, inward, towards the dank black chest cavity of the corpse edifice, and as he climbs, the door behind swings shut. The darkness is

teased by a dim red light on the landing above, where a plump woman sits, behind a counter, straining her eyes to read The Mirror. She looks up with a smile.

"'ello. "

"Afternoon" he says, fishing in his pockets.

"'ow's things been goin' with you then?"

"Quite nicely. Musn't complain—as they say."

"You're dead right there. I've just bin readin' the paper—it's shockin' some of the things goin' on. Shockin'."

"Mmm."

"What's the world comin' to? That's what I want to know. What's it comin' to? I've just been looking at the new budget as well. It says 'ere they're gonna put five pence extra on a packet of fags. That's a shillin' you know." he notices an ash tray full of butts, discoloured by lipstick.

"Yes, i had heard," he answers, removing some money from his wallet.

"It's shockin'. Really shockin'. Two pound fifty, please." he gives her the money. She hands him a pink ticket with her fat, pink-pudding hand, and he strolls away from the inconvenience of people.

he enters a room which is so dark he sees white spots dance before his eyes. The only light lies at the front of the room, oblong, and the size of a wall, though its moving incandescence has no effect at the rear where he stands. The eyes are closed, and he stands unmoving, allowing them time to adjust to the blackness. he opens them up like attic windows on a sloping roof, windows to a despicable room that would best be abandoned, and can now see the rows of empty seats facing front. Sideways, crab like, he makes his way down a destitute isle and takes his place.

It is warm, though he does not remove his coat.

he is bombarded by images of naked bodies writhing in artificial lust. Pasted to the screen like paper dolls somehow able to move, the girls cry in frantic orgasm, the boys grunt, gyrate and explode. he watches, spellbound, hypnotised, lost in a strange world of dark and distant conception.

The next morning comes around. It is saturday, as he likes to call it, though nothing happens.

The next morning comes around too. he is dressed and ready by seven fifteen. The wife makes breakfast and sees him off. he drives away, down a ribbon of asphalt, which twists and turns through quiet groves of suburban opulence, and more.

The car park is still empty. he is the first to arrive.

Inside, the main corridor is still sleeping. his footsteps, tip-tapping as he goes, echo faintly into its distant dream and die away. Nothing has changed. Soon the children will come, stomping and screaming, to awaken the corridor from its summer time slumber, to see that peace shall be no more, and to prove to its glossy tiles that innocence is a transient thing, way-ward, apt to "do a bunk" at the slightest opportunity—and leave a dirty trail as it goes.

he is home, eating supper, answering the questions of a wife eager to learn of his day. The set lighting shows a harshness to his features that was previously beneath the surface, that was covered by a mask of delusion, enveloped in a desire to be something other than that which destiny has planned for him. During the day he, has, discovered,

some, strange, kind, of, truth, which took him by the scruff of the neck and dragged him to a world he had only before suspected vaguely to be there. Recognising that world now as real, he finally has been introduced to himself, shook hands politely, and wiped the grime away secretively onto his trousers.

The trees of a local park still bare witness to the splendour of summer past. It is another Saturday, and there is a warmth in the air that does not want to be there. The ground is still muddy from a recent spell of rain. Near by, old men are busy playing bowls, and the clank of wood on wood can be heard in all corners of the park. There are children feeding ducks beside a distant pond, and there is something else too. Soggy leaves squelch beneath feet, and suddenly there is an explosion of sound as several flocks of birds, nearby, take simultaneously to flight.

"Where've you been all day?"

"Just out walking," he says, looking to his shoes shyly, and at once turning hurriedly, guiltily away.

"Look at your shoes! They're covered in mud. Where've you been?"

"Nowhere. i suppose i stood in some mud—that's all."

"Well take them off and wash up. Tea's almost ready."

"You mean dinner."

"I suppose I do. Anyway, you're all dirty. You need to wash."

"i suppose i do." And he leaves the room. She is not suspicious by nature, but since several weeks it is all she has. Suspicion tells her she breathes.

Meanwhile, in the bathroom, the other one washes vigorously, but no matter how hard he scrubs, nor how much soap he wastes, it will not come off.

Another week has passed. It is Saturday again. Breakfast has been consumed and the morning paper read. Errands have been run and the afternoon stretches ahead like a long bleak tunnel. he feels need to escape, out into the sunshine, to release a strange feeling pent up inside, which is growing by the minute and feels ready to burst him, wide open, like a red balloon filled with vomit.

"i'm going to take a walk."

"Where to?"

"i don't know. Just around."

"Shall I come with you?"

The answer is in his mouth at once, but he chews on it for a while before spitting it out. "No, it's all right. i feel like being on my own for a while."

The door slams shut with a bang of frightening finality, leaving a gothic silence in its aftermath. That the wife knows her husband is going for something more than a walk is not suspect, she has seen it in the tea leaves at the bottom of his cup; but they cannot foretell all, and they have left her in a dark cloud of confusion and desperation. Since sometime now he has not been himself. There is something showing of him that she can not fathom, and, less, wants to see. Where is her happiness now? This is not the way things were intended to go; her copy of the story reads quite differently. Something very, very strange is going on. A fast one has been pulled. She knows it, though she cannot understand it. All is beyond her scope of

reference, for she is like a tiny ant victimised by a playful boy who will soon crush her into the dirt with an outstretched thumb. Then, through the soot-laden mist, comes a partial explanation that seems to fit that seems to fit that she insists will fit—even if it must be forced. So she sits at the kitchen table fidgeting, counting the moments, lost in wild imaginings of her husband in the bed of another, fucking away her happiness. Fucking hard until it is all gone, for that must be it: he has found a mistress. And so it all seems at last to make sense, and yet it does not, for this is not the way that things were supposed to be. She is thrown of balance by this warping of reality, unaware that all the players have been given an entirely different script, that the ending for one is not the ending for another.

She puts on her hat and coat and rushes out, to follow, to find out why things are all twisted and deformed, running along in his wake. A slight fog wafts in the air, like scribble through a line of words; words though which can still be seen which can still be read. Out the gate she sees him at once, distant, down the avenue, a ghost shrouded in mystery, unnatural, walking who knows where. he turns around the bend, has gone around the bend, out of sight. She hastens onward.

Now she is closer, hides behind tree after tree, feeling foolish. Who might the woman be? Someone from work, someone she has never seen, someone she hates with such absolute abandon it hurts. Terribly. She is probably waiting for him right now, naked, ready for him.

She sees the back of him turn into the park, follows, along a sloping wooded path, a tunnel formed by branch, whose leaves hang mournfully, knowing their time is almost

done. he sinks from view, descending into the valley, into the thin mist, down the steep hill towards the duck pond, leaving her alone in the woods, in the woods alone. There is daylight at the end of that branchy tunnel, and she walks slowly now, finding herself possessed by that empty space, that murky piece of sky, looking forward to it like a blinkered horse. With each step though, her perspective is changed, and soon she has hint of the valley below, the terrible and eternal torment of the valley below.

The wife comes to a halt. She is arrived. The park stretches out its damp body ahead of her, below her, at her feet.

She can see her husband, scampering down the slope like a boy running to join his friends, and wonders what he is doing and what she is doing, and that perhaps he did just want to walk. Perhaps. She walks over to the ruinous remains of a small castle to her left; a castle which guards by day and by night, its blind window eyes seeing all. She stands, leaning back against its tumble down wall, watching. An enigma hangs in the air, dangling on a gossamer thread. Over a-ways, a black raven lands on the head of a weather beaten statue and does a bird shit down its face.

The wife, hands sunk deeply, a thousand fathoms deeply, into her pockets, sees him arrive at the bottom and walk out over the grass towards the ducks and the reflection of ducks, begins to believe that this is just after all an innocent traipse through the afternoon. his gait is unhurried, though stiff. Stiff though unhurried. Soon he is beyond, slips into the woods opposite, which climb, gently at first, up to the golf course.

She begins to breath easily, but then a new character enters: A young girl, appearing from the café at the western extreme of the park, walking towards the pond, unaware that her every move is checked, checked and double double checked. The wife at first does not take heed of the insidious wink of implication, but suspicion is running through her veins, running against the current, and she soon notices that the object of her now keen scrutiny follows the same path as her husband: a path that must surely lead to nowhere, and she feels the comfort drain from her and a familiar cold chill takes its place. Her heart sinks as the girl too slips into those awkward bushes, is yet out of view, sinks like a lead weight, pulling her down into a pool of black death. She feels about to vomit, so acute is her feeling of end, of redundance, of solitude. It all seems so much worse. The girl, so young, no doubt one of his students, she feels herself betrayed and her age too. This is more terrible than terrible. She is frozen in time, unable to move, and yet the directions say she must and so she must. The first step is the hardest, with such inert lack of will to overcome, but then the momentum of action—which pretends at purpose—takes hold, and she feels herself moved like a puppet by invisible strings down the hill, by the water and on. She is so young. How could he? he must look at her all day in school, watch her youth heave with every breath she takes. How could he?

Meanwhile, the pristine one is not in the best of moods; has decided life has turned on her and means her no good. The poor girl, though she plays her part well, knows

nothing well of the part she plays. And such is the way of most.

he is waiting. In the bushes. In the bushes he is waiting. he sees the girl through jagged holes and smiles to himself. The girl is innocent, though the eyes are not.

"She has come," he thinks, smiles some more, watching through the spider's web of branch and leaf. The girl does not see him yet, stairs down at her feet, watching them move back and forth, back and forth, the path slipping by beneath their dainty tread. Suddenly, an arm is extended, appears there all alone, as if amputated, grabs her by the neck and more and more and more. The girl disappears into the bush.

The waiting is over. he is soon lost within himself, though he is about to be found out.

Wife, in the interim, has found her way along the path which leads to nowhere, and the worst is, she has arrived. She heard a certain cry, she heard a certain voice, though as yet they have no meaning. But now she can see through the tangle of branches and stops dead in her tracks, halted by a truth which can only be a lie, unwilling. Stops and stares through that nasty mess of brush, ready at once to flee, to return home and watch T.V. There are no words in her head now, she has slipped back to a primeval state of instinct and non-verbal process, where there is no thought in any normal sense of the word. She can see a man, who wears a brown bag over his head. he wears a brown bag over his head. The brown bag. Two holes have been bored through the rough paper, through which the eyes peep out. The girl is there, but at this point, with this partial image in mind, we must close our eyes and listen, listen to the

depravity, the contamination, for the sight of it would surely lead to everlasting blindness.

he has not noticed the sound of another's arrival, for there is, inside his head, the sound of an exploding atomic bomb.

"Ahh," he says, gasping, loving. "Ahhh." And with it, several things begin to collide: Firstly he reaches orgasm, we hear its groan; secondly the wife, who can fool herself not a moment longer, admits to his identity. Taking a step forward, leaves squelch beneath her tread. She knows who that bag man is. She calls out his name. Lastly he looks up and sees his conscience has arrived.

"Everard!" she calls.

"Doris!" he answers.

In Conclusion

And so Doris is with husband, happy at last, knowing all the years of loneliness have finally amounted to something tangible, something she can take home and keep for her own. Something she can sleep with. He is not perfect, but she will forgive him his weaknesses as he will forgive hers. She will search in her heart and find him there, forever. Such is the essence of her love, whose meaning she can now understand as an assurance never more to be alone. No matter what.