The black bag

A black sports bag, standing in a front porch, hidden from view, out of the rain. Jim didn’t notice it at first, when he arrived home, for he walked head down and hood up, mulling over his day at work when his boss had slammed him for sloppy paperwork.

‘Damn him’, he thought, ‘At least my designs are original.’

On arriving at the spiked railings of his yard, he pushed through the permanently ajar gate; ducked his head under the draping foliage of an old, twisting laurel, and stomped up the stone steps to his front door. Then began his usual home-coming routine of key-hunting, frantically thrusting his hands through a large assortment of pockets. This always took some time. He was that sort of guy. And it was at this point that he noticed the bag.

It was a smart, leather, black bag, a hold-all, with two carry handles and a long strap. He looked around and seeing nobody looking, gave the bag a gentle prod with his foot, expecting a spongey response. But no. There seemed to be something quite large inside. Something hard and bulky.

‘Huh!’ He exclaimed. ‘Strange!’

He continued searching for his door key by rummaging deep within his coat pockets, fingers feeling their way through lighters, tissues, coins, a cigarette packet, pens...but no key. So he switched to trouser pockets, reflecting on the bag.

‘Must be a visitor’s’, was his conclusion, ‘but why leave it outside? Oh! They must have forgotten it. Or, maybe they didn’t want to bring it in for some reason.’

At last, the key was located, in the lining of his coat where things often disappeared, and he carefully extracted it covered in biscuit crumbs. He turned towards the front door, a dirty maroon colour, and barely registered the flaking
paint or the discoloured gaps in the side-masonry where plaster had crumbled and fallen. He inserted the key, turned and opened the door.

‘Anyone at home’, he called.

The house where Jim lived was a terraced house on a dingy side-lane in the east side of town. He liked it there. That was where the life was. Four people ‘officially’ lived in the house sharing meals, expenses and toilet rolls. But others came and went; especially at weekends.

There was Joan, a sporty-looking student who ate, slept, attended college and did the shopping in her tracksuit. She never actually did any sport though; she preferred lounging around the house, watching soaps and entertaining boyfriends. And being a gorgeous blond she was never short of suitors. Then there was Amanda, who worked in a solicitor’s office and was terribly posh. She wasn’t often seen without a string of pearls around her high-necked pullovers; was rarely seen without make-up on, and was never seen without her hair perfectly coiffured - not even on daddy’s yacht.

‘Mumsy is paying a visit on Saturday,’ she might announce, ‘I must phone the florists and order orchids for the hall.’

To which Jim would reply: ‘Don’t worry ‘manda, I’ll nick some daffs from the local park’, just to wind her up.

They got on well though, even if Amanda preferred Jim to be out of the way when mumsy called around. In fact, ‘mumsy’ could only justify her daughter lodging here in terms of her going through a ‘bohemian stage’. Although, Amanda thought of it more as living amongst ‘salt-of-the-earth’ people and rather enjoyed living here. It was quite a ‘wheeze’.

Jim, it can be gleaned, was ‘a bit of a lad’. A joker and a tease. The wild card of the house, and the scruffiest too. He worked in an architect’s office, after having graduated last year, and though his student days were now behind him the student life-style was not. In this, he contrasted with serious Howard whose piercing dark eyes and thick, black eyebrows scared some of Joan’s female
friends away, whilst they passionately attracted others. None got near him though. He was a recluse. Even male friends were few and far between, and no-one knew what he did for a job. It was all hush-hush government business, apparently, and no-one liked to ask.

‘Anyone at home!’ Jim called again, louder this time, as he closed the door.

There was no answer, but he could hear voices coming from downstairs in the basement living room. He clumped down the wooden stairs, with each step emitting creaks and groans under his army surplus boots. Then he thrust his head into the downstairs space where Amanda was busy watching a t.v. soap:

‘Hiya!’

‘Blimey! You make some noise, you do!’ Amanda complained.

‘Well, you didn’t hear me when I shouted upstairs’.

‘Yes, I did, but I’m watching my soap. Shh!’

‘Oh, sorry.’ He paused, then added, ‘who’s the vistor?’

‘Sshh! What visitor?’

‘The visitor who’s left his bag on the step outside.’

‘What bag?’

‘The black leather sports bag’.

‘I didn’t see no black leather sportsbag when I got home and there ‘aint no visitor here.’

‘When did you get home?’

‘Just before Corrie started. Hey, Shh will you?’

Amanda, lying on the sofa in a green tracksuit with her legs curled up and tightly hugging a cushion, fixed herself back on the t.v. Jim took the hint and shrugged off his coat, casually dumping it on the dining table. Then he slumped down into an armchair with a noisy sigh. Amanda shot him a quick, meaningful glare and he shut up.

‘All the same,’ he continued after a minute’s silence had passed, ‘whose is that bag? I mean, it must belong to someone. What’s it doing on our step?’
Amanda ignored him.
‘What if it’s a bomb?’
Amanda swivelled her legs off the sofa, sat up and leant forward into the t.v. drama, her cushion hugged in her lap.
‘Or a decapitated head?’
Amanda’s head jerked around at him ‘You’re sick’ she blandly stated, then turned her head back again.
‘O.k. What if it’s got a stash of money inside?’
Amanda started to lose her patience.
‘Well, why not just take a look and let me watch Corrie, hey?’
‘O.k., I will.’ Jim reacted, ‘keep your cool!’
He pulled himself back out of the armchair with a struggle, hunched up his trousers and took a step towards the basement stairs. But then, before he got there, the front door opened. Jim stopped, then stood and listened as soft footsteps entered, paused, went back outside, paused and re-entered. He glanced at Amanda. But Amanda was glued to the television and totally unaware of anything outside of the unfolding drama on the screen. He heard the footsteps padding down the stairs with the gentleness of a cat and saw a smart pair of brown suede boots appear, followed by a pair of chic slacks and an expensive looking designer hand-bag clutched against a grey-striped fur coat. Finally, Joan came into view. She raised her hand; with slender, red nail-polished fingers pointing up, palm side out, and gave a delicate, circular wave.
‘Hi folks’, she greeted, pausing momentarily on the second step from the bottom like a celebrity posing for the cameras. Then she continued down and asked, ‘have either of you noticed the black bag on the doorstep?’
‘Well now you mention it...’ began Jim, in a tone laced with sarcasm, ‘I was wondering about it myself’.
‘Well, whose is it? Does it belong to anyone we know. It is rather a cheap, tacky looking thing, you know.’
Her questioning was suddenly interrupted by the soap opera theme tune resounding out loudly as today’s episode finished and Amanda sat back awestruck.: 

‘Wow!’ she exclaimed, ‘oh, my God!’

‘Amanda...?’ Jim asked, pulling her back from the twilight zone, ‘Joan’s arrived home and is enquiring about the black bag on the doorstep.’

Amanda turned and stared at Jim increduosly, unable to understand what was so damned important about a black bag, particularly after the dramatic events she’d just viewed on tele. She let out a long exasperated sigh and threw her cushion at Jim. Then she stood up, crossed the room in two steps and leapt up the basement stairs in three bounds.

Astonished, Joan looked at Jim, who simply shrugged his shoulders and blew out through pursed lips in bewilderment. Standing together in silence they heard Amanda strut towards the front door upstairs, jerk it open, grab the bag, slam the door, return down the hallway and leap down the stairs in two bounds. And there she was again, in front of them both, holding the black leather sports bag in her arms, which she dropped on the floor at their feet proclaiming:

‘If you want to know whose it is, look inside.’ She said.

And with no further word, she retrieved her cushion from the floor and jumped back on the sofa, leaving a stunned Joan and Jim regarding the black leather sports bag together.

Bags, like souls, are private. Instinctively this is known, for to open another person’s bag is taboo. It’s an off-limits voyeurism, and to forage inside is personality rape. It is just ‘not done’ and that’s why both Jim and Joan were reticent about picking up the black leather bag.

‘Perhaps we shouldn’t’, suggested Joan looking down at it. ‘Perhaps we should leave it on the doorstep for whoever put it there to reclaim.’
‘Maybe,’ agreed Jim churning it over, ‘but what gets me is that it seems to have been purposefully placed there, out of view...just left there...with whoever leaving it, just walking off. And that’s bizarre.’

‘Well, I know what mumsy would say.’

‘What?’

‘Take it to the police.’

‘Huh! You can if you want, but I wouldn’t involve them.’

‘No, I think I’ll call them.’

‘No, don’t bother. We don’t need to bother them with something minor.’

‘Oh, it’s no bother. Daddy is friends with the Chief Inspector.’

Jim groaned. ‘I think we should just peep inside and not waste police time.’

Joan shot Jim a sideways look and perceived something best kept hidden.

‘O.k,’ Joan backed down, ‘go on then, have a look inside.’

Amanda too now turned to watch Jim’s indecision. He shifted his feet uncomfortably and ruffled his hair with both hands.

‘Why me?’ he demanded.

‘Because...it’s you who most wants to know,’ answered Amanda. Joan nodded in agreement and Jim felt trapped between the two. But with the decision now collectively made, Jim felt justified in proceeding, and so he squatted down to examine the bag.

He first ran his hands over the leather, feeling its sheek sheen slide under his fingers. He then put a hand each side and pressed like a gynocologist feeling an extended pregnant stomach, mindful of the solid form he’d earlier felt with his boot. He now felt it again; hard, bulky and box shaped.

‘It’s a box,’ he told the girls.

‘Oh, isn’t this thrilling’, responded Joan holding her breath.

Amanda raised her eyes: ‘Yes, Joan-y. You must tell mumsy. Come on, Jim.’
Jim reached for the bag’s zipper on top and slowly drew it open. Joan’s bent her head forward and Amanda got off the sofa to see better. Then Jim pulled back the sides.

The bag now stood open and it was apparent that there was, indeed, a large, wooden box inside. He took a breath, placed his hands inside the bag under the box, one each end, and slowly wriggled it out of the bag. Then holding it in his arms like an unexploded bomb, he took one step forward and gently lowered it onto the table.

The box was about a foot-and-a-half long, a foot deep and a foot wide. It was made of walnut and had a faint florid design on the top surrounding the just distinguishable words: Martenie.

‘Ah,’ announced Jim, who knew about these things, ‘it’s an old cigar box.’

He found a side latch in, looked up at the girls, and opened wide the lid.

If they had been hoping for something special, they were disappointed. This was evidently no Pandora’s box. There was no explosion, no decapitated head, and no wealth of jewels. Just somebody’s personal junk. A collection of odds-and-ends of no apparent value.

Amanda turned back to the t.v. unimpressed, her minor interest in the bag over. Joan took a brief look over Jim’s shoulder and felt the thrill disappear. The mystery was over. There was no mystery.

‘Throw it away, Jim’ she told him, ‘it’s rubbish. We don’t want it inside.’

She then carefully placed her hand-bag on the sofa, shimmered out of her coat and sat down next to Amanda for a natter.

Jim, however, was a born scavanger; a magpie, a gatherer of finds, a beach-comber with an inquisive bent for curios and he was not so ready to consign this find to the garbage can. So, as the two girls engaged in idle chit-chat, he pulled up a chair and began to examine the contents in detail.

The first thing that Jim took out of the box was a small roll of paper, bound with an elastic band. On unrolling and laying it flat on the table, he saw that it
was a sample of light yellow wall-paper, embossed with a pattern of flowery tendrils. He smoothed it down flat, as it attempted to curl up, feeling the paper’s bumps and grooves as the lines turned and twisted. The pattern itself was without visual distinction, but it felt good to touch. Jim closed his eyes and followed a line that wove across the paper. Then he followed a second line which led in a completely different direction before doubling-back.

He opened his eyes again, pushed the paper to the side and looked back in the box. A door handle was the next thing he took out, for no reason other than the shape attracted him – an embellished ‘S’, with elongated head and tail. He felt the cold cast-iron in his hand, testing its weight. It was quite light. It was also incredibly smooth; like satin, with a silvery gleen.

‘Whose hands previously held this handle, ‘Jim wondered, ‘and why save it in a box, then put the box in a bag and leave it on someone’s doorstep?’

He delved once more into the box, pulling out a collection of small stones; all different. One was a white pebble, finely-smoothed by water, the sea or a river. Another, was a jagged piece of clear quartz, with many minor scratched faces that caught and dispersed the light. Another, was a sharp, piece of hardened lava dotted all over with air pockets. He drew it across the back of his hand, which caused a slight graze, and he looked at it anew with respect. The last piece was a flintstone, broken in two, with a knobbly, course-grained exterior and perfectly polished, shiny, veneered surface. He placed it against his face and felt its coolness. Then he licked it – it tasted slightly salty.

Having taken out these stones, Jim could now see a small plastic see-through bag underneath; the kind of plastic bag one keeps banknotes in. His fingers delicately picked it up and held it to the light. Inside was hair. A large, copious lock of hair. Dark and curly. It was as if someone had gathered up hair from a hairdresser’s floor to keep safe. Why? A momento? Then, having taken out this plastic bag, Jim’s eyes fell on a single woollen glove, which was obviously a woman’s looking at its size and its rainbow-coloured design. It was quite
fluffy, yet he could feel the ridges and rows of knitted knots between his fingers. And the palm side was slightly worn. So it wasn’t new.

Then came ‘the find’. Jim had known persistence would pay. It was wrapped in brown paper which, itself, was wrapped in a silk headscarf. This, in itself, was a glory, for it was finely embroidered around the edge in black, red and green, with an intricate flowery pattern. But as Jim picked it out he could see, and feel, that it contained something. So he unrolled the scarf and found inside a brown paper ‘package’ sealed with sellotape. His fingers trembled a little in excitement as he prised off small strips of tape, unfolded the paper and found within, a marvellous soap-stone miniature, hazel-brown, with a gleaming glossy glaze.

The sculpture was a kneeling man with bowing head and limbs that flowed, almost dripped, like a melting wax candle. Jim caressed it lovingly, enjoying its feel, enjoying gliding his fingers over the curves and bumps, over the shoulders, over the head, along the body. Then he held it up like a prize trophy:

‘Hey girls, it’s not all rubbish,’ he announced proudly.

‘Hey, that’s not bad,’ replied Joan braking off her chat and turning to look.

‘It’s a soap-stone and a very nice one.’

‘It sure is. It’ll look nice in my room.’

‘Oh, Jim, but it’s not really yours, is it?’

‘Oh, come on. If it’s just left on our doorstep like that...’

‘I reckon Jim’s right,’ Amanda interjected, ‘anything else in there?’

‘Well, yes and no. It’s a strange collection: A roll of wallpaper, a door handle, a few stones, a women’s glove, a lock of hair, a silk scarf...and this soap-stone. I’m not sure what to make of it all, really.’

‘Nothing else?’

‘Yeah. There’s a few screws that probably fit the handle. And, what’s this? Oh, it’s a cube of soap...umm, smells nice... lavendar, I think. Do you want it?’

‘If it’s new?’
‘It’s not,’

‘Then no.’

‘Oh, look’, Jim continued, ‘there’s a small glass bottle here...strange shape...looks like perfume.’ He shook it. ‘There’s some inside too.’

‘If it’s Channel, I’ll have it’, quickly added Amanda.

‘Oh, Amanda, please no’, said Joan, ‘If you want Channel take some of mine, not some from an old bag left on a doorstep.’

‘Thanks, Joan-y, I will. But you can’t throw Channel away,’ insisted Amanda.

‘As you wish. Is that all, Jim?’

‘That’s about it, except for this fading, dog-eared booklet. Hey, look at it. It’s in braille.’

‘Braille?’ both girls simultaneously questioned.

‘Yes. It’s got lines and lines of dots. Here, you run your finger over them.’

Jim passed the booklet over to Joan. She tried it and felt the tingle of tiny spots pressing onto her finger tip.

‘Isn’t it incredible how people can read this?’ She mused.

‘Blind people, Joan,’ said Jim.

‘Yes, that’s what I meant.’

‘You know something,’ interrupted Amanda, ‘there is something curious about that bag. I mean... not just that it’s been left on the step like that, but what it contains. I mean...well, firstly...why would a blind person leave it on our step? It’s not exactly that accessible, right...and all the things inside the bag, well, they seem like tactile souvenirs – if you know what I mean. The stones, the hair, the soapstone...even the wallpaper.’

‘Yeah,’ concurred Jim, ‘it’s a mystery. At least as good as your soap.’

Upstairs, the front door suddenly opened and closed. Jim looked at the girls:

‘Must be Howard.’

Sure enough, the basement stairs rattled and shook as Howard descended in his polished black shoes and crisp, clean black suit. Then he stopped on the the
second stair, as Joan had, suprised to see them all staring at him. His dark eyes inspected their stares:

‘What’s up?’
‘Nothing up,’ answered Jim, ‘we’re just discussing a mystery.’
‘A mystery? Well, there’s a real mystery down the road if you want one.’
‘Why? What’s up?’
‘They’ve found a body in river. The police have sealed off the area.’
‘A body?’
‘Yeah. And apparently, so I was told by the man in the corner shop, they also found a white stick on the river bank. Looks like suicide. Could be an accident. Or murder.’

‘I don’t get it,’ said Howard, ‘what’s it to you lot? They haven’t even identified the body yet. Could be a local. Might even be that blind guy that used to live here. But he went into care years ago after his wife died. Poor guy, he never got over it. He used to call in her from time-to-time, just to smell the air and feel the wallpaper. It was all a bit weird really...’

Howard stopped, mid-speech, grasping a thread of communal understanding.
‘I really think, Jim,’ Joan whispered, ‘that this time we should call the police.’

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Phil