

The Sleepwalkers' Ball

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Alan
Bilton

ALCEMI 

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For Pamela

Letter from Gilbert Roland to Clara Bow, 1953

Hello Clarita Girl,

I am truly sad that you don't feel well. Sometimes when I go to church and I think of you I say a prayer. It will be heard. God hears everything.

I hope someday they show 'The Plastic Age'. It would be wonderful to see that dancing scene, you and I. It would be pleasant seeing how I looked when I was your beau, and you were my dream-girl. It would be pleasant seeing that. And then it might be very beautiful and suddenly it might be very sad.

It seems you are in my thoughts.

It's good I feel that way.

It's good I have never forgotten you.

God bless you,

Gilbert

PART ONE

Our Grand Tour

Right this way, ladies and gentlemen, watch your step! The way down from the castle is awful steep, and there's broken glass and dog mess everywhere. Sorry Madam, no refunds! It's a wee squeeze in places, so keep one eye on your valuables and the other on the road ahead. That's it, sir, mind how you go: the steps are treacherous and the handrail is kind of loose. What's that sir, something on my breath? Merely the slightest nip against the cold, nothing to be concerned about — the engine won't start without juice! Quick as you can now please: our time is short and the sky is threatening rain.

Look — the cutting is coming to an end and the old town is opening up before us, concertina-like between the blackened cannons and the lone kebab shop. There now, can you see? Granted, it's not much of a view and the town is kind of grey, but... Miss? Miss, if you please? To the east you can see the chimneys of the breweries, followed by a line of long cooling towers and the beginnings of the industrial park; to the west, a crooked line of hills and the inky squiggle of the river-bank, the railway running alongside, as straight as a ruler. And just ahead? A jumble of huddled grey houses, darker tenement blocks and little old yards which belong to the time of the castle itself. What a sight, eh? Like the coals of a fire which has just gone out. And hidden amongst the dour municipal housing is a gloomy wee yard, held together by row after row of stiff-drying laundry, a little shoebox theatre wrapped up in washing. Ah, do you see? A line of socks and smalls flip-flap in the wind and two dodderly old pigeons footer about amongst the aerials and the dishes. And all the way at the bottom some kid is kicking his ball between two piles of bin bags, his innocent mug without a care in the world. There, Madam, just below that big striped sheet; he's dribbling it up and down the yard, a tiny little kid, just a speck really... He runs up, gives a little hop, and boots the ball clear over the line of washing. No sir, don't run and get it! The kid's scuttling off to fetch it, happiness written all over his mucky little face.

Funny little kid, eh? Just messing around, a little kid and his ball. Wee Hans boots his ball up and down the yard, while above him the TV aerials creak in the wind and the sky gets darker and darker... Ah,

my friends, do you remember a time when you were happy doing nothing, messing around for hours, every day stretched out as if hung up on a washing line? Mm, weren't we happier then, in our own little world, killing time... What's that sir? No, just leave him, he's fine, just a funny little kid. Let him be, eh? We'll go on in a minute...

See, the lad fires between two big piles of bin bags and then a window opens up above him, some woman poking her head out and yelling to the kid. Quite a gal, eh? Her face as round as a birthday cake, with two black raisins for eyes. Well, it seems that she wants Hans to go to the shops before his dad comes home, to get a few things, you know, for their tea. The gal throws her purse out, a shower of cake-crumbs following it down, the lad waiting at the bottom with wide-open arms. Down, down, down it goes, no more than a little black spot; when the kid catches it he jumps up and down and waves, no more than a little black spot himself.

But what's he doing now? He's chasing a little cloud of sparrows and hopping in and out of the drains. Hey kid, kid! But it's no use; he's over by one of the smelly black grates, poking around in it with a long stick. What about the shops, you little squirt? But the boy's not listening. No, he's playing hide and seek between the rows of washing, painting stripes on the sheets with his long slimy stick. Blimey, he's going to get it when his dad comes home! Kid, kid, look up! The light's fading and it's going to bucket down any minute! I mean, just look at that sky — like a cup of black coffee about to spill over. What's wrong with the boy anyway? Now he's painting funny figures on the walls with his manky stick, his tongue sticking out and his hands completely filthy.

Listen kid, I know what I said earlier, but you can't just muck around all day. I mean, look at those windows, those doorways, the big black eye of the sky; ah, kid do you think you can't be seen? Look, some old biddy is already hobbling into view, hurrying over to where the boy dabs at the bedding with his long sticky pole. Blimey, she's ancient; like the shadow of a shadow and crooked as a hairpin bend.

Well, the kid's in for it now. I mean, just look at the way she's holding her stick: she probably gave Adam what for when he was a little lad. But hold on, what's going on? The old bat's smiling and

rooting around in her cardy and doesn't seem to have noticed the kid's scribbles at all. Nope, she's heard that the boy's popping out to the shops and wonders if he could pick up a little wet fish and maybe some tinned fruit, you know, something to tide her over till her daughter comes round in the morning. The old girl pulls a stub-end of sweets from one sleeve and the boy pops one in his mouth.

"That's a good boy," the wifey says and hands over her purse. It's as round and wizened as she is.

Granny, granny, are you sure? You might as well give your purse to a monkey...

"You're a good boy," the old woman says again and the little kid beams. A gust of wind suddenly sweeps across the yard and the two of them wobble on their pins. Yessir, the wind is really getting up now! No place for kids or grannies!

"Off you go then," says the old woman, pointing the way to the shops. Her pale eyes are kind and watery. Then she pats him twice on the head as if he were a little dog.

Ho, what a daft old bat! Imagine trusting that tiny little kid with your cash! I mean, look at the size of him; no more than a smudge on a page. That granny must be as dotty as they come to lend her purse to a kiddie like him. But what can you do? There she goes, shuffling back over to the stair-well, bent over her stick like a little letter 'm'. And whilst she's climbing back up that stairwell, painfully picking her way amongst the rubbish and the loose steps, what d'you think the kid's doing with her purse? Why, he's tossing it up in the air and using a pair of boxer shorts as a basketball hoop. What a monkey! What a brat! Does he think that old gal's made of money? The purse is sailing through the air and little Hans is chucking it higher and higher, laughing and clapping as it slides down the pants, until the purse gets caught in some fold or other and won't come down again. Oh kid! It's hanging high above him and the boy looks up at it with wide-open eyes, his grubby paws outstretched. The wind blows, the sky darkens, the laundry starts to flap, but the purse isn't going anywhere. What a twerp, what a clot... And what's he doing now? Chucking his ma's purse in to try and dislodge it! No sonny, don't do it! Look at that black sky, d'you think it augurs well? Anyway, we

all know where this is going — yes, now there's two purses hanging high above his head and the boy's still marooned in the yard. Ah kid, couldn't you have seen what was going to happen? What a pup, what a brat! Little Hans, little Hans! What will save us from the perpetual stupidity of youth?

Meanwhile the clouds are closing in and the sky is growing darker and darker. Best look for shelter, ladies and gentlemen! An awful gale is blowing in from the East, an ill wind indeed... See how it makes the laundry twist and spin, the trousers running on the spot, a line of black tights jogging along next to them. Yes, the sky is heavy and angry: atop the flats, telephone wires zip and twang and a chimney pot wobbles and blows loose. Ah, my friends, hold onto something solid and try to stay together! Mm, what's that, miss? The kid? He's over by a big pile of cement, a tiny little midge blown this way and that in the wind.

Kid, kid, over here! I mean, doesn't he care about all the trouble he's caused? A scrap of paper blows off down the yard and the brat follows it, flapping his arms like he's about to take off. Weeeeeee, he shouts. Then two of the bin-bags topple over, and a welter of rubbish chases after him, a great wave of litter and sweepings. But what about the old woman's fish? And something for his dad's supper? Mm, does he think that no one will notice?

The boy jumps over the rubbish-pit and crosses over into another, smaller yard. There he comes out by the row of buckets and rusted tools which dot the outside of the caretaker's run-down shed and suddenly grinds to a halt. It's a little more sheltered here, and you can find interesting things hidden amongst the rotting railway sleepers: old paintbrushes, the skeleton of a stepladder, a nest of rusted lawnmower parts.

The kid hugs the wall and tiptoes toward the caretaker's bothy, a ramshackle hut which looks like a railway carriage inexplicably abandoned in the middle of the yard. In the doorway, the caretaker, a squat, hairy man, sits by a three-bar fire. He wipes his mouth and peers at the boy with two bleary eyes, a telly on behind him, some type of quiz show, laughter. As the child draws near, the fella gestures toward him, his gut struggling to get out of the chair.

“Kid, hey kid!”

The caretaker’s round and meaty and covered with a heavy pelt. He scratches his shaggy head and rises up as if wakening from some great and terrible sleep.

“Hey, kid, kid — you doing anything, eh? You got a minute?”

The boy examines the fellow closely. His big bushy brows look like felt-tip marks and his stubbly face seems badly shaded, as if somebody has scribbled over all the lines.

“Take my dog for a wee trot, will ya? Just up the castle-walk and back.”

Wee Hans looks back at him blankly as the caretaker fumbles in his pockets.

“G’wan, be a pal, eh? There’s a pound in it for you.”

Ah, kid, don’t fall for it! D’you think the fella’s asking you for no good reason? Why, look at that sky: like a great black balloon just waiting to burst! And we’ve all heard tales of the caretaker’s ferocious hound...

But the fella shuffles back into the bothy and pulls a big metal chain down from a nail on the wall.

“Good boy, you’re a good boy. He’s tied up by the garages, okay?”

Ah, kid...

“Off you go, then. There’s a pal.”

Hans takes the lead and holds it in both hands. Blimey, it’s big! Like a loo chain with the end sawn off. Nevertheless the kid inches away and the fella settles back down in his chair. The shed smells of calor gas and methylated spirits and there are bits of old newspaper everywhere.

“G’boy. You’re a good boy.”

With that the fella settles back in his chair while the boy scampers away, trailing the lead over by the railway sleepers. Well, we’d best go after him; I mean, who’s to say what might happen? But it’s pretty grim here — engine parts, old sacks, piles of discarded rubbish. Ah, watch your feet, Miss! Something’s taken a dump all over the ground, great mounds of crap. Where are we now? There’s a horrible, piss-stained wall, a number of half-collapsed sheds and, further on, a line

of firmly secured lock-ups and a skip. All sorts of weeds are growing in the middle of the tarmac, and a puddle of thick, black oil oozes out from one of the garages. What a place! The shapes seem obscure, indefinite, the light heavy and mottled. And the turds are really piling up here, big dumps everywhere. I mean, I don't know what that fella is feeding his dog on, but....

What's that, Madam? No, the kid's still going, even though he looks smaller than ever now, no more than a little black dot really. After you, sir: the yard is dismal and louring, a collection of shapes without origin or purpose. One side of the alley is made up of solid blocks of darkness, and the other is even worse, as if we're wading through thick black ink. Still, there are a few recognisable things: a drainpipe, bin-bags, plastic sheeting ...and amidst all this nothing, something is breathing. Yes, the thing's right there, slumped in the darkness, a denser patch of shadow amongst the gloom. Best not get too close, Madam; its tum is going up and down and a terrible smell emanates from its rear-end. And yet the boy is inching toward it, his silhouette no more than a pencil-stroke. He gingerly puts out one hand and ... What's that he's doing? Untying the thing? A sudden gust rattles the garages and the shutters bang and creak. Stay together at the back! The kid is right by its mouth now, unhooking the chain that's looped around its ruff. But it's terribly dark in there and the beast is awful hard to see. All I can make out is a long pink tongue and now the kid's right on top of it, his little head just above the creature's maw. Don't push, Madam! The boy is practically tickling its whiskers, his face obscured by the gloom...

And then suddenly the kid freezes. Kid, kid, what are you doing? He stops and lets go of the lead, the dog giving a low growl as the chain plops on his paw. Foolish boy! The beast is untethered and you're standing there like a loon! I mean, just look at that thing — like a rolled-up carpet but with teeth. Oh miss, I wouldn't do that if I was you! I'd leave that thing well alone. Aye, let's go! The kid's scampering away and we'd be best advised to follow him. The boy's hopping between the oil and broken glass, his little black shape disappearing in the gloom. And the dog? It's shaking its great head, a row of teeth in space. Yes, the beast is dark and shapeless, more of a smell than a form,

a crude daub of darkness licking its chops. Let's go, let's go...

Miss? Miss? If you please? Back along the alley-way... that's it, dodging the wire and the dog muck, over the wooden boxes, past the bothy and the sleepers ... Mm, we're back in the main courtyard now, the yard a little darker but otherwise undisturbed. A few lights are coming on now, and if you look up at the tenement windows, you can see the old woman laying out her knife and fork on the kitchen table, the boy's mum staring into her oven, an enormous room lit by a naked bulb. The yard's brighter here, but colder too. Best button up your coat, sir! That wind's blowing straight from the east. I mean, just look above you ladies and gentlemen; the clouds form a long black line, like a dam waiting to spill over.

What's that, Madam, something panting in the yard? Just the coming gale, my dear, no need to worry. The hound? No, no, nowhere to be seen. Now everyone over to the bike-shed, the rain will be coming soon. Sir, sir? No shoving at the back!

And the kid? Still footering about by the rubbish-tip, his grubby little mug as guileless as ever. Look, there's the kiddie over by the rubbish heap, staring off into space, watching the laundry twist and turn. If only he knew, eh? Up on that line hangs the whole sad livery of our lives, nightie, pinny, and thermal breeks; and at the end some dark things all plastic and rubbery, reeking of disinfectant and old folk's pish. Ach, such sorrow! The little boy's shape looks smaller than ever there, his daddy's overalls and ma's pants flapping in the gale.

Kid, kid, when will your dad be home? Purse lost, bike uncleaned, dog loose in the yard. Oh my lad, what do you think you're doing?

Well, what happens next is no surprise. A screech of brakes, the swish of tyres, the slight clatter of a loose mudguard; yes, his dad is home, his bike just starting to free wheel into the yard. Fast as a monkey the boy leaps into one of the great white sheets and hauls himself in (aye, with his mucky shoes on too!), his little legs swallowed up beneath him. From the bedding the lad can see his dad locking up his bike and slowly taking a plastic lunch box from out of his saddlebag, his orange vest the only colour in the yard. Then the fella — stooped, round shouldered, and with a big bristly moustache — checks his lock, takes off his bicycle-clips, and walks over to his son's bike, lying upturned by

one of the smelly drains. Yes, it's as he thought — nothing has been done. The fella shakes his head and sighs through his 'tache. Ah Madam, have you ever seen such a sorrowful face? Sad eyes, sad chops — even his moustache seems weighed down by the sorrows of the world. But then he straightens up, looks up at the black cauldron of the sky and thinks to himself, well at least I beat the rain. Grit blows crazily across the yard and the fella props the kid's bike up, scoops up the lad's ball, and walks stiffly across to the stairwell. Dad, dad! But the boy doesn't dare cry out in case he gets into trouble. No, he just lies there wrapped up in wet bedclothes, one more rag hanging on the line. There's the fella's orange safety jacket and there's his big heavy boots and now he's away up the stairwell and the kid is all on his own.

Kid, hey, kid!

But he isn't coming down.

No, the lad's just hanging there, swaying gently above the concrete and rubbish. Mm, is he ever going to climb down? Or is he going to stay there forever, his little dot just another lump in the lining, one more bump or form... I mean, the boy feels kinda safe in his hammock, like he's been swallowed by an enormous cloud, a cloud which smells of bath time and soapsuds... Yes the wind bellows and the dog growls but the lad's all tucked up in his little white nest, his body a wee round ball, curled up against the cold.

What's that? Doesn't he miss his mummy and daddy? Why, of course he does, Missy, his little heart is breaking! But, in his heart of hearts, he knows he can never go home again. His purse is lost, the dog is loose, the little old wifey will never get to eat her fish — and in the meantime the sling rocks to and fro, the boy one more scrap swinging on the line.

So did he ever come down? Well, you have to remember that all this happened a very long time ago. It's true, sir; even that block of flats isn't there anymore. Ah, ladies and gentlemen, there's no use complaining, time marches on, even in a little grey town like this. And the kid? Well, of course eventually he had to climb out of the sheet and face the music; I mean, after a while he got hungry and lonely and the sheet was all damp and cold. And were his mum and dad mad? Sure, I mean, you saw what the little brat got up to! But

what do you say we leave him there a little while longer? That's right sir; let him lie there a little bit more, suspended softly above the life that's yet to come. After all, he's only a little kid and doesn't know what's what; let him swing there for a little while more... Yes, the kid's in his hammock and just starting to drop off... Let him be, sir, let him sleep...

Hm, what's that? The first drop of rain! Well, we'd best be going, ladies and gents; our tour is only just starting and we've a long way yet to go. What's that? No, no, let the boy be. He'll be fine. Take a swig from the bottle and off we go; the pavement's terribly uneven and the rain is coming down in buckets. Miss, miss? The kid's still there, though the heavens are opening and the little line of laundry is blowing this way and that. Miss? It's time to go. Right this way ladies and gentlemen, keep together and follow me. You too, Missy, after me...

II

The poky little pub was squeezed in between two big concrete blocks, one of those spit and sawdust joints frequented by students, piss-artists, glue sniffers and the like. Tonight though was something different: tonight some kind of coach-party and their guide were crammed into the wee snug, the fella necking pint after pint while the rain poured down and the heavens bellowed and bayed. Tubfuls of rain exploded out on the dingy street and the drains gurgled and belched, like a plughole about to overflow. What a hole! The snug swirled and lurched, the tour-guide got hammered, and the coach-party huddled together, looking kind of nervous.

Over by the pool table a bunch of young guys were lounging about, knocking some balls together in a desultory fashion. One of them was supposed to be finishing an essay and another had to prepare for some class or other, but instead they ate crisps and flicked beer-mats across the pool table. Work-shy skivers! Every once in a while one of them would poke his nose out of doors, check that it was still raining, and then buy another pint; the glasses were lining up now 'cause the barmaid couldn't be bothered to pick them up, and a lackadaisical air hung over the establishment, two old bods talking about football, and the barmaid reading a magazine. Some of the walking-party grumbled and muttered but nobody wanted to go back outside and no wonder. Outside, the wind shrieked and threw itself at the door, the windowpanes rattling in their frames. Better to stay indoors, even if the place was kinda dumpy, its tartan decor all mottled and stained.

Well, it was just about then that the doors flew open and this scrap of a girl blew in, drenched from head to foot. She looked around, blinked twice, and then shook herself down like a dog.

“Okay,” she said. “Who wants to buy me a drink?”

She wandered over to the clump of students and struck a provocative pose. The gal was little and skinny but had a big round face, like a silent movie star. By her side was a scuffed wee case.

“What do you say?”

Nobody made much of a move.

“C'mon fellas, I'm drowned!”

She was quite pretty actually, but had a whopping great bruise on

one cheek. Her eyes were two dark caves, her eyebrows two little fish.

Reluctantly, Hans put down his cue.

“I’ve only got a pound...”

“That’s okay, just something fizzy! The bubbles go straight to my head.”

Hans walked over to the bar, the girl shivering and clapping her hands.

“I’m freezing!” she announced, jumping on the spot. “My pully’s soaked through...”

He didn’t know what to say. The barmaid was finishing her word-search and barely looked up.

“Are you from the Uni?” she asked, bobbing up and down.

“Um, yeah.”

“What’cha doing?”

“The History of Art.”

“Really?”

“Mm.”

He eyed up her tiny wee skirt and tried to guess her age. What a crazy dame, he thought.

“Coke alright?”

“Mm, great.”

“Diet?”

“That sounds lovely.”

The gale was picking up strength outside. It sounded like the roof was about to fly off and the pub creaked and groaned.

“Art, eh?”

“Mm.”

“So would you like to paint me?” She assumed a dramatic pose and Hans thought she’s got ants in her pants this one; can’t she just stand still?

“No, I don’t paint. I just write about them.”

“Oh. Hey, I’m really hungry, you know.”

“I...”

“How about some chips?”

Hans looked out the window. Big chunks of debris were blowing

down the street and you could hear funny clanks and bangs.

“My pully’s just drying out...” the girl said.

Instead, he bought her some crisps (“Hey, you’ve got more than a pound” she muttered) and watched as she devoured them. Her mouth was tiny, like a little black bud, but she managed to pack ’em in.

“Art, eh? Mmm.”

Clara was a packer in a biscuit factory, which was all right, though there was a guy there who wouldn’t leave her alone. He’d corner her in the stockroom and try and grab her bum or else he’d squeeze past her in the corridor and try to look down her top.

“It’s true!” she said. “Every time he saw me he’d start to act up. Once he tried to get me to go up to the roof with him ’cause he said he’d seen a squirrel but I knew what he wanted.”

She took a big swig of Coke.

“You see guys are always after me! Like when I was a cashier in a petrol station and this bloke who delivered the confectionery there said that he was in love with me. Well, I said to him ‘are you serious?’ and he said ‘sure I am’ and I said ‘well prove it’, ‘prove it how?’ says the fella, and I say ‘any way you like’ and the fella laughs and says ‘look, I’ll streak through the car-wash’ and I say ‘well let’s see you do it’ and the fella runs outside in just his boxers and gets hit by the rollers and when we got him to the hospital he needed seventeen stitches. But guys have always been crazy about me!”

“Ah.”

The girl’s eyes flashed defiantly.

“They can’t help it! I mean, there was this one bloke when I was a hairdresser...”

“You were a hairdresser?”

“And what’s so weird about that? One day this old bloke comes in with, like, hardly a hair on his head, and asks for a quick wash and go and well, I do him quick, ’cause there’s not much to be getting on with, and at the end he puts twenty quid in my hand and says, awful polite, ‘That was lovely Miss, but could you do it again and this time a little hotter.’ Anyway, you know, he’s the customer so I do what he tells me, but when I’m done he produces another note and whispers, ‘I don’t suppose you could let the shampoo run down into my eyes

could you?’ so I do and he shouts ‘Hotter! Hotter!’ and ‘Give my head a good scrub!’ and ‘Fetch me a rough towel!’ and afterwards he sighed and said ‘Just once more, if you’d be so kind’ and I was just about to do it when he sticks his hand up my skirt and so I have to squirt perming solution in his eyes and clout him one with the clippers. ‘Oh, Miss, oh, Miss,’ he says, ‘will you marry me or no?’ Now what do you say to that?”

Hans looked at her kinda suspiciously. “You did all those jobs? You look kind of young to me.”

“I’m not that young, you know,” Clara said, batting her eyelids. “Anyway, how about another Coke?”

He counted his pennies and went off and got one. When he got back, the girl was perched on the pool table, chatting to his mates.

“Hi there! Martin’s given me a pound for the juke-box.”

“Great. Here’s your Coke.”

“Mm! Are you sure you don’t want to paint me?”

“I wouldn’t know how.”

She yawned and there was a crash from outside like a bin was rolling down the road. Rain bounced against the windowpanes like bullets.

“Which bit would you do first?”

“I...”

“My legs? My knees? My eyes?”

Her eyes were two dark cherries framed by long black stalks.

“Really, I can’t paint to save my life...”

She wrinkled her nose up and skipped over to the jukebox. A few seconds later a pop song came on at top volume but nobody shifted; the two bods continued to argue, the barmaid nibbled the top of her pen, and the studenty-types looked down at the table. Outside the heavens roiled and spun. The tour-group was still there.

“This song reminds me of a guy I once knew,” the girl yelled. “He worked in a record shop and would get me whatever I liked. He was great! He did this song for me but I accidentally taped over it and we broke up.”

“You know a lot of guys.”

“Yeah.” Her eyebrows were two black commas on a crisp white page. “It’s like I can’t help it! Now, what about those chips?”

The students looked at one another sleepily. The two old blokes had grown tired of their argument and were now quietly supping. The barmaid yawned.

“Well?”

It was as if the pub were the only point of dry land in a vast and terrible ocean. It bobbed to and fro whilst everything else was torn apart and pulverised by the gale.

“Okay, okay. Let me put my jacket on,” Hans muttered. “I’ll see you guys later, okay?”

The snug seemed to be the last dry place on earth. Outside, the void roared and leapt. The rain came down in one long deluge, and within seconds the two little stick figures were drenched.

“Can you hear my stomach rumbling?” yelled the girl and the squall cracked open the sky, tearing the clouds to rags. The rain came down in stair-roads and cascaded down the flooded little street.

“When I was little they couldn’t keep me out of water,” she said. “I was always falling into rivers, paddling pools, ditches, hoping some fella would fish me out.”

Her big, wet face was lit up by the streetlight and she pulled a long black hair from her mouth. She still had her case by her side.

“Lucky, I don’t mind getting wet.”

“Mm.”

They took the short cut by the churchyard, the steps a little waterfall, the flailing trees clawing savagely at the sky.

“Look at that,” she said, and they watched a flock of black tiles cut through the air and smash into the warehouse opposite.

If I don’t hold onto her then she’ll blow away, Hans thought, though he didn’t know whether or not to bother. Ah, when was the last bus back to Uni? Meanwhile, Clara was off on her own skipping through the puddles.

“Do you want to hear about my last boyfriend?” she asked. “He washed dishes at this fancy restaurant and he used to say that my face was a big round plate and when he kissed me he could see his own face smiling back.” Hans didn’t answer. More debris went flying off into space and the wind blew rainwater in his ears. “We split up ’cause he was sick of all the guys chasing after me — but what can I do?”

Her hair blew in front of her round, white face, and it was like a lunar eclipse, the girl's eyes and nose and mouth disappearing in the darkness. All he could see was the bruise.

What a gal, thought Hans. But what was she doing with a suitcase in the middle of the night anyway?

The chip shop was on the main road to the bridge out of town and a weary yellow glow emanated from its dreary interior. The spotty guy behind the fryers looked just bored out of his brains and the only customer was some little old dear waiting quietly for her fish.

"Double chips please!" said the girl. Water was streaming from her clothes and sizzled on the hot counter. The pair of them were soaked to the bone.

But where should they go with them? Hans wasn't even hungry. They sheltered in a tenement stoop near the bridge. Outside, cars splashed along the main road and the rain lashed down in barrels. When he poked his head out, it was like a bucket of water in the face.

The girl was shivering. "These chips are lovely," she said.

When he kissed her she tasted of vinegar. He couldn't see very well and water kept trickling in his eyes. Close-up the girl looked even prettier, her bruise an ugly crater on the moon.

And Hans thought: If I could paint her then I'd put her head on upside down, make her eyes as big as saucers, and her mouth a tiny hole in the canvas. Then I'd draw her body like one skinny line with this big white balloon on the top, a light bulb on inside.

Clara's lips were warm but her teeth chattered.

The gale battered the low stone bridge, picked up water from the river, threw it at the town. It wailed and hollered. Heavy black clouds came down and obliterated the skyline, flooding the rooftops, the steeples, the grey granite hills.

"There was this one guy who was mad keen on me," said the girl between kisses. "I mean, he was really crazy. One day when I didn't show up he burst into tears, took off all his clothes, and jumped out of his tenement window. It's true! But it all went wrong 'cause, like, he fell really awkwardly and got himself caught up in all the washing-lines which were strung across, and he ended up sort of tangled, one leg slipped into a stiff pair of shorts and one arm stuck in an apron, and

there he was, hanging there above the yard, all dressed up. Anyhow, after a while a crowd came to watch him and eventually someone called the fire brigade. They came in a big red lorry, with smart black uniforms and shiny helmets, and everyone clapped and cheered.”

And Hans thought: look, her pullover’s like a dish-rag. She’s shaking.

She was the shape of a lollypop — skinny with a big round head. And where had she got that bruise from? Hans felt awful tired and wet but the girl was stuck to him like a plaster.

Had somebody really thrown himself out of a window for her? Raindrops sparkled in her hair and her eyes were dark and saucy. But I don’t know, Hans thought to himself; his neck was sore and he had these cramps in his legs. I don’t know. Tch, he blinked his eyes and looked down at her case. What was in there anyway?

After a while they stopped kissing. “I’m still a bitty hungry,” she said. “There’s a Spar just round the corner. Could you get me some chocolate?”

He mentally counted up his change and said, “Okay.” When he looked back her face was this big round headlamp in the darkness.

Clouds exploded and great grenades of water bounced off the road. The wind blew the water into great swells, which coursed down toward the overflow. Hans crossed the channel and ran over to the shop.

Just look at him, though: he’s tired and he’s wet-through, with his hair stuck flat to the top of his head. Bugger this, he thinks to himself. There’s a leak in one of his trainers and his essay is due in tomorrow.

Outside the Spar is a bus stop and he stops and thinks about the cash in his pocket. Ah, he thinks, isn’t it easier to just go? A great weariness seems to descend upon him and all he wants to do is to lie down and sleep. But then he thinks about the girl shivering and waiting for her chocolate and starts to feels bad. How old was she anyway? The rain pours down in a never-ending stream, splashing from the guttering, spilling out from the overflows. He pictures her face, a big round balloon with a smile crayoned-on, and then he pictures her case, all battered and scuffed, sitting next to her like an obedient dog. What a crazy girl! The wind is trying to grab his glasses, his trainers two grey

puddles beneath his trouser-slops.

But amazingly, the headlights of a bus are approaching. Is it the right one? Yes it is.

Ah, me, he thinks. It's awful late.

So what's he doing now? He's climbing on the bus and giving the man his money. No, really!

The fella is on the bus and he's fishing in his pocket for his loose-change. Kid, hey kid! Ah, it's as if he can't be bothered; he stumbles down the aisle already half-asleep, swaying from side to side and falling over half the seats. Lucky the bus is empty; he makes it to the back seat and throws himself down, his clothes one big wet bundle. Ah, what's he thinking about d'you think? The girl? Her case? The gales? No, nothing. The kid is thinking about nothing. A mysterious lethargy seems to overwhelm him and he slowly closes his eyes. Look – the bus is starting to pull away and the fella is starting to disappear...

Lethargy! Lassitude! Indolence! O, the listlessness of man! The bus is disappearing and back on the stoop the girl seems to vanish too. Yes, there's a sudden flicker and her little headlamp goes out, swallowed up by the darkness. But the kid's asleep and doesn't even notice. Listlessness, torpidity, indifference; what will save us from these?

III

Outside on the pavement, our little group of tourists clustered together for warmth. Ah, what a night! Above us the clouds were being wrung out like dish cloths, huge spouts of water pouring down from the sky. Rain surged along the guttering, cascaded from the overflows, and gurgled in the drains. How cold it was and how heavy! But what could we do? We watched the little bus pull away and felt the sky rumble and flush, terrifying water-bombs exploding above our heads. Even the darkness felt wet.

“On we go,” yelled our guide. He was four sheets to the wind by now and his eyes rolled erratically in his sockets. “We’re leaving the old town behind. Ahead lies bleak industrial parks, housing estates, closed down shops. But don’t worry! The silhouette of the castle will stay with us, and the shadow of those grey-black hills.”

But, oh, where were we going? Outside the supermarket, a flock of trolleys ranged freely across the car-park, whilst over by the off-licence a ragged mass of bin-bags looked like a great black cloud fallen down to earth. We were so wet! The pedestrian walkway was more like a paddling pool, the dark underpass flooded and impassable.

Our boss-eyed guide glared at us impatiently.

“If you please, ladies and gentlemen... no time to lose!”

One hand held a now-empty bottle, the other the black stalk of an umbrella.

“Right this way!”

Tell me, what could we do? We were cold, wet, bedraggled. We hung onto each other in fear, soggy wee ticket stubs crumpled up in our paws, water dripping down our forlorn little faces. And so on we went. We clambered over some railings and stumbled across a patch of muddy waste-ground, every step heavy, every patch of earth a puddle.

“This way, this way,” cried our guide. “Watch out for any sink-holes or sudden drops! There’s no time to go back for your shoe now, sir: you can scrape that off when you get back. Miss, stop crying, please! Hold on tight and the storm may spare you.”

Suddenly he came to a halt, the stalk of his umbrella pointing up toward heaven. What was going through his head? His eyes looked

wild and maddened, his long grey face as flat as a spade.

“Shhh”, he said, pointing to a battered ‘No Trespassing’ sign. His umbrella was a little black hole cut out of the sky. “Not a sound, do you hear me? Not a sound!” And with that he ushered us forward, over a high wall and across some wire, his umbrella shaking from side to side.

The cluster of blocky buildings were piled up in a dull, grey compound, bereft of life. Only one block was illuminated, a low concrete shed with a row of fat chimneys and a thick tangle of pipes running along the outside. Well, maybe we’ll find shelter here, we thought, our sad little huddle shivering in the darkness. We crept toward it, a few steps behind our guide, and then we were in the compound itself, staring through the window of a grey out-building, water trickling down our faces and pricking our eyes.

The place was some kind of laundrette, but not the ordinary kind, open to the general public: no, it was one of those huge industrial jobs, with enormous machines, massive drums and vast dryers. It was just as noisy inside as out. The drums span, the tubs gurgled, water surged and rolled, blasted in terrible jets. And in the middle of this turmoil, this little bloke lay dozing over his newspaper, his head cradled in the sports pages.

Our guide put one finger to his lips.

“Quiet as you can,” he whispered. He shuffled over to a little side-window and jemmied it open with his broolly.

Then we crept in a little closer to see the skiver close-up.

Was that wee Hans? Aye, weak chin, watery eyes, a mug like a cake that won’t rise. “And look at the length of those finger-nails,” whispered our sozzled guide. “He’s never done a day’s work in his life.”

We were well inside the laundrette by now. All around us, washers chugged, boilers droned, machines whirred and hummed; everything whizzed and spun but the whey-faced lump just sat there, dozing.

“Pfff,” said the guide, shaking his broolly dismissively. His ragged umbrella looked like one of the torn black clouds fallen from the sky.

But just then one of the machines finished its cycle and the fella

had to get to his feet and haul out all the washing. Blimey, he looked bored, limp as a sock. Hans fished out the laundry and dumped in the next load with a kind of stubborn slowness. Work-shy layabout! He could scarcely be bothered to check the setting for the next boil-wash and just left the dials where they were.

I don't know — Hans looked down at his paper and sighed. He drew funny beards on the film stars, comedy scars on the models, poked daggers through politicians. Then he ringed the telly programmes he was missing, checked his answers to the Kwik-Quiz, filled in all the o's in the money section. What a lump! His face looked as washed-out as the laundry.

Meanwhile our guide was telling us how the launderette dealt with big orders from local firms, overalls, uniforms, tabards, aprons and the like. Caterers' apparel came in smeared with sauces, sweat, stains, factory workers' coveralls smelling of chemicals and oil, a feint tang of machine-parts. But by far the worst were the big orders from the old folks home, bibs and pinafores painted yellow, red, brown, encrusted with who knows what. Mm, what a job! The windows rattled, the door shook, and inside the tubs the garments reeled and slew.

Hans watched the machines for a while and then went back to his newspaper. But after a while his eyes started to wander, his pulse slowed down, and even his breathing seemed to grow heavier and more pronounced. One eye drooped and then the other. His face seemed to sag and crumple. And then he started to mutter something in his sleep, cradling his sagging noggin in the crook of his arm.

Inside his head, he'd taken off his socks and shoes and was paddling at the edge of a foamy tide. Hi ho, he thought. The waves smelt of detergent and conditioner, spumes of soap flakes breaking over his hairy toes. He rolled up his trews and waded in a little deeper. The water was hot and lathery and breakers of froth rolled over him. What's this, he said to himself, it's lovely and bubbly in here. Suds swirled around his head and his feet scarcely seemed to reach the bottom.

But at the same time he couldn't help noticing that something wasn't quite right. The crash of waves on the shore sounded strangely like a knocking or a banging, and the further he bobbed out to sea, the louder the knocking seemed to be. Hans looked down at the

bubbles and blew some more of his own. Where was the banging coming from? Something in the tub? Glug, glug, glug, said the fella, screwing up his eyes.

But the drumming wasn't coming from the tub at all – no, somebody was hammering on the front door of the launderette, heavy, insistent blows like thunder-claps, and as the sound echoed across the linoleum, Hans made himself get up and go over and have a look.

If anything the thuds were getting louder. The tide receded and the fella stumbled over to the door.

'Blimey,' thought wee Hans, 'who is this?' Rubbing his eyes he unlocked the security grill and stared out into the gloom, where he saw a dark shape standing beneath a bottomless sky, a sort of scribble squatting there in the doorway, curled up against the rain. No, really! 'Twas more of a bundle than a man, a sopping heap of mismatched clothes all bundled up in a pile.

"Are you open?" yelled the heap, the wind howling round him. He was holding a big plastic carrier bag with both hands, the bag starting to tear at the seams.

"No, listen," Hans tried to say, "we're a private..." but his words were blown off across the yard.

"What's that?" cried the stranger, his hair blown crazily in the gale.

"Not open to the public," cried Hans, yelling as loud as he could.

"What?"

The gale bawled and wailed, a great disturbance in the heavens.

"... not that sort of launderette," Hans shouted, but his voice was carried away over the rooftops, off past the garage, and down by the charity-shops. Besides, the fella wasn't listening anyway. He pushed his way past, seated himself on the mannie's chair and stuffed the soggy bag between his knees.

"Ah, thanks," he said. "Poor me!"

Hans scratched his crotch and lingered by the doorway.

"I..."

"Ah, dear, what a night!" The fella put two sodden feet on top of an enormous dryer. "You wouldn't believe the things I've seen; it's

like the whole world is disappearing down the plug-hole. Ah, but will you look at my bag.”

Hans nodded and we took our chance and scuttled in, hiding behind a long row of grey plastic baskets.

“Look at the state of it. And look at the state of me! Not a bus to be seen, not a cab on the road. I don’t know... I was glad when I saw that you still had a light on, let me tell you.”

Hans scratched his head. “Well...” he said, rather uncertainly, whilst the stranger lolled back in his chair, dripping water all over the seat. The guy was short, round and had a kind of idiot grin plastered over the front of his face. It was hard to tell which clothes he was carrying and which ones he was wearing.

“I was just walking past the discount centre,” said the funny-little guy, “when suddenly the awnings blew down and it was like a whole bath-tub had been dumped on top of me. And then, when I picked myself up, this van drove past and — splshhh — right in the face again.”

“Really?” asked the attendant, watching what the mannie was doing on his chair.

“Yeah! And no sooner had I wiped the water out of my eyes when I noticed my bag was shooting off by the overflow, and I had to splash my way in to get it and my shoes got ruined and everything.”

“Well, people should look where they’re going.”

“That’s right...”

“I mean, you know, on a night like this...”

“Specially on a night like this.”

“That’s right.”

The funny little guy smiled at Hans, his mouth suspended between two round apple-cheeks. His eyes flashed mysteriously.

“You seem a sympathetic sort,” he said to the skinny lad. “Will you join me in a bottle?” And so saying he produced a jar from inside his soggy jacket; the bottle had no label and the top seemed to be gummed shut.

“Um, well...”

“Ah, c’mon. Time for a quick one!”

“Well...”

“On a night like this? Don’t be silly. C’mon, sit yourself down.”

“You see I...”

“Sit yourself down! Nobody’s checking up on you tonight.”

“Well, I don’t know,” Hans said, but nevertheless he pulled up a chair and retrieved two manky old mugs from a sink.

Then he took a swig and felt his stomach lurch. The drink tasted of gin, aniseed and lighter fluid.

“Warms the cockles, eh?”

“Mm, yeah”

“Have another.”

“Thanks.”

Hans leaned back on his chair and looked at the little ball of a man with his little round cheeks and his idiot grin. “It’s kinda late to be doing your laundry, eh?” he said, trying to figure out what the fella was doing here

“What? Ah, well...”

“Cause you see, we’re not open to the general...”

“Oh, don’t you worry,” said the little bloke. “I’m in no rush! Just glad to be out of the rain.”

“Well, I guess,” Hans said, watching the fella spinning round on his office-chair. He looked very much at home.

The roundy-man pulled off his socks and hung them out to dry over a big electric heater.

“Are you done with that paper?” he said, flicking through the attendant’s things.

“Oh, yeah, sure.”

“Much obliged.”

The machines hummed, the dryers turned, and the drains frothed and gurgled. Hans started to explain that this place wasn’t for public use but then realised he couldn’t be bothered. Ah, it was late; might as well have another drink with the fella instead.

The launderette sounded like an enormous plane about to take off.

“It’s a nice wee place you’ve got here,” said the stranger, eyeing up the concrete washroom. “Warm, dry, awful cozy.” He swung round on his seat again. “And this chair’s a beauty!”

“Do you think?” asked Hans, sniffing the edge of his mug. “It’s all shift-work you know — deliveries, loads, hauling stuff in and out.”

“But... a place of your own, time to catch up on your reading,” (and here he held up a picture of a model where the young fella had drawn a rope-ladder between her breasts) “nobody breathing down your neck... no, no, it’s pretty good, considering.”

“Well...”

The booze seemed to be having a strange effect upon our laddie, and Hans felt his tongue starting to go a little numb.

“I mean, look outside,” said the strange wee fella, pointing to where the great black sky was tearing itself into pieces, a huge dark canvas coming apart at the seams. “No, you’re better off in than out, sitting on your arse, putting out some washing once in a while.”

“Well, thanks for saying so.”

“Yes, nice little place,” said the roundy-man, sagely, “a nice little place.”

The two men drunk a little more and the stranger flicked through the paper. Various lights were flashing, and buzzers sounded, but Hans couldn’t really be bothered. By now his tongue felt like the inside of a slipper.

“So what’s in the bag, eh?” he slurred, nudging the carrier with one outstretched toe.

“Just a little washing, you know, this and that,” said the squat wee fella.

“Oh yeah? Well who does their washing in the middle of the night? On a night like this?” And so saying Hans clinked his mug on the dryer.

“Bits and bobs,” smiled the mannie, “bits and bobs. Here, your mug looks nearly empty.”

Hans sipped a bit more, but his throat felt furred, like the inside of an old kettle.

“This is lovely,” he said.

“Look at the night outside, and think of what we’ve got right here. Best stay indoors, eh? Good company, something to drink, refuge from the storm... Who wants to venture outside on a night like this? Aye, the wind is sharpening its claws all right, and the rain feels more

like grit. But we can turn up the radiator, have a game of cards, finish off the paper..."

"That's right."

"Let the storm blow itself inside out for all we care! Trust me, the night will keep."

Sloth! Lethargy! Laziness! No good will come of this, hissed our guide, shaking his broly at the pair of them.

But who could be bothered... who could be bothered on a night like this, checking the panels, lugging out the contents, wheeling round the trolleys? I mean, overalls, uniforms, tabards, aprons... And outside the sky looked more and more like the sea, storm-tossed and roiling.

"Mind if I use the lav?" asked the wee fella and Hans said, "Why, sure," and pointed the way. To be honest, his legs felt kinda wobbly and his thoughts kept sticking to the inside of his head.

Hi-Ho, he thought. When he looked down he saw a little foamy wave breaking round his feet; it lapped around the bottom of the chair and smelt of chemicals and detergent.

I've got to wake myself up, Hans thought. What will the little guy think if he finds me sleeping on the job?

A few of the machines had started to bleat but Hans didn't get up; he couldn't remember what to do anyway.

When the stranger came back, he was dressed in some kind of bottle-green uniform, with a peaked-cap, a tunic-like jacket and stiff, formal trews.

"I found some dry clothes," he announced. "Is that okay?"

"Why sure," said Hans. "Don't want to catch a cold!"

"That's right!"

"Sure is."

"Have another drink."

So he did. Well, why not? Anything to break the monotony.

"Where did you get them?" Hans asked, gesturing toward the mannie's new outfit.

"Oh, round the back." The little fella ran his hand along one neatly creased trouser-leg. "Nice, eh?"

"Nice."

After that the night's spin-cycle drowned out the conversation for a while, the sky a great black pool pouring down on the grey little town. But then Hans spotted the fella's manky plastic bag and said, "Say, I forgot your washing..."

"Oh, don't you worry," said the mannie with the apple-shaped cheeks.

"No, but..."

"That's okay, I'll do it myself."

"Oh, no, I..."

"Don't worry! They're pretty badly stained and you look kinda tired. Let me..."

Hans stretched and leaned back on his seat. "That's very good of you. How about I see if I've got a couple of cans out back."

"You go ahead."

"Back in a second."

"Mm."

The fella smiled his big idiot smile but as soon as the attendant was out of the room, he scuttled over to one of the tubs and surreptitiously opened his bag. A terrible stench issued forth and the sack's lips drooped obscenely. What was in it? We couldn't see. But the fella was up to something; he checked the setting, opened the lid, and stuffed a whole bundle of things inside. Our guide shook his head, awful sadly. Then, when the young fella trooped back from the side-room, the roundyman innocently closed the lid and wandered back to the table.

"Find 'em?"

"No, but I was sure..."

"Ach, well. Fancy a game of cards?"

"H'okay. I'll just..."

"Don't you worry! Sit yourself down. I'll fetch us a pencil and pad."

Hans parked himself on his chair and looked down at the floor of the unit. When he moved his feet up and down he seemed to be paddling.

"Hey!" he said, and then promptly forgot what he was saying. Meanwhile the fella set the dial to boil-wash and the machine began to hum.

“Rummy?” asked the mannie.

“Great!” Hans said and picked up his cards. We wanted to creep over to the machine but felt afraid; even our guide was silent for once, regarding the tubs with a mournful air.

Well, it was getting pretty late by now, but the little roundy-man seemed wider awake than ever. Beneath his peaked cap his eyes shone brightly, and the uniform seemed to make him look bigger somehow, almost a different person.

“Clubs!”

Hans looked knackered, barely able to look at his hands. His thoughts seemed sluggish and heavy, like wading through soup. The two blokes gabbed away for a while, but Hans kept nodding off, his chin tumbling down to his chest.

To be honest, he was finding it hard to remember what he was supposed to be doing here. He blinked at the fella in his bottle-green uniform and felt confused. Who was this guy? The jacket made his shoulders look wider and the shadow of the cap lent his features a rather fearsome aspect. Hans leant back on his chair and suddenly caught sight of the mannie’s bag; it was empty but looked kinda sticky, squashed up into a strange shape. ’S’funny, he thought to himself, his head terribly heavy. Waves of soapsuds were lapping at his feet. Splish-splash. The water bubbled and frothed round his ankles and the tide seemed to curl lazily around him.

But meanwhile the guy in the uniform was watching him intently. As soon as he was sure he was asleep, the fella stole back over to the machine and eagerly checked the dial: hm, yes, nearly done. Illuminated by the flashing lights, his features seemed sinister, even diabolical. His apple-cheeks glowed and his idiot-smile beamed.

What was he washing? O, let us leave this place! This cannot end well. The fella placed both paws on the machine and rocked to and fro.

When it was done he leaned into the tub and began to rummage around in there, his large round face huffing and puffing. What was in there? We tried to creep closer, but our guide waved us back.

“No, no,” he whispered, “’tis all too late...”

And just then a loud klaxon went off, water poured out of all the

plugholes, and Hans suddenly jumped to his feet.

He looked groggy, dazed, his tongue lolling about in his mouth. Where was he? When he looked at the guy in the uniform and peaked-cap, he looked totally different, taller, wider, stern in countenance, with a fierce glint in his eyes.

“Okay pal, time to go,” he growled, fingering the fella’s collar.

Hans looked up at him like something waking from a long hibernation.

“What?” he mouthed, the words slow and heavy on his tongue.

“Yeah, yeah, time to go,” said the fella in the uniform, frogmarching the other man to the door.

Something was wrong here; after all, wasn’t he the attendant? Hans looked at the fella’s uniform and grew confused. Wasn’t this his job? If not, then what did he do?

Outside the door the heavens bayed and shrieked, the black sky a storm-tossed sea, savage and endless.

“Wait, wait,” said Hans, staring out into the gale. But he couldn’t think what else to say. He looked down at his clothes: jeans, T-shirt, and trainers. Then he looked over at the mannie’s cap, tunic-like jacket, and formal trews. But why was he so confused? What was he doing here in the first place? Especially at this hour of the night, in this old grey town, when he should be tucked up in bed.

He looked around the bright, smelly launderette but couldn’t recognise anything. Behind him the guy in the uniform, with the stern eyes and the podgy cheeks, seemed to grow even taller. “Don’t give me any trouble, son,” he said, and bundled a pile of laundry into his arms. Overalls, coveralls, tabards, aprons. “Out you go.”

“I don’t think...” said wee Hans, but the attendant shook his head.

“But, I...”

“Away with you...”

Confused, Hans looked back into his office as if from inside a washing machine; rain lashed down from all angles, was picked up by the wind, and then lashed down again. How cozy the little block looked! An electric-fire, a travel-kettle, two manky mugs. Ah, well. The rain stung his eyes. Hi ho, Hans thought.

His jeans, T-shirt, and zip-up top were soon soaked. He lingered by the window for a while, watching the fella and his uniform scuttling this way and that; the fella seemed to be busy with the control panels, pressing this one, turning another, checking each of the drums and throwing out the previous loads. But the young guy's face seemed oddly indifferent, impassive, sleepy. To be honest, he didn't seem to register what was going on. What was he thinking about? Home? His bed? Something good on the telly tonight? After a while, he walked away and didn't look back.

Join us friend! Our tour isn't over and there's always room for another! But our tour-guide shakes his head: no, no, such things are not to be. Friend, friend, where are you going? Wait for us! This is no night to be walking the streets alone! But our guide is signalling for us to move on. This is a haunted place, he says; nothing good can come from here. And inside, the idiot with the apple-cheeks removes something dark and stained from another plastic bag.