

1982

Marble Bags

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Recommended Citation

Augusta, Mike (1982) "Marble Bags," *Exile*: Vol. 28 : No. 1 , Article 11.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/exile/vol28/iss1/11>

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Marble Bags

Dot had her usual hard time finding first gear as she swung the old bus around; fighting with the clutch, she watched her fender imperil the trading post porch and then come up scant inches short of an out-thrust pine trunk on the other side of the trampled, lifeless dirt of Times Square. She glanced at the nearly empty seats in the rear view, then pulled up at the seething line of kids scrambling in the dirt for their dinner buckets and tattered books. The door opened with a hydraulic sigh. Dot, impassive behind sunglasses, did not greet the dozen children representing almost as many ages as they pounded up the steps and scattered for seats. Dot heard marbles clacking as they passed. 'Marbles in October!', she fumed, cursing Walter Moyses's irreverent disrespect for spring ritual when the week before he had rattled up to the bus stop with his impressive Carthage Bank money bag swinging from his hip. This spark in a tinder box saw forgotten caches looted, coffee cans employed and leather pouches wheeled with the fruit of chipped piggy banks. Walter Moyses maintained an undiminished swagger throughout the self-perpetrated renaissance, the inexorable depths of his bag rewriting Carthage Elementary mythology. Rumors spread of the rarely glimpsed individually sorted pouches of ball bearings, bumblebees and crystal boulders nested in the sorely strained fabric of the brightly lettered sack. A bag of bags assured Walter's playground apotheosis, but more significantly, Walter Moyses only played keep-sies.

The bus lurched south from the square, jostling kindergartners and eighth graders alike, though moreso the older children who dominated the rear seats, distancing themselves from the ham-fisted driver whose burly scorn radiated through her sunglasses into the all-seeing rear view. At North Junction another gaggle of scholars climbed aboard. Dot leaned back in her seat, watching overhead the kids absorption into the dwindling supply of seats. The McCafferty and Savage broods, three and four respectively, flowed by her with unheeded trouser zippers and trailing shoelaces, their baggy jackets leaking kapok and inorganic stuffings. Paper sacks of lunch showed moisture where, if the contents had been of more substantial bulk, the cheap bagging would surely have given way. Dot levered the door closed, found first and lumbered away. She grimaced as Len Savage, a sixth grader with a black mane of hair like a rabid dog, foolishly rattled his Maxwell House can with its meager horde of cat's-eyes. Walter Moyses had abdicated the back row, his usual station, in favor of the penultimate seat, which allowed for a more centralized position and a larger audience to witness his dealings. Norman McCafferty, a malnourished twelve year old with a shock of pumpkin hair, was going a few perfunctory rounds of odd or even with the demigod of North New Boston, losing handfulls with impunity. Walter soon tired of such small potatoes and suggested numbers. Excitement coursed the aisle as Walter went elbow deep into the Carthage Bank depository and, with both hands, maliciously shook the contents in front of Norman's vacantly rapt face.

"Twenty one," Norman ventured hesitantly.

"Gawd, I scassly dowdit!", Walter hooted derisively, spreading his palms to reveal that Norman had indeed been short, by seven. Norman coughed up his due, cat's-eyes chipped from previous springs on asphalt playgrounds. Walter smugly bagged his prize and proceeded to send both hands in elbow deep, shaking the Godawful load before Norman's watery eyes.

"Fawty faw.", Norman winced, sensing incredible personal loss and ruin, already reaching for his small leather pouch.

"Gimme your hat," Walter snapped at Lucien Derosier, who had been hovering over his shoulder to view the counting out. The marbles went into the hat and came out individually, everyone with a view chanting "forty two, forty three forty four!" Norman and Walter sat face to face across the aisle, their knees wedged together, the latter a full head taller than his scrawny foe.

"Lucky guess, weasel piss."

"Yeah, I 'magine." Norman grabbed the leaden hat, drooling with stupid gleeful shock, and filled his pouch to bursting. Walter turned away; struggling for composure he pulled a dog eared Daddy Loved Me Best, with pictures, from his overcoat and proceeded to enlighten two sixth graders who shared the seat with him. Norman turned upon his audience, suavely wiping the snot from his upper lip, and tried to find challengers.

Dot kept watch in the rear view, grinding a non-gear as she turned off the Carthage road onto the smooth blacktop of the ski area's new access road, oblivious to the din that welled up behind her.

"We wuz playin funsies!"

"You're a stinkin fairy, Carlton Bishop!"

"Three crystul bodas?"

"She puts it in her mouth?"

"Thisiza ball bearin from a Army tank."

"That's nothin', lookithis . . ."

"Jeezum Crow!"

Dot turned off the access road onto an equally smooth stretch of blacktop conspicuously marked SYLVAN WAY by a bright white on green sign. The bus hummed cleanly on the winding road, passing through well tended pines before emerging into a clearing, fifty yards of finely manicured lawn that stretched up a gentle slope on the left. Through gaps in the trees one could make out snatches of houses, a massive field stone chimney, a wide stretch of screened porch on high stilts, walls that appeared to be all glass. The bus grew silent as it pulled up to the confluence of three crushed stone driveways that met at the pavements end. Ursulla Albers kissed her seven year old daughter Helga on the mouth, but couldn't catch Rudy, a year older, before he scampered onto the bus. Ursulla straightened, patting a bothersome whisp of her long blonde hair back into place, trying to relocate it where it had slipped from her tight bun. A blue wool suit hugged her statuesque frame luxuriantly, dark leather walking shoes carressed her naked feet. Helga labored up the bus steps in her dirndl and slippers, with a tiny rucksack slung on her back. Ursulla found herself waving at the olive drab flank of the bus, not ten feet away, unable to see her children for the glare from the windows. She flinched as she met the staring hungry eyes of a boy, maybe thirteen years old, that refused to be averted, gripping hers with deep unflinching longing. As the bus turned its back on her, a half dozen pale faces were frozen in the rear

window. They watched her turn and followed the progress of her long, slender legs returning up the drive to her home. Rudy plowed down the aisle, then felt an iron clamp on his bicep and he was being pulled forcibly into a seat with Jimmy Thibeau, a monstrous bovine creature, and Joe Michaud, a short, wiry seventh grader with thick glasses and a hoarse horn of a voice.

"Howya doin', Hymie?," Joe bellowed into Rudy's startled face. Rudy gagged at the older boy's foul breath, which bore no trace of tooth polish, or even food for that matter, but which radiated a hot blast of staleness like when Rudy's electric transformer overheated. Joe smashed Rudy up against the massive thighs of Jimmy Thibeau, who grinned foolishly next to the window. Jimmy wrapped his massive left arm around Rudy and bearhugged the little boy into his lap, rasping his knuckles across the blond scalp. Rudy could smell the manure of Thibeau's cows and Thibeau's own urine wafting from the denim encased between the older boys legs. Rudy played dead, suppressing tears, and Jimmy released him. He tried to ignore Joe, who asked him about the 'Nazzy's' and tweaked him painfully on the earlobes until his whole head burned. Across the aisle, Dawson McCafferty, who felt destined to be a sheriff, saw Rudy's stifled heaving and wet eyes, and told Joe to leave the little Kraut alone. Dawson was big for his twelve years, bigger than Joe, but he bled and cried easily. Joe fixed his confused lens-blurred scowl on the beady-eyed red face of propriety, and faked a jab at the fragile bulbous nose, which caused Dawson to flinch severely, and subsequently took the fight out of Joe. Joe looked around for support but found no following, even Jimmy Thibeau had gone back to staring out the window as the bus entered Carthage, so he amused himself by cleaning the dirt from his fingernails and flicking it on Rudy's new corduroy trousers. Dawson bumbled off towards a misty burning sunset, Marshall McHero, confident he had saved from harm the little Kraut, the rich Kraut's son, the irrefutable link to the beautiful blonde, the very sight of whom made Walter Moyses clap his knees together, flap his thumb-in-earpits wings and crow heavenward with painful desperation.

Dot pulled the old bus, Macwahoc County #17, to a stop in front of Carthage Elementary, a shambling brick and board edifice that entombed six hundred students on any given school day it didn't snow. Dot paid no attention as her charges were absorbed into the milling children waiting for the first bell, most vanishing quickly in the drab whirl of overcoats and wool hats pulled over eyebrows; others, like Walter Moyses, advanced with a cautious swagger into the throng, one weary eye peeled for any strutting roosters with bigger bags swinging from their hips.

Mike Augusta

Monsters

He learned the fear
from fascination — spinning,
spinning past the inner threshold
warm then cold going
around
once more.

The mother with her three bags
from other stores and
seven more gifts to buy and
only fourteen shopping days left

pivoted.
"If you do that again I'll!"

A threat is enough
to avoid the blades of glass and steel.

Keeping fingers in tight fists,
gingerly pressing the handle,
he learned to jump out quickly — looking back
as the monster flapped metallic arms
around
once more.

Sharon S. McCartney