

JOHN BLANK'S BAGS

Some people use up all of the space around them. They fill the sidewalk when they walk down the street and pass through the world in ways you will never forget. They leave an invisible tattoo on your skin. You may not see it, but it is there. That is how I think of John Blank, and why I smile when I remember the way he introduced himself to me.

“Hi, my name is John Blank and I am an original.”

John was a big man. With his barrel chest, broad shoulders and heavy legs he seemed to be as wide as a small truck. He always wore ragged shirts with their sleeves ripped away from the shoulders. It drew your eyes toward his thick and heavily muscled arms. At first glance, he looked like an errant weight-lifter, but when John started talking, this impression quickly changed. John had a flamboyant and deep love for conversation that matched his golden coloured hair. He was genuinely interested in other people and had lots to say to them. Only one thing slowed him down, and that was his missing teeth. It affected how he talked. He had to work harder to get the words out, and the harder he worked, the wetter his words became. When John got passionate about something or told a story, you would see his friends discreetly ducking and weaving in a foolish effort to stay dry.

John's big presence got even bigger when you saw what he carried with him. He had lots and lots of things stuffed into enormous bags made out of upholstery scraps, canvas and leather. John created his bags with a meticulous care that bordered on devotion. He used a mixture of cords and yarns to put them together, twisting, winding and overlapping them until he had made seams as thick as his big fingers.

John's bags were packed so that he could lug them everywhere. He usually wore two of them, one over each shoulder. Each time he put them on he had to make careful adjustments in their position, so they were balanced enough to allow walking under their weight. His daily travelling load averaged around 80 lbs. When he used more than two bags, everyone who knew him began to worry.

No one ever got the full picture of what John stored in his bags. I saw what he stored at the top of them because that was where John kept his sewing supplies and whatever else he was using to make new or larger bags. One time, I was allowed to look deeper into the bags and saw the collection of jars containing mysterious liquids, bean sprouts and grains. John showed me the honey water he carried and used to feed the bees. Below this were his shakers and rattles made out of beans, pop bottle caps, sticks and wire. John got out these home-made instruments whenever music was in the air. He loved to play them while he danced.

But there was always more in John's bags, especially the assorted cuttings from magazines and newspapers: clippings of sentences, torn pictures and strange hand written notes. John cut and pasted this stuff together into collage posters and hefty books. The material he used explored his lived experiences with sex, poverty, hunger, love, isolation and change. As each work evolved, John inserted many scrawled comments, arrows and pointers. This was his personal way of mortising his selection of images and statements together, and it went on until some sort of finished state was reached. The overall affect was disorienting. I often thought of his creations as psychic maps, the stuff of dreams and nightmares and the things we leave unspoken.

At the last creative stage, John covered each piece with clear binding tape, wrapping it around and around until he was satisfied he had reached an optimum state of adhesion, rigidity and weight. In one notorious effort, John's taping and collage work transformed an ordinary cook-book into an extraordinary and very heavy sculpture of sexual recipes. It was about a foot deep and very heavy. I thought it was primordial.

Most people found this work amazing even if they didn't fully comprehend the content or intent. I loved those moody diary records of John's life, and the way he sewed and taped his way towards peace of mind. It seemed to channel the two spirits of the man: the soft delicacy of the sewing giving way to the brute strength needed to carry the bags.

If our world begins to fall apart, it may test what we normally do to keep it together. This is what happened to John. As time passed, and as he got older, his eccentricity became more challenging to maintain. His bags got bigger and heavier. Rest was harder to find. As with all aging people, he was slowing down. His enormous physical strength was fading even though his spirit remained youthful. This is when John had to face the prospect of losing his home. His rental building was being sold and he needed to find somewhere else to live

The spectacle of a man carrying lots of strange baggage always stirs an image of homelessness, even though most people living on the street only have the clothes on their back. John didn't live on the street. His determination to carry the things he valued had nothing to do with homelessness. He did this because he had to, because this was who he was. From the moment John picked up his bags, he was a giant. He filled doorways because he could not get through them easily. Walking up stairs looked very dangerous. Getting on street cars could be unforgettable if it took place during rush hour. His bags would make some people step back, and other people come closer. It was all part of his charm.

John was used to attracting and enjoying public attention, but now there was something altered and deadly serious taking place in his relationship with the world. Landlords were not interested in renting a place to him, and John worried about how poorly his housing search was going. His efforts to negotiate landlord interviews were failing. He knew that he could not survive on the street, so he asked me to help him.

We talked over coffee. I knew that John's bags were influencing his housing prospects. There was no way any landlord would understand what role these bags had in his life. And even though John trusted me, he would never agree to leave his bags with me when he went apartment shopping. Where he went his bags had to go. What should be done? John asked me to make a suggestion. So I did.

"John, I know that this may seem crazy, but here is the best thing I can come up with. I think these hand-made bags are preventing you from getting housing. They are telling a story that makes landlords suspicious of you. We have to think of another story, something more familiar to them so that you're less likely to end

up with doors slammed in your face. Have you ever considered getting some luggage to carry your things in while you are looking for a place to live? You would simply be a traveler. You can still take your things with you, but you would be less controversial in your appearance. After you secure a place, you can ditch the luggage and use your bags again. There is a bit of deceit in this, but I think it will work... if you are willing to give it a try?"

For the next hour we discussed the merits and the drawbacks of this off the wall idea. Money might have been an issue, but John had \$3000 saved in the bank. Shopping could be difficult, but I had arranged the time needed to go downtown with John to ease this along. We both agreed the luggage should be quality merchandise, because anything chosen to replace his bags had to be first class.

At the end of this conversation we had a plan with a start date, a list of stores and future arrangements for a pre-shopping strategy huddle. The luggage experiment was now in motion, so I began investigating potential apartments for viewing.

Three days later we were in a large store looking at suitcases, discussing their size, color, quality of construction, durability and the number of matching pieces required for this strange enterprise. No one knows what the salesman could have been thinking as he delivered his sales pitch to this odd looking couple checking everything on display. Then, at last, John was satisfied. He purchased two large green suitcases.

On our way out of the store, I felt an uneasy sensation growing in my heart. Outside, the sky had darkened. Rain was beginning to fall. I was going west, and John was going east, but we stood together on the corner waiting for our individual streetcars to come along. We waited awkwardly, wanting to end what now felt like a strange partnership neither one of us had really wanted, but in the end had put together.

My streetcar came first. I ran across the street to catch my ride and chose a seat at the back of the car so I could look out the window and see John. As I settled into place, the rain began to fall with more force. John stood there unmoving, like

a statue, his two huge bags draped across each shoulder and the two new green suitcases planted at his feet.

The rain fell harder. I felt stress in my eyes and the uneasy feeling growing. This was so unfair. What the hell had I been thinking? I stared at those beautiful handmade bags beside the dismal and ordinary suitcases that would replace them. What was I doing? By the time the streetcar pulled away, I was convinced I had unwittingly hurt someone I cared deeply about. There was no way to take it back. There was no way any of this could take John to a place called home.

In the days that followed, the worry I'd felt on the street car got darker. John did not come to visit. The arrangements made for an apartment viewing fell through. Every passing day increased my regret for how all of this was turning out. But there was nothing I could have done about any of it. I believed that I might never see John again. What was done was done. Ten days passed.

On the eleventh day, to my everlasting surprise, something wonderful took place as the PARC drop-in prepared to close for the day. John returned.

I was there to see his entrance and it was spectacular as always. He came to the door and looked in. Then he turned sideways, slowly stepping through the doorway, lifting his bags over the threshold. I stood there beaming with a mix of pleasure, relief and uncertainty. I was glad to see John again, but just as anxious to know what he had been doing while he had been away. Had he found a place? Yes he had. John smiled at me. Then I began to bluster.

“But how did you manage this? Did you use the luggage?”

John was silent. He looked at me and spoke slowly in a hushed tone.

“You were right to tell me to change my approach to home hunting. It was... yes, it was... a lot of work. I needed to take time to prepare. So after I left you, I had to do more. I made some changes. I went to work to get some new supplies... and then I made these new bags.”

As he said this I looked again at the bags John was carrying. They were the largest ones I had ever seen. They were very finely done. The sewing on them outstripped anything John had ever made before.

“But John...” I stammered again. “Why didn’t you use the suitcases that you purchased?”

John looked at me thoughtfully.

“But... I did use them. They worked really well.”

Now I was really confused.

“I don’t understand John, you say you used the luggage, but here you are with a whole new set of bags. I don’t get it.”

There are moments when the stars in heaven, knocked out of alignment, suddenly correct themselves. This was just such a moment. John stepped towards me and leaned forward. He opened one of the bags to show me what was inside.

It was a green suitcase, inside another new and wonderful handmade bag.