

## Lipstick in His Handbag

Joanna Sterling

“Is she dead?” David, a plump, balding, middle-aged man wearing a tan-coloured raincoat and holding a Tesco’s carrier bag asks “Are you sure?”

The care-worker looks at David and with a well-practised sympathetic half smile and slight inclination of the head replies.

“Yes, I am sorry, she slipped away peacefully about half an hour ago. I believe someone tried to ring you.”

“A message was left on my phone. I came as soon as I got it. You’re sure she’s dead, there’s no doubt?”

“Would you like me to get you a cup of tea?”

“No. I want to see her.”

“Of course, you’d like to say good-bye.”

The care-worker leads David along a carpeted corridor, past prints of rural landscapes. At the door at the end he hesitates on the threshold of the room. Lying in the bed, eyes closed, is an old lady. Her white hair has been smoothed and she’s wearing a salmon-pink nightie buttoned up to the neck. David approaches, places the Tesco’s bag on the end of the bed and reaches into the bag, withdrawing a small mirror with a gilt handle. Walking to the head of the bed, he bends over holding it close to the old lady’s mouth.

“Yes, you’re right, she’s really dead – at last.”

Again from the Tesco’s bag he withdraws a lipstick and holding the mirror paints his lips bright red. Finally he takes out a black patent leather handbag, puts in the mirror and the lipstick and snaps it shut with a satisfying click. He takes off his raincoat, stuffs it in the Tesco’s bag and hands it to the care-worker.

“Could you get rid of this for me, I won’t be wearing it anymore.” He turns and leaves swinging his hips and handbag in unison.