



The Handbag

If life is a play, and we're actors assigned to roles, Victoria would consider herself mis-cast, in the wrong production entirely. She always thought herself destined for something more. Her father blamed her name, even though she was named after a place and not the Queen. Who does she think she is? Her parents whispered at night. Victoria refused hand me downs, left carefully chosen gifts resting on the paper in which they'd been wrapped and never once sought their counsel. She held her head back, looking down.

When she was ten, Victoria searched the house for proof she was adopted. She wasn't. Victoria is the only daughter of Eileen and Joseph Barry, from Bathurst. The alliteration entertaining to her father, embarrassing for Victoria. Despite being a feminist, she was certain she'd take her husband's name and be done with everything Barry.

Victoria wasn't 'from the land', as she let people think. The Barry's were Townies. They ran the newsagency, then an ice-cream parlour (her mother's folly, almost sending them broke), then a petrol station. Victoria left for Sydney as soon as she could. She planned on driving an electric car, never to set foot in a petrol station again.

Victoria performed well at school and was accepted into The University of Sydney. Her father organised a room for her at the Henley's, who had a large old house close to campus. They were once Townies, although Victoria didn't think their lot much improved by the move to the city. To cover board, Victoria was required to do household chores. She resented cleaning other people's toilets, cleaning other people's plates. She begrudged her parents for not having done better.

Victoria knew, happiness would come when she had money. Then she could shop at PE Nation for her workout gear, wear Zimmerman to a friend's wedding, shop at Camilla and Marc for casuals. She could have Gucci sneakers, a Chloe handbag and jewellery from Van Cleef & Arpels. She scoured websites for second hand items that looked brand new. She could almost, but never, believe they were coming direct from the store.

Victoria did well at university and was offered a place on a graduate program at an investment bank. At the welcome dinner, the Managing Director complimented her table manners. Her parents had taught her well. At the end of the graduate program, Victoria was offered a fulltime position with the firm. At twenty-one years of age, Victoria had a debt from her university tuition, no car, a modest wardrobe she could mix-and-match to get through the work week and expensive taste. When she could, she took a lease on a studio apartment in the city and hired a cleaner.

Victoria was thrilled when Kate Lewis was assigned as her mentor at work. As the head of Investment Banking, Kate regularly featured in the financial newspaper. She was stylish, sophisticated, and smart. Finally, Victoria had someone in her life she could admire.

Each Tuesday, Kate and Victoria had a catch-up in Kate's office on level thirty-four. Victoria worked in open plan, twenty-seven floors down on level seven. The meetings with Kate were the highlight of Victoria's week. She protected them fiercely from double-booking, a common practice in the firm. On weekends, Victoria read the financial papers from cover to cover. Kate was impressed, and soon Victoria was promoted to Associate ahead of her peers.

When Kate nominated Victoria for Australian Young Executive of the Year, the firm's marketing team got behind the nomination. So certain of their female, low socio-economic, regional hire, they purchased three tables at the Awards dinner.

For Victoria, the initial thrill of the nomination was quickly replaced by a pre-occupation with what she would wear. She complained to her mother.

"Everyone will find out I come from nothing."

Her mother questioned why she had moved out of the Henley's rather than saving money. Victoria dismissed her mother's suggestion to hire a dress. She wanted something new. When her mother asked how much an appropriate dress would cost, Victoria told her eight hundred dollars. The money arrived in the post.

Victoria spent over a thousand dollars on a dress from Sass and Bide. Her concern then turned to accessories. The dress would be wasted without a new handbag. She became distracted, scouring websites for sales and discounts.

During their Tuesday catch-up, Kate sensed something was wrong.

"You don't seem yourself, is something on your mind?"

Usually, Kate wouldn't enquire as to someone's state of mind, but she'd recently completed mental health and well-being awareness training. Even so, she wasn't prepared for Victoria's response, Victoria being of a generation to answer honestly.

"I'm not like you. I mean, I don't have much. I just get by."

"I'm not sure I understand."

Kate was confused.

"I'm not sure I can go to the awards night. I don't have the right things. I have no handbag, just the one I bring in here every day and it doesn't go with my dress."

"That's it, that's your problem? I have a cupboard of handbags."

Kate wrote her address down on a piece of paper and handed it to Victoria.

"On the weekend, come to my place and you can choose a bag. You can borrow any bag you want."

"Really?"

Victoria was delighted at the thought of seeing where Kate lived, the intimacy of it all.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. Come by on Saturday morning before I go for my run at 8. Arrive by 7:30. Ok?”

Victoria usually slept past ten on Saturdays.

Victoria knew nothing of Kate’s personal life and learned little more from the visit. After a long wait at the front door, Kate ushered Victoria in, glancing at her watch.

“Follow me,” she directed.

Victoria trailed behind Kate, eyes darting to the sides to take in what she could. There were no photos, trinkets, or books. Almost everything was white.

“Here,” she opened the door to a long room.

“Take any one you want. I don’t mind.”

Victoria stepped forward into what looked like Harrods, or so she imagined. At eye level were large handbags, above were clutches, and higher were boxes. There was Chanel, Gucci, Prada, and Hermès.

“You want one of those? From up there.” Kate pointed at the boxes.

“I was just wondering what’s in the Hermès box, is it a Birkin?”

“It is. You want that?”

Kate brought down the orange box and took off the lid. Inside was a cloth bag and inside that was a shiny black bag.

“A crocodile skin! Oh my god.

Could I? Really?”

“Of course, take it.”

Kate hurriedly put the lid on, pushing down before it was square.

“Yours to borrow. All happy now?” She handed Victoria the box.

“Oh yes. I can’t thank you enough.” Victoria tightened her grip on the box.

“Off you go. I need to leave.” Kate checked her watch again.

Victoria left with the big orange box. When she arrived home, she searched online to check the price. A similar Hermes Birkin Diamond Hardware Black Shiny Porosus Crocodile bag was for sale on 1stdibs, an online marketplace, for \$292,368.05. Victoria covered the box with a towel and pushed it under her bed. She began counting down the days to the awards night.

The night arrived. Victoria took the afternoon off work for a series of appointments - hair, make-up, and nails. She took the Birkin bag out from under her bed, practicing how she would hold it on her wrist.

Victoria was awarded Australian Young Executive of the Year. When they asked her up to the podium, she reached under the table, looped her wrist in the handle of the Birkin and walked past the other tables, posing for photos with the event sponsors and her colleagues.

After dessert, the lights dimmed, and two tables were moved to the side to make space for a dance floor. Kate congratulated Victoria and excused herself, pointing at her phone. By the time she was at the exit, her phone was to her ear.

Around midnight, they were told the venue would close soon. There were still four bottles of Champagne on the table. Victoria and her colleague, Mia, took two each. Victoria also had to carry her award, a small sculptural trophy that was rather heavy. Victoria and Mia shared an Uber even though Victoria's apartment was just down the street.

It wasn't until Victoria woke, thirsty, at seven the next morning that she realised she didn't have the handbag. She screamed. Frantic, she rang the venue, punching at her phone with her fingers. The call rang out. She pulled on a tracksuit and ran to the venue. It was closed. From there, she called in sick to work and waited at the venue until someone arrived.

When they unlocked the door, she burst in, running to the ballroom. The bag wasn't there. She walked home, her mind spinning. She rang the venue over and over, requesting she review video footage, accusing the staff of theft. By the afternoon, they no longer answered her calls.

At the end of the day, Kate sent out an all-staff email congratulating Victoria. Victoria felt sick at the sight of herself with the handbag in photos.

In the evening, realising the handbag was gone, Victoria went on to First Dibs and offered \$50,000 for the matching handbag. She knew she could get the money from a payday lender. But, in a matter of minutes, the offer was rejected.

She returned to the office the next day, allowing her weekly meeting with Kate to be booked over. She took the stairs and not the lift to avoid any chance of bumping into Kate or anyone senior in the firm.

After a week, she organised a meeting with her bank and applied for a loan of three hundred thousand dollars. The Bank Manager approved her application, citing her earning potential and recent award.

When the loan was approved, Victoria put in an offer for the Birkin Bag on First Dibs, offering the exact amount of \$292,368.05. It was accepted, with free shipping. Relieved the bag was on its way, Victoria started taking the lift at work.

A week later, she received a postal notification. The bag had arrived from Milan. She called Kate to ask when would be convenient for her to return the bag.

"Bit late, isn't it?"

"Yes, I'm sorry. I haven't known when, or how."

"You can drop it off tonight. I'll be home at 7, before I go to the theatre."

Kate met Victoria at the door, not inviting her in. Victoria handed over the box. Kate didn't look inside.

"Well, I hope that made you happy."

"It did. Thank you so much."

"A word of advice. Don't let it all go to your head. You still have a long way to go."

"I know that. I know," said Victoria.

Kate glanced at her watch. She wished Victoria a good evening and closed the door. Victoria walked home.

The repayments on the loan were hefty. Victoria decided to sub-let her studio and move back in with the Henley's. She took a second job cleaning at night, starting at 8pm. She stayed at work until the start of her shift, taking advantage of the company policy of ordering dinner after 7pm. She returned to the office after her shift and took a taxi home on the firm's account.

A few months in, she was so fatigued, she could hardly concentrate at work. She no longer bought the weekend newspapers and so had little to discuss with Kate in their weekly meetings which she tried to avoid.

Wanting to pay off the loan sooner, Victoria began to buy and sell clothes online, spending much of her workday scouring the internet for bargains.

A few months later, she received a letter from Risk Management. Victoria was being investigated for misuse of company funds (dinners and taxis without pre-approval) and breach of the technology policy (excessive use of non-work websites). With no defence, her employment with the firm was terminated.

Victoria packed up her city life and caught the train back to Bathurst.

Over a decade later, a black Mercedes pulled up at the Barry's Petrol Station in Bathurst. Victoria was behind the counter when she saw Kate get out of the car. A young child was in the back and a woman in the passenger seat. Victoria started shaking as she ran out to greet her.

"Kate, it's me. Remember me?"

Kate put her sunglasses down on the end of her nose, looking over the top with a furrowed brow.

"It's Victoria, the Young Executive of the Year," Victoria offered.

"Victoria?" questioned Kate.

"Yes, it's me."

"What happened?" asked Kate.

“What happened?” Victoria repeated back to her. “That bag you lent me. I lost it. I had to get a loan, for three hundred thousand, to buy a replacement. I’m still paying it off. It changed everything.”

“Oh Victoria, that bag was a fake, from Hong Kong. It would have been worth a few hundred dollars at most.”

Victoria lit with fury.

“Do you have it, the bag?”

“I gave it away, years ago, to charity.”

Victoria gasped, “No! Kate, please. Can I start again?”

“Victoria, that’s not possible. I’m retired.”

Kate went inside, paid her bill, and drove off without looking back.

A note on this story: *The Handbag* is a reimagining of *The Necklace* by Guy de Maupassant, written in 1884. The price of the Hermès Birkin Bag referenced in the story is the true price of a Birkin Bag for sale on 1stdibs at the time of writing. I think this story is about status, greed and the role of money and wealth in defining character. Some may think that Victoria got her just desserts, but should Kate have let her know the bag was fake when she chose it? If she had been honest with Victoria, the handbag would have been easily replaced. Did Kate have any obligation to Victoria once she knew the impact of the lost bag on Victoria’s life? On the work front, should someone in the office have checked on Victoria as she spiralled and ultimately lost her job? And of course, there’s the ethics of fake luxury goods. How did Kate end up with a fake, and is it right to give fakes to charity? You can read about the plot and themes of the original story online.