

Uncle Dougie's Suitcase

When I was nine years old my Uncle Dougie caught me looking in his suitcase.

Uncle Dougie was my favourite relative. He was my great-uncle really, Dad's uncle, and every time he came around he gave me a present – and Uncle Dougie had the best presents. Small things, usually: American bubblegum, or a tiny fish carved from sandalwood and brought back from India. A bamboo dragonfly, or odd-flavoured chewy lychee sweets from Hong Kong in a bag covered in strange writing. Always something to show off at school the next day.

He was my favourite because he never really seemed like a grown-up. He didn't have a wife or children; he usually came on his own. [...]

He arrived at six and rang the doorbell by leaning on the button until Mum threw open the door. He always dressed the same. A lurid white-yellow shirt with a wide collar and big buttons, and the top two buttons undone. A brown and green tie, wide as a clipboard, tied loose around his neck with a large knot. And a thick, heavy overcoat that he told me he'd made from a bear he'd killed himself, in Canada. I believed him: it looked and smelled like something recently dead.

He greeted Mum with a huge hug that pushed her face into the foetid depths of the overcoat. She spluttered and shoved him away and gave him her fake stern glare, then smiled. That was the thing about Uncle Dougie: he probably annoyed the hell out of the other adults but they couldn't stop liking him anyway. Mum liked him really, though she rolled her eyes whenever Dad said he was visiting.

Then he spied me and pushed past Mum, grabbing me under the armpits and lifting me up.

It was always the same, and I loved it. "How're you doin', wee Dougie?" he'd roar, and I'd splutter and laugh. "How're you doin', eh? Grown a bit, haven't you?" He'd spin around and around, swinging me after him till my legs flew through the air. [...]

"Have you been good?" he'd roar, still spinning me, and I'd try to say *Yes!* without throwing up. "I bet you haven't! You've just not been caught, right? Right?" Laughing, I'd shout *Yes!* again, and he'd laugh too and pretend to drop me before putting me down. And that was when he always gave me my present.

But on this particular day my dad arrived home just after him and offered him a drink. Roaring with approval, Uncle Dougie headed off and my mum, who'd been trying to collar¹ me to tidy my room all afternoon, dragged me away.

"You can get your present after you've tidied, come on," she said, propelling me up the stairs. I made a half-hearted effort, moved a few clothes from one pile to another, and crept back down; but by now Uncle Dougie was in a loud conversation with my parents, telling some far-fetched story about his recent trip. I fidgeted and waited for my chance and tried to interrupt but had no luck and eventually Mum sent me to take his suitcase to the spare room. [...]

I was still staring at the case, seething, when it occurred to me that my present was inside. Probably sitting on top of everything else, ready for him to give to me. I was desperate to find out what it was. And it was there... right there...

I chewed my lip and listened for the grown-ups downstairs. Uncle Dougie's booming laugh meant he'd probably just finished another rude joke. I could do it, I thought. I could open the case, have a peek and sneak out again. Just a peek. No one would know. [...]

Inside, the case seemed surprisingly ordinary. It was neatly packed, shirts and trousers folded and shoes tucked down one side. A white plastic bag lay on top. I took a breath and reached in to open the bag. It rustled loudly and I stopped, then tried again.

"It's not in there," said Uncle Dougie.

I jumped and spun around to find him standing in the doorway. With one hand I tried to shut the case again behind me. "It opened!" I shouted, hopelessly.

¹ (here) force

45 Mum leant her head in behind Uncle Dougie, smiling. Then she realised what was happening. "Douglas!" she snapped, furious and embarrassed. "What are you *doing*?"
Uncle Dougie waved a hand.
"It's okay, Mary" he said. "The boy's just curious."
Mum's face was livid, but he just looked at me with a thoughtful expression. After a moment, he smiled.
50 "It's always tempting, eh?" he asked. "To look when you know you shouldn't."
I nodded, and he nodded back.
"I don't think I ever told you how I got this case," he said. "There's a funny story there. You'll like it."
He walked across and sat next to the suitcase and rested one hand on top of it. His fingers stroked and tapped the leather, and the frayed strap, as he spoke.
55 "I travel a bit, as you know," he said. "One time I was doing a story on Scottish football supporters abroad, and I was at the airport in Barcelona with a bunch of Celtic² fans. They were good lads, a bit drunk but all happy and no trouble.
"There was this one fellow called Charlie Hannion, and we talked a bit. He was a smart lad, sharp. Very blue eyes, and a birthmark on his face like a strawberry; it made him lopsided, as if he was always half
60 laughing at you." [...]
"Have you seen the luggage movers they have in airports where you pick up your suitcases?" I nodded. "They're called carousels; because they go round and round, I suppose. Anyway, when the carousel started up, Charlie suddenly leapt up onto it, dancing and messing about. The other lads laughed and cheered him on and nobody seemed to be about to stop him. This was a while back, things were different. Nowadays I dare say the anti-terror boys would have shot him in the head.
65 "Then he *lay* on the carousel, as if he was asleep, bags at his head and suitcases at his feet. And before we knew what'd happened... he'd gone right through the little entrance!
"You see, Dougie, the carousel is a big loop. Luggage comes in through one door, and if no one picks it up then it goes back out through the other, and it keeps going round.
70 "And the thing about these doors," said Uncle Dougie, slowly, "is that *nobody* knows *what's on the other side of them*." His eyes gleamed. I stared at him. "You ask anybody, they'll tell you the same. Nobody knows what happens to the suitcases. That world, beyond... It's theirs. Not ours.
"But Charlie had gone through. And some of the lads cheered but some of them didn't know what to do, and we waited, and then suddenly..." He slapped his knee. "Suddenly out he came through the other door!" I realised I'd been holding my breath and blew out, grinning. Uncle Dougie grinned too. My dad was at the doorway now, with Mum, listening.
75 "So now all the lads were cheering and even some of the other passengers, and Charlie was lying there with a cheeky smile on his face. I gave him a hand up and he laughed.
"So what's it like back there?" I asked him. But he shook his head. "I can't tell you that," he said,
80 "because of the Rule."
I looked at Uncle Dougie in confusion. "What rule?"
Uncle Dougie nodded. "That's what I asked too. And Charlie told me something he was told. "Nobody," he said, "I mean *nobody* can see behind the doors. That's how it works." What Charlie did was very dangerous, because no one is ever allowed to see the world behind. The only way he could go through was
85 if he kept his eyes tight shut all the time.
"I asked Charlie, 'But what if you just peeked a tiny bit? Weren't you tempted?' And he nodded and said yes, of course, but he'd resisted. He said I didn't want to know what happened if you looked. "You mustn't *ever* look," Charlie said. "That's the Rule." My uncle stared at me with his one good eye fiercely bright and his hair wild about his head. It was like a command from God; like Moses in the old Sunday movies when he was really angry and about to smash everything up.
90 "But then he grinned," said Uncle Dougie, relaxing, "and I couldn't tell if he was kidding or not. We carried on to the match and I did my story, and that was the last I saw of him for a while."

² football team in Glasgow

My uncle paused, and his eyes half-closed as he puffed on his cigar. I waited. So did my mum and dad. The room was silent.

95 “Anyway”, he said, opening his eyes again. “A couple of years later I met him again, at Edinburgh airport this time. [...]

“Hey, Charlie,” I said, and we got chatting. He was quite drunk, to tell you the truth. Maybe a bit too drunk. And of course, when the suitcases started rolling out, he leapt onto the carousel again, laughing like before. The lads he was with grinned but didn’t seem as impressed this time.

100 “Oh, aye,” said one of them. ‘He’s always doin’ it. It was funny for a bit, but now it’s everywhere we go.’ Charlie lay down on the carousel and waited to go through the exit, and as he passed through the little doors he grinned at me and waved, and I waved back.

“And so we waited again, but this time... he didn’t come out.” Uncle Dougie’s voice became very slow and careful.

105 “He went in, and a few seconds later there was a noise from behind the wall. It was like someone had started to yell, you know? Like they’d managed half a shout before something stopped them. Then the luggage stopped moving and the carousel ground to a halt. Everything went still.

“We looked at each other, me and the lads, and wondered what to do. But then there was a sound... like a *pop*. And it all started up again, and the cases lurched forward and slithered around like before.

110 “But there was no Charlie.

“O’course the lads thought this was just another joke. They reckoned he’d doubled back and was going to come out the in-doors instead of the out-doors or something. But I thought, no, he can’t have done that, because he couldn’t open his eyes, could he?”

“No,” I managed.

115 “But then it struck me,” said Uncle Dougie, “Charlie had waved at me as he passed through the entrance, and you know what that means, don’t you?”

I stared at him. What did it mean?

“It means *he didn’t have his eyes closed.*”

“He broke the Rule!” I shouted.

120 Uncle Dougie nodded. “He broke the Rule. We waited and waited and I was getting a bit worried about what might have happened. The lads still thought it was a joke but we held on till we were the only ones left. The luggage had all been collected now, except for his, which was trundling round and round, looking all sad and unwanted.

125 “You’d better take his case,” I said to his pal, but he just shrugged and said he wasn’t Charlie’s servant and he could carry his own case. So I picked it up for him.

“And we waited a bit longer and eventually the lads gave up. They reckoned he’d been arrested around the back, and he’d turn up tomorrow. I left them and went home, but I read in the papers the next day that he’d been reported missing.

“And nobody ever saw him again.”

130 I stared at Uncle Dougie with my mouth open. He slowly lit a fresh cigar from the base of his old one.

“I hadn’t given his suitcase much thought, to be honest,” he said. “It was late when I got back and I’d left it in the hall till the next day. But the more I thought about Charlie, the more I worried, and so I went to take a look at it. It was bothering me.

135 “You see, what I couldn’t get out of my mind was that big Celtic scarf of Charlie’s. It nagged away at me, nag nag nag. I kept thinking about the scarf... and this strap.” He tapped the suitcase strap. Sure enough, it was a Celtic pattern in faded green and white, slightly frayed at the edges.

“And I thought about Charlie and his scarf, and the suitcase and the strap... and how he’d broken the Rule. How he’d looked when he knew he shouldn’t. And the noise we’d heard from behind the doors... and I noticed this, here.” He pulled me towards the case. I didn’t want to be near it anymore, but Uncle Dougie’s grip was surprisingly strong and he pushed my face near a small patch of leather under the handle.

140 “You see it?”

Burned into the leather was a dark, mottled pattern, in a shape like a strawberry. Like a strawberry birthmark.

Uncle Dougie took a long drag of his cigar.

145 "But that wasn't the really funny thing," he said, blowing a wavery smoke ring, "The really funny thing was what was inside the case."

"What was inside the case?" I croaked.

Uncle Dougie started to speak and then hesitated.

150 "Are you sure you want to know?" he asked, staring at me with his peering eye. I didn't want to know, not at all. I nodded.

He looked at me hard. "That whole case was packed. Absolutely packed. You know what with?"

"What?"

He blew out a stream of smoke.

"... Sausages."

155 "*Christ* Dougie, that's disgusting!" cried my Dad, making a face and laughing. My Mum turned away from the door. I stared at my Uncle Dougie, then at the case, then back at him. He studied me carefully and bent down until his face was just inches from mine. His good eye glinted and cigar smoke curled around his face.

He grinned like a tiger.

"They were *delicious*," he said.

(2018)