

# Essay on the bagmans father:happiness in dystopia

[Family](#), [Father](#)



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Jeff Liss's short story, *The Bagman's Father*, concerns an important moment of change in the life of the unnamed protagonist who is known as the bagman. The story is written from the bagman's point of view; a bagman is someone "who collects, carries, or distributes illegal payoff money" ("Bagman"). Liss's story is a slice of the bagman's life, beginning with dinner with his father which is a prelude and cover for the job in which he is currently involved. What starts out being an ordinary dinner and a typical job for the bagman evolves into a vast change in his and others' lives. Liss's story revolves around people's facades and the underlying truth of humanity's social nature.

The setting of the story is a version of Earth that is different from our own, possibly a future Earth. The name of the nation that the action takes place in is not mentioned, although the city is called Madras City. A Council of Religious Matters, High Magistrate, Reverend Master, and the Master of the High Council of Sacred Rites and Religious Matters are a few of the organizations and political positions mentioned concerning the nation. Other nations mentioned within the story are America, presumably some version of the United States, and Feris, a fictional nation unknown to readers. These details provide a picture of a society based on religion in which class and political intrigue play a primary role. Because the story is told from the bagman's point of view, readers have a firsthand view of the dark underbelly of Madras society, revealing it as a politically unstable and corrupt dystopia. Although the narrator has many flaws, such as his criminal profession and addiction to drugs, he also has a set of lawful principles to which he adheres. For example, he tells Avila Schond that when it comes to the money or

messages he delivers, “ I can’t get into the habit of wondering” what is in the letters or why a client is being paid (Liss 13). He also states that his job includes observing recipients open the things he delivers, watching them count money, and that “ Bagman’s Rule Number One” is to “ always speak first” (Liss 19). He appears to pride himself on sticking to his own rules without deviation. However, during this latest jobs, very bizarre things happen. He is almost assassinated by the lobotomized ratha, he has a very strange interview with Avila Schond, some crayfish speak to him and tell him he must kill a scarred man. These events are part of what causes the bagman to reach a turning point in which he decides to go against his principles of disinterest; he decides, “ I had to read the letters. Both of them” (Liss 16). In spite of this decision, he only reads the first letter and not the second one sealed within the first. Although his intuition leads him to read only the first letter, the big surprise that leads him to take unprecedented action, an attempt to kill exalted citizen Verigable Smythe, is that these city leaders and politicians are holding his father hostage. It is equally surprising to the narrator that in spite of his ambivalent feelings about his father, he realizes he cares enough about him to try to defend him. In a final irony, it is his father who ends up killing Smythe.

The narrator appears to be a well educated man. His grammar is correct, and his vocabulary represents one who must be able to understand his environs, which often include the upper echelons of Madras City society. This does not mean he necessarily had a traditional education; at the beginning of the story, he mentions, “ My teacher – the man who brought me along the game – was the only father I knew” (Liss 1). It appears that the narrator’s

education came less from traditional schooling and more from a mentorship or apprenticeship type of relationship with his teacher. Most of the story is narration and not dialogue; in the narration, his voice is well-educated. He keeps his words to others short, succinct, and polite. Initially, his world view is one of complicity with the Madras City society because that is how he makes his living and that is what keeps him alive. He probably would have continued doing the same kinds of jobs except for the extraordinary machinations of those who organize the death of Smythe, the Master of the High Council of Sacred Rites and Religious Matters. The bagman's situation changes as a result of this plot and his father's, Alvia's, and the Doctor's forced escape from Madras City. By the end of the story, the narrator has accepted his relationship with his father, appears to be forming a relationship with Avila, and reforming his idea of what it means to die happy. He thinks to himself, " I thought often of dying, and whether I could die happy, but I always thought it would be alone" (Liss 24). It is interesting that even in this dystopia that the bagman can focus so much on the idea of dying happy, which was his mentor's way of expressing that people should only do in life that which makes them happy.

Liss's story provides so many details that allow the reader to become immersed in this strange dystopian society, such as the political intrigue, the comedy that highlights what a ridiculous society it is, and the multicultural names that suggest globalization and the future. Silly names such as The Chamber Pot and the Turd Canoe mask a much more serious and dangerous reality; the deeper one goes into the restaurant and the deeper one goes into society, the closer one gets to the real source of power and the truth of

who has control. Although it is set in the future or an alternate Earth, Liss's story is relevant to today's society because it demonstrates how society uses façade to hide the truth of everything from individual lives to powerful government entities. Only a character such as the bagman, who has the fluidity to move between these layers, can accurately show the reality of these layers of façade. Like the narrator, people often choose to keep their eyes and ears shut concerning the world around them so they can be unaware of the world's more unpleasant details. The final thesis which Liss presents through the bagman's transformation of thought is that ignorance is not bliss and that in order to die happy, one must take action, see the truth, and in spite of the challenges of life, do what one loves and be with those one loves best.

## **Works Cited**

Bagman. Dictionary. com, n. d. Accessed 16 May 2013. bagman? s= t>  
Liss, Jeff. The Bagman's Father. Print.