Keep It

As much as I hated working at the transfer station, there was one major benefit: there was always someone lower on the food chain. I was still superior to fast food workers, gas station cashiers, and soccer moms pushing MLMs to their high school friends. Literally pushing around other people's trash for a living, and yet, my pride still craved target practice.

Sure, I was pushing thirty with nothing but half an audio engineering degree to show for it. Sure, I got a DUI so my elderly mom had to drive me to work. Sure, the hoppers had an infectious locker-room-and-broken-sewer-line stench when the summer sun cooked it into a putrid stew. And sure, I had not one, not two, but three pants stained by poorly-contained dog crap.

But I had to believe I was better than *someone*, even if it wasn't true. Otherwise, I might start thinking. Thinking might lead to re-evaluation, re-evaluation to change, and I just didn't need that kind of complication change might bring in my life right now. Certainly not on a Tuesday.

All that to say, at this point in my life, I was a butthat of the highest magnitude. I still kinda am, but more so then. Embarrassment is a lot like smoking: you start off hacking and coughing, but eventually you just get used to the stink and the phlegm and you just let the buzz make you feel invincible. I mean, what could other people's opinions actually do to my ego at this point? My ego was doing just fine, thank you kindly, because it lied about my importance every chance it got. I was lord of the waste stickers, baron of the refuse heap, navigator of wayward cans, defender of the burn pile. All hail, king of the castoff and forgotten.

Speaking of which, one of our repeat offenders was back on her bullshit again. Cherese obviously thought she was invisible behind her ancient Cutlass Supreme, but there she was, trying to huck her cans into the burn pile yet again. Third time in two weeks, Judas *Priest*, how much soda could one burnout drink? And why couldn't she just sneak them into her trash like a normal person?

I sighed loud enough to wake up Nicky, who was napping in what little shade the waste station shack gave us. The line of drool connecting her to the ground broke as she stretched and sat up. Squinting and blinking, she looked at me and gave an interrogatory grunt.

No one knew where Nicky came from. As the story went, she'd just shown up one day, curled up around a bunch of Allen's Coffee Brandy empties. A few different people tried to take Nicky home, but she always ended up back at the dump. In the end, she was just more at home with the refuse than on someone's living room floor.

It's probably pertinent to mention here that Nicky was the junkyard dog.

A chunky, gray-muzzled corgi and sweet as pie, Nicky never wanted for food. There was a constant cycle of old folks coming by with leftovers from Mutha's Cubbudd to spoil her rotten while they dropped off the week's trash in a single kitchen bag.

"Duty calls, Nicky," I said, getting up from my milk carton crate throne, ignoring the sensation of sweat moving through the dents it left in my buttcheeks. You learn to live with it—comfort has a different meaning when you work at the dump.

"Cherese, I've told you fifteen friggin' times, you can't toss your cans in the burn pile," I yelled, jogging over to the local cat lady throwing empty Frescas and Moxies into the burn pile. "Are you deaf or just dense?"

She didn't answer, although a furtive glance in my direction said her hearing was working just fine. Her aluminum contraband rattled over a half-destroyed dresser and into some abandoned window boxes, taking some of the flaking paint with it.

I waved my hands. "Cherese, I know you can hear me, you ancient 'tard, take your empties to the redemption center, for Christ's sake!"

I know it was mean. Cruel, even. I do now, anyway.

No. That's not true. I knew it then, too.

But in the end, insults seemed to be the only language she responded to, and results were the only dopamine ration I got those days. So I said it.

"Ancient?" Cherese said, hauling up her tall kitchen trash can, its remaining contents tattling as they rolled back to the bottom. She tensed, glaring at me like the teachers at the old school used to, back before it got consolidated with a bunch of other towns. Long bus rides after that.

"*Ancient?*" she repeated, shaking the bottle bin at me. "You were in di-a-pers when I was finishin' high school, I ain't that much older than you." She said the word *diapers* like it didn't have all the syllables she thought it should. "Not much older than the shitlords at

the 'demption center, either."

I made a back-up motion with my hand. "Well, you'll have plenty to talk about with 'em, then."

"Ceiling's too close, there, makes me nervous. Cans are too loud when you dump 'em. Smells like liquor." She tucked a greasy strand of hair behind her cauliflower ear, a flicker of fear taking off a few of the harder years on her face. "Smells like liquor," she repeated quietly, as she turned away from me and reached back in the bin for another can.

Obtuse as a brick wall, I walked closer, thumb in my beltloops like I had a friggin' holster. Nicky, sensing she might be needed for moral support, trotted up alongside me, happy as a frog in black fly season.

Please keep this image in your mind—a little corgi bebopping in step with a grown-ass man policing a pile of branches and discarded chairs, hands on the hips of his stained Blindside 2005 Great Depression tour t-shirt as he speaks down to a fellow townie, both doomed to be stuck here whether the mill survived or not. I was a beater hatchback pulling up to the husk of an old Ford, acting like my engine wouldn't die after a few laps around the old farm.

I promise, I get it now. I do, and I'm sorry. Said so a few weeks ago to Cherese's grave marker, about the time I decided to write all this down. Better late than never.

But I didn't know that when I was swaggering over to her like a swamp-assed John Wayne in a 2004 World Series hat.

She was wearing her old flannel jacket, even though the thermometer was practically licking eighty degrees. Her bin caught on the sleeve, and she futzed with it, pulling and yanking as she muttered, "They're just gonna melt when it burns, dipstick, what do you care?"

Nicky scratched her ear, then snapped at a passing fly.

"I care about not getting crabbed at by my boss," I said.

Another passing fly worked Nicky up. She tried to jump and snapped at it, a futile little gesture from futile little legs.

"I babysat your boss, back when his daddy was second shift on the line."

I rolled my eyes. "Explains a few things."

Cherese hauled her sleeve away, ripping the time-thinned jacket. She scowled at me, then vehemently started chucking her cans again. "I'll be done before your boss can squawk, just friggin' piss off!"

Well, that did it. *It* in this case being *hurt my babyman ego to the point of direct action.*

"For the *love*, Cherese!" I strode over and started to pull the can out of her hands. "Just take 'em to the redem—"

"*I told you IT SMELLS LIKE LIQUOR!"*

She spun and swung the entire frickin' bottle bin like a fat, off-white Louisville Slugger. The hard edge of the ancient Sears trash can hit me upside the head, dirt from the Reagan era sprinkling. I fell to the ground, reflexes completely gobsmacked. Nicky barked, not at me, not at Cherese, but because *things* were happening and she was required by dog law to report it.

By the time I'd propped myself up on my scunned elbow, Cherese's Oldmobile was firing gravel past my head. I ducked behind my right arm as she peeled out, almost winging an old Bowflex before she skidded back onto the road, the serpentine belt on the Cutlass singing a song of maintenance all the way down the quarter-mile driveway. After a few more cursory barks, Nicky dutifully waddled over to me and started to lick the blood trickling from my chin. I tried not to think about where her tongue had been.

As I sat there picking rocks and dirt out of my elbows, the rumble of a Bobcat engine closed in, then coughed into silence next to me.

"Heh. You're all stove up, bub." My boss, one Alan Engstrom, sat unconcerned and sweaty, somehow comfy in the skid steer. He leaned forward, his back peeling away from the patched vinyl seat with a sound like Velcro hawking a loogie. "She dump her cans in the brush again?"

"Third week in a friggin' row," I said, standing up and brushing the fresh dust off my dirt stains. "Where were you when she was winging me upside the head?"

"Staying at a practiced distance."

I rolled my neck, then spat out some grit. "Screw you."

"Ayuh," was all the reaction Alan gave. I might as well have told him *hello*. Honestly, up here in the United Counties of Introversion, *hello* is more insulting. In Maine, *screw you* is an official part of Thanksgiving closing ceremonies.

This was my life. Assaulted in broad daylight by a regular, who was most definitely going to come back next week, pretending nothing happened or actually forgetting what happened. Really though, what was I gonna do? Wait around a few hours for a statey to show up once I called the non-emergency hotline? Entertain the possibility of getting a semi-crazy old git tossed in prison for the crime of being violently stuck in her ways?

If we did that, half the population would disappear behind bars. No one would be running Mutha's Cubbudd, and ipso facto, Nicky might not get fed.

So I chose the path of forgiveness, if only for the corgi.

As we watched Cherese leave, Alan put a thumb beneath faded suspenders holding up similarly past-prime jeans. He had a hole in his t-shirt for insulin shots, a function-over-fashion endemic to this neck of the woods. He wiggled a finger in it to itch himself, his sweat making it more of a slosh than a scratch.

Nodding like someone made a great point, he turned toward the burn pile. "Yep. Gonna have to get those cans out."

"Seriously?" I waved an incredulous hand. "There's probably...what, sixty cents of cans in there, Alan? Why bother?"

Alan looked at me with the superior sort of pity you reserve for Jehovah's Witnesses on your porch. "If there's only sixty cents worth, it shouldn't take you too long to pick 'em up, now then, should it?"

"This isn't worth the paycheck."

He chortled and started the skid steer back up. "I resent that, young buck, we pay you in cash," he hollered over its idle. Pushing up his trucker hat, he met my eyes. "But if you've got somewhere else to be on this fine summer day, I'm sure we can pay some high schooler less for better work."

Alan fidgeted with his seat, prepping to run his patrol. His usual MO was to drive the Bobcat back and forth from section to section, looking busy for who-knew-who.

Honestly, it was probably that the only air conditioning you got out here was the ten-mile-an-hour breeze the junior bulldozer gave you. He scooted forward ungracefully, gave me another pointed nod, then rolled out like an anemic Transformer.

I rolled my eyes and took two steps toward the burn pile, but I stopped short when I noticed movement on one of the waste piles. Sometimes we got animals digging around out there. Deer, coyotes, even the furry kind of bobcats showed up around the dump at regular intervals. Most of the time they didn't get too close, and if they did, Nicky usually ended up scaring them off.

Well, *most* of them. Skunks, she learned, didn't truck her nonsense. Hard to make a dump smell worse, but she'd managed, all right.

My trash dog supervising me, I kept a weather eye on the mountain of Hefty, Husky, and Glad bags as I picked up Cherese's soda cans. A small wall of misshapen kitchen bags were forming a ridge on the dump hill, gaining additions every thirty seconds or so. Distracted, I reached for a Diet Coke can in some box elder branches and got a splinter for my trouble. Growling, I pulled the tweezers out of my Swiss Army Knife (thanks, Dad), and dug away at it.

This was weird. We'd get some people digging around the piles sometimes, but it was usually the burn and metal drops, not the hopper remnants. No one wanted kitty litter and gas station pizza boxes when they could have a busted washer adorning their front lawn for the next three years.

"Someone should go check that out, huh, Nicky?" I said, picking up the final Moxie can.

Nicky sat down, cocked her head at me, then started gnawing her hinders. No help there.

I looked down at the can. The Moxie Man pointed at me.

Dammit.

Leaving Nicky to her devices, I began ascending the hill, fighting to stay upright. It smelled like an old god's farts—ancient, powerful, with mysterious undertones of cheese. A few bags broke open under my Marden's-bought work boots as I climbed, and the ones that didn't were usually broken somewhere else. Bit by bit, I staggered to the top, resisting the urge to lean on the bags stacked there. Winded as I was, I didn't want to breathe through my nose, so I settled on sucking air through the side of my mouth

like it was wrapped around an invisible snorkel.

I jumped as another trash bag landed on my feet. Once I'd confirmed it wasn't a skunk, I followed its trajectory to the source.

A middle-aged man, probably seven to ten years older than me—widow's peak, glasses, mild case of dad bod—was tearing open bags, flailing through them, then throwing them off to the side. He'd dug out a small pit on the summit. Ordinary and unassuming as he was, I don't think an Olympic lifter could have matched his primal energy. Grab, rip, tear, dig, throw, repeat.

Another bag landed at my feet. Knowing it wasn't a skunk this time, I had the presence of mind to be annoyed.

"Bub, what're you doing?" I said, shaking a microwave meal box off my food. "Besides making a mess, that is."

Grab, rip, tear, dig, throw, repeat. He didn't seem to notice me, but unlike Cherese, this wasn't an act. He was locked in, and my voice was nothing more than a southeast breeze whipping past his head. Still feeling the sting on my chin, I decided not to get directly involved this time. I slowly moved to stand in front of him, keeping my distance.

"Hey, bub," I did a long, slow windshield wiper wave. "You hearin' me?"

He froze and took in big old lungful of air, like he'd remembered how to breathe all of a sudden. He didn't answer immediately, but swallowed hard and sniffed. His sleeves had been rolled up at one point, but one had slunk down to hang around his wrist, unbuttoned. Filth coated his ungloved hands, and he ran one across his forehead, making skid marks in the sweat. He looked up from his shallow grave of trash, eyes puffy and red.

"I threw 'em away," he said, explaining it, but not to me. Not really. "Wasn't practical to keep 'em all, right?"

Holding out my hands to steady my balance, I squatted down on the ridge he'd created. "Guess that depends on what they were. Lose a few checks? Happens sometimes."

He shook his head and grabbed another bag. I was rankled, but what was I gonna do, tell him to stop throwing trash around the dump?

I continued. "Had a guy wandering around last week. Wife sent him out because he'd thrown out some uranium glass her mom left her in the will. Boy, wasn't he...pissed." I tapered off as the man tore the cord off top of another bag.

"Nothing," he said bitterly—not to me—then picked up another bag to massacre.

"Okay, well, you can't keep making a mess up here," I said, surrounded by messes. "You're gonna have to—"

He cut me off. "They tell you not to keep everything."

I blinked. "Keep wha—"

He bisected a 40 gallon bag like a piece of paper.

"So I *didn't!* I didn't keep a goddamn thing! Why would I? They were *trash!* If you keep everything and watch them all the time, you're just a hoarder and a helicopt—" He stopped to wipe his nose. "A helicopter..."

If my eyebrows went any higher, I swear they could've high-fived my scalp. What was happening right now was so *very* far above my pay grade. I don't think I even qualified to be on a pay grade. If I did, that grade would be an F, because I was standing on a mountain of consumer manure with a man who was throwing around garbage and screaming about being a helicopter. I wondered why I bothered getting out of bed that morning.

"I snuck them out to the bins, just before the truck came by last Friday." His feet shifted as he feebly tried to get to another bag, his focus waning. "My wi—" he choked, "my wife scolded me. Said she'd wanted to keep them. I said we had enough. I squeezed them in the top and off they went."

"Bub, what the faw—"

He looked me dead in the eye through smeared lenses, and I flinched. It cut off my cussing like a knife through a red snapper. His fingers punched holes through the plastic in his hands.

"You don't *know*, you don't *know* when it'll all hit the fan, and we all act like it never will, in fact, we *assume* it never will! Like we're all gonna live forever and that ignorance somehow makes it better, right? Because, because ignoring the possibility makes us and everyone around us invincible...right?" He shook a bag at me. "*Right?*"

I swallowed hard, practically feeling the airborne microplastics going down my throat. "I..."

"Let me tell you right now, it *doesn't*. Plan for *ev-er-y* variable, babyproof your house, get insurance, wipe their noses, wash their hands, vet their schools, check their friends, limit their sugar intake and..."

He took a deep shuddering breath that worked hard to get through his nose. "And yet...and yet..."

Somewhere deep inside me, a budding sense of social cues told me it wasn't my turn to talk, so I stayed crouched. It was the closest thing I could do to sitting right now.

"You protect them from everything." He kicked a box of takeout, and it pinged off a bowling trophy into a rice bag. "Dogs, strangers, stoves, foul balls, all that. You tell them to keep their eyes open and their head on a swivel. You stay awake at night. You worry what you might have missed, then sleep by telling yourself you can't do it all. But you have to.

"You forget one, just one of those imminent dangers—" he held up a single, gunk-coated finger, "and that's *it*. They're done. One riptide with a distracted teenage lifeguard and she's *done*. You go home from the beach without your five-year-old.

"And all you have left of her..." He stared at the noxious ground beneath him, eyes searching. "...is what you kept."

It all clicked into place for me. My heart sunk into my stomach and my stomach digested it. Heartburn boiled in my chest, and I hoped it was situational and not a new norm of early middle-age.

I shuffled my feet and almost lost my balance. "So...what're you looking for?"

Tears spattered onto the confetti of waste like rain.

"Drawings. We got a ream of construction paper and she wanted to make a coloring book." He choked a laugh. "She went through almost half of it before we figured out what she was doing. Hardly had a drawing per page, if that. Just a bunch of stick figures. One of 'em had me with way too much hair. It was funny, but I didn't keep it."

Somewhere between desperate and despondent, he waved his hands at the debris around him. "Can't remember the bag it went in."

As I watched this grief-stricken, distraught dad shovel through everyone else's garbage to find his lost treasure, I found myself fighting against—and losing to—introspection.

In a few hours' time, I'd text my mom. She'd come through and pick me up. One short, wordless ride home later, we'd roll up the dooryard, past my uninspectable, undrivable car with Bull Moose bumper stickers. I thought about the creak of the boards in front of the storm door, the flickering light of the TV, my old man powernapping in his recliner or snuffling a laugh at whatever's on TVLand. I thought about the hallway that never sees sunlight, my old room at the end of it with the faux-brick paneling, track lighting, an aging gaming PC perched next to a giant, worn mousepad, my fellow late-bloomers waiting for me to log onto World of Warcraft.

This man had loved and lost, and was willing to go to the ends of the earth for the *chance* of one last memory.

I mean, I might snag Dad's pocket knife or Mom's old Kitchenaid mixer before their inevitable estate sale, but something as fragile as a stack of crayon drawings? How deep was this man's love to create regret like this? No one in my life could elicit that kind of posthumous loyalty in me.

In all honestly, I wasn't sure if I could allow myself that kind of pain, no matter what the payoff was. The night I got my DUI was the night I realized I wasn't going anywhere. Meaningless semi-hedonism had gotten me exactly twenty-nine years of bupkis in long-term impact, but no pain, at the very least.

In that moment, I had an image of thousands more worthy, songworthy adventures that required a heart willing to break. Like an oddball version of physical laws, safety and love couldn't reside in the same place. Couldn't be done.

I took a deep breath. "What color?"

A box of Trix fell from his newest partially opened bag. "What?"

"Her drawings, bub. What color were the papers?"

He sniffed, wincing as the smell momentarily pierced his grief. "Mostly orange. She liked coloring on those. It's my favorite color and she could use some of the brighter crayons on it."

I grabbed a stoved-up bag and tore it open. "One big stack?"

Nodding, he wiped tears from his eyes—wisely, with his mostly-untouched shoulder. "One big stack."

❖

We were up there for three hours. I jogged off to grab us waters a couple times. Alan stopped me to ask what was going on. I told him to piss off.

God love him, he did. I'll say this much for Alan, he certainly didn't have an ego to bruise.

As my gloves got soaked from sweat and half-decayed fountain sodas, I thought about my high school English class, reading Charles Dickens's Tale of Two Cities: *"tis a far, far better thing I do now than I have ever done before."* Granted, I wasn't going to the guillotine for someone. Technically, I wasn't even going outside the duties of my job.

By the time I ripped open that final bag, a fierce mix of guilt, grief and hope had dug into my core. In all those years spent chasing my own happiness, I'd missed out on the joy of giving a crap about someone who wasn't me.

In a store-brand flex bag, there they were—surrounded by pudding cups and deflated Capri-Suns, miraculously only a little bit moist.

I flipped through them. A family with hearts attached directly to the tops of their heads. A cat with three more ears than necessary. A...tank? No, a car with the trunk up and square wheels.

And then, the *piece de resistance*—a little stick figure girl holding her generously-haired dad's stick arm, glasses forming half his face, his smile forming the other.

I snapped to reality. "Hey! Hey, bub! These the ones?"

In a span of seconds, the stack left my hands, I was given the stankiest, most meaningful hug I'd ever received, and he was gone. I stood atop the trash mountain, watching the dust cloud from his car go up into the summer sky. It looked like a burnt offering they talked about in the Pentecostal Sunday School my parents sent me to when I was kid—the sacrifice of someone who could never repay what was given to them, floating up in a weird kind of thanks.

Or something like that. Between the flannelgraph Old Testament stories and the speaking in tongues, it didn't really stick. Couldn't complain, though. My parents got a

quiet house on Sunday mornings, and I got a decent stash of candy, which led to a less-quiet Sunday afternoon.

Wherever that little girl was, I genuinely hoped she saw that cloud and the wall of trash her dad and I tore apart for more memories of her. I vicariously attached myself to her father's love, descending my own trash Mount Sinai with new perspective. While I had a very different kind of glow than Moses, I couldn't help feeling like I was carrying a new kind of mandate down with me, etched deep into my stone heart.

❖

Alan met me at the bottom of the pile, cold Moxie in hand. Nicky had obviously licked the condensation off the side, but I couldn't hold it against her. It was frigging hot.

"It's past your shift," he said, handing me the can. "Tell your mutha to pick up your sorry ass."

Still lost in thought, I nodded, wiping off the dog slobber from the side before popping the tab. Black licorice foam erupted, then settled. I took a swig, gloriously sweet with a bitter finish. I'll never understand how flatlanders can't grasp the glory and the pain of a good can of Moxie.

"You, uh..." An unsure hand patted me on the shoulder, two quick awkward palm taps that almost resulted in soda coming out my nose. "You did a good thing, kid."

"Thanks," I said hoarsely, feeling the Moxie burn the edge of my nasal cavity. "I hope so."

"Ayuh." A pause. A sip. "I ain't payin' you overtime."

"I know." I sighed and pulled out my phone, trying to ignore the cracks in the corners. "I know."

It was probably well past time for something new.