Aaron Waite — Keep It

Overall Impression: I think this is a solid piece with a grounded setting (i.e., it feels very Maine, which is a good vibe for this contest). The prose style and framing sequence fit the story well. Your characters feel realistic and believable in terms of their descriptions, actions, and dialogues. They have enough detail to bring them beyond tropes without shoving gobs of random information in the reader's face most of the time. My two developmental recommendations are changes for clarity and thematic relevance.

Quick formatting reminder: when you attach the file to your email draft, make sure that the file's page numbers are accurate (the author's note makes it off by one). The contest didn't have any particular rules about page format, so what you have should be fine.

I found the dad's introduction confusing (p. 7, paras. 2, 4, & 5) since I wasn't sure where both characters were located at a given point in time. As best as I can tell, the narrator sees movement at the dump pile but stays at the burn pile to pick up Cherese's cans, and then because he's distracted he gets a splinter in his finger from a branch in the burn pile. It's only after he looks at the Moxie can in his hand that he decides to go over to the dump pile to investigate. That synopsis took me a few minutes to puzzle out from the prose, especially because I took Moxie Man literally and thought that was the name of a character whose introduction had been cut.

I'd recommend rephrasing and reordering some parts of these paragraphs to keep the action clear (i.e., the narrator spotting odd movement at a different location and then going to investigate). The interruptions about the skunks and Swiss Army Knife divert the reader's attention from what's happening and the "this" in "This was weird" points to an unclear antecedent. I'm not saying those elements can't or shouldn't be present, but the narrative thread needs to focus on the suspicious movement or else the reader may not understand what's going on.

I don't think Cherese is necessary. I'm sure you've heard of the expression "kill your darlings," and I think it may apply here. From what I can tell, this short story is about how you shouldn't just coast through life like a half-hearted hedonist who refuses to be vulnerable with others. Instead, you should embrace love/passion and accept the inevitable pain—you'll have memories and keepsakes to help with that future pain.

I don't see how Cherese contributes to this theme. Perhaps the redemption center smelling like liquor is a trigger for some painful memories she has, but if it is, then it's not referenced at the end of the story to tie it all together. If the point of Cherese is that we don't know everything about what's going on with other people, and to illustrate this we as readers know nothing about

Cherese, it seems underdeveloped. The reader doesn't really get much information about Cherese and she doesn't come up again after page 6.

To sum up, I think that Cherese's section should be cut or trimmed down because it doesn't serve an evident narrative purpose; if I'm wrong and Cherese is critical to the narrative or its theme(s), then that purpose should be emphasized more, although not to the point of being heavy-handed.

If she stays in, the line "And why couldn't she just sneak them into her trash like a normal person?" brings up the question of why Cherese is still throwing her cans into the burn pile. I don't see why she wouldn't be more subtle in throwing her cans away, especially when she knows she's going to get caught and chastised by the narrator (unless she actually forgets week to week, as is hinted at in the text—maybe play that up a little more somewhere to make her more of a tragic character in constant pain like the dad?).