

Garbage

Bart watches through the closed blinds of his kitchen window the garbage truck rolling by. As it does every week, it stops on the opposite side and the operator jumps out, looks both ways, dashes across to Bart's tall green and yellow bin, and wheels it back to the truck. At this point in the weekly dance, Bart is already shaking his head. He knows that municipal taxes pay for refuse collection, but he is amazed by the young garbage men who service his street on Thursdays.

The truck has a mechanical arm that swings down on the driver side, and he watches the driver deftly shove the big plastic bin between the grippers and hold down a lever. The truck's engine speeds up a little, and Bart's bin slowly rises up the side of the truck. Bart holds his breath. A small thrill of love blooms in his chest while the bin—his bin—slowly flips open and up-ends into the gaping receptacle on the truck. The driver flips the control lever up and down at just the right moment, and the lifting mechanism gives Bart's bin a corresponding shake.

It seems impossible that these complete strangers would bring this massive machinery to his house every week, rain or shine, just to take away Bart's personal crumpled trash and rotting garbage, some of it very disgusting and foul-smelling, as a faithful service, without complaint, without even being asked, without reward. Although Bart acknowledges the city salaries of these men, nevertheless, they do come to his insignificant house. They don't just grudgingly report in on a Thursday morning and spend their time cynically, performing an absolute minimum, skipping as many containers as they can get away with. What's more, they haven't noticed anything specific about Bart's house, or his refuse, that over the

years they have come to detest. They must by now know, at least in some small peripheral detail, much about his house and trash, but they have not judged, and they have no special repugnance for Bart's garbage, and they have not mentally marked his street and his home as unworthy of more than the most grudging and perfunctory service. Instead, they have shown up punctually, with brisk and impartial efficiency, not singling him out for special attention of any kind, but simply taking away his trash as if it were the most natural thing in the world to do on a Thursday morning, not cheerfully but also not bitterly, with a simple dispassionate observance.

Bart owes these young men his gratitude, and he watches in admiration as the driver detaches Bart's cannister from the lifting mechanism and whips the empty container back across the street, where it careens into the curb in front of Bart's house, teeters a moment, and then tips over onto his modest lawn, the yellow lid flung open so Bart can see at a glance that all the rubbish is gone, slid into the maw of the truck where some groaning mechanism is even now compacting it into a massive amalgam with his neighbors' trash, and the trash of his whole street, for blocks to the East, unknowably far. Bart looks across the street at the truck, and the driver has already swung up into the cab and the lifter is folded back against the side. The compactor is straining and for a moment the truck shakes visibly and its engine races until some crushing limit is reached and the truck suddenly becomes calm again and returns to idle. The driver releases the air brakes with a loud hiss, and clanks into gear. The truck revs again, more modestly, and pulls away from the opposite curb and rolls to the next intersection, pauses a moment, and then turns around the corner and up the avenue. The street outside Bart's window is silent, but the garbage truck's benign roar is still audible, fading into the city background noise. Bart continues to stare out the window, touched by the brief cacophony of selfless service, flattered that this young man, who would scarcely have acknowledged Bart's existence in a restaurant or on the street, had come yet again to do Bart this one fine favor, without complaint, a favor Bart would have never been able to perform himself.

One Thursday in the recent past, Bart was admiring the morning garbage collection with his usual wonderment, when a small blue sedan sped down the street just as the garbage man was crossing to pick up Bart's cannister. The car was well over the speed limit—this much was obvious,

because its engine was revved unusually high for a city street, and it was still rocking from side to side from rounding the last corner dangerously fast. The driver was a young male, not yet a man, in a black T-shirt and sunglasses. His arm dangled casually out of the window holding a cigarette, which he dropped when he saw the garbage man in his path. He pulled in his arm and swerved abruptly to the right and locked up his brakes. The car immediately skidded, turning much farther to the right, and narrowly missed the garbage man, who had leapt into the air and was now falling onto Bart's lawn beside the trash bin. As it spun, the sedan caught its plastic bumper on the steel front framework of the idling garbage truck, and the plastic and foam was peeled almost completely off the car as it rotated violently against the far curb and lurched to a stop. It looked as if someone had parked it the wrong way round, with its torn bumper protruding like an oversize hang-nail.

Bart could no longer see the driver, but his attention had gone to the garbage man, who now lay on Bart's lawn with one hand over his face. Bart could see his chest rising and falling rapidly. The man must be in shock, and he might have hurt himself. Bart was moved to run out onto the lawn to see if he was alright, but he remained at the kitchen window and pulled back a little ways from the venetian blind. Another car had come down the street, unaware of what had just happened, and was now waiting at the corner to turn onto the avenue. As it drove away, the garbage man stood up and brushed himself off. He saw the sedan semi-detached from his truck, and although Bart couldn't see his expression, the man looked both ways and then stalked across the street, fists clenched at his sides.

When the garbage man reached the sedan, he opened the nearest door, by the empty passenger seat, and stuck his head inside the car. Bart wished he could see the youthful sedan driver, but the angle was wrong. All he could see was the back of the sanitation man, from the waist down, his whole upper body now leaning far into the sedan. Bart wished he could hear what they were saying to each other. He thought about opening his window a crack, but he didn't want to create too much movement of the window blinds. The garbage man was young and wiry, and strong from hauling garbage cans all day, month after month, year after year. Without any apparent effort, he hauled the driver across the front seat of the sedan and onto the street, where the youth leaned against his car, visibly shaking

with fear. Bart could hear the garbage man shouting now, although he couldn't make out the words. The workman stood with his legs apart, fists clenched at his hips, leaning toward the sedan driver, punctuating his words with repeated thrusts of his head and torso toward the cowering youth. The boy's dark glasses had come off and were lying in the street. He glanced down at them, and made a furtive move to pick them up. The garbage man intervened and brought his work boot down on the glasses and then looked back at the boy, whose mouth was now open in protest, apparently yelling something back at the garbage man, and Bart could hear his shouts, higher pitched and tinged with a protesting whine. He had no right to complain, having nearly killed this selfless servant of the city. Bart considered going right out onto his porch, a concerned citizen, witness to an egregious offense.

The garbage man was much stronger than Bart had guessed. As the youth's defensive yelling persisted, the garbage man must have become even more enraged, because he grabbed the sedan's driver in a bear hug, and the two began to stumble around as one, bumping against the car and the front of the truck. Bart noticed that the garbage man was actually lifting the young driver from his feet, lugging him alongside the truck. A moment later, he had vaulted the boy into the air above the cannister lifter, and the young man was clutching at the truck to avoid falling onto the greased steel mechanism. For a long moment he clung to the frame of the receptacle opening, and then the lifter mechanism unlatched and moved upward, catching the youth's flailing legs and boosting him up the side of the truck. There was no escape from the rising hydraulic lifter prongs and he was forced to dive into the receptacle itself, into the sticky and revolting deposits from the last several bins, his legs sticking out, kicking for purchase. Bart watched without breathing, as the garbage man released the lifter control and activated the compactor and the legs abruptly pulled out of sight. Bart still wonders if he may have heard a cry, but it probably would have been drowned out by the roar of the truck.

That day, just a few weeks ago, the garbage man climbed up into the cab and waited for the compactor to finish. When the engine returned to idle, he released the brakes with a hiss, clanked into first gear, and drove forward to the corner, pushing the sedan ahead, out onto the avenue, where a dump truck slammed into it.

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