

Looking for the Junk Man

The street in front of our house is the last of the streets with a hard surface of any kind as you move farther north. The houses that line the streets grow progressively more modest. At first, they are small but mostly tidy; then there are a few blocks where the houses appear shoddy and unkempt, old paint flaking off of them behind weedy lawns; finally, near the edge of town, beyond which there are no more streets, the houses are only tiny shacks, sullen and tired-looking.

Our street is made of thick red bricks, set end-to-end in endless rows, uneven in places, but mostly smooth enough for my brothers and me to ride our bicycles without the worry of crashing. The streets north of our block are dirt roads, like the one that runs along the side of our house. After a rain, cars and pickups make deep ruts that will eventually be graded smooth again, but usually not for a while.

My brothers and I have the run of the neighborhood, which we cruise daily during the summer months on our bicycles. But we don't venture north very often. The narrow dirt roads there, the overgrown lawns, the peeling paint, the rusty cars parked on the streets and in the driveways, lend this area a forbidding quality. Even in the bright light of a summer day, it feels ominous and wild. I sense something in the air – desperation, maybe – and it makes me stay away.

I am sitting in my mother's car in the parking lot of the grocery store when I see a dirty pickup roll conspicuously into the lot. I notice the pickup because it is so badly dented, with scratches and patches of rust here and there. Its bed is piled high with old tires and rolls of chicken wire and pieces of scrap metal. I see bulky plastic bags stuffed with squashed aluminum cans. Across one side of the pickup, someone has used a can of black spray paint to scrawl, in a childish hand and in large uneven letters, "I BY JUNK."

The pickup door creaks open and a small man emerges. He is the dirtiest person I have ever seen. He wears torn painter's pants that are many shades removed from their original white. His boots are old and falling apart. A greasy khaki shirt, a few sizes too large, is tucked into his pants. I see his face. He is old, older than my parents but not as old as my grandparents. His face is dark and grimy, his hands almost black. He tugs at the bill of a filthy baseball cap, and walks past my mother's car and into the grocery.

I wonder about this man. I ask my parents about him. They tell me a few things they have heard. They know his name, and that he doesn't talk to anyone, and that all he buys at the grocery store is dog food. He buys many cans of dog food every time he comes to the grocery, people say. People say they see him around town in his rusty pickup, but they don't know where he goes. Yes, he does buy junk. And then he sells the junk somewhere to make a little money. People figure that he is crazy, that he probably drinks all the time, and that he might have a lot of dogs to feed – or maybe he eats the dog food himself.

"Why does he want to buy junk?" I ask.

"There's all kinds of people in this world," my father says.

"Where does he live? Does anyone know?"

"Lives a few blocks right down that way," my father says, pointing to the north.

I want to see where the junk man lives. I want to see what his house looks like, if he really does have a lot of dogs. I feel sorry for the man. I know he is poor and doesn't have much and is very

dirty, and because of these things I feel sorry for him. But mostly, I feel sorry for him because of what he painted on his pickup.

I think about what he wrote with the spray paint and I feel a little sad. I want to see that again: I BY JUNK. People think the man is crazy and that he drinks all the time and that he doesn't talk to anyone. Maybe he is telling people that all he wants to do is just buy some junk – but he gets it a little wrong. I BY JUNK. I am sad that the world is this way. There are all kinds of people in this world, and no one cares if you are crazy and dirty and eat dog food and want to buy junk.

I think about the man for a while. Then one day I jump onto my bike and ride down the street beside our house, heading north. I am anxious, and ride fast. There are places in the rutted road where passing cars have made the dried mud smooth, and I aim my bicycle onto these tracks when I can. I sweep back and forth along the intersecting side streets, going farther north of our house block by block, looking for the junk man.

On a block where there are mostly vacant lots, I look down a narrow dirt path and recognize the junk man's pickup parked in the weeds. I ride past, then turn around in the road and ride by for another look. Cicadas are singing their summer song. Dogs begin to bark, but I don't see any dogs. I can't see the house from the street. Bushes and trees and clumps of brush block my view. The pickup is parked in such a way that I can't read what is painted on its side. I don't see the junk man.

I wonder, if he suddenly appeared, would he give me a friendly wave? Could I wave back and then ride over to say hello? Maybe I could say, 'Let me fix what you wrote, I'm good with words.'

I want to fix what he wrote. I wish he would come out of his house back there behind the trees and give the friendly wave.

But the junk man doesn't appear. There is only the barking of the unseen dogs and the singing of the cicadas. I ride a few circles in the street, and know that I must get back home. I pedal away, riding fast.