The Garbage Collector, Ray Bradbury

The Garbage Collector

This is how his work was: he got up at five in the cold dark morning and washed his face with warm water if the heater was working and cold water if the heater was not working. He shaved carefully, talking out to his wife in the kitchen, who was fixing ham and eggs or pancakes or whatever it was that morning.

By six o'clock he was driving on his way to work alone, and parking his car in the big yard where all the other men parked their cars as the sun was coming up. The colors of the sky that time of morning were orange and blue and violet and sometimes very red and sometimes yellow or a clear color like water on white rock. Some mornings he could see his breath on the air and some mornings he could not.

But as the sun was still rising he knocked his fist on the side of the green truck, and his driver, smiling and saying hello, would climb in the other side of the truck and they would drive out into the great city and go down all the streets until they came to the place where they started work.

Sometimes, on the way, they stopped for black coffee and then went on, the warmness in them. And they began the work which meant that he jumped off in front of each house and picked up the garbage cans and brought them back and took off their lids and knocked them against the bin edge, which made the orange peels and cantaloupe rinds and coffee grounds fall out and thump down and begin to fill the empty truck.

There were always steak bones and the heads of fish and pieces of green onion and stale celery. If the garbage was new it wasn't so bad, but if it was very old it was bad.

He was not sure if he liked the job or not, but it was a job and he did it well, talking about it a lot at some times and sometimes not thinking of it in any way at all. Some days the job was wonderful, for you were out early and the air was cool and fresh until you had worked too long and the sun got hot and the garbage steamed early.

But mostly it was a job significant enough to keep him busy and calm and looking at the houses and cut lawns he passed by and seeing how everybody lived. And once or twice a month he was surprised to find that he loved the job and that it was the finest job in the world.

It went on just that way for many years. And then suddenly the job changed for him. It changed in a single day. Later he often wondered how a job could change so much in such a few short hours.

HE WALKED INTO THE APARTMENT and did not see his wife or hear her voice, but she was there, and he walked to a chair and let her stand away from him, watching him as he touched the chair and sat down in it without saying a word. He sat there for a long time.

"What's wrong?" At last her voice came through to him. She must have said it three or four times.

"Wrong?" He looked at this woman and yes, it was his wife all right, it was someone he knew, and this was their apartment with the tall ceilings and the worn carpeting.

"Something happened at work today," he said.

She waited for him.

“On my garbage truck, something happened.” His tongue moved dryly on his lips and his eyes shut over his seeing until there was all blackness and no light of any sort and it was like standing alone in a room when you got out of bed in the middle of a dark night. “I think I’m going to quit my job. Try to understand.”

“Understand!” she cried.

“It can’t be helped. This is all the strangest damned thing that ever happened to me in my life.” He opened his eyes and sat there, his hands feeling cold when he rubbed his thumb and forefingers together. “The thing that happened was strange.”

“Well, don’t just sit there!”

He took part of a newspaper from the pocket of his leather jacket. “This is today’s paper,” he said. “December 10, 1951. Los Angeles Times. Civil Defense Bulletin. It says they’re buying radios for our garbage trucks.”

“Well, what’s so bad about a little music?”

“No music. You don’t understand. No music.”

He opened his rough hand and drew with one clean fingernail, slowly, trying to put everything there where he could see it and she could see it. “In this article the mayor says they’ll put sending and receiving apparatus on every garbage truck in town.” He squinted at his hand. “After the atom bombs hit our city, those radios will talk to us. And then our garbage trucks will go pick up the bodies.”

“Well, that seems practical. When—”

“The garbage trucks,” he said, “go out and pick up all the bodies.”

“You can’t just leave bodies around, can you? You’ve got to take them and—” His wife shut her mouth very slowly. She blinked, one time only, and she did this very slowly also. He watched that one slow blink of her eyes. Then, with a turn of her body, as if someone else had turned it for her, she walked to a chair, paused, thought how to do it, and sat down, very straight and stiff. She said nothing.

He listened to his wristwatch ticking, but with only a small part of his attention.

At last she laughed. “They were joking!”

He shook his head. He felt his head moving from left to right and from right to left, as slowly as everything else had happened. “No. They put a receiver on my truck today. They said, at the alert, if you’re working, dump your garbage anywhere. When we radio you, get in there and haul out the dead.”

Some water in the kitchen boiled over loudly. She let it boil for five seconds and then held the arm of the chair with one hand and got up and found the door and went out. The boiling sound stopped. She stood in the door and then walked back to where he still sat, not moving, his head in one position only.

“It’s all blueprinted out. They have squads, sergeants, captains, corporals, everything,” he said. “We even know where to bring the bodies.”

“So you’ve been thinking about it all day,” she said.

“All day since this morning. I thought: Maybe now I don’t want to be a garbage collector anymore. It used to be Tom and me had fun with a kind of game. You got to do that. Garbage is bad. But if you work at it you can make a game. Tom and me did that. We watched people’s

garbage. We saw what kind they had. Steak bones in rich houses, lettuce and orange peel in poor ones. Sure it's silly, but a guy's got to make his work as good as he can and worthwhile or why in hell do it?

And you're your own boss, in a way, on a truck. You get out early in the morning and it's an outdoor job, anyway; you see the sun come up and you see the town get up, and that's not bad at all. But now, today, all of a sudden it's not the kind of job for me anymore."

His wife started to talk swiftly. She named a lot of things and she talked about a lot more, but before she got very far he cut gently across her talking. "I know, I know, the kids and school, our car, I know," he said. "And bills and money and credit. But what about that farm Dad left us? Why can't we move there, away from cities? I know a little about farming. We could stock up, hole in, have enough to live on for months if anything happened."

She said nothing.

"Sure, all of our friends are here in town," he went on reasonably. "And movies and shows and the kids' friends, and…"

She took a deep breath. "Can't we think it over a few more days?"

"I don't know. I'm afraid of that. I'm afraid if I think it over, about my truck and my new work, I'll get used to it. And, oh Christ, it just doesn't seem right a man, a human being, should ever let himself get used to any idea like that."

She shook her head slowly, looking at the windows, the gray walls, the dark pictures on the walls. She tightened her hands. She started to open her mouth.

“I’ll think tonight,” he said. “I’ll stay up awhile. By morning I’ll know what to do.”

“Be careful with the children. It wouldn’t be good, their knowing all this.”

“I’ll be careful.”

“Let’s not talk anymore, then. I’ll finish dinner!” She jumped up and put her hands to her face and then looked at her hands and at the sunlight in the windows. “Why, the kids’ll be home any minute.”

“I’m not very hungry.”

“You got to eat, you just got to keep on going.” She hurried off, leaving him alone in the middle of a room where not a breeze stirred the curtains, and only the gray ceiling hung over him with a lonely bulb unlit in it, like an old moon in a sky.

He was quiet. He massaged his face with both hands. He got up and stood alone in the dining-room door and walked forward and felt himself sit down and remain seated in a dining-room chair. He saw his hands spread on the white tablecloth, open and empty.

“All afternoon,” he said, “I’ve thought.”

She moved through the kitchen, rattling silverware, crashing pans against the silence that was everywhere.

“Wondering,” he said, “if you put the bodies in the trucks lengthwise or endwise, with the heads on the right, or the feet on the right. Men and women together, or separated? Children in one truck, or mixed with men and women? Dogs in special trucks, or just let them lie? Wondering how many bodies one garbage truck can hold. And

wondering if you stack them on top of each other and finally knowing you must just have to. I can't figure it.

I can't work it out. I try, but there's no guessing, no guessing at all how many you could stack in one single truck."

He sat thinking of how it was late in the day at his work, with the truck full and the canvas pulled over the great bulk of garbage so the bulk shaped the canvas in an uneven mound. And how it was if you suddenly pulled the canvas back and looked in. And for a few seconds you saw the white things like macaroni or noodles, only the white things were alive and boiling up, millions of them.

And when the white things felt the hot sun on them they simmered down and burrowed and were gone in the lettuce and the old ground beef and the coffee grounds and the heads of white fish. After ten seconds of sunlight the white things that looked like noodles or macaroni were gone and the great bulk of garbage silent and not moving, and you drew the canvas over the bulk and looked at how the canvas folded unevenly over the hidden collection, and underneath you knew it was dark again, and things beginning to move as they must always move when things get dark again.

He was still sitting there in the empty room when the front door of the apartment burst wide. His son and daughter rushed in, laughing, and saw him sitting there, and stopped.

Their mother ran to the kitchen door, held to the edge of it quickly, and stared at her family. They saw her face and they heard her voice:

"Sit down, children, sit down!" She lifted one hand and pushed it toward them. "You're just in time."

The End