

A TREASURE

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PROSE CONTEST RUNNER UP

“I swear to God, Kit, if you say garbage man one more time, I’ll shove you into the compactor.”

Kit swept back the floppy hair in his eyes that constantly escaped his bandana. He rolled his eyes as Bucket threatened him with the same, unimaginative threat as they began a conversation they’d had a million times.

“It’s what we are, man, I’m just sayin’,” Kit answered blithely as they picked up another trash bin and dumped it into the truck. “I dunno why it bothers you so much.”

“‘Sanitation Engineer,’ that’s our title,” sighed the older man. “Not some filthy garbage man with grime in his beard and dirty coveralls. I didn’t sign on with the government to be a dirty junkman.”

“Guess no one told you life was gonna be this way,” Kit laughed as he tapped a strange rhythm on the side of the truck. Bucket just shook his head.

Bucket was tall; that was pretty much the only thing about him worth describing. He was usually a quiet man who over enunciated everything in an attempt to sound intelligent. He was clean-cut and plain but, when he straightened his high-vis orange and yellow vest, Bucket

almost looked presidential.

Kit, with his uncut hair and youthful face, looked like a member of a boy band in comparison. The boy grinned and skipped through everything while spouting slang and television references more than real words. Bucket couldn't understand half the things he said.

Both men continued their route with harmless teasing, hopping off and on the truck at different stages in each neighborhood. It was so early that the sky was dark, and some spooky decorations were placed in the front yards of the houses they visited. Their destroyed packaging was always present in the bins. Crisp autumn air still made mist as they huffed and did their work routinely. The cement beneath their feet was so pale and clean in the mornings after the street cleaners returned to the waste disposal facility; Bucket wished their job had such obvious success.

Sometimes they'd marvel at the different things on the curb that day: couches, the odd scrap of carpet, old VCRs, a nice set of chairs with a mismatched table. Other times, they'd be saddened at seeing the wastefulness apparent in their truck.

"Ooooh! Catalogs!" cried Kit. Sometimes they'd hit their version of a jackpot in the form of magazines and catalogs.

Bucket's face lit up for the first time that morning as he finished replacing the large black garbage bin at the base of the driveway.

"What kind?"

"*Lane Bryant* and *Pier One*," said Kit as he shuffled through the top of the heap in the back of the truck where several glossy magazines lay. "*Seventeen* for you."

The brightly colored magazine promptly hit Bucket in the face and fell to the concrete. The older man scrambled to pick it up, throwing it in the back of the gigantic truck as he resumed his spot on the back. Kit hung onto the moving vehicle with one hand as he flipped through the furniture catalog. Bucket knew both of them would sort through the pile in a 'more clean corner' of the truck later, taking home whatever they wanted to read that hadn't soaked up refuse in their pages. He also knew that doing this was illegal.

"You know, one of these days we're going to get caught," Bucket sighed as the rumbling waste collection unit halted at the next house.

"Serves them all right for not recycling instead," Kit grunted as his wiry arms shook with the weight of tipping the next bin. Dozens of bags fell out beside orange peels and Styrofoam plates. "Maybe they

can have a turn sorting it all at the waste center while we just throw everything into the trash. How the turntables,” he said while swiveling to see Bucket’s reaction.

“What?” asked the older man.

Kit sighed.

“It ain’t easy bein’ green,” Bucket tried in turn.

“What?”

“Never mind,” he sighed. How did kids these days not know the most famous saying of Kermit the frog?

It was the same conversation every time, like a well-oiled machine. Truth be told, he was a creature of habit and didn’t think he was ready to give up reading *The Week* or *TIME Magazine* anyway. He certainly didn’t want to give up the free supplies for collages, either. But that was something he wasn’t prepared to admit to anyone other than Kit.

“I suppose you’re right anyway,” said Bucket. He had already been defeated years ago; the bright text of a *Seventeen Magazine* had sealed his fate.

When they finished their route through the neighborhoods on their side of the city that afternoon, Kit and Bucket returned to unload their collection at the waste facility. After the routine sanitation of their truck, they prepared to go their separate ways with their ill-gotten gains of the day. Kit had a bunch of the Halloween editions of *Oriental Trading Company* and some *Bed, Bath, and Beyond* clenched in his gloved fist. Bucket held a multitude that were ready to be cut up and Mod-Podged into something transcendent of their original forms. For a few hours, he would be a powerful force of destruction and recreation. Then, his transformations would be left forgotten on his kitchen table.

“Ya know one of these days, you should show me one of those collage things you do,” Kit said as they hung up their vests in the locker room. “I’m due for some culturing,” he laughed.

Please, Kit was the only cultured one of their group at work. He’d been the only one college life stuck to.

“They’re just a hobby,” replied Bucket quietly as he put his weathered work gloves on the top shelf of his locker. “It’s not worth me bringing them.”

“Nah man, bring at least one! C’mon, I wanna see!” said Kit. Bucket couldn’t help but think of a whiny child. By all rights, Kit still

was a kid. He was going to be a freshman in college now? A gap-year employee of the city only, trying to save up some money to cover what his scholarship couldn't. He couldn't remember these kids' ages anymore and, to be honest, he didn't want to. It made him feel even older.

"Why so interested, need some art for your dorm room next semester? Won't you need to coordinate room colors with your roommate before you start getting artwork?" Bucket attempted a joke but he was getting uncomfortable.

"We'll pull a Tim Gunn and make it work. Just bring one, I only want to see it!"

"Fine, fine, I will," Bucket granted as he shut his locker and left the room to go to his car and some blessed relief from the cold wind they'd faced that day. Kit followed behind animatedly.

"Great, fam! Maybe I can even get creative myself. You could be my muse!"

Bucket grunted tiredly. He sent a haphazard wave towards where he knew Kit's beat-up truck was while he jammed his key into his own car door and twisted.

"See you tomorrow," came the bright reply.

Bucket unlocked the door to his apartment and toed off his work boots by the door. The warm air of his radiators whooshed past him into the cold hallway as he scrambled to close the door again with his shoe half off. Again, the same thing every day.

He threw his keys on the scratched table at the center of his apartment, and they slid across the surface until they were stopped by a pile of cut up magazines. He threw four more magazines on top of the stack but Bucket couldn't even look at the pile as he washed his hands and went to the fridge to grab some cold cuts and mayonnaise. Why did he say yes to Kit? How could he bring his artwork on the route tomorrow? Which piece was he going to bring?

He hastily slapped together a cold ham sandwich and sat at his table with some carrots and a tall glass of water. The radio buzzed half-hearted jazz in the solitude of his home. With robotic movements, he brought the sandwich to his mouth while his gaze remained on the pile of magazines. Maybe he would read the new magazines he got today and create something new? Or maybe he could just go in tomorrow and claim he forgot.

The sandwich didn't taste right. He looked down and checked the bread for mold. He found none. Maybe it was the mayo. It wasn't, and it wasn't the ham either when he checked the fridge. It must be his taste buds. Bucket sat back down and returned to his plain meal.

When he finished, he pushed his plate away and seized the stack of magazines, first grabbing the ones he had pilfered today. There was indeed a *Seventeen Magazine*, along with *TIME* and two other catalogs for clothing and furniture. Everything was fall themed with pumpkins and ghosts and leaves. Lots of oranges and reds, like the empty plastic Tide containers that always end up in their waste disposal unit despite the recycling offered by the city.

He thumbed through them thoughtfully and placed small yellow Post-It notes on pages that had promising images—a candle here, a nice pair of hands there, a few creative table decorations, some great lettering was in *TIME* this week and one young lady had a nice smile in *Seventeen*. The rest of the bubbly teen magazine didn't fit his aesthetic.

With his scrapbooking scissors, he carefully cut out his selected pieces and added them to the Tupperware filled with clippings on the chair next to him. Bucket then plucked a particular cutout of pumpkins, leaves, and other squash out of the container like a benevolent god. This would be the centerpiece of his most recent re-animation. Other bits of Halloween text, candy, laughing children, and spooky skeletons were also chosen.

Over the next three hours Bucket created a special, fall-inspired collage on a strong piece of dark gray cardstock while static crackled through the ancient speaker of his radio. Flickering yellow light in the dingy kitchen cast shadows on the mad genius as he Mod-Podged in a creative haze. Fingers and clippings stuck together but no sacrifice was too great for the arts. More than once, Bucket stepped back from his collage and tried to clean his home or do something else but the work always drew him back.

Finally, at 9:30 that evening, Bucket finished his project and stood. His wooden chair scraped as he pushed back.

"It's alive," Bucket chuckled to himself quietly. He wondered if Kit would understand the reference and that quickly wiped the smile from his face. He gazed at his creation and, while he did like it and feel pride, reminded himself it was just a collage of stolen magazines. Kit was just being kind by showing an interest in the hobby of his colleague, like how Bucket once attempted to watch that *Lord of the Rings* movie to

understand Kit's repetition of the question "What do your elf-eyes see?"

It was just a hobby, they were just magazines, and he was just a sanitation engineer. He sighed. Ignoring the artwork in front of him, he collected his plate and glass to take to the sink.

"Let's see it! I gotta know we aren't breaking the law for nothing!"

Bucket sighed. "Stop shouting, it's in my bag. You and I know they're just magazines but a supervisor might not see it that way."

"Fight the power, stick it to the man! But also, yeah, I don't wanna get fired." Kit took off his shoulder bag as they walked through the hallway leading to their lockers and to prepare for their walk to the lot where the trucks and street cleaners were parked. They passed a few rooms with telephones ringing or coffee machines dripping. As usual, there weren't many people there at 5:00 in the morning.

When the two got to their side-by-side lockers, Bucket put his satchel onto the hook inside and opened the flap. He took out a plain cream folder, and he could feel Kit almost vibrating beside him.

"C'mon, old man, let's see it!" whispered Kit. It was almost flattering, his excitement at a mundane collage just because it was created by him. . . or because it was forbidden. Bucket decided it didn't matter. He would take what he could get.

He withdrew the thick cardstock covered in its stolen imagery. The glossy shine of the magazine clippings were no more, the matte finish of the glue that covered them cemented their place in a new story. Muted fall leaves cradled pumpkins and spiders sweetly while facetious, spooky text was offset by gentle hands cupping small candles. Resplendent flame almost renewed its twinkle in the center of the collage despite the probability that the photo was taken weeks ago. It was devastating in its simplicity but, looking at it in the eyes of another person, Bucket was proud.

"Wow, that's pretty nice. You know, I wouldn't mind that on a T-shirt," said Kit in a slightly surprised voice. "Like, it's almost got a graphic kinda quality to it."

Bucket snorted. "That's what I've been working with since junior high school. You and I both know it's remedial. It's just a hobby."

"I dunno man, if all of 'em are like this, maybe you should look into Photoshop or something. It's kinda cool."

"Stop it. Pilfering magazines is one thing but buying a computer with some artsy tech on it is another."

Kit stopped halfway to putting on his work gloves. The yellow

fingers flopped limply as he waved his arms in alarm. “You don’t even have a computer? Jesus, no wonder you don’t understand half the shit coming out of my mouth!”

“Watch your language,” Bucket warned as he shut his locker door and clipped on his high-vis vest. “Swearing makes you sound uneducated.”

Kit just rolled his eyes as the two began walking from their locker room towards their waste collection unit. The sun had yet to appear, and Kit was still flapping his arms like some astonished bird. In the fluorescent lights of the processing center, his gestures reminded Bucket of the dingy high school football flag they threw in the truck a few weeks ago. The thing was fluttering around the unit for hours.

“Who cares? If you had a computer, you’d know you could learn anything from the internet!” he said.

“Could I learn about this me-me nonsense you always spout?” Bucket asked in hopes of distracting his partner.

“They’re memes, Bucket, but yeah. It can also help you with your dope hobby.”

Bucket was saved from formulating a response as Snap, the driver of the truck, entered with his thermos in hand. He was a rotund man in his mid-thirties, and he bridged the age gap between the two waste collectors.

“Morning boys, you ready to go? Forecast is a bright and sunny day, high of forty-four degrees.”

Bucket nodded and hopped into the passenger seat of the unit to sit in the heated cab until they got to their first neighborhood.

“Winter is coming,” the young man muttered before he followed suit to sit behind the driver.

Kit always remained silent on the drive to their designated neighborhood. The younger man didn’t talk much to Snap because he said Snap reminded him of his brother. Bucket never really asked why that was a bad thing. He would later but today he was glad for the silence and the respite it brought from Kit’s chatter.

He knew his collage was nothing special. He wasn’t going to spend money on some wafer-thin Apple laptop when he knew the tech would only be a roadblock to his creativity. He was 56 years old, dammit, and he wasn’t about to break into the art world with some cut out text and a laptop. No, people went to school for things like that, and that wasn’t him.

“Alright boys, first ‘hood of the morning! Go get ‘em,” Snap said with a grin and a sip from his coffee.

Kit and Bucket exited the cab of the truck and circled to their first driveway of the morning. After the heavy door shut Snap in, it was like the conversation between the two sanitation engineers had never stopped.

“Seriously, you may even be able to sell that stuff online. One of my exes does some design stuff and says silhouette stuff is really in. A little tweaking on the computer and you might have a logo or something!”

Bucket sighed as he lifted the second bin from the curb. Why couldn’t Kit just understand that old men who never got a degree didn’t get careers they loved? He had come to terms long ago that he was a sanitation engineer who glued paper together on the side. Higher education just hadn’t been for him. The workforce was where he belonged; why shouldn’t he be fine with that? The job paid well, and he had provided everything needed for himself—even had a little extra for his niece and nephew.

“Maybe you could even sell them on eBay or make one of those Etsy things? You could take requests or do custom name stuff—”

Kit was still talking as the truck jerked to a stop at another house. Why was this so important to him? It’s not like people were in the market for collage art from magazines. It’s not like anyone would pay someone to cut up pictures for them, and it’s not like he wanted to sell the pile of trash sitting on his old kitchen table.

Kit was grunting as he dragged an old armchair from the side of the street. Bucket lifted the other end, and they threw it into the back of the truck together.

“I’m just sayin’, you know, that some museums like that kind of thing. If you send some work in maybe you can catch a break,” the young man said as he wiped his gloved hands on his pants. He looked at Bucket expectantly. There was excitement on his face.

Bucket took off his right glove and ran his hand through his thinning hair. He didn’t want to take the light out of the kid’s eyes but he had to put his partner down.

“Kit, I am an adult. If I want a computer, I will buy one. If I wanted to sell artwork, I would,” Bucket said patiently. “There aren’t places for people like me, and if there were, I don’t think I’d want to take them.”

Kit didn't say anything to him for the rest of that work day. They went about their jobs lifting bins and carpets and trash into their collection unit silently, both lost in their thoughts. Bucket wondered if he had been too harsh when he spoke to his younger colleague. Whenever his sister yelled at her kids, they would attempt the silent treatment for a while. He dismissed it quickly because cruelty was not part of his nature, even as a boy. Kit was probably just thinking about what he said. Well, it would do him some good to contemplate the real world for a while.

After their last neighborhood, the two climbed back into the coffee-smelling cab with Snap. On the way back to the sanitation center, the large driver and Bucket talked vaguely about a recent football game they'd both only half-watched. Bucket recounted a 'great pass' towards the end of the game, leaving out that he turned his radio down after so he could focus on reading his book of poetry. Snap marveled at the overtime but admitted he changed the channel on the TV because his daughter wanted to watch a movie. The ride seemed eons longer when Bucket thought about the unnatural silence of Kit that day.

When they finally returned to the center, they parted ways with Snap as he tried to heave his body from the driver's seat. Kit and Bucket walked quietly from the back lot into the building and to the locker room. No one was in there at the moment; their shift was the earliest.

Bucket opened his locker and began pulling off his gloves and vest when Kit finally spoke up.

"Can I have that?" he asked while gesturing to Bucket's messenger bag. For a moment, Bucket thought he was asking for his satchel but then he understood that the boy wanted the art.

"Of course! I made it for you," Bucket said in surprise. He pulled out the folder again and passed it to Kit. Kit was smiling happily, like nothing had happened earlier.

"Thanks man! It'll go on my fridge at school," he laughed.

"The best museum there could be," Bucket joked uncomfortably.

"You gotta name it though."

Bucket finished shrugging on his coat and looped the strap of his bag over his shoulder as he contemplated Kit's command. He'd never named one of his creations before. You only name things you are attached to.

"Maybe you should name it for me. You could use some culturing," Bucket said with a smile.

"Alright man, have it your way. See you tomorrow?" Kit asked.

It was clear in the hunched shoulders and sheepish grin that he was still slightly worried about his pushiness earlier that day. Bucket wanted everything to be fine again; the kid had nothing to worry about.

“See you tomorrow. Maybe you can come with a title?”

Kit shifted and his grin grew larger, if possible, as he tucked the folder under his arm safely. “I’ll come with a few. You might even understand some of ‘em!”

He didn’t understand the titles Kit brought over the next days but he slowly began to appreciate the young man’s enthusiastic support of his hobby. Frequently, Kit took out his smartphone and showed him pictures and digital collages in museums or as T-shirts. The kids in Kit’s pictures slouched, throwing the designs on their shirts into wavy, colorful messes that brought a glint to Bucket’s eye.

All too soon, it was time for Kit to head off to school for the fall semester. After a few days without him, Bucket found himself thinking about how he missed the wild kid. He had somehow sent a picture of his dorm room to Bucket’s ancient phone showing the proud placement of the collage on the wall by his desk. It looked good hanging there.

Bucket made another collage, this time themed for beach weather, to hang on his own fridge. He asked his niece and nephew to show him how to send pictures on his phone and after much thumbing of the number pad, Bucket managed to send a picture of his artwork to Kit at school.

Bucket continued his hobby through the fall and winter, never throwing away his pieces and even showing a few to his friends. They told him to send some pieces to local art fairs or to try and sell them online like Kit had suggested. A few even began saving magazines and newspapers for him so that he no longer had to pilfer from the garbage. Around New Year’s, Bucket finally relented—more out of exhaustion than a desire to be an artist—when one of those friends who worked at the local farmer’s market offered to sell some pieces at her jewelry stall. He made a few bucks that month and then a bit more the next. It wasn’t a global design business or a museum but Bucket was excited to tell Kit anyway.

When Bucket sat down to eat that night and looked at the pile of magazines at the end of the table, his sandwich tasted just right. Maybe he’d send the kid a text after dinner.