

Wasteland

Charles woke up and got ready for work. It was exactly one year ago that he began working as a garbage collector for the city. He took the bus to city management grounds. He walked inside and saw his route partner Mike. Pouring himself a cup of coffee and sitting down he said, "Morning Mike, how was your weekend?"

Mike's replied, "Mornin" and went back to his newspaper.

It was 6am so he and Mike got into the truck and began on their route together. Mike was driving and Charles was doing the collecting. Riding on the back of the truck he basked in the cold morning air and the smell of a dewy morning. He thought about how much he appreciated having a simple job. He like waking up in the morning and being outside. He knew his work was honest and that it needed to be done. He didn't have qualms about his company's incentives. He took relief in knowing that he wasn't a part of something unethical.

But still the job didn't inspire him or give him much purpose and he wondered why he was living. To collect garbage for other people? Surely not. After a year he was beginning to feel the mundanity of the repetitious work-week creep into his mind. He need to find something more to make his life worth living. He often thought about his own impermanence and the decisive nature of life. Knowing he only had one life to live made him feel the pressure to something great with it. And while collecting garbage was a fine first step he knew he would never be satisfied entirely with his life without an ambition to do or see something spectacular.

Passing home after home he took notice of his city in its stark disparity. He couldn't help seeing the inequality of the homes and neighborhoods he passed. Giant mansions occupied what felt like blocks each then he would pass an intersection and find himself surrounded by small neglected apartments that piled up on each other. He wondered how these two groups lived so close among one another. One group knowing that their great homes and beautiful neighborhoods were an extravagant luxury. How could the rich justify the opulence of their great homes and beautiful neighborhoods when only blocks away were the destitute apartments surrounded by homeless encampments? These streets were covered in litter amongst cockroaches and rats. And the unfortunate walked around in clothes they had worn for weeks, carrying their belongings in stolen shopping carts. Who knew what would happen to these people? Would they live the rest of their lives struggling in vain, begging for food. How could anyone pretend to believe that there was any equality in this city? The waving flags and optimistic billboards seemed to mock the poor. How did they look on the guarded affluence everyday? So close they were practically touching each other but for a street full of cars. Living so close to opulence and never knowing it themselves. What kept the poor neighborhoods, their strength in numbers, from raging against the agents and institutions that guarded them? These thoughts stayed on Charles mind while he worked and the day seemed to dim the more his mind reeled. And then finally it was night.

It was while Charles was deep in thoughts of inequity and injustice that Mike shouted that he needed to take a piss. Mike jumped out of the truck and walked behind a tree on the side of the road. Charles stayed on the back of the truck and continued considering the problems that plagued the city and its people. Just then he heard something inside the truck. He often found

animals in the garbage he collected; raccoons and rats usually. Sometimes cats. He climbed up the side of the truck and peered in when he saw something moving around in the piles of waste. He couldn't see it so he leaned in. It moved again and the white of its fluffy tail poked out of the garbage. Next two pointy ears. This was the first time Charles had seen a rabbit in the garbage. He leaned in and reached down with his hands to pick up the creature. Just as he held the rabbit, he heard Mike start the engine. He yelled, "Mike! Wait!" but futilely. The trucked was moving and with a jerk it threw Charles and the rabbit back into the garbage. Hitting his head on the side of the container, Charles was knocked unconscious in a daze.

Charles lied unconscious in the piles of waste for a hours. When he woke up he was hit by a stench that he recognized. He was at the dump. He wonder how did Mike not notice his partner was missing and no one was collecting the garbage cans? But as he thought this he knew that of course Mike didn't notice. Charles got up and looked around for any sign of an exit but he saw nothing but trash. A sea of waste surrounded him and he could hardly move around among the piles of garbage. The piles were so high they could've been mountains he thought.

As he was treading through the endless trash he was startled by a familiar sound, "Take me to the river! Drop me in the water! Take me to the river! Put me in the water!" It was a Big Mouth Billy Bass. One of those singing fish you mount on the wall. His dad had kept one in the garage. He wondered if it could be the same one. He picked it up and pressed the button, "Take me to the river! Drop me in the water! Take me to the river! Put me in the water!" He chuckled and set it down and walked away. unmistakable

Then he heard it again, “Take me to the river! Drop me in the water! Take me to the river! Put me in the water!” That’s strange, he thought, it must be broken.

He began to walk again when he heard, “Helloo! I’m talking to you! Take me to the river! Drop me in the water.”

Charles turned around in disbelief and asked, “Who said that?!”

Indignantly, the Big Mouth Billy Bass replied, “Who do you think?! Me!.”

Charles was now sure he was in a dream and he would wake up so he pinched himself and said, “Wake up, Wake up, Wake up.” The Big Mouth Bill Bass asked, “What are you nuts? This ain’t a dream.” Charles felt dizzy so he sat down and tried to catch his thoughts. I must’ve hit my head pretty hard when I fell, this can’t be real. The fish shouted, “Look buddy! I am as real as you or anybody else. Are you gonna help me out or not?”

“Help you out with what?” Charles asked, forgetting the freakish situation that he found himself in.

“Like I told you, take me down to the river. Drop me in the water” said the fish.

“But you’re not a real fish. You run on batteries. Won’t you die?” asked Charles.

“Won’t I die? Haha good one. Whats your name kid?” asked the fish.

“Charles. Whats yours?”

“Bill” answered the fish.

Charles remembered he was speaking to a novelty toy fish. This can't be real. I'm dreaming. Maybe I'm hallucinating? Could I be dead? He was disturbed at the possibility of this last thought. He hoped he was dreaming or hallucinating. What if the fish is right? I'm crazy. What am I talking about?! How could the fish be right? it isn't real.

Bill interrupted Charles thoughts and asked, “Are you gonna take me to the river or not?”

“What river? What are you talking about? There isn't a river in sight. Not one drop of water.” Saying this, Charles realized how thirsty he was he must have been knocked out for almost a day and gone without any water or food. He was dehydrated and the stench of the garbage filled his nostrils.

“That's why I need you to take me to it. The river is the only way out of here. I don't exactly know where it is but I need a ride.”

“Why can't you go out through the front gate? Charles asked.

“The front gate is guarded by dogs. They'll rip you apart.” Bill answered.

“Okay then do you have any idea how to get to this river then?” Charles inquired.

“Not exactly. But I've got a friend who says they've seen it.” said the fish.

“Any idea where to start?” Charles asked Bill.

Charles looked around and saw what could be thousands of cars. The dump was filled with rundown cars, trucks, buses, even boats: cars that were twice as old as Charles had piled up and were too many to count. He hardly recognized some of the models. His vision stretched and he realized that the dump was old. Years and years of waste and garbage had conglomerated to make it up. The dump was its own city really. It could have been a historically significant neighborhood the way time was preserved. Antiquated cars, televisions, radios, furniture and everything else. Everything. The dump was an evil twin to the city. Everything that once made up the city was replaced and found its way into the dump. In this way the dump was more than the city itself. It was the city's past, in its entirety. The thought was haunting.

And they kept walking looking for a river that neither knew or had ever seen. They had only ever heard of its existence. Whether or not it existed was still in question.

Wandering across the city of garbage, felt like an art exhibition. No, more like a museum. A museum that had a putrid stench all around it. And as they walked further they felt more and more lost. Each step was aimless. They were getting nowhere. The river was nowhere in sight but they kept moving out of boredom and lack of ideas.

Charles was done questioning the legitimacy of his or Bill's existence. If it was real or not, it did not matter. He was glad that Bill was there, novelty-toy fish or not.

They had been walking for what felt like hours and hardly gotten anywhere. Charles started to notice the cars. Most could be described as a hunk of junk, but there were some classics in between the buckets. He saw an old corvette stingray that looked like it had flown off

the freeway into a brick wall. Jumping into the driver seat and setting Bill on the passenger side. He got behind the wheel and imagined what the world might have been like when the banana yellow corvette stingray was on the road.

Squeal-BOOM-Pop!-ROAR

The engine started.

Charles jaw drops. The fish turns to the man and smiles with no teeth. The gums of Bill's mouth look like green jelly. And his smile is so revoltingly amusing that Charles loses doubt. He grabs the wheel, steps on the gas and everything becomes clear. The aimless wandering, the thirst from days without a drop of water, the putrid stink of garbage; they are all pushed out of his mind at the roar of the engine and thrust of momentum. He's forgotten that Bill can be bought at Walmart for thirty dollars. The memory of his work and the Nissan he used drive are now so distant. Even his own name is out of his mind. All his mind can handle is carving a path through the garbage at 300 horsepower and nothing more.

"Sure beats walking!" shouts the fish, barely audible below the bellow of the engine. roar
vociferation, bellow

And for a while Charles and Bill are just driving.

Finally, Charles thinks, *we are getting somewhere*. Walking on foot through the waves and mountains of garbage felt like the earth was spinning too fast and they couldn't keep up on just two feet. But driving... Driving the banana yellow Corvette Stingray was a feeling that

Charles had never known. His beat up Toyota moved about the pace of riding a bike downhill. And given the rare opportunity to drive above the state enforced speed-limit his car would wobble and threaten to collapse entirely in the middle of the 10 freeway. No, the Corvette might as well have a turbo charged Pegasus for Charles. The Chevrolet Corvette was a foreign experience to the man that had only ever driven a rusting old bucket. What a bore! And Charles made a vow to himself and the gods of the world of garbage and garages that he would never again drive a car in the name of practicality or economy. Knowing this feeling made him hate every moment he didn't have it. And he would have it, if he had to steal it.

They kept driving. And kept driving until finally the indistinguishable hills and mounds of garbage became smaller. And finally lumps became smaller lumps and those smaller lumps became flat. And the unrecognizable milieu of garbage became distinct. Things started to look familiar to Charles. It was like the city only if it had been made from garbage.

In the garbage city the streets were paved with textbooks, the toothpaste that goes unused, flattened cardboard from every amazon package that was ever sent, and the shoes of children whose feet outgrew them. There were no street lights, no stop signs, just pure chaos amongst the people, if you could call them people that lived in the dump.

They looked like people from a distance but there was something strange about them. The rhythm of their movement was from another time. Charles saw a tall, perfectly figured woman walking around in a beautiful black dress, heels and sunglasses. Only as he drove by her, she wasn't human at all. She was a mannequin. She had no eyes behind the black sunglasses. But when Charles waved her way she waved back. And as the crowds grew closer in sight Charles

realized that most of them weren't human either. There were mannequins like the one he had just drove by and there were skeletons, bones still rotting. There were ghosts that could only be distinguished by their translucency. Charles noticed a few oversized animals driving past them; dogs, cats, rats. And there were some regular everyday humans, only their clothing was tattered and torn. There were many other creatures that resembled nothing he had ever known and driving past them he was reminded of the bizarre world he had entered when he woke up in the dump. And what Charles thought he saw, he couldn't be sure of, as is seeing anything so unusual for the first time.

There were buildings scrapped together with whatever could be found. Mostly the buildings were structured around cars. Cars stacked up on top of each other, old movie sets for walls and some scrap metal for ceilings; these made up the shanty towns of garbage city. Charles imagined the entire place tumbling down in an earthquake and his life ending in the confines of a world of garbage.

“Hey pull over somewhere. I wanna ask somebody about the river. There's gotta be someone who's seen it.” Said the fish.

So Charles pulled onto the side of the road and picking up Bill they got out of the banana yellow corvette. And they hadn't even walked a block away, before they looked back and the car was gone.

“Huh” said Charles perplexed and saddened to see the car gone.

Bill had picked up a conversation with one of the rats. He was an unusually large and fat rat, about the size of an overweight cat. The rat had also heard of such a river but had never seen it and implied that it was just folklore, and too good to be true.

Bill asked a mannequin. No response.

Then one of the skeletons.

Then a conversation with the ghost of an old Hollywood Western star, went round in circles. Bill trying to ascertain the whereabouts to the river but inevitably the cowboy would bring the topic back to 1950's Hollywood. He asked Charles if he had ever heard of Betty Page, claiming he dated her for a year in 1959. Finally the cowboy actor said he hadn't seen a river since he moved to Los Angeles from Memphis, Tennessee.

Many conversations followed with the same results. Bill did most of the talking and Charles began to get tired from standing around. It was getting late and the dark sky turned an already peculiar shanty town into an unknown and frightening place. He started to look for a place to lay his head.

There was an unusually large pink Cadillac with Thunderbird wings and bench seating. So Bill and Charles decided to get some rest and try again the next day. Climbing through a broken window he and Bill rested for the night.

The morning came with a ray of sunlight that hit Charles directly in the eyes. Blinded by the light Charles squinted and saw a small shadow on the wing of the Cadillac; a shadow with two pointy ears. "Hey!" he shouted. And the rabbit ran.

He grabbed Bill and chased the rabbit, berating himself for scaring it away so stupidly. And as he jumped out the Cadillac he realized it was not his shout that had made the rabbit run. It was the guard dogs. Five Rottweilers were chasing the rabbit and now himself and Bill.

"RUN!" screamed Bill. His usually calm and amusing voice was now panicked.

Looking back he knew he didn't stand a chance to outrun the five dogs. He saw the dogs already closing the distance. Now terrified he looked for any kind of escape. And just then he heard another bellowing engine. The Cadillac's body rumbled as if to say, "Are you getting in or not?"

Charles threw Bill back into the bench seat, jumped in himself and slammed his foot on the gas.

"Phew!" said Bill. "Thought it was all over."

The dogs now focused on the rabbit. The rabbit was quick but against five dogs his fate was inevitable.

Charles turned the giant car around and started driving towards the rabbit who was nearly caught. The dogs each took turns trying to bite at the rabbit's tale, and each time they did the rabbit hopped out of the way. Charles had the pedal to the floor, flying past the rabbit as the dog

lunged to bite its foot. And in a blur of luck, the rabbit was now in the Cadillac with Bill and Charles.

“Thanks friends” said the rabbit to Charles and the fish.

“Of cour—” and Charles realized the road was ending over a cliff. But it was too late, the Cadillac with Thunderbird Wings was flying through the air and then it was falling. Down the side of a mountain of trash the giant automobile rolled with the rabbit, Bill and Charles tumbling inside.

Crash, Thud, SPLASH.

Charles grabbed Bill and the rabbit and jumped out of the Cadillac as it was being submerged in water. It was not until he had escaped safely that it hit him. “Here it is! The river!” he shouted with joy as he climbed to the top of the Cadillac.

The rabbit was already out of the river, drying its furry tale. “Thanks!” he said again.

He looked for Bill but couldn’t find him. Worried for his friend Charles looked around and saw a small ripple of water. And beneath it was a bass swimming down current. Not a plastic novelty bass, but a real bass with slimy scales, gills, fins and a nervous system. The fish turned around as if to say thanks to his partner. Charles waved back to say, *until I see you again.*