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When I put out the garbage, I expect it to go away. On Wednesday nights, as soon as the cab gets to my neighborhood, I lean forward and peer through the window. If I see unpicked-up garbage, my heart goes pitter-patter till the driver turns the last corner and I find out whether they've picked up on my block yet. On the rare Saturdays when I sleep in, I actually like being woken up by the clattering cans and the truck crunching the garbage. As soon as the men move on to the next house, I turn over and go back to sleep with a feeling of personal accomplishment.

Right now, I'm up in Maine at my summer place. Been here two weeks, one to go. The kids are in camp, their mother's off in Europe someplace, and the day before yesterday, I got myself into what you might call "a little situation." Relating to this matter of garbage disposal.

Friday night, I had zilch in the way of sleep. The fucking crows were cawing all fucking night, and the asshole dogs in the next cottage interrupted every one of my dreams with their goddamned yipping. As soon as it was light I gave up, crawled out of bed and wandered up the hill to the road, only to find that the guy who usually hauls my garbage had left it there with a little note for me: "Sorry, too much!" This brief communication was rolled like a fat joint and stuck through the knot of one of the five large clear-plastic bags I'd dragged up from the shed the night before. Rolled inside the note were the two bucks I'd left --the going rate. I almost had a fucking heart attack. I ran back down to the cottage and, without even washing my face or making coffee, I got dressed and grabbed the keys to my old blue pick-up. I ran to the garage, gunned the engine a few seconds, and backed her up the hill to the garbage, which was already covered with sunlight, moisture and flies. Cursing, I wadded the note and money and flung them in the bushes. Then, still cursing --and resisting an urge to retrieve the two bucks-- I started hefting the bags unto the truck bed. It was a lot of fun. After heaving the first three bags, I had to clamber up and move them back to make room for the last ones. This close contact, you might say, rubbed my face in my own garbage, for as I worked I relived the seafood party I'd thrown on Wednesday night. Three entire bags came from that bash: salad, corn cobs (two dozen), shells (clam, mussel, lobster) and wine bottles (ten). Ah, yes, the wine: Pinot Chardonnay, domestic. The pretty labels reminded me not only of all the times over the years when I've been bilked by the local Yankee wine merchant, but of the uncommon hangover I'd enjoyed all day Thursday. French prices for a California hangover. The heaviest of these three dinner bags contained the bottles, plus the remains of several lobsters, whose festive color and castanet-like claws seemed to mock me with personal malice.

When I was done I climbed back into the cab and sat with my hands trembling on the wheel, all

dressed up and no place to go. The town dump was out --you need a sticker for which summer residents (like me) are ineligible. That was why I paid the guy with the truck.

When I got tired of sitting there, I drove up onto the highway and into town, where I inched through the usual Saturday shopping aggravation --the hot-rodders who stop every ten feet to schmooze with their friends and the law-abiding oldsters who take the preposterous speed limit --twenty-five-- literally. Then I headed up the coast with a vague notion that, since it was less developed there, they might not have as strict dumping ordinances --or enforcement.

Halfway to the next town, I impulsively hung a right down a steep hill into what looked like a construction site for new condos along the shore. Since the place was already an eyesore, and since no one was around, I braked and backed down a dirt slope into what seemed destined to become a carport. It was only after I'd edged back into the shadows of this half-built structure that I noticed a piece of construction equipment right behind me, looming over my truck. In fact, it was so close that if I had backed up a few more inches I would have smacked right into it. The only part of the thing I could see in the mirror was a huge metal jaw, the shovel of a bulldozer or crane. The machine had been left with its buck teeth chomping into the ground, and for some reason --nerves, who knows what?-- that bothered me. It reminded me of a portcullis that had barely missed slamming shut on my ass. At any rate, I got out of there before the women started dropping rocks or hot oil.

I headed east again, up the coast to a sad-assed place with nauseating air pollution from a fish-rendering plant --and lots of vacant lots. Now the folks in a town like this aren't going to care much about five teensy bags of garbage, are they? On the outskirts I got into a line of very slow traffic going up a very steep hill --so steep I began to feel the garbage slipping back toward the windshield of a little green sports car on my tail. When the driver, a blond kid, noticed what was happening, he began beeping like crazy, and his girlfriend stood up and pointed frantically at the moving garbage. I gave them the finger, hung a screeching left, and headed up an even steeper hill I had never been on before. This hill, it turned out, climbed and climbed, up into a poor neighborhood with cheap little shingle houses overlooking the whole town and a good bit of the coastline, a neighborhood that had obviously been built before the sharks arrived and started selling off the view by the inch. Somehow, on the way up, my garbage had stabilized. When I hesitated at a stop sign because I had no reason to turn either way or to go straight ahead, the fun began.

I had been there no more than ten or fifteen seconds when I was approached by a sort of generic teen-ager, who came running from the back of one of the little houses. She was pale, skinny and leggy --stork-like -- and definitely a minor. She wore tight little white shorts, a pink tank top, white high heels, lots of perfume and eye makeup, and a gold chain identifying her as a "Cheryl." If I was a wise guy, I might say this girl was trouble with a small t(ee).

Cheryl asked if I was lost, and when I'd briefly explained the situation, with a straight face she politely offered to show me to "a good place." Before I could answer, the bimbo ran around the front of the truck, swung the passenger door open, and hopped in. After a very short silence, I became excited by her tawdry youth, and she, I guess, by finding herself inside an older stranger's pick-up (!) truck.

When the brazen little thing reached across and gave my red beard a playful tug, reflex caused me to tweak one of her little birdies. After that, there was no going back, it all became automatic and unstoppable. Before I could even think about throwing this jail bait back in the water, we had stopped downtown for a six-pack and parked in some bushes behind the firehouse, where we killed the package and she sat on my lap backwards for a while. Then I tossed the empties (and the rubber) into the bushes and we took off again.

Laughing, feeling refreshed, but a little nervous, and wondering how best to ditch Cheryl, I drove around and schemed, while she smoked and enjoyed the view. Finally, I made a tentative offer to drop her back at the stop sign. Big mistake. Obviously hurt, she called me a bastard, then wouldn't look at me or say another word. My feeble excuses sounded stupid, even to me. Since I didn't know her very well, I decided I'd better be careful, so I changed my tune and started gabbling about places to go and things to do. Something also warned me not to offer this kid

any money. She still didn't say anything, but the gloom seemed to lift, at least partially. By the time we were back at the stop sign, the cunning little voice in my brain had told me that, sometimes, the safest thing to do in a risky situation is to take more risks. Since no one was around, I explained my change of heart to Cheryl's young body with my hangman's hands. That worked, it made her perk right up. She said she had some things to do for her mother, who was at work, and told me to be back at six sharp. A last smack on the lips, a bright smile, and she wriggled off toward her little house. I revved the engine, turned right, and careened back down toward the ocean.

That day a fresh wind was blowing from the west, and as I sailed along I realized I hadn't been smelling any fish pollution, but when I reached the bottom of the hill and made some more turns, I noticed that my garbage had really started to reek. Of course I knew I should hurry up and get rid of the stuff, but I'd already made other plans. How much fun it would be to wait until dark, then sneak into the dump with Cheryl! A nice secluded place with lots of scary things to make the bopper hop right back up on my lap again.

All afternoon I wandered around killing time, looping back and forth on some newly built roads that formed a network of clover leaves. Around two, I stopped on the old coastal bypass at one of those little white restaurants that call themselves diners, where I had some weak coffee and hot chili with bread and butter. As I was paying, I mentioned to the waitress that I hadn't smelled the fish, and she said times were bad and they weren't running any Saturday shifts. I bought gas near the diner and drove on, listening to a ball game on the radio. Around four, I pulled over again, this time for a nap at a scenic turn-off.

At six sharp I was back at the stop sign, with two more six-packs and a big bag full of hoagies, chips and stuff, on the seat next to me. Once again the streets were empty, and I could smell supper from some of the houses --mixed with my garbage. After about thirty seconds, Cheryl came running up. She poked her head through the passenger-side window and, spotting all the goodies, flashed a big mercenary smile. Beside the little white purse she'd had with her earlier, she was now carrying something long in two grocery bags, one upended. She was grasping the middle of the bags tightly together so they wouldn't come apart, and when she handed them to me through the window I pulled them apart and found a gun --a rifle-- plus a bunch of loose shells and a big red flashlight.

It was her brother's twenty-two, Cheryl explained innocently, hopping in and shoving the groceries toward me. I laughed and said it was better the gun was in my hands than in his. She was working on a major-league wad of gum and wearing the same pink tank-top, but she had changed from the shorts to a denim mini-skirt which made her legs look even storkier.

"Let's go to the dump," she said. "Later. When it's dark. We'll use your garbage as bait to shoot rats. Whew, that stuff reeks! I mean, if you like. It's fun! All the kids go. But there's a big dance at school tonight, so the dump won't get crowded till way after midnight."

I didn't ask her why she wasn't going to the dance, I just assumed she had broken up with someone and I had caught her on the rebound, which was fine with me. I told her I'd had the same idea --going to the dump-- and she laughed. She pointed to her name on the chain, and I told her mine was Richie. (It's Bob.)

There was time to kill, but we couldn't return to the firehouse because a bean supper was in progress. In fact, her mom was there, and she made a little pleasantry about my maybe wanting to drive by to say "Hi." Then, she reached into her gun bag, fished out two clean, empty Coke cans, and poured two beers into them. This was in case we ran into any sharp-eyed cops on the road. A short stocky guy in a flannel shirt, with a neatly trimmed beard, driving his kid or his niece someplace, each of them enjoying a Coke. A pleasant picture. Since the dance wasn't due to start for a couple of hours, we took off for the high school.

Everyone in these parts has supper at the same time. In fact, once when I was driving through a tiny place called Arnold's Corner at supper time, I had a vision of all the residents eating a synchronized meal --lifting forks and spoons at the same time, all taking a sip of their beverage, and so on. Anyway, as Cheryl and I zig-zagged through the back streets of town, we saw

almost no one. Here and there an old man or woman was putting the unsold stuff from the yard sale back in the garage --fifty pairs of Bermuda shorts, two-hundred plastic plates and grandma's culotte. A few kids in vehicles like mine roared past, but that was about it. We saw a neon sign in front of a car wash that said, "IF MORE HUSBANDS WERE SELF-STARTERS, THEIR WIVES WOULDN'T BE CRANKS." Maine humor.

She had been right about the high school --it seemed deserted-- but when we had parked behind the building and were just starting to eat, a bunch of kids in a new red low-rider called "Bounty Hunter" came blasting toward us. Cheryl had had me park so we could see anyone coming from a long way off, and now she ducked down, sandwich and fake Coke and all, and giggled when I lost half my sandwich and sloshed beer on my pants, trying to get us moving. By the time "Bounty Hunter" was abreast, I had gotten things under control enough to reply to their friendly wave with a "Howdy" that made her choke.

Since she couldn't think of anyplace better, we headed out to the coastal highway and wound up at the scenic turn-off where I'd taken the nap. There were several vehicles parked there now, but most of the occupants looked like tourists or summer residents come to have a picnic and watch the free sunset. A couple of the cars and trucks did seem like they might belong to locals, but Cheryl peeped up from behind the door and said none of the folks looked familiar. Anyway, my truck has local registration, and there were those fake Cokes, which we took turns flashing while the other one tried not to laugh.

We stayed there more than an hour, chatting, listening to the radio, finishing the food and three more beers apiece, and fooling around so much (below window level) that I gave the sunset a loud cheer, which provoked polite amusement in the next vehicle. It would be a moonless night, and before taking off for the dump we checked the flashlight. The gun and the bag with the bullets were under the seat. When I asked, Cheryl claimed to have the registration in her purse.

To get to the dump, we drove back to the stop sign, hung a left away from the coast, then followed a gravel road three miles through some woods. I drove slowly, and by the time we got there the sun had long since gone down behind the surrounding trees. Inside, a dirt track skirted the woods, and we followed it around to where it ducked into a little hollow partly hidden by a still-smoking pile of mostly burned trash. (I was surprised anyone still burned the stuff. What an ecologically incorrect town!) I slammed on the brakes, and we flung the remains of our dinner through the window and went at it like crazy.

In the next two hours, we finished the beer, talked a lot, and climbed over each other a couple of more times. When we wanted to see what we were doing, we would turn on the inside light. At one point Cheryl suggested I stop using my truck to haul around garbage and put an old mattress back there, instead, like a lot of her friends had. I didn't ask her what their parents thought the mattresses were for, or what my friends would think mine was for.

The light was on now as she quickly and smoothly loaded the gun, showing me she was not too drunk to do so. This was lucky since it happened that, even sober, I had never so much as held a gun, except for those electric ones or whatever they are, in amusement parks.

"We'll use your garbage for bait," she said, jumping down easily with the rifle in one hand. I opened my door, stepped into space, and barely managed to hold on to the flashlight and land on my feet. I could hear her snorting with laughter in the dark, and I shone the light toward the front of the truck and saw her lurch toward me, doubled up, the gun still in her hand. When I put the light on her, she raised the empty hand in front of her eyes. Then, I flicked off the light and she reacted immediately by firing a shot. I jumped back, this time falling, but holding the light above my head to keep it from hitting the ground. When she finally stopped laughing, she reassured me from the dark that she was just making sure everything was "in working order," because, as she explained, she had once met a bear there.

"Now for the trash," she said, and I heard her stumble around to the back. I crept along my side of the truck and, arriving at the same time, we bumped heads. Holding on to the gun and light, we managed some heavy smooching, until she pushed me back, saying, "Let's take care of

business first. There'll be time for plenty more of that later."

So Cheryl held the light while I lowered the tailgate and clambered up, barking both shins, but not minding. Then, one by one, I rolled the bags off the truck while she counted: One. Two. Three. Four.

"Wait!" she said, when I had my hand on the fifth, and again she laughed for a long time. When she could finally speak, she suggested we save this one to scatter on the lawn of the High School Principal, who went to all the dances in order to prove he was one of the boys --which he definitely wasn't.

"Just save the last bag for me," she sang wittily. I thought saving the last bag for him was an excellent idea.

Next, we used the flashlight to watch each other pee in the woods. It turned out she had forgotten her purse, with the Kleenex, so I left her there squatting in the dark while, tripping, laughing and waving the flashlight, I finally found the truck. I made her shout by starting up the motor, then turned it off and staggered back with the Kleenex.

By now we were so squiffed we felt no squeamishness toward my garbage. On the contrary, it might have been jewelry or fine lace which we took turns sorting, while the other one held the light. Ostensibly to select the things the rats would like best, we picked over two or three of the bags, really hamming it up. The show started when Cheryl put the spotlight on me and I did a little dance with half a grapefruit on my head. Then I did a sort of Carmen Miranda number with lobster claws for castanets. After I had played the corn cob harmonica (lame), the lobster motif took hold. For her main act, Cheryl used a tail as a big red nose, holding it on with one hand and her white sunglasses, which she had been wearing ever since we got to the dump. Imitating a woman her mother worked with at the five-and-ten, she jumped around, chattering and wagging the nose. For my own finale I held up a big carcass as if it were an electric guitar, and pretended to be Elvis singing a song I made upon the spot to the tune of "Blue Suede Shoes." It was called "Rockin' Lobster." The part I remember went like this:

Well, you can suck my claws and crack my tail,

Squeeze me till I spout like a whale,

Rockin' Lobster. Rockin' Lobster ...

You had to have been there.

When Amateur Night was over, we set the pile of selected appetizers out in a little clearing. Then we hid behind the truck and, taking turns, fired off about two-dozen shots apiece. There were lots of rats --at first-- and we --she-- may have hit one or two, but none fatally. By then the night had grown cold, so we got back in the cab, turned on the motor and heat, hugged and said nice things.

By the time we were back at the stop sign, it was after eleven. The lights in Cheryl's house were on, so we made it quick. She had told her mother she was going to the drive-in and the dance, and now she would just say she'd come home early because the kids were getting into some heavy drinking. Her friends would cover for her. When she had gotten her things together --the gun would go right into the back shed, to be cleaned in the morning-- I offered to pick her up again the next night at nine. No, her aunt and uncle were coming to supper, so she'd have to stay in. Sunday would have been out, anyway, because her family was religious. As she jumped down she coyly whispered, "Maybe Monday."

I drove home fast and wild with the tailgate clanging. Only fool's luck kept me from being pulled over. I was pretty sure I got home uneventfully, the only exception being when I zoomed around the curve in front of my friend Alice's house, hit the bump and banged my head on the roof of the cab. This was just out of town, where the main road turns toward my road, and just before the speed limit changes from twenty-five to thirty-five. I was doing about forty when I hit the

bump. For some reason I noticed that Alice's place was dark, and her carport, empty.

The next day --yesterday-- I got up around noon, feeling the same way I had felt Thursday after the wine. I was scheduled for brunch with a young lawyer and his family in town and, having canceled the previous Sunday for a similar reason, this time I had to go. So, loaded with coffee and aspirin, freshly showered and all dolled up in new white painter's pants and a sky-blue tee shirt, I decided to take the Ferrari. You understand what was going on, don't you? Everything clean? neat? expensive? Besides, when I peered through the garage window at the truck, it seemed to have a "hit-and-run" look.

As I approached Alice's place, something jarred against my mental picture. As usual, the spindly little trees stood there in a row baking in the sun. And Alice's nice flagstone and olive-green-shingle house gleamed prosperously in the same sun. And the new blacktop drive

I braked, forgot to put the clutch in, burped to a stop right in the mouth of the driveway, and jumped out. There were the contents of the fifth bag, spread all over the glistening asphalt. Either the bag had split open as it bumped off the truck or a raccoon had gotten into it later --but what did that matter? There were bugs, too.

I looked at my watch and started sweating. By local standards, it was a hot and humid day. There would be rings on my tee shirt and I might smell a bit, but there was no choice, I already knew what I had to do. It was like the moment when you bounce off a horse and have all the landing options figured by the time you start downward.

Fact: Alice's car hadn't been there last night, and she hadn't come and gone since. I knew because she couldn't have gotten past the garbage without leaving tracks. Fact: on Saturday nights, she often stays over with her old mom on the other side of town, in which case she would take her to church, drive her home, then come back here for lunch and the ball game, which began in --twenty-five minutes.

Those facts left me with three apparent choices, plus one real one. Choice: go home, change, grab a new bag, a shovel, etc., call the lawyer with a simple, plausible story, hurry back here and get to work. But I couldn't think of a simple, plausible story, and even if I could I might be late, still stooping in the driveway when Alice pulled up. Choice: leave the garbage for now, with a note saying I'd be back later to explain and clean it up. (It occurred to me to leave a buck or two.) But Alice and I happened to be on terms which made both this choice and the first one unacceptable. For, as luck would have it, she and I had gotten a bit familiar at my lobster dinner Wednesday night, and as she had been a little less drunk and a little less carried away by the moment, there had been the matter of a slap in the face. That had been our most recent communication and, as Alice had more than once previously noted what she called "a mean, vindictive streak" in me, my guess was that she would have the mess all cleaned up by the time I got back, after which there would be a staggering debt to be repaid --on her terms.

So, as I said, had there really ever been a choice? Just as I got back into the Ferrari, an old couple out for their pre-lunch constitutional paused to look askance at me and my garbage.

Leaning through the window, I smiled and said conspiratorially, "Damned kids!" and the old folks walked on, apparently satisfied. I quickly backed up the Ferrari. Sighing as if I had arrived late at a funeral, I turned off the motor. Then I opened the trunk, got down on my hands and knees, tossed in the first carapace, and something happened.

Call it a sea change. For was I mistaken, or was that Cheryl's nose in the trunk? And had I never before looked closely at a cooked lobster shell in bright sunlight? You know, once at an antiques fair I saw a whole oceanful of lobster-colored Fiesta ware, set out on a gigantic red table. Into the trunk went a sea-green wine bottle and some pieces of pastel yellow and light-green melon rind. Then, with a second bottle poised in mid-air, I began to laugh. As Yogi Berra said, "It was *deja vu* all over again." What was I going to do with the stuff in the trunk of the Ferrari?

It was like falling off the horse again. Of course, I could have just cleaned it out into another bag

and left it with a buck the next Saturday. Dull! Perhaps it should have gone back to the construction site, or to the Principal's lawn. No, those, too, were ideas whose time had passed.

Of course I already had the answer --and, with it, the courage to get the driveway spill completely cleaned up before Alice arrived, and the courage to get through the brunch reeking of sweat and garbage and with a headache four of the lawyer's extra-strength Excedrin couldn't touch.

And so that long Sunday passed. And then the night, through which I slept wonderfully well. And now Monday morning and afternoon, which I have profitably spent on overdue errands and household chores. And now --soon-- not more than two hours from now, comes my reward. Yes, tonight the little lady and I will once again be hauling my garbage to the dump. This time, however, it travels first-class, and, although there is only that one bag, I take comfort in the fact that, what with my filthy white painter's pants and sky-blue tee shirt, I have already made considerable inroads on a new bag.

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This year, **Ron Singer (www.ronsinger.net)** has had prose and poetry accepted by *3711 atlantic*, *55 words*, *alba*, *big bridge*, *Contemporary Rhyme*, *elima*, *Friends of Nigeria Newsletter*, *ghoti*, *Great Works*, *Nth Position*, *New Works Review*, *Pilgrimage*, *Poetry Midwest*, *right hand pointing*, *SN Review*, *Waterways*, and *Word Riot*. His Essay-Review, "O Ti Lo Wa Ju ('You Have Gone Past All'), The Caine Prize for African Writing," is in the Summer 2007 issue of *The Georgia Review*, and three poems are slated to appear in the anthology, *Poetic Voices Without Borders-2 (PVWB 2)*, Gival Press). His chapbook, *A Voice for My Grandmother*, was published in November 2006 by Ten Penny Players, Inc/bardpress chapbooks. Thus far, *A Voice* has been reviewed eight times, and a second printing was issued in October 2007. Singer (B.A., Union College; M.A., Ph.d., University of Chicago) lives in New York City, where he has taught at Friends Seminary.