

Goodwill

For Mona and Rick, depositing the old clothes in the Goodwill bin was the final task of the night, the last in a long and sweaty sequence, the finale of a day strange and familiar with daily disillusion. After circling the pothole-scarred asphalt of the strip mall that formerly housed their usual Goodwill bin, they argued for ten minutes over the prospect of giving up and saving that errand for another day. The debate ended with Mona stating in a chalkboard voice that she would go to hell before returning home with those same two ragged old bags of useless clothes.

The air conditioning was dead in the old Prius, or nearly so, and at the stoplight no conversation interfered with the sultry cursing of cicadas. When the light turned green their talk did not resume but the last angry words seemed to hang between them like a stench. A block later, Rick slammed on the brakes when his peripheral vision caught a bulky shape, of a difficult-to-describe but vivid color in the approximate family of swamp neon green. A closer look satisfied Mona that it was indeed a Goodwill box or close equivalent, so Rick pulled into the lot and dropped his keys in the cupholder so as to avoid triggering the remote key alert. The lot seemed to belong to an old dark gas station which no longer featured any identification or logos, and the remaining pump had no numbers. They each took a Hefty bag, Rick taking the lumpier one with the holes. An exhausted pigeon interrupted the insects with a single dejected coo.

Mona arrived first and grabbed the handle to slide the door open. "It's stuck," she said. "Of course, that's how our day has been." Then a moment later: "Hey, my hand's stuck."

Rick came over to help her but started with the handle rather than her hand. He agreed that it was stuck and then, agreed that his hand was, also.

They struggled a little, still holding the bags, as though demonstrating to a nonexistent audience that they were suffering a mere momentary setback. Then they tried without the bags.

"Need help?" asked a voice.

They turned from the door of the bin to see two vaguely Nordic-looking dudes standing very close. They were blond and wore expensive-looking leather jackets. Each had blue eyes but there was something queasy about the eyes: Rick tried to make firm aggressive eye contact as part of city self-presentation, but when the one on the left turned his head briefly toward the one on the right, there was something weird and unsettling about how the eyes looked, as if the eyes and head were turning independently. Rick looked away.

"We're stuck," he announced, making up in voice for what he lost by breaking eye contact.

"You sure are," said the one on the right, cheerfully.

"What's in the bags?" asked the one on the left.

"What do you care?" Mona retorted. "Are you going to help us or what?"

The one on the left shrugged. "Depends, really. It looks like the bags are just a bunch of old clothes."

“Yes, they’re for the poor,” said Rick, incredulous that someone needed background on the concept of a Goodwill Bin. “We don’t need them any more so we donate them to someone who can use them.” Internally, he tried to place their accents. Actually, the strangers didn’t have any discernable accent, but Rick sensed that their very lack of an accent could reveal their place of origin to an expert.

The one on the right gently kicked Rick’s bag. He turned his head while doing so, and Rick had to look away again. “Seems like these clothes have a lot of holes and rips. Some of the others are all worn out. Don’t the poor deserve better stuff?”

“This is surely better than what the poor would have without it,” Rick protested hotly.

The one on the right shrugged. “Have you met the poor?”

The one on the left asked the one on the right “What’s the poor?”

“It’s an indefinite collective term. It might mean a couple persons or a whole community or demographic, who possess relatively few things and few means to procure their needs.” He turned to the bin. “But the label on this receptacle says that the clothing deposited therein should be in fairly new condition.”

“Our things are as new as anything else people put in there,” claimed Mona. Then she added, partly in non sequitur, “Everybody does it.”

“If that’s what the poor is,” said the one on the left. “It deserves better stuff. Isn’t it already suffering and disadvantaged? You shouldn’t try to give it anything you wouldn’t wear.”

“In fact,” said his companion, “You should give the poor what you are wearing.”

Mona and Rick objected to this suggestion through several stages, including disbelief and profane bluff, to threats and promises, and including the simple fact that they couldn’t undress with one hand. When they had reached this last justification, their hands became unstuck. “We only did that so you can give your raiments to the poor,” said the one on the right. “If you try to get away, we’ll stick you back on and leave you. Don’t think we won’t.”

Rick and Mona thought they would, so undressed to their underwear. The Nordic-ish thugs insisted on the underwear too and seemed vague on the special status of underwear. Rick and Mona took the rest off, fearing even worse treatment, but the one on the right picked up the discarded clothing and nodded to them. “You’re free to go.”

Rick felt it was his role and duty to say something defiant, but when the one on the left looked up the mismatch between the movement of his eyes and head bothered Rick again and they ran to the car. They slammed the doors, naked as bluebirds, and screeched away from the site, wondering what would be the next Law of Physics to suffer violation.

The leather jacket guys watched them speed off.

“Were they good looking specimens?” asked the one on the left.

“No idea,” said the one on the right.

“Where do people around here have their shame zones? I think it might be here because I always see that part covered.” The one on the left described an arc on his hip where the leg hole of a bikini bottom or Speedo might be.

“No, I think it’s their genitals.”

The one on the left was incredulous. “That can’t be right. How do they think reproduction works? Why would they hide that?”

The one on the left shrugged the shoulders, though in a sliding motion that looked like he was working his way through a poorly-written manual on shoulder shrugging.

And, coming from a place where there is not really a concept of boredom or a need for distraction or entertainment, they remained silent until Kara’s footsteps were audible, her high heels clacking on the sidewalk like a dead branch hitting a winter window. She was slightly out of breath with exertion, as a Hefty bag of shoes can be quite heavy and, with heels breaking through the plastic here and there like a porcupine stuck in a purse, she was holding the bag at a distance from her body.

She pulled down the handle of the Goodwill bin, and a moment later had both hands attached, after putting down the bag and trying to free her right hand with her left.

“We’ve seen this before,” said a voice over her right shoulder. She tried to crane her neck around and could see a couple guys but not much about them. “You’re giving the poor a bunch of shoes that you don’t want anymore.”

“Let her let go so she can see us,” said a voice over her left shoulder.

The voices behind her argued about this for a few moments and reached an agreement to release one hand. She turned around to face them, her spine an icicle.

“What is your problem?” she asked feebly.

“That label on the bin says you are to give the poor items that are in good condition. Are all of those shoes in good condition?”

“Certainly. Some haven’t ever been worn.”

“How many feet does it have?” the one on the right asked. The two guys in the leather looked elaborately at her two feet, then compared with their own, slowly and in unison.

“Some of the shoes in that bag aren’t in a pair,” said the one on the left. “Do the poor want half of a pair of shoes?”

“I don’t know,” Kara retorted in fearful exasperation. “It’s not efficient for me to check every pair. I just gathered up a bagful I didn’t use and took them here. That’s how they can afford to have these bins, it’s an efficiency. A few mismatched shoes don’t break the system.”

“Why do you have shoes that you never wear?” The left one asked.

“Oh, I don’t know,” she pleaded. “I see them in the store or in a Catalogue, I think I might like them, and when I try them on they aren’t what I expected. Maybe it turns out they don’t go with anything I wear. I wait a while to see if my feeling changes – after a while I get rid of them and buy more.”

“The trousers you are wearing on your lower body, they are called jeans?” asked the one on the left.

Without waiting for her answer, the one on the right described jeans as a sort of universal attire popular in these parts that crossed socioeconomic classes and demographic categories. Kara interrupted to report how much the jeans had cost.

Neither of the guys had brushed up on local currencies. “The logical thread I was preparing,” said the one on the left, “is that if your lower garments are considered universal, what does it mean to say that a pair of shoes doesn’t go with them?”

“Why are you interrogating me about my shoe buying habits?”

The one on the right made something close to an oratorical gesture. “In localities where the denizens wear hard interchangeable surfaces on their feet, which is a subset of the subset of localities where the primary form of movement of the top predators are pendular walking rather than slithering or the like, we often see these protective shoes take on a complex admission function. The beings that use shoes come to associate different styles of these objects with being admitted to, or ‘passing’ into different social or mercantile settings. The more of these styles they possess, the more they feel secure that they could be admitted to any setting. I understand that the locals here are particularly sensitive to admission protocols and feel deep discomfort at being excluded from prestigious settings.”

The one on the left nodded. “And since the natural dynamic of an admission setting is to rapidly cycle the totems that allow admission, to maintain exclusivity, the would-be admittees must also cycle their repertoire of shoe styles.” The one on the right moved his head diagonally and then remembered the proper form of nodding and did that.

Kara understood more of their conversation than she wanted to. Rather than defend the attitude toward shoes of her personally or of the earth, she repeated her question as to why she was being interrogated.

“It’s like this,” said the one on the right. “We are guarding this box to protect the poor. This isn’t a trash receptacle, and the label clearly says in your alphabet that the deposits are to be in good condition. The poor don’t want your outmoded shoes that are out of fashion.”

“What our procedure has been tonight,” said the one on the left, “is that we will require you to give the poor your own shoes which you are wearing rather than your junk shoes.”

Kara froze for a second, paralyzed between her impulse to declare the value of her shoes, a nauseous roil of fears, and the hope that if she did what they wanted they wouldn’t make her take back the bag. Two minutes later she was jogging barefoot away from the dead gas station, having been tolerated to leave the bag next to the bin, where a sparrow had already perched on one of the random heels thrust out of a hole in the plastic.

“Is that what we are doing, protecting the poor?” asked the one on the left as they watched her disappear.

The one on the right did not answer and they remained in a silence and stillness that would have made an observer very uncomfortable. But there was no observer until Darren, quite some time later. While Rick and Mona and Kara had embarked on their Goodwill missions seeing them as one of the ends to their active days, Darren had deliberately waited until a time of the night that almost anyone would call night, when the majority of his fellow citizens were in an uneasy sleep or uneasy about not being asleep. This sounds like the action of someone planning a serious sin; perhaps people like that might wait even longer. Darren, for his part, only wanted to get rid of a tire, now that he had been informed by the most implacable of authorities, his garage's trash company, that they could no longer take tires. The town recycling had already levied a fine on his shop for the equivalent offense, and his most recent monthly bottom lines did not encourage him to pay for a service.

Darren checked the decayed parking lot carefully to satisfy his caution that no one was there, and it wasn't really his fault that he failed to notice the dudes in the leather coats, as they had means to watch unobserved. They did wonder momentarily if Darren was going to grab the bar or not, as he could be seen studying the bin for a few moments without making contact. What Darren was wondering was if the tires would fit in the door of the bin, and if he would prefer simply leaning the tires against the bin's exterior. In a vague way that he couldn't fully follow in his head but felt like a warning, Darren believed that leaving the tires against the bin would increase the chances that the tires would be spotted and connected to him before they were safely commingled in whatever vehicle emptied bins like these. He looked around again and verified that no closed-circuit cameras were visible, but that didn't reassure him about the exterior-lean option. So he grabbed the bar and was soon talking to the dudes.

A few moments later, he was tearing away from the site in a hectic steam of sparks, damaging the rims of his naked back wheels and mentally calculating the costs of the damage, to be added to the cost of the two brand-new radials that had been left in the weeds by the bin.

"Do we have enough?" asked the one on the right.

"One more," said the one on the left.

So they remained, terrible in their companionable patience, at one point ignoring a racoon that nibbled on one of the heels and attempted to budge the bar before scurrying away in frustration. It rained at one point for about six minutes, more of a gesture of the atmosphere's disgust that anything signaling the end of the steamy sordid phase of the night. Eventually, human ears would have detected the furtive grunts of three men as they approached using different forms of locomotion. Two were known to different people by different names, but they had been christened Jim and Dan. Jim and Dan said nothing and succeeded mostly at suppressing their natural grunts at the heavy bags they each carried. They each had impressive experience at disposal and did not need to communicate to cooperate. While disposal in bodies of water or junkyards was more in their experience, they had worked together on disposal in a public bin at least once before, choosing a location that appeared abandoned or likely to have a very long pickup cycle. To their eyes, the goodwill bin looked rusty and outdated, pinged and dented. Like Darren, they were curious about closed-circuit cameras though they considered them unlikely at the current locale. But there was no need for suspense; Jim had a device that reported on the frequencies a camera was likely to use and it reported nothing.

The third man was usually known as Mr Taggart, and his strengths were in different areas than Jim and Dan though most were not much more respectable. A short time ago he had been holding his own in an

intense difference of perspective with a gentleman who employed Jim and Dan. That dispute had been resolved fairly recently in favor of Mr Taggart's opponent, and he approached the bin in skeletal form, his skeleton now in sawed-apart pieces, divided among the two Hefty bags. Jim and Dan had urged their employer to authorize a separate location for the two bags, but their employer liked the idea of the message sent by the bag's eventual discovery, as long as that discovery was not too soon. Jim and Dan did not press their case.

So now Jim pulled down the bar, and before long Dan had grasped the bar to help him get unstuck, and they each dropped their garbage bags, the contents of which shifted in a sinister calcium rustle. They could each turn around mostly, and saw two blond guys wearing leather jackets. In near unison, Jim and Dan both reached for the weapons they carried and realized they were inaccessible with their other hands stuck in the current posture.

"Hey," said the dude on the left to Jim and Dan. "What are you getting rid of?"