WATER UPHILL

I'm just a garbage man, but God gave me the eye. Sometimes I pick up broken things, and I fix them. When I come around the corner in Bernice and see a pile of trash by the street, I'm on cloud nine. I throw most of the stuff into the back compartment and pull the lever. The compressor whines. But every once in awhile, there's something that makes my heart go pitter patter. I gently place it beside me in the cab along with the day's other treasures.

It ain't that bad a job. It's got its benefits. The pay's okay. I get to move my arms and legs with nobody in a suit and tie looking over my shoulder. Good outdoor work - not cooped up in a tiny room like Herman, my supervisor. I can smell the fresh air, at least when I'm upwind of Bernice, and I get to drive out of the city to the dump two or three times a day.

It's amazing what people throw away. So many things, just a little damaged. A touch of glue, a dab of paint, another hinge, and they're as good as new. I can't count how many bicycles I've placed in the cab over the years. Maybe on Pine Street I find just a frame. Or the wheel's folded in half because some goofy kid tried to ride three friends on it all at once.

A bent wheel's no problem. I already have four spares hanging in the garage that might just fit. Even if they don't, I'll find the right one by the curb in a day or two.

My nieces, my nephews, the neighborhood kids…they all ride Caruso specials. I also bring 'em to Father Porcelli who knows other families that need them. A little buffing with some steel wool to get the specks of rust off the chrome, and they're making someone happy again.

Every day, more prizes. I give them all away. I mean, how many birdhouses does a guy my age need? Not just kids' stuff. The chandelier in Mrs. Sabatini's dining room, Mrs. Mancuso's sewing machine, Mr. Bellomo's lawn mower…an accordion even, that's now in the old timers' home on Steeple Street.

There was the boy without a father two houses down from mine who was going a little south – a loose nut, a wobbly wheel. It happens to all of us. One day I stopped by with a basketball hoop I'd picked up on Foster Road. I tried to talk to him as I set it up in his driveway. He didn't answer, but he sort of hung around behind my left shoulder as I worked. I just kept talking away while I tightened the bolts as if I hadn't noticed. The next week I showed up with a basketball, almost brand new, and then a month later with a nice fiberglass backstop. He started coming around. Before I knew it I was tousling his hair and giving him noogies whenever he missed a shot.

"Mr. Caruso," he said to me a few years later when he finally finished college. "I want you to be the best man at my wedding."

I choked up. A big palooka like me, a best man, even though I'm old enough to be his father.

Then there was the evening little Emily knocked on my door with tears running down her cheeks. I looked into her cupped hands. My mouth dropped open. A sparrow, a little bit of a thing with a hanging wing.

"Momma mia," I says to myself, "I can't fix no sparrow."

"Please," Emily says with pleading eyes.

A broken doll, that's no big deal. But a living being, full of fear, is another matter.

I plop Emily on the stool by my workbench and brush away her tears with the clean corner of my shop rag. I tell her that I'll try and send her away with an uncertain smile on her tiny face.

Me and the sparrow, we have a staring contest. For a long time I just sit there, all 250 pounds of me, while this tiny creature, less than an ounce, glares back from the middle of the table, feathers on one side drooping, full of its own doubt and pain.

I spend half the night digging in the garden looking for worms with a flashlight hanging from my mouth. No luck.

For hours more I play with a razor blade, toothpicks and Popsicle sticks, all the while making what I think are parent sparrow noises. By morning he's all splinted up. Emily is delighted.

"Why the light bulb?" she says, peering into the shoebox and stroking the little head with a finger.

"To keep him warm."

"What's that for?" she asks, pointing to the spaghetti soaking in the glass of warm water. The stuff's a little yellow from the crushed vitamin pill I mixed in.

"He thinks it's worms," I answer. "Watch."

I hold a wet noodle above his beak, and the little fella opens wide for his new mudder. Emily claps her hands and laughs.

We name the little bugger Henry. I send him home with her. He still lives there without a cage.

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Yeah, yeah, I know. Some people say that because I've been by myself all these years that I'm just a lonely guy with a garage full of junk. But it ain't so bad. I have my bottle of Elmer's glue and my clamps and my jars of paint. How can I be lonely? I just keep busy. The other drivers, every night the same. A six pack of Miller and the sports channel. Me? Sometimes in the middle of the night while I'm working on something really delicate – a music box with a broken ballerina - I think about Colleen and how it didn't work out, but what's past is past.

Now the things crowding my work shop are my friends. God gave me the eye, and I can see when something that no one wants any more still has a lot of good. Each one has a soul. It ain't junk – at least not after I'm through. All that it may need is a gentle touch, some patience….

An old rocker might sit on the table for two or three months. You just look at it for a long time not knowing how to start. At first, you're tempted to quickly bang in a nail here and there. A schlock job.

Time…time…. You have to give it time. You study it. You stroke it. You talk to it. You reassure it. You wait. And eventually it talks to you – maybe in a whisper or whimper at

first, about where it hurts, what it needs to be whole again. You see how it's really made, and you do it right – carefully drilled slots, wooden dowels…. You caress it some more. In the end you've got something good – better than it's ever been. Alive again. Something you love and that loves you back.

Sure, I'm just a garbage man. To the pencil pushers in city hall, I'm at the bottom of the heap. That's why my salary's not as good as the town's electricians, the plumbers or even the pothole fillers. But I can't believe how lucky I am. The big shots on the mayor's floor, they get company cars. But a Cadillac weighs only 5,000 pounds. Me? They give me Bernice, fifteen tons empty. I named her after Bernicia, my grandmother from Palermo, who was also big. Best of all, they actually pay me to load the front of her with things that are still beautiful. Some days the cab is so full I drive home half leaning out the window.

No ringing phones. No one running up to me with piles of papers changing orders. And as I make my rounds every day, I get to watch. I have time to think.

Sometimes, something that's real good isn't by the curb yet. I wait. I just wait. The statue of the angel on the front lawn of the house on Astoria Boulevard - so lovely. For years I slowed down and looked in her direction every time I drove by. Eventually I could see the chip on her elbow all the way from the road.

I wait. I wait some more. Sure enough, one day I turn the corner, and my heart does its little pitter patter. There she is, finally, leaning against the can. By this time the left wing's busted, and her curls have all worn away. But in my mind's eye I can see her when she was new, fresh, and full of joy. I slip my arms under her real careful – so as not to hurt her any more. As I pick her up and cradle her against me, her head brushes against my cheek, and I

have to catch my breath. As I gently place her in the passenger seat, I resist the temptation to kiss her.

Back behind the wheel, I put Bernice into gear and ease down on the accelerator. At every red light I look over at her, and my chest swells to think that she is finally mine.

As soon as I get home I place her on the work table. For a long time I just look at her. I then reach for my putty knife. I fill the bigger holes with cement. Next comes the layer of wet plaster. Ever so delicately I swirl my fingertip around her head and then down to her shoulders, and her hair is curly again. I touch the corners of her lips, and she begins to smile. I work on the missing wing for hours – Michaelangelo and the Angel Gabriel. I texture each and every feather and carefully taper the edges. As I caress her delicate legs I feel my spirit enter hers. Before I know it, she's graceful and vibrant again. She looks like she can fly. Better yet, she looks like she wants to fly. I place her in the garden under the maple tree. Every time I step outside she makes me feel light and young.

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Sometimes at night when I can't sleep I open the mangled folder by the bed with the scraps of paper. My poems. Here and there I touch up a line or two. As I turn the pages, I find the last Christmas card my sister Angela sent five years ago. I look back up at the ceiling. It's been such a long time since I've seen her and her children even though they live only a few miles away. I try not to think about it. Instead, I just shuffle into the garage. I take out a needle and some thread, my sandpaper, a jar of red paint. A ripped teddy bear and a toy soldier with a dented drum are waiting for me.

I do okay. Besides my broken friends on the workbench, my customers are my family. They're part of mine even though I'm not part of theirs. Most smile and wave. Once in a while someone says a couple of words about the weather. Of course there are a few that are not so nice – the ones that treat you as if…well, like you're a garbage man.

At Christmas there are gifts of all types – lots of ties, a case of beer, a bottle of Jack Daniels, an envelope with a few bucks. Sometimes they come out to meet me. Other times it's just left on top of the garbage can without even a note. All well and good. All very appreciated.

You get to know your customers over time. You can tell a lot about them from reading their garbage. Every address is a book. Years are like chapters. Each pickup's a page. The paragraphs are what people throw out. The baby clothes, the first highchair, the sandbox, the kiddy swing, larger and larger shoes – first sneakers, later, high heels. One day there's a little girl in pig tails with a jump rope. Before you know it you turn the corner and she's transformed into a young woman getting into a limo in a bride's dress.

Funny. The same people who pull down their curtains and wouldn't dare allow their own priest through the front door think nothing about the confessions in their trash cans. You see what they wear, what they eat, how they sleep. Secrets? You don't have to sneak up to the house and peek into their bedroom windows. You can see the ripped nighties, the girlie magazines. If you're a good garbage man you turn your eyes away.

You learn what they value and don't value. You see their yesterday's. What they once held precious – their old books, faded gowns, torn photo albums…broken dreams that they've finally given up on. You notice if they've been fixed before. And you can tell by the nature of the repair whether they were treated with love and respect – the number of patches,

the quality of the paint, how carefully it was applied. You learn so much by how their pasts are discarded. Whether the item is placed reverently by the curb as if saying goodbye to a dear friend, so that it now looks like a dignified old man waiting for a bus – or crushed inside with the potato peels.

You peer into their tomorrows. The boxes from their new stuff proclaim their future hopes – the sports equipment, the stereo, the computer, the new TV.

Open or closed? Some pack their empty beer cans in cases, piled high like trophies. Supermarket brand or hoity-toity? Others squirrel their booze bottles in ten layers of plastic. It's hard to fool a garbage man. You can hear them rattling around when you swing the load into Bernice's bin.

Even the condition of their garbage cans – how often they're replaced, how close to the curb, how packed or empty. Whether they are neat or sloppy, whether they separate things out, wrap them in newspaper, tie them up with cord, or sandwich them between cardboard.

You know if they're rich or poor, trying to save a dime or blowing the bucks like they've just won the sweepstakes. Whether they're living high on the hog on king crab legs or just getting by on macaroni and cheese.

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You feel for each and every one. Billy on Wilson Street who scrambled his head in that football game; Ed, the fireman, who broke both legs and was out of work for a year;

crazy Mrs. Kelly on Chamber Street whose cat always gets stuck up the tree. You hurt for some of them – the couple on Blanchard who never get along.

Other memories make you smile. The lovely lady, the one I've seen in passing for so many years on Buttonwood Drive – so kind. The one who always keeps to herself. More often than not, she'd be walking slowly beside her mother, helping her along, one hesitant step after the other. Other times she'd be serving the older woman on the porch swing. The more feeble one would have a hand-knitted afghan over her knees, while the lovely lady sat on a bench, the table with the tea cups between them. The two of them would be sipping delicately. So formal, so polite, like from days gone by when women still wore white gloves to church on Sunday.

One August day it was so hot that I was driving with my head outside the window just so I could breathe. Even then the air hitting my face felt like I had just opened an oven. My clothes were sticking to me. Bernice, she smelled especially bad. I turned the corner. There she was standing by the curb in the God-awful heat just waiting with a pitcher of ice water and a glass on a metal tray. So nice. So very much appreciated. I stepped down, all sweaty, and pulled off my cap.

"Please take the whole pitcher with you," she said in a quiet voice. When she spoke she enunciated her words ever so carefully like a grade school teacher afraid to smile. "You may return it some other time."

That night I lay in my bed in the dark, looking up at the ceiling, thinking. Just another kind person on a route with a lot of other nice people. She wasn't exactly young. I imagined her friends all getting married 20 years earlier and moving on while she chose to stay home and take care of her mother.

I was a little nervous the next week as I rang the bell. No answer.

I left a note with the empty container. "*Grazie.* Thank you."

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Afterwards as I make rounds the neighborhood I try to push her out of my mind. But as I turn onto Buttonwood there she'd be again - the same old routine, walking alongside her dear mother, such a slow pace, her hand gently under the older woman's elbow. So simple. No makeup. An unkind person might say plain. But I can't help but take notice – such a lovely thing, but at the same time so delicate, like Grandma's espresso cups from the old country that my sister, Angela, got when Momma died. That's okay. Angela can use them. She always has a house full of company, although I haven't visited in years. Besides, what does a big dummy like me surrounded by empty pizza boxes need with espresso cups? I'm not exactly the kind of guy who eats with a napkin on his lap.

Over time there are other hot spells, and again she'd be standing at the curb. Not every scorcher, but often enough. One day ice water; on another a Coke. Sometimes a paper plate with two cookies. Just being nice, that's all.

In time her mother grows more stooped, more infirm, and it takes them over an hour to inch around the block. I know because I do one side of the street for several miles before looping back later for the other side.

The summers go by. The mother eventually has a cane, then a walker. I keep watching. I catch myself stretching my neck as I turn onto Buttonwood Road. A moment of joy. At the same time, a stab of pain. Eventually the mother can no longer stand. She's

slumped in a wheelchair, too weak to hold up her head. I click my tongue. It's just a matter of time. Every few feet the lovely lady stops to tuck the blanket back up under the old woman's chin. She's trying so hard to be brave, but now each time I see her, just like her mother, she seems a little more lost, a little more tattered.

"It's okay, lovely lady," I hear myself praying. I look at her forlorn figure in the neat but drab clothes in the side mirror as I drive past. I make the sign of the cross. It's all I can do.

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For awhile a Ford begins to appear in the driveway. I see the fella once or twice. Seems like a regular guy – not too much hair.

She starts dressing differently – pretty outfits with a bit of a waist. She even applies some color to her cheeks. Not a lot, but enough to notice. She looks nice. I'm happy for her. Why not?

I notice the empty cans of diet drinks, the cartons from the gym equipment, the cosmetic wrappers. Then one day the shiny Ford is gone and the empty potato chip bags reappear. A month later a stack of glamour magazines is piled alongside the cans.

Another sleepless night. I lie in bed staring up at the ceiling. Colleen Sullivan. She was very, very beautiful. I so much wanted to take her to the freshman dance. How she lit up when I asked her, but her Irish parents said no. They didn't like someone whose grandparents were born in Sicily.

My thoughts drift back to the lovely lady. Maybe, just maybe, I begin to think. But then I snort. I force the silly thoughts from my head. I remember from catechism, *thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife.* Okay, so the lovely lady's not married, but nevertheless I feel dirty. It's just not good to want something too much – to covet things that were never meant for you, that's all.

But she's still so beautiful to me in her dreary clothes, even when she's on her hands and knees in the garden covered with dirt.

I watch. I wait. I wait.

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There's a period when I don't see her and the elderly woman. Not a few weeks. More like six months. Then one day as I round the corner there are boxes and boxes stacked ever so neatly by the curb. The top one is open. I look inside. Old-lady clothes.

I know.

I take off my cap, hold it to my chest and raise my hand to knock on the door. But then I don't. I can't. What am I doing here? What's a jerk like me got to say?

I take a clean scrap of paper from the garbage and do my best. It's not my greatest poem. Very short. But it's from my heart. Under my name I add "I said a Hail Mary for your mother." That's all. I squeeze it into the crack of the door.

As I drive along I wonder again why God makes things to break and people to suffer. Why do all His creations start off so fresh and new only to get old and tired? How terrible that everything and everyone gets all chipped and bent until one day you find yourself

standing by the curb. In the meantime, before you wind up in the back of the truck for that final trip to the dump, you reach out with trembling fingers and try to gather up a little joy.

I heard this professor on Bernice's radio once explain how everything goes downhill. Like water. Mountains turn into dust. Nothing can ever get better by itself.

Water, mountains, even people, the radio professor said. You start out like a shiny bicycle - bright, cheerful, happy to be alive. Then after a month or a year, a single speck of rust appears on the chain, then on the handle bars…. The bike that only yesterday was spanking new gets grease on the spokes and hits some bumps in the road. Can't do anything about it. That's the way it is. Someday even the sun will go out. That's what he says.

I think about it. What then? Maybe there's a big garbage man in the sky who gently removes the darkened stars and takes them to His workbench. The next day He plugs them back in, and they shine again, good as new. Or does He just toss them into something like what the radio professor called a black hole and start the compressor?

As I consider it all, I get sadder and sadder. I try to snap out of it, but I just can't shake off the gloominess. I want to push it all out of my mind. I'm just a garbage man. I don't get paid to think. The city tells me to toss the stuff into the back of the truck. Just ahead I see a table by the curb – not brand new, but decent. One of the legs is a little loose, that's all. But after listening to that radio show, what's the use? After all, this man's a professor. He knows what he's talking about.

I reach for the table. It's all in my hands now. The cab or the bin? I grit my teeth and close my eyes as I shove the table up Bernice's backside and pull the lever. A few hours later at the dump I linger. I just can't help it. I watch as the dozer pushes some dirt over what's left of it. I want to cry.

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For a long time my heart feels heavy every time I drive along Buttonwood. I slow down as usual, but the curtains are always drawn. The flower beds are choked with weeds. The paint is peeling off the porch swing. I want to go up to the door, but I can't. What can a big dummy like me possibly say?

Then one day, again, it's ghastly hot. My clothes are drenched. As I turn the corner my heart skips a beat and does its little pitter patter. There she is, standing by the garbage cans, tray in her hands, swaying unsteadily, the water in the pitcher shaking. My eyes go up and down. My lovely, lovely lady…so much thinner, so shattered. Her forehead's creased. Her eyes are weary, sunken.

I take off my cap and step out of the truck. She says nothing. She bites her lip as she just stands there like a statue, stiff, with eyes cast down as she tries to fight back the tears.

Ever so gently I reach for the tray, but she holds it so tightly that I have to tug a bit to get it away. I place it on the nearest can. Even then her hands remain extended - empty, so empty, as if she doesn't know what to do with them. I search for words. How I wish I had finished high school. Maybe I'd have learned not to mumble when I try to speak.

Everyone's been kicked in the teeth. Like the day I showed one of my poems to Angela, and she just laughed. I keep telling myself that it was such a long, long time ago. A human being is no different from a bicycle. It may have a scratch or two or a bent spoke, but I can see into its splintered soul, even if everyone else has given up on it. Even if it's given

up on itself. Alone, all alone by the curb, it's tired, and it's scared. It's as if it wants to stop living. As if it can't take another breath. It happens to both bicycles and people.

But deep down it's still so very, very beautiful. I know. I can see. And even though I'm unsure at first exactly how I'm going to fix it, something inside tells me that I surely can and will. I reverse time. I carry the water back up the hill.

In the end a tattered heart becomes whole again, and suddenly there's joy. Not only joy for the thing saved. Double joy. There's my joy too. I bring it back to life and get it to smile in the sun again. I share a gift with the Creator.

Before I know what I'm doing I lower an arm and slip it under the lovely lady. I pick her up ever so gently so as to not hurt her any more. She doesn't resist. As I cradle her against me her hair brushes across my cheek, and I have to catch my breath. Slowly, ever so carefully, I place her in the passenger seat.

Back behind the wheel, I put Bernice into gear and ease down on the accelerator. At every red light I look over at her, and my chest swells.

Time. Time. It will take a little time, but I know I can do it. All it needs is a gentle touch, a little patience. In its place there will be something good – better than it's ever been. Something you love and that loves you back.

I'm just a garbage man, but God gave me the eye. Sometimes I pick up broken things, and I fix them.

THE END