

Rubbish

The man shuffled behind the shopping cart at a cripple's pace, staring at the ground like a horse with blinders. He seemed old, but it was hard to tell; the grime on his cheekbones had a sheen like a polished shoe and worked as a cosmetic of sorts.

He had an earpiece that was attached to an old transistor radio he kept in his shirt pocket. His cart, laden with bottles and cans, was hardly remarkable. There seemed *nothing* remarkable about him, in fact: he was faceless, homeless and dirty.

Of course, there *were* remarkable things about him, if one took the time to look: he was tall- maybe six foot four but stooped. He had a beard, a red beard. He looked like Paul Bunyan. And his shoes: purple shoes, dress shoes. They would have been an odd choice if he'd had one.

He stopped in front of the recycling bins on the first block and began to rummage through the cans and bottles. If one's view of him was not obstructed by the cart, one could have seen the oddly colored shoes and the strawberry beard and been mesmerized by the clash of these unlikely colors.

If one took the time to look, that is.

The man leaned in and pushed the cart, as if against a headwind, to the end of the block.

Sisyphus in rags.

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He was surprised that he'd gotten through most of his route unmolested by the police, or hollered at by men in suits that left trails of cologne as they made their way to shiny, sporty cars.

His cart was nearly full, including the black trash bags he tied to the sides for extra storage. He struggled to change direction; there was a grinding sound, the loose metal wheels shivering as they chattered over the asphalt.

“Hey, you! Take a hike! This street is off limits.” The voice in the dark blue suit stepped into a sleek midnight-blue German car and fired up the engine.

The man bent further over the cart, held up a hand in acknowledgement and pushed off.

It hadn't always been this way, him wrestling a cart through the well-to-do neighborhoods in town. There were echoes of his other life everywhere he went.

There was the dentist's office. He used to go to the dentist.

He'd had suits in that life, suits that were tailored to fit. He'd showered every day, worn a tie, stopped for a box of doughnuts on the way to work once a week. But that seemed a long time ago.

He still had the photo that a stranger had taken. He'd asked the man to take the picture of the three of them in front of the Parthenon. He never looked at it though.

He began his journey to the recycling center. Then he would make one more round before going home to rest.

Home was a makeshift camp at the north end of the park. They- the cart people, the *Hey You* people- slept by the river, camouflaged by rows of hedges. The shanty was decorated with

shopping carts, old sleeping bags and armies of blankets that were pressed into service to when the morning frosts came in early spring. There was a gated community: you had to be looking for the opening in the thick brush to find it.

On summer evenings- and it was summer now, a hot one- they would gather in the park at a barbeque pit still smoldering with charcoal from the day users, and grill questionable catches from the murky river. Sometimes there would be potato chips and cake on the picnic tables, left behind from a party, or piñata candy in the grass. Whatever remained would be consumed.

The only constant in the way of food was Gruber's Hominy; Gruber's donated to the local shelters. The factory was right there, on the other side of the river. When the 'Hey You' people crawled under soiled blankets to sleep, they could see the lights of the dilapidated Gruber's factory, soft and yellow, shining through the cracked, grimy windows and dancing in shards upon the river. It was the last thing they saw, those factory lights, and it was comforting somehow. The weathered plant was like a church to them, promising protection.

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The sun was a magnifying glass by 11 o'clock. Through the wheels of the cart he felt every bump in the road, and every rock or pebble threatened to start the trash bags swaying to and fro, upending the thing. When it did, the man with the purple shoes and the red beard simply weathered the clanking, rolling flotsam of cans and bottles onto the street. When they settled, he would loosen the trash bags that hung off of the sides and stand the cart to rights, load it up again and push off.

When he reached the park, the man lifted the front of the cart from the street onto the sidewalk and chose a path by the swing sets that had a smoother texture. Not far to go now. His purple shoes clacked on the smooth pavement with false authority.

He'd take this second load in for cash tomorrow morning, before it got hot. Then he would visit the Gruber's factory. He knew where the dented, misprinted or otherwise damaged cans were put out. It was a long way to walk; just getting to the bridge and over the river was enough, but there would be another couple of miles after that.

It would be hot by then. But a can was a can.

He'd had an idea kicking around in his head for awhile, but he'd been drinking again and become sidetracked. He seemed to gravitate to booze for a week or so, then – odd for a citizen of his little community- he'd go on the wagon for a month or two. That was when he felt a sense of accomplishment- funding a debit card with the cans, saving whatever he could. If this meant getting sick on rotten scraps more than was usual, well, that was the price he'd pay.

Gruber's had been a thriving, publicly traded company back in the 50's and 60's; so much so that Gruber's stock was considered a safe if unspectacular investment, like treasury bonds.

The Gruber's factory looked to some like an old brick office building with two grain silo appendages, kind of like the C&H Sugar plant in Crockett. It used to be home to a whole line of canned foods and was poised to surpass Del Monte in gross sales back in 1964.

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The plant produced hominy these days and hominy only, from Dixon corn. That ‘safe investment’ was now a penny stock and nearly worthless at thirty three cents a share; the can with the yellow label and the orange lettering had become a familiar anachronism.

The man slept close to his cart, and in the morning he traded its contents for nine dollars. He set off for the Gruber’s factory. It took him forty minutes to get there.

He pushed the cart along the shady side of the factory, not his usual route but it kept him out of the heat. The Gruber’s plant smelled of propane from the forklifts, and of corn. Popcorn, that was it: it smelled like a giant popcorn machine.

He hated the smell, but he liked the taste of it. Hominy, at least, wasn’t some expensive shit from some huge, faceless company making high fructose sweetener, or any of the other crap that would end up killing people. Hominy was honest and- most importantly- it filled him up.

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The man kept to himself in the encampment, except when he was drinking; then, it seemed as if the inhabitants moved in unison to his blurred vision, like a flock of starlings a million strong.

There were the occasional fights at night, but there were also discussions about things he didn’t have a chance to talk about much, anymore. He always regretted his lapses, but he also looked forward to them; the booze melted everything together and warmed him, wrapping his vision in a gauze cocoon.

Booze or no booze, he kept his debit card and some cash safe in a money belt stained by sweat and strapped to his skin.

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When he was sober, he'd leave for stretches- sometimes for hours- after the recycling was finished and the dog hours of the day had begun. He'd tell the others that he had 'business to attend to.' They snickered, or, if they were drunk, called him a liar.

It was fall when he began a ritual no other homeless person had ever performed:

He placed cans *in* the recycle bins of the neighborhood; empty cans of Gruber's Hominy.

People would think he was nuts. They probably did anyway.

By the time the recycling truck came, each home with fancy landscaping and shiny cars had one like item on top of their last bit of recycling: a can of Gruber's Hominy, displayed for all to see.

Occasionally he would hear passersby make comments like "The Dowds eat hominy? That stuff is so sixties!" and the like.

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The library was where he spent many afternoons, letting the silence wash over him as he indulged himself reading. Now, he made copies of old Gruber's advertisements, and researched the history of the factory. He took the copies (they cost him ten cents apiece) and taped them to restaurant windows and on city buses. He popped open newspaper racks (he knew the trick, pounding on the top and yanking the door at the same time) and placed copies of the ads in every paper.

He wrote his own recipes and taped them to supermarket shelves that held Gruber's Hominy. He was caught only once, and asked to leave.

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If a famous chef was being interviewed on a radio talk show, the man with the red beard and the purple shoes would go to one of the few pay telephones left in the city and call in. He would say that he, too, was a chef, and that hominy was set for a big comeback. *All natural*, he'd tell the guest. *The good side of the corn industry. A great base for a new wave of recipes- the tofu of the new millennium.* The bemused chef would thank him for the call, and the host would make jokes about hominy grits afterward.

He wrote letters to the editors of culinary magazines extolling the virtues of hominy. *The 'Mac n' cheese of the 21st century, he wrote- ready for its resurgence.* A few of the letters were printed.

When the initial frosts of winter appeared, the man shivered through his rounds. One of his purple shoes had duct tape on it now; soon he would need a new pair.

The drivers of the recycling trucks began to tell stories about the cans of Gruber's Hominy that they'd picked up. *Everyone* was eating it, they said.

One restaurant in town began serving Posole, a Mexican soup that featured hominy.

Behind the doors of the houses that the man shuffled past in his fading purple shoes, hominy- believed by every neighbor to be used by every neighbor- became the base for upscale dishes like Hominy Duck Confit, Hominy Hash Browns with Apple Bacon, and the Hominy and Scrambled Goose Eggs they'd just seen on Rachel Ray's show.

Cuisine magazine ran a feature on hominy recipes- the peasant dish called Squaw Corn, and the venerable Southwestern Succotash.

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Once a week in the fall, a local chef was the guest host on the man's favorite radio station. Making for the nearest pay telephone, the man would call in, listening on his little transistor radio until he was put through.

If his luck held and they took his call, he would offer a recipe like Posole Paella, his own take on the dish. Once, the host talked on the air with him from one station break to the next, an unprecedented occurrence.

When asked specific questions about his identity, the man said that he could not give his name, but that the restaurant he cooked for had 'the best hominy recipes in town'.

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It's finally October, the man thought. *Almost time*. October marked the 50th anniversary of Gruber's Hominy.

The local papers ran stories on the factory and its history. A 'Hominy Cook-off' was scheduled as a fundraiser for a local charity.

He taped more reviews- they were real now- onto the supermarket shelves. He continued to call radio stations, now to discuss the history of the factory. He'd become an expert on the subject.

The anniversary made national news as a curiosity. Bobby Flay featured hominy on his program; Paul Prudhomme threw his hat in the ring with a recipe for Southwestern Succotash with Blackened Hominy. Jamie Oliver fought for hominy in school cafeterias.

Magazine features appeared with tag lines like 'Living in Hominy' and 'True Grits'.

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Then Arby's struck: a hominy chicken sandwich called 'Hominy on the Range'.

Wendy's answered with deep fried rounds of hominy called 'Cornballs.'

The Gruber's factory was now staffed for round the clock production. They could not keep up with the demand; a plant was purchased in North Carolina for a huge sum. It was projected to cover costs in one year.

Gruber's stock shot up, and back onto the Exchange; it split, and split again.

In addition to the two fast food giants, Gruber's Hominy succeeded in winning the contract to supply product to Jack in the Box and was in negotiations with McDonalds. Two more factories were purchased.

The stock had climbed to \$95 dollars a share.

One morning, the man with the red beard folded his blankets and packed his things. Winter had long since set in; his breath came in bursts of white steam, his fingers numb in tattered gloves.

He had decisions to make.

He looked around the camp: two people still sleeping, the rest on their daily foraging routes.

He slid the purple shoes on. The left heel was loose now. The shoes flapped when he walked.

He rolled his bedding tightly and put his personal items in a camouflage duffle bag, buttoned his old corduroy coat and hugged the collar to his neck. He looked at his shopping cart

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with the trash bags hanging off the sides. In one corner he spotted a last empty can of Gruber's Hominy. He picked up the can, tossed it in the air and caught it with an icy hand. Yellow label, orange letters.

A penny stock that began at 33 cents a share. If one had purchased 200 shares a week for 20 weeks, one would own 4,000 shares.

And if one sold it today... \$380,000.

He set the can back in the cart and shouldered the duffle. He took a last look at the Gruber's factory across the river. It had fresh paint and a proud new sign. Every window had been replaced, their reflections winking and glittering as if there was never a question.

The man slid through a box hedge into the bright, cold light of the morning. He'd rent a room; shower until the hot water ran out. Shave his dirty red beard. Buy a new toothbrush and fresh, clean clothes. A jug of red wine.

After awhile, he'd look for a little house he could call his own.

And shoes. It was time to buy a new pair of shoes.

Purple ones.

End