

Twenty five cent coffee in a paper cup with a poker hand image on the side. It tasted like hot hot water brewed last year. It was a way to pass the time before we - the college summer help - got our assignments for the day. It was June, early morning heat and exhaust already everywhere.

This was at the city's east side sanitation department, where the garbage trucks started their pick up five days a week. In the summer, college students helped on the routes - never driving, only picking up cans and emptying them into the truck. There was also usually other discarded objects left on curbs. Ice skates, records, bags of unknown heavy things, cat litter, vacuums, shoes, and on and on.

We'd all punch in and meet around 5:45 in a room at the shop, which was used for the morning start, during which routes would be assigned and any announcements made. Some of the crew used it as a lunchroom.

Today I got my hand out of the coffee machine. Three of a kind. I was assigned with a man named Jerry Gable. Jerry was a veteran on the team, a worn down man of probably 55 years old who looked to be in his early eighties. He had lived hard, smoked many packs of Winstons, never wore a t-shirt with attached sleeves, a faded bicep tattoo in the shape of possibly an eagle, and a face reminiscent of halloween pirate mask. He'd be my driver for the day, and he waved me along with him when assignments were done.

Everyday on the job looked almost the same: assignments followed by a short, deliberate walk to the garage where the garbage trucks were kept. Tan in color, they were beastly machines with a bench seat inside, usually open side doors with a padded yellow bar to prevent the passenger from accidentally slipping out while in motion. That was the cab. Most of of the shift, though, I would spend riding on a foot-wide platform at the back of the truck, holding on with both hands while in motion, in a position similar to a windsurfer.

It wasn't difficult to hang on since we didn't regularly travel over 10 miles an hour.

Jerry was an odd one. The truck was warming up as we stood near it in the garage, breathing in exhaust and testing the hopper/crusher mechanism on the back. When enough time had passed, we hopped in the cab and off we went.

That day we had one of the close routes, on the east side of the city. It was a series of tight neighborhoods, small city lots, homes built in the 50s and 60s when the city shaped itself around the post-war babyboom. As we rode, Jerry in the front, me gripping and hopping off the back, the day got brighter, hotter and the truck filled slowly. At some of the larger piles (called "jackpots" in sanitation engineer parlance) Jerry would put the truck in park, slowly crawl out and help toss trash into the belly of the machine. Once in a while he'd toss out an insult or slur towards the people who left the trash. Jerry, in general, was a surly fellow of few words.

That day, unlike most days, the truck was full before we had finished the route. Jerry shout-muttered something like “that’s it - time to run out to the dump” and made a hand signal that looked like a grenadier hailing a cab . That meant I’d be back in the cab for the 30 minute ride out to the dump, situated outside the city in the hills. Our ride out was a mix of FM radio and first or second-hand smoke. At one point, the song “In a Big Country” by the pop group Big Country played - for some reason especially clear through the truck’s modest speaker set-up. No doors, June air whistling and Big Country’s lead singer Stuart Adamson pleading after the songs mad drum opening:

I've never seen you look like this without a reason  
Another promise fallen through, another season passes by you  
I never took the smile away from anybody's face  
And that's a desperate way to look  
For someone who is still a child

In a big country dreams stay with you  
Like a lover's voice fires the mountainside  
Stay alive

As the song played every word, note, chord, beat struck us both - from what I could perceive - deeper and deeper. Maybe it was the long noise and exhaust. The song was faded out I said, making sure Jerry heard me, I said “what a great song, fuck”. Profanity as camaraderie.

Jerry replied. “It is a big country.”

We emptied the truck at the dump and finished the route, carving up the city block by block.