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Down in the Dumps

I never know when I'll be here. I'm just here, so I go back to work. The work needs doing. I like the work I'm doing. I like the sense of continuity I get from picking up where I left off last time.

This was a dump. Car bodies, kitchen refuse, city dump-truck leavings, discarded appliances, destructed houses, concrete rubble, clean fill, industrial waste. I've sorted, piled, burned, and composted.

I built a shelter of bottles, boards, timber, and rubble, sheets of glass and sheets of metal, to use some of the material and to have a shelter. Sometimes it rains. I rarely use the shelter. Mostly, I work.

I've never before thought much about my progress, but now that I have thought about it, I see the house and the garden, the spring and its clean run-off going down the clear channel, and I remember when I didn't know there were three separate ridges and a spring under the garbage.

This time, I cut car bodies into movable pieces of sheet-metal and manageable pieces of steel frame. I have almost the entire center canyon cleared of garbage.

The compostable material has helped build good soil in the garden and in the swale below the spring. The profusion of lush weeds in the unused ground doesn't look disorderly to me. There was metal and glass and garbage, and now there are living plants, dense, varied and healthy.

No one dumps here anymore. The dump was abandoned long before I began to come here. Still, I find ten broken bales of alfalfa that have not deteriorated. Good. I haul them to the garden and use them for fertilizer and mulch.

The garden is in good shape. Tomatoes ripen on the vines. But no ripe ones. Corn fills out. Squash hangs heavy on the vines. Melons ripen. But no ripe melons.

Did I ever eat anything from this garden? Or did I always grow it and then leave before anything ripened? I don't think I ever ate anything here.

I never thought about anything much before. I just worked. I liked it better that way. It was much less confusing. So I start back to work on the boards. I pull them out and sort them. Someone has been eating tomatoes. I realize that as I'm loading

boards onto the wagon.

That's why I kept wondering, have I eaten, did I just eat? Because someone has eaten tomatoes and, since I'm the only one ever here, I must have eaten them.

I scratch my hand on a nail. I put the board down, observe the cut, suck the blood, and spit it out. Did I cook the tomatoes? Or why do I keep thinking of the stove? Thinking too much. That's why. I never found it necessary to think about it before. It won't bear scrutiny. Better get to work, quit maundering, getting careless. I wouldn't cook a ripe, fresh tomato, so I didn't cook it, and I didn't eat any, period, so the answer is no, I didn't eat.

I find large panes of glass, some of them whole. I'll use them to build a greenhouse.

Someone hung a mobile in the greenhouse I built from those boards and panes of glass. Snowflakes cut from thin sheets of white plastic. I even know which material pile the plastic came from.

I stepped into the greenhouse and saw the mobile, and my reaction was as strong as if someone approached silently and yelled in my ear. I jumped back, yelled in fright, and fled from the greenhouse. Then I thought, what's this? I put that mobile up myself.

Didn't didn't didn't. I stacked that plastic up there, put other stuff on top of it and never touched it since.

I put it up. No other way it could have gotten there, because there is nobody else here. Ever, before or after. Then what's it all about?

Something to do. Clean it up. Make order of it. Disorder progressing into order. The next step is, cut up six more cars and move the parts up the hill. Then I'll have another half-acre clear for garden.

Thinking about it is something I've never done before. Now, thinking about it interferes with getting anything done. I cut my hand on a nail over thinking about a tomato. Somebody, not me, ate a ripe tomato. And other vegetables. And that other voice, that keeps saying forget thinking and get back to work, that's not me. I know to work. That's why I'm here.

The first time I was here, I didn't wonder, where'd it come from, what's it about, why am I here, who's in charge? I just started digging down through garbage, looking for dirt. Get the dirt opened up to light, and something will grow. That's all I thought. Cut, pile, sort, and use. Burn, judiciously. Build a shelter. Build the soil. Build a future. That's the part that

bothers me. The future. I've built a shelter and planted a garden. Do I eat? Do I sleep? I don't think so. Why have I been afraid to consider the processes? Whose voice is that, saying get back to work?

It's the voice saying if you become too analytic of processes, you'll expose the dream and wake.

And I woke and thought, "Who ate the tomatoes?" I knew it was more than tomatoes, much more.

I told my wife, "I've been having a developing dream for more than thirty years, only I didn't realize it until this morning."

"What's it about?"

"I'm going to a dump. It's deep in cans, bottles, car bodies, all kinds of garbage. Things haven't deteriorated, but it hasn't been used in years. There's nobody else there."

"What happens when you're there?"

"I'm cleaning it up. Over the years, I've made a lot of progress."

"I could see you doing that, cleaning up a dump."

Somebody did eat a tomato. Tomatoes. A whole stew, with cheese in it. Where did I get the cheese?

"You don't think there's anybody there? In the whole world?"

"There is. But that's just starting to happen. I don't know yet just what is happening, except when I don't think about it, and then the whole picture is clear. If I try to think of it, it goes. Trying to put it into words messes it up."

"What does it look like?"

"A dump. Only now you can see the contour of the land, and there's a garden and a shelter. Still a lot of work to do, but progress shows."

And someone eats tomatoes. That's good. Eat the food. I grow it to eat. Only, how come, now that I'm looking for tomatoes, there's never any ripe for me? If a man works to grow the plants, he should eat of the food.

There's never anyone home. There are ashes and coals in the stove. A little bit of smoke rises above the chimney. How about leaving a few ripe tomatoes for a working man? Maybe leave a melon ripe on the vine. That voice I didn't name earlier says, "Leave a melon? Leave a tomato for a shadow thought, a passing dream? You gobble and forget."

"Shut up."

"Don't change anything."

"Shut up."

“Don’t change anything. Everything unknown brings danger.”

“Shut up.”

Still, the work is real. I wait and watch for someone as well when I pile sheet-metal or plant garden as when I sit in front of the shelter.

I’ve seeded another quarter-acre to alfalfa, to build the soil.

Everything changes every day. A trucker hauls all the metal, all the glass, all the recyclable materials away. Good. It opens up so much ground. The trucker, I know him. I went to eighth grade with him, only he’s running a recycling business now, used to drive a garbage truck. He made a deal with my wife.

My wife? The sun shines in my bedroom window, and I reach back into the dream, try to remember. My wife? You mean my wife?

I asked her, “If you could sell something of mine without me knowing and keep the money, would you?”

“Certainly not. You know how I am about money.”

And she is, fair to the penny, honest to a fault.

Nobody ever said I wouldn’t get money from selling the materials. I want to ask my trucker friend. I can’t remember his name.

I never get there when he’s there. Once, I see him leaving. I run and try to catch him, but I just breathe oily dust; he never knows I’m there. Okay. I don’t care. They can have the money. Money. That’s not the worry, come to think of it. What’s up? What’s next?

Why is there never one, not even one ripe tomato for me?

I used to enjoy this work. Now I’m nervous most of the time, watching for someone to show. I’ve cut my hand twice on sheet-metal, and I have a glass sliver embedded in my thumb. Why didn’t I have gloves on? Oh, I do, the same gloves. I skim sheet-metal flat through the air, toward the wagon.

I’ll leave a note in the shelter, on the stove. Another on the door. Just write, “What’s up? What’s next?” signed, “Jason.” No, signed, “The gardener.”

I’ll leave a note. Up the hill, down the hill, through the house. I can’t find pencil and paper. I pick something up for a pencil, but it’s a stick, and it sticks to me when I try to drop it, sticks harder when I try to throw it down, and it’s biting me. I wake, and my hand is numb because I’ve been sleeping on my arm.

Dream it. Dream it again. Finish the dream. But I can’t

sleep. I don't dream. Then I dream phony dreams. Fine dreams, beautiful dreams, but they're phonies, set up the instant before I wake to cover what I'm actually dreaming. It doesn't matter. It drifts out of my mind.

Then one day the sun shines through my office windows, and I'm sorting invoices, and I find one that says I've bought a huge quantity of recyclable materials. At a good price. I could make some money on it, but where will I put it while I sort it out and make deals to sell it?

It's confusing. I don't remember doing that. I phone. No phone is hooked up at that place. I go around to see. An old bakery, but it's shut down. There isn't any metal there, no glass, no garbage, no trucks. Okay. Somebody's having fun. Forget it. But I did write a check, or someone did, and it got cashed, and I can't tell the signature from my own.

I can't put it out of my mind.

After dinner, Elaine asked, "Are you down in the dumps, honey?"

"No. No. I forgot about it. I have been dreaming, but I haven't remembered the dreams, only now I do."

The note. It's taken care of. The note on the stove in the shelter. The note on the door of the shelter.

But wait. I didn't write it. I'm sure of that. Almost sure. They're there though, so I must have written them. Go back to work. It's taken care of.

No, wait. I didn't write those notes. I didn't write them.

Okay. But it's taken care of. Don't worry about it.

I didn't write them, I know that, so I don't know if they're right or not. I have to look at them.

No. You'd better not. Wake up.

It could even be a message for me from someone else.

Hardly. Wake up. Better wake up now.

Maybe two messages for me.

Wake up.

Phooey to you. Shut up. The note says,

Wake up.

Familiar hand-writing. It says, "Wake up."

The one on the stove says, "Jason; wake up. Howard's here to see you."

Sunshine. It's hot on the cot. I'm sweaty.

I sat up and leaned against the wall in the sunshine. Howard stood in front of me. I said, "What are you doing?"

The woman stepped forward. I've always known her, but I don't know her at all.

“He has the check for you.”

“Who are you?”

“Ellen. Remember me? I’m your wife.”

“Oh. Oh yes. I do. I’ve had the strangest dream.”

Howard said, “Anyway, here’s your check. It puts you in good shape to finish your projects.”

“Did I say sell?”

“Sure you said sell. Don’t you remember anything? You said it would look good and open up ground. It does look good too. See it yourself.”

“It does. It does. Sure. I’m glad to have it out of the way. Wow, it does look good. Have I been here all the time, full time?”

“Honey, you’re rarely here. Not so’s you’d notice and doing anything useful. You fell into a vacation when Howard hauled away the last load.”

“Was this a dump?”

“Boy, when you go on vacation, you really go on vacation. Lunch. Howard, can you eat with us?”

“The meals you fix here, anytime.”

Tomatoes. Great, ripe, red tomatoes. She quarters them with a small, sharp knife. Roast ears of corn, steaming. Small carrots. Medium size carrots. Kohlrabi. Cheese that Howard brought.

“Howard.” He follows one tomato quarter down with another. I pick up a piece. “Howard, did you haul everything away, everything?” Juice runs from the tomato, clear, pink drops in the sunlight.

“Everything.”

“Didn’t miss anything?”

“Hey, what is this? You’re head cleanup man, and me and Ellen, we’re no slackers either. You know we didn’t miss anything. What’s on your mind?”

“What’s that noise, what’s that noise, ringing noise? Did we miss something? Somewhere out there, that ringing noise. Is there a clock, alarm clock ringing?”

Bite. Bite the tomato. Eat. My jaws don’t work. Ellen, you beautiful, Howard, I’ll be right back. I’ve got to find that thing and shut it off.

I woke and grabbed for the alarm clock. “Shut it off. Shut it off.”

“Okay. Okay. I got it. Geez. What a grouch.”

“Who missed it?”

“Missed what?”

“The alarm clock.” Then I looked at her. “Who are you?”

“Oh boy. This morning’s starting out right. Do you want me to call the office and tell them you won’t be in?”

“What office?”

“Oh boy. I’m phoning.”

The phone rings and rings again. If you’re calling out, why does it ring here? Only it isn’t the phone, and I wake up and sit up in bed. Helen comes into the room. I ask her, “What’s that bell?”

“A bell rings on the trucks when they back up. So they won’t run over anybody.”

“What trucks?”

“They’re delivering the materials you bought.”

Out in the back yard, they’ve dumped cut-up car bodies, glass, wood, metal, a pile of copper, another pile of car radiators, broken appliances. More trucks wait to dump.

“Howard. Howard, wait a minute. It’s a mistake.”

But it isn’t Howard. It’s his younger brother. He hands me the contract, with my signature on it, and I try to assimilate what it says.

Helen starts shouting, “Jason. Jason. Don’t do it. Wait.”

Howard’s voice comes from somewhere. He says, “Bite the tomato.”

Elaine screams, “Jason, Jason, you wait.” She runs between the trucks toward me. If they don’t run over her there obscured in the dust,

Howard says, “Jason, bite.”

I bit. Sweet burst of tomato. Ellen sliced cheese for me, sliced cheese for Howard. She said, “I didn’t mind living in a dump, but I’m glad it’s gone. It’s clean and open and fresh.”

Howard said, “Here’s to hauling it away,” raised his carrot in a salute and then bit it and chewed.

I bit my carrot, crisp, and the longer I chewed, the sweeter it tasted.