

Garbage Cans and Dreams of Wild Roses

“Damn dirty garbage cans and damn dirty people. I’d like to drive this truck right through a bunch of these houses.” Lids and cans clattered and rattled as if they were thrown. I woke to the words and the sounds of metal coming through my open window. I slapped my feet on the cold, bare floor, walked to the window and looked into the early morning. All I saw was the back of the garbage truck as it roared away, up the alley toward 14th street. Burned diesel fuel streamed black into the early morning air from the exhaust pipe that exited above the gray cab.

I got back in bed and pulled the covers up, but I couldn’t go back to sleep. I got up and dressed. The floor was cold, but the morning already warmed up. It would be hot as soon as the sun rose.

Downtown, midmorning, I walked into the Empire Building, read the signs on the wall, and started to open the door to go into the waiting room of suite 11. The other side of the door, a familiar voice peaked in an intense diatribe, “Damn dirty people and their rotting chicken and sticky paint cans and rotting garbage and filthy shit of all kinds. Who do they think they are, and who the hell do they think I am?”

I started to push the door open. The doorknob jerked out of my hand, and a man in a grey uniform, sleeves rolled up, shirt stained with sweat, walked out of the waiting room, through the hallway, and out into sunlight.

I stood in the open doorway.

The woman behind the desk said, “Are you Mr. Riley?” I nodded to the thin woman with red-blond hair pillowed around her pale face. The clock on the wall behind and above her told me I was four minutes late for my appointment. She said, “We’re ready for you if you’ll come in now, Mr. Riley.”

In the inner office, the balding, square-faced psychiatrist, remaining grey hair cut close to his head, pointed to a chair. I walked toward him and sat down across the desk from him. A faint smell of garbage lingered in the room and mixed with the smell of leather and plastic coverings on furniture and plants growing from planters.

“I’m James Riley.”

“Yes. I’m Doctor Schuman.” He reached toward me, and we shook hands across the desk.

“Is that garbageman a patient of yours?”

“I don’t discuss patients. Even as far as identifying them.”

“I wasn’t trying to pry. A garbageman passed me outside the waiting room. He’s the garbageman who woke me up this morning. I asked if he was a patient of yours to bring up the subject.”

“The garbageman interests you.”

“Well sure, or I wouldn’t have brought it up. And I don’t know if it’s so much the garbageman who interests me. It startled me when I heard him here, because that’s what woke me up. The noise he made at five-thirty this morning behind my house.”

Doctor Schuman placed his pencil on the blotter on top of his desk and adjusted it until it lay as close to the edge as it would go without rolling off. He rolled his chair back, opened the top drawer of his desk and looked in, shut it, pulled his chair forward, and picked up the pencil.

I asked him, “What were you looking for?”

“What? In the desk? Oh. I don’t know.” He shook his head. “I looked in there without really thinking about it.” He placed his pencil on the edge of the blotter and adjusted it. He looked up at me scooted his chair back, opened the drawer, took out some tissue, and cleaned his glasses.

“You know, you just finished cleaning your glasses as I came in.”

The psychiatrist dropped his tissue into the drawer and slammed it shut. The slam of the drawer caused the pencil to roll from the edge of the blotter onto the desktop with enough momentum that it rolled to the edge and fell on the floor. He pushed his chair back and leaned forward to pick up the pencil. His shift of weight shot the chair backward out from under him, and he fell forward and hit his head hard on the edge of the desk. I saw only his back, with the desk between us, and I started around the desk.

Doctor Schuman felt for his glasses, looked up watery-eyed, still on his hands and knees, and said, “No, no. Sit down please. Stay in your chair. I’ll manage here.”

I sat back down.

The Doctor stood up, straightened his suit coat, pulled his chair forward, sat down, and put his glasses on. The right lens had shattered without coming out of the frame. He stared blankly. His right eye behind

the crazed lens seemed to be a dozen jagged particles of eye. Each part looked at me from a slightly different angle.

“Your glasses are broken.”

“Oh yes. Yes, I can see they are broken. I can see that. Well, I have another pair here.” He put the broken glasses in a drawer, brought out a pair with lighter colored rims, and settled them on his face.

“You all right? You took a pretty heavy knock on the head there.”

“Mr. Riley, please sit down. I’m quite all right, and even if I weren’t, I would be able to handle it.”

“What if you got knocked out cold, though? You know, maybe you should check with a doctor.”

“I am a doctor, Mr. Riley. Jesus Christ. Let me see. Jesus me. Where are we?”

He looked through his different glasses at me. They made him look like a slightly different man. Maybe we wouldn’t have cohesion to where we had been before he fell and hit his head.

“Was that why you came in to see me? The garbageman woke you up this morning?”

“No. I’ve had the appointment for two months. I came in because I promised my wife I’d see a psychiatrist, and I have felt, what? disoriented? lately, since I came down from the mountains, particularly this morning, so that influenced my decision to come in.”

“Were you thinking of not keeping your promise to your wife?”

“It doesn’t mean anything now. She left with my friend, Davis, won’t be back anymore. He has a blue Harley seventy-four. I don’t know if they were on that motorcycle or in his car.”

“Do you have children?”

“She took them with her.”

“When?”

“Saturday night or Sunday morning. I came in Sunday morning, and they were gone. If I had a bigger motorcycle, maybe she would have stayed. I don’t really know if she hates me or loves him or loves that Harley seventy-four. That is a lot of power between her legs.”

“I would like to know which it was if you find out.”

“Sure, me too.”

“I mean Saturday night or Sunday morning, which it was they left. If

you ever find out, it's something I'd like to know."

"Oh. Okay."

A knot as big as half a pigeon's egg rose from his forehead. We didn't say anything. I wondered if his silence might be a symptom of cerebral concussion. I stood up, leaned over the desk, and looked into his face to see if his pupils were dilated.

Doctor Schuman drew back as if I startled him. He turned his face away and motioned, with some irritation, to sit down. I sat back down, unsure about the pupils of his eyes.

"So you think she left because of this motorcycle the guy has."

"No. I think she left because I just could not be what she wanted me to be. I tried. I became compliant beyond recognition, but what woman could respect a man who would try to change as casually as changing shirts? She told me to get out. I stayed with a friend until I found a small house to rent out the other side of town.

"I still don't understand the permanence of the changes. I wake up thinking she's knocked on the door, and nobody's there. I wait around in the afternoon and evening, restless as a hungry cat, but I don't go any place in case someone comes by. But I don't realize that's why I'm not going anywhere until it's too late to go."

"What can you do about it?"

"Nothing. I'm so enraged by the way things have turned out, I feel moved to violence, but the fact that I tended toward violence, or that she thought I tended toward violence, helped bring about the deterioration of our marriage, so violence isn't a possibility for me. Sometimes I'm so unsure what violence is, I hesitate to take any action, for fear that action is violent."

We sat quietly. I stood again, leaned forward, and looked closely at the man across the desk. The pupils of his eyes dilated. I waved my hand in front of his face and saw a diminished reaction.

I walked over and opened the door into the waiting room. The receptionist turned from her keyboard and looked at me. I said, "You'd better come in here. He's hurt." The woman with the bush of red-blond hair surrounding her face walked quickly into the room, and I shut the door after her. "He took a nasty knock on the head. I think he's going into shock or he's suffering concussion. You'd better get medical help."

The woman spoke to the psychiatrist. He turned toward her, but he gave her no answer. Fear lined his face. It looked like he couldn't focus his eyes.

The receptionist dithered about in confusion.

I worked for her attention. "Get the phone book, call the hospital, and arrange to get him there."

She fumbled through the phone book. She said, "Oh dear. Oh dear." She paged through the A section and the H section without stopping and then started at the beginning again. I took the book from her, found the number, and called, and they came in an ambulance. Two police cars and four policemen came with them.

When they loaded him into the ambulance on a stretcher, he looked up at me and reached out to me, as if he wanted to say something but couldn't. I started to get into the ambulance with him, but two policemen grabbed my arms and stopped me. The ambulance left, siren howling and lights flashing. The tallest policeman asked me what had happened. I told him, and the policeman asked, "Did you argue with him?"

"No. We didn't argue. We were having a psychiatric session, a treatment, an analysis, you know, doing the work he does."

"And you were the patient. He was treating you. What was he treating you for?"

"That doesn't have anything to do with what happened here."

"Maybe it doesn't. But what I read on his note pad here says, 'tending toward violence.' Is that you, Mr. Riley, tending toward violence? Is that what he was treating you for, violence?"

"I see what you're thinking, but don't carry it any further. Just give him some time, and he'll be fine. Then you can ask him what happened."

Two days later, Doctor Schuman regained coherence and remembered what had happened and confirmed the account I gave to the police. The police came around to my house and questioned me twice in the meantime. When the psychiatrist told them what had happened, they came back and questioned me twice more. I said, "Didn't you say he told you what happened, and you were satisfied that cleared me of any suspicion of violence?"

The shorter, heavier policeman stood near the front door. The taller policeman stood too close in front of me. The name tag pinned to his shirt

said, "Bryce Price." He unsnapped his pistol holster and snapped it again, unsnapped it, and snapped it again. He said, "How do you pay your rent and buy groceries if you don't have a job?"

"We've been over this too many times. I'm between jobs. I have enough money to live on for a while, until I find a job. Check on it. You wrote down some of the places I've applied. Go ask them if I'm telling the truth."

Bryce Price backed away from me, turned, and walked toward the door. "That's what we're going to do. We'll see you again. Count on it." Both policemen walked out of the house. They left the door standing open. They walked from my small house under summer trees to their patrol car, got in and drove away.

Doctor Schuman's receptionist called Tuesday morning and asked me to come in Thursday. When I sat down, the psychiatrist said, "I don't intend to charge you for your last visit." He wore glasses different from any I had seen him wear before.

"Okay."

The psychiatrist made a steeple of all his fingers and said, "Mr. Riley, marriage has a three-cornered foundation. One corner is love. Another corner is finances, and the third is..."

I said, "I only came in because the woman out there asked me to. I didn't know what you might need from me, but I came to find out. I've decided not to seek treatment."

"The third cornerstone of that foundation..."

"I don't think we'd get anywhere if we continued, do you? Talking about my marriage and trying to adjust me to it is pointless, since my marriage is finished. We're already split up. Permanently. We aren't getting back together. Maybe you could analyze some of what I've been having trouble with in my existence, but I've also analyzed that, with no good results from analysis alone."

The psychiatrist leaned back in his chair and folded his hands across his stomach. "That decision is your decision, of course."

I stood up, walked to the door, and opened it. The Doctor said, "I see one major problem."

I leaned against the edge of the half-opened door and looked back at him. "There's a large difference between what you want to be and what you are. You want to be successful, but you're struggling with everything, even

basic survival. Think about that.”

“Okay. Sure.”

I started to walk away, and the psychiatrist said, “Most people who need psychiatric help don’t get around to getting it until they’re in deep enough trouble, we just hope to keep them going, and it takes a long while to make any actual progress. For a while, I thought you had a head start on that.” Anxiety etched his face. I thought of the way he reached toward me when they loaded him into the ambulance. He sat forward, on the edge of his chair.

I looked at him for a minute, but he didn’t say anything more. I left and shut the door behind me. I walked through the waiting room. The receptionist watched me and said something to me, but I didn’t distinguish the words, and I didn’t ask her what she had said. I walked out of the waiting room and shut the door.

Outside, sun shone on asphalt, concrete sidewalks, and concrete buildings. Heat of direct sunshine soaked into me. Heat of the concrete sidewalk soaked up through my shoes. I walked to where my car sat in the sunshine and soaked up heat. I unlocked the car, rolled all the windows down, and drove out of town. Hot wind hammered through my car. Twisting asphalt highway wound into the mountains.

I drove a familiar, rough dirt road, parked under spreading branches of a pine tree, walked away from the tree, and found wild flowers, a tall blue sky, pine and fir forests. I walked through wild grasses, flowers, and moss.

Birds flew and sang in mountain sunshine. I soaked solitude and quiet of wild country with hot summer sun. I walked across green meadow and then between tall trees and grass growing in bunches on forest floor. Wild sounds of birds flying through the day and sounds of wild water in the canyon ahead of me reached through sunshine toward me. I walked down a trail in stone descending one side of a black stone canyon and looked at and listened to animals and plants around me. Water roared down a tall fall into stone and flowed rapidly away, toward the sea.

I undressed in hot sunshine, left my clothes on black stone, picked my way over rough stones fallen from the face of the mountain, and jumped into cold water pooling deep beneath the fall. Cold, clean water stunned me. I tried and tried again to breathe evenly, gasped in air, treaded water, and smoothed my breathing.

I stretched out in the water and swam into deeper water where mist from the waterfall filled the air. I turned and floated on my back and looked up. Sunlight broke into bands of rainbow colors through mist thrown high into summer air by falling water hammering stone.

Man's world retreated beyond the mist, grew smaller and less significant until only the waterfall and its mist, the thundering sound of water against stone and I, floating as still as still water, remained. I locked images, sounds, cold, the smell of clean water and the clean peace of this place into my memories, deeply into the core of my being to nurture me through the rest of my existence.