

The Garbage Man



Jason Darrah was born in Sioux City, Iowa. Raised in an atmosphere dominated by drugs and violence, he chose a path of crime that led him to prison at the age of sixteen. Viewing prison as an opportunity to find redemption through self-improvement, while incarcerated he dedicated himself to academics and to helping others. He is now certified in braille transcription, mental health first aid, guide dog training, and is a mentor for struggling souls recently released from prison. He recently received his first college degree and will continue his academic endeavors at the University of Iowa in the Fall. Jason Darrah has been a garbage man for two years. He can be reached at jasonboydarrah73@gmail.com

JASON DARRAH

I watched his arrival through the eyes of a child. I stood breathless as he swung from his truck, huge but graceful. Wrapped in sunlight banded in silver, he was a comic book super hero come to life. After quickly emptying the can, he deftly remounted .

Then he paused, only for a moment, but to me it has become a moment which defies eternity. His laser-blue eyes peered at me through the lightning bolt crags of a sun-forged face. A smile flickered at the edge of his chew-stained lips. And he was gone.

That was the day my life was forever changed. That was the day the Garbage Man became my hero.

Thirty-four years have passed since that summer day, when I was an eight-year-old boy . I still smile every time I look back to that moment, to when the Garbage Man briefly locked eyes with a hopeful child filled with adulation. That look was an agreement, a contract promising that even a small boy, if he held his dreams tightly enough, could himself be a Garbage Man.

And now I am one.

But the sun doesn't shine quite as brightly as it did when I was a kid. Don't get me wrong, I love being a Garbage Man, but playing the role, as I do now, is a lot different than seeing it on stage. And the longer I'm a Garbage Man myself, the more questions I'm asked about the position. This leads me to the conclusion that the general public has a convoluted view of this most noble vocation. Although many people are dead-on with some of their assumptions, they are generally shooting air balls when it comes to others, and—as a true defender of trash—it is my responsibility to set the record straight.

People who work for the city make great money and are provided awesome benefits. Many people be-

lieve the Garbage Man works for the city. He doesn't, at least not in the Midwestern gem that is Sioux City, Iowa. People have this belief because up until the 1980s, we *did* work for the city. But in an attempt to save money, city management contracted the job out to a private company. This in turn led to said private company using staffing agencies to provide their hiring services--services which exploit desperate job-seekers by guaranteeing fast work at a high-turnover job.

The result is a dangerous, highly strenuous occupation that provides no benefits, at a near-minimum wage-rate. So no, we do not work for the city, and we feel more than a trifle of animosity for it, as well .

Many people believe the Garbage Man is uneducated. This is partly true. The low qualifications funnel a unique sector of society into the position. Practically all of my thirty-three coworkers are military veterans or ex-convicts. Many of the vets have psychological disorders, as do the former prisoners, and this particular job provides the structured hard work that isolates individuals from social constraints encumbrances. Contrary to the above-mentioned assumption, though, many of the vets attended college through the GI Bill, and the ex-cons have a surprising array of life experiences that no formal education can replicate. So although we may not all have degrees, we are not uneducated; our experiences just don't represent traditional models of education. And why are vets and cons so similar? When asked that question, all vets will almost inevitably say, "The only difference between a prisoner and a soldier is the direction the gun is pointing."

Garbage Men attain other kinds of education on the job. A friend of mine recently cited an article she had read, which stated that we know everybody's secrets. When asked if this were true, I answered without hesitation: Yes, we know everybody's secrets. While this might be disturbing to some , I don't think this should be a real surprise to anyone, an opinion which I see confirmed each time a customer is unable to lock eyes with me on those rare occasions when necessity dictates they are present when we dump their little cans of discarded secrets. But yes, in that four or five seconds that their unwanted are spread before us, we see a snapshot of every habit and embarrassing secret the customer has.

Automobile drivers regularly fly around the gar-

bage trucks with reckless abandon, assuming they are not (or perhaps not caring whether they are) a threat to the brave men who run back and forth across the street before them. Contrary to these travelers' beliefs, , the Garbage Man lacks x-ray vision, and so reckless drivers are a huge threat to our safety. As a matter of fact, a recent study ranked the Garbage Man as having the third most dangerous job in the United States. What's our biggest threat? Chain-smoking soccer moms desperately speeding their kids to an academic drop zone. No kidding. We jokingly refer to the high-visibility vests we wear while working as "mini-van targets." So please drive carefully and with respect when around the Garbage Man.

I am a Garbage Man in America's heartland, a place where there is already a unique pride in hard physical work. Some people have the opposite belief—that our job is easy and we don't earn the respect that someone in a better economic bracket may deserve. If you are one of these people, I recommend treading lightly when voicing your opinion to the Garbage Man. We are tough as liver gristle and have a general hatred for the world. Ok, we're not misanthropes, but we do work a tough job and have a lot of reasons to be mad at the world. Treat us with the respect we deserve; nobody wants to find how difficult it is to escape the confines of a garbage can feet-first.

People are always asking me to tell them stories regarding my garbage-laden adventures. I never refuse. My most notable memory is about a little girl who couldn't have been more than eight years old. There she was, standing at the curb, bawling like a ruptured sprinkler, screaming, "Nooooooo! Noooooo!" No more than twenty feet behind her, two adults stood stone-faced and determined. I was at a loss to decipher the scene before me. Not willing to get involved in mysterious domestic matters, I ignored the screams of the little girl which, it was increasingly apparent, were directed at me. I was bemused until the moment I dumped the can. There before me, completely filling the truck's hopper, was an eclectic rainbow of plastic toys. *Somebody's been a bad little girl*, I thought. That's when I learned the disturbing truth: Contrary to my own experience with the Garbage Man, we are not every child's hero. 