

IRINA DUMITRESCU

TRASH

I LIVE IN A PLACE THAT CARES A LOT ABOUT GARBAGE. Garbage is not just a utility here, but a way of life. A normal person might be tempted to push trash to the margins of their thoughts, to let it drop off into unconsciousness for most of their waking days. Our City makes sure nothing of the sort will happen here. We must concentrate on the matter of garbage all the time. Even in our brief moments of respite, we must be open to the possibility of garbage. We must maintain a permanent garbage orientation.

The City has ways of achieving this. Unpredictability is one of them. We must never be able to guess when the garbage will be taken away. Each address has its own days for pickup, and a regular person who did not know the ways of the City might guess that it would always be the same day of the week, spaced apart at regular intervals. A week, a fortnight. Maybe the regular trash and the recycling and the organic compost could all be taken away on the same day. But that would be easy. It might allow us some days of rest. It would give us a clean slate, and who among us has earned a clean slate?

No, the City has other plans for us. First, there is a calendar that tells us when each bin is picked up. The bins are not always picked up on the same day, but neither are they spaced out equally over the week. Instead, the City has developed a pattern with exceptions, so we are always, always guessing. Sometimes the black household trash is taken away on a Monday. It usually is, in fact, but not always. Sometimes we have to put it out on a Tuesday or a Saturday. There is no way to guess. The yellow and blue recycling bins have their own day, but the larger recycling containers have another schedule altogether. The recycling is picked up every four weeks, except when it is every six weeks, just to keep us on our toes.

I once lived in an apartment in a large American city. We threw our trash into a large bin in the centre of the parking lot. There was no recycling and no compost; we simply threw whatever we wanted into this massive,

ever-forgiving container and pressed it away from our care. Sometimes I had twinges of regret about the world I was helping to suffocate, but I had no other option. I was free to be as irresponsible as I wanted, but I had no freedom to be responsible. You can't have both.

I once lived in a house in a large Canadian city. There was a whole book of rules about garbage with smartly designed graphics to show which items went into which containers and which items could be recycled or had to be thrown into the guilt can. The book even told you where and how to place the bin so it would be easy to lift and dump into the truck. Reading was almost unnecessary, as someone unfamiliar with the local language would still manage just fine, and the trash pickup was on a regular schedule, so you simply had to know your day and then follow the cute pictures in the little book. There was a choreography, yes, but once you learned it you could keep dancing. Every week, the same melody. The only tricky thing was that the trash had a special locking mechanism to keep the raccoons out. Raccoons are smarter than people, so they tended to be better at handling the bin than I was.

When we first moved into our place in the City, there were a few months of stress with our landlords. We had come from a different city in the same Country. In our previous home we lived in a large apartment building and were not responsible for taking out the trash, but a general sense of unease still presided over the garbage despite almost no human interaction taking place in that part of the courtyard. The garbage bins had signs above them, written in angry block letters with a thick black marker, admonishing us not to put any food in the household trash. All of the food had to go into the organic waste or else rats would be attracted and infest the premises. The signs were always renewed, and in the firmness of the lettering we discerned the landlord's increasing frustration with our intractability. My husband and I spent years disciplining ourselves to put all the food waste into the compost bin. All of it, bones and everything.

Despite being in the same garbage-haunted Country, our new City had different rules. For a while, we followed the rules of the old place, which we had so carefully learned, but the City had its own way of dealing with old bones. Here, bones definitely went into the regular trash and absolutely not into the compost. In fact, nothing that had been part of an animal could go into the compost except for raw eggshells. Raw eggshells were the only exception, and you had to know about it. For months our landlords—or,

more accurately, the wife—stewed and steamed about how badly we were dividing our trash. She finally came to talk to me about it, maybe because I'm a woman and the kitchen and the trash seem naturally to belong to my domain. When she did, she was so angry she seemed to be on the verge of crying. If the garbage collectors notice that our organic waste has the wrong things in it, then they won't take it, she said. She will be stuck, in high summer, with a bin full of rotting apple peels, cauliflower leaves, and chicken skins.

I laughed at the time, thinking it was small-minded to be so upset about trash. It seemed like the kind of thing that well-off people think about when they have no other problems, and I suspected that it might be typical of the Country, which is rich despite its bloody past—a past in which so many people were thrown into the garbage or recycled.

I thought it was this same mentality that caused so many people in the Country to have toilets with little shelves where the shit sits for a while even after you flush. It's a country where people like the opportunity to examine their shit closely, I thought, and seem to be okay with the fact that they subsequently have to fight with it a little until it goes down. There is the little brush beside every toilet, of course, but the brush is meant for scraping traces of shit off the porcelain and not for manhandling entire loads into the water. But you also cannot leave traces of your discharge in the toilet. That is considered rude, and if you do it someone will put up a strongly lettered sign about it. So every bowel movement requires at least three flushes: one to get rid of the toilet paper so you can analyze what your body has excreted, one to nudge the offensive matter on its way once it has given up whatever secrets it has, and another to clean the toilet bowl and the brush. Water is cheap here.

Under the pressure of neighbourly resentment, I began learning the ways of my new City. I studied the instructions online, which were lengthy and in small print, and I learned where to put dry leaves and coffee grounds, tin cans and cardboard boxes, diapers and aluminum foil, old sweaters and torn-up shoes, white glass and green glass and brown glass. I learned what times it was permitted to throw glass in the glass containers and on which days it was illegal, as the noise would disturb the peace. I learned which bottles had deposits on them and which didn't, which could be taken to any store for a refund and which had to go to the same store where they were purchased. I learned the quiet etiquette of throwing away bottles, that if you

were out and about in the City you left them next to a trash bin and not in it, so the retirees who collected bottles to supplement their pensions did not have to dig through the garbage for seven cents. People went to great lengths for these bottles—especially the plastic ones, which were worth twenty-five cents and were lighter to carry too. Once, at a train station, I called a security officer after seeing a man climb up from a track onto a platform in a suspicious manner, sprinkle a liquid down behind him, and then walk away quickly. I thought that I should say something, and I didn't want to risk my train going up in a bang because I'd been too much of a coward to report it. The security officer checked the tracks and found nothing. He told me that the man had probably jumped down there to collect a plastic bottle for the twenty-five cent return.

I also worked out how to use the garbage strategically as a peace offering between neighbours. I first made clear my willingness to be a rule-abiding trash divider. I had to become as fussy as my landlord and as particular about washing out the old yoghurt containers and tins of coconut milk. When I did this, I noticed a strange thing. When another neighbour missorted the trash, I began to be annoyed. Why was I following the rules when she couldn't be bothered? She threw bread rolls into the recycling bin with abandon. She also had loud, pot-stewed parties in the middle of the week and even louder sex on the weekends, but it was somehow easier to be annoyed with someone about their flagrancy with respect to garbage. Young people were allowed to have fun. Objecting to their music or their sex might mean thinking about how little music or sex you were having in your own apartment. But what excuse could there be for putting bread rolls in the recycling bin or creamy potato salad in the vegetable compost?

When my landlord became upset about the creamy potato salad, I mirrored her outrage. Sure, we may have been the kind of people who accidentally put creamy potato salad in the compost at some innocent point in the past, but we were not those people now. Even then, we had made mistakes because we were following the rules of the wrong place and not because we had bucked rules altogether. I shared a few more of my neighbour's trash infractions with my landlord, revealing through my silent gestures of frustration and helplessness how disagreeable I found the situation. In just a few seconds I felt myself slip to her side, and we were now allies. We would water each other's plants and pick up each other's mail when necessary, and we would take out each other's bins on pickup day, sometimes even sponta-

neously, as an unspoken gesture of unbounded generosity.

Still, there were moments of failure. There were days when I asked my husband to take out the trash, and he thought I meant to take a bag of waste to the bin, not to roll the bin out into the street. It was only when I heard the garbage truck stopping and starting in the street the following morning that I recognized the mistake we'd made. In weeks when we missed the collection, I fantasized about rogue acts of disobedience. Maybe I could wander the local neighbourhoods at night with my bags of bones, dropping them into the unguarded bins of distant buildings. Would I be caught? Would I strike a suspicious figure taking a walk with a garbage bag in hand? Surely everyone would guess my criminal intention, because everyone secretly had the same thoughts when they fell into straits. Then I thought of sneakier methods. Perhaps I could take a small bag on my walks—a bag that could look like anything at all—and squeeze it into the small openings at the top of public trash cans. Or perhaps I could carry individual items that I was eager to see gone and dispose of them at the earliest opportunity, such as half-eaten smoked fish wrapped in paper towel, cotton pads drenched with acetone, or pasta left on the counter overnight and now too dry to eat. Look the other way, slip it into the can, and it's gone.

When friends come to the Country from other places the first thing they notice is how clean it is. "It's so clean!" they exclaim. Sometimes I have put up pictures of the City online, and my friends say the same thing, as though they were bewildered tourists. "How clean it is!" The City has an army of people to keep it clean. There are the men who pick up our bins and swing them onto the truck, yes, but there is also an unlisted corps of women who have taken the job onto themselves. There is the old woman who lives above the main street in the City, who looks down from her window and shouts at cyclists who veer off the path marked down for them. There are other old women in the suburbs, who bend their aching backs over their driveways to pick out the weeds pressing up between the stones. They do it slowly, one weed at a time, and it gives them a few hours to keep an eye on the neighbourhood. Then there are the younger women who take a pleasurable moment to tell someone who has briefly parked their car that they are not allowed to wait there, no, not even for a few minutes. And there are the mothers who ask if the jam is organic and struggle to contain their horror when told, no, the jam is not organic, and it even comes from a discount supermarket. They could not tell you what is wrong with the discount jam

except that it somehow feels dirty.

Everything has to be kept tidy in this Country. It is a matter of morals, not grace. A few years ago, in my previous city, there was a commemoration of the people who should have still been our neighbours. The city was strewn with little brass plaques to remember them, or at least their names and the dates at which they stopped being neighbours and were turned into something else. But brass ages, especially when people step on it and the sky rains on it. To help the commemoration along, a local magazine attached a soft square of cloth to each issue along with instructions on how to participate. Each person was supposed to take his little square of cloth, kneel beside a brass plaque, and polish, polish, polish until it was clean. Since then I have learned that it's become a kind of tradition to get together in groups and bring a shine to those little brass plaques. When the City's new mayor was elected last year, she had herself photographed on her knees buffing a brass plaque. It must be very satisfying to make things gleam again, and the brass plaques can't refuse the solicitude.

A few months ago my best friend in the City lost it. She sat down one evening on the sidewalk in front of her house and picked out every budding weed or blade of grass she could find for a few metres. I think she used the tweezers she usually uses to groom her eyebrows. She didn't get very far, as it was late and she was tired after a day of taking care of other people's children, but three squares of concrete were now immaculate.

My friend was born in the Country, but her mother wasn't. My friend talks to strangers on the street and gives people unexpected gifts, which makes people in the Country uncomfortable. They are afraid of being pulled into a relationship; they are afraid of owing something. She knows they hate it, but she offers them her humanity anyway. Her yard is ruled by the laws of nature. For the entire time that she has lived in the house, the neighbour behind her has sent letters through a lawyer demanding that she trim her hedges. He knows the exact regulation maximum that hedges are allowed to be, and he demands that the hedges obey this limit.

Of course, the City has laws that tell everyone when they are allowed to trim hedges and when they are not. Hedges are a home for some species of birds, so it's important not to trim them at the wrong time of year. At the same time, the hedges have to be kept under the legal maximum at all times. My friend's neighbour watches for the precise moment when the hedges grow past their appointed limit and has his lawyer send another threatening

letter. My friend and her husband have tried to knock on the neighbour's door, to reach a detente in person, to explain that they are trimming the hedges but the hedges insist on growing, but the neighbour will not agree to this. He prefers to pay the lawyer to send them a letter. I wondered what it's like to be a lawyer who lives from sending letters about hedges.

A little while ago I lost it too. My landlords were renting out the second apartment. My former neighbour had stopped having sex and parties and moved on to better things, so there was free space. The people who came in were careless about their garbage. There were take-out cartons left on the ground, and bags of mixed recycling and food were piled up all around the trash cans but not in them. I wrote my landlords text messages, revised them to take out the passive-aggressive sentences, and then revised them again because the messages were still passive-aggressive. They were relaxed about the situation, which maddened me even more. How could they be so calm about these flagrant infractions? Didn't they realize what they could lead to? I refused to pick up the trash left by the boarders and with very little subtlety suggested to our landlords that they put an informational guide to garbage sorting in the apartment, with pictures. I was home all the time, because I had to be, and every time I saw the mounds of bags outside it made me even madder.

Then, one day, we missed the pickup. I had gone to sleep thinking about the garbage, willing myself to remember the garbage, but we woke up too late, and before I knew it the familiar sound of the garbage trucks in the street told me we would be dancing on the edge of desperation for the next two weeks. I went to the City website and started searching for the pickup schedules of the streets around us, thinking I might be able to pull our bin a few kilometres late at night to a street with a different pickup day. Surely no one would notice one extra bin. I wanted to be angry at my husband, who misheard me again, or at the boarders who produced too much trash, or at myself for not bundling myself up to take the bin out into the freezing rain. Instead, I left the house.

The problem, I saw as I walked away, was the City. It was the City that had turned us against each other. It was the City that kept us focused on our trash at all times by rarely taking it and then only capriciously. I once read about an experiment in which rats were given nibbles if they pressed a lever. Some rats got the rewards on a regular schedule. When the scientists stopped the flow of snacks, the rats stopped pressing the lever. Other rats got

the rewards randomly, sometimes close together, sometimes spaced apart. Even when the scientists stopped releasing food, the rats kept pressing the lever madly until they died. The unpredictability of their rewards kept the creatures bound to their stupid, hopeless task. I was now trained to be one of these rats. After years of living in the City, I had become one of its own, allied with it against my neighbours, against confused strangers, against my own family. I walked and I walked, and I would have walked right out of the City if I could have.