

—THE GARBAGE COLLECTORS

by Ron McGillvray

The bus pulled up to my stop and I got off and began my short walk home. The same neighbors who'd ignored me this morning were all smiles and waves as I passed by. I waved back and smiled, but didn't stop to chat. I'd commented to my wife a few days earlier about how strange our neighbors seemed, but she told me it was all in my imagination. I crossed the street and couldn't help but look at the house where the early morning incident had occurred. In front of the house a van sat, crammed with boxes and small tables. More furniture adorned its roof. It looked like they were moving. I wondered if it had anything to do with what had happened this morning? Nah, they must have been planning the move beforehand. I was still thinking about the incident when I walked in my front door.

"Stephen, can you come in here please," my wife, Sarah called from the kitchen. What now?

"Patrick's upstairs crying and won't come out of his room." She had a worried look on her face and she was fidgeting with some framed pictures on the mantle. Never a good sign.

"What's the matter? Is he sick?"

"No, something happened at school. I think some kids picked on him, but I can't get the whole story out of him."

"Was he hurt?"

"No, I don't think it was anything physical. Can you try talking to him," she asked, looking more than desperate.

"Sure. I'll go up there right now. It'll be fine," I tried to assure her.

I placed my briefcase against the wall and walked toward the stairs. As I passed my wife I stopped for a second to give her a kiss. I got the smile I was looking for and headed up the stairs.

I heard sobbing from the other side of Patrick's door. I knocked a few times before I finally let myself in. Patrick lay on his bed, his head facing the wall. He looked up briefly and I could see he'd been crying for a while. His eyes were puffy and red, and he looked like he'd been through the wringer.

"What a terrible day I had at work," I said, trying to commiserate with my son. "Looks like you had a bad one too. Want to come downstairs with me and have a beer so we can talk about it?"

That got a bit of a grin, but the sobbing started again. Without warning, Patrick jumped off his bed, ran over to me, and wrapped his little arms around my legs.

RON MCGILLIVARY

“Whoa there little buddy, what’s the matter?”

“You wouldn’t let anyone take me away would you, Daddy?”

“What are you talking about? Of course not. Who’d help me with the chores?” I tried to make a joke of it, but what he’d said hit me like a jackhammer.

“Some of the kids at school told me the garbage collectors were going to come and get me and there was nothing you could do about it,” Patrick managed between snuffles.

“Garbage collectors? What are you talking about? Do you look like garbage?” I asked, putting on my *daddy knows best* smile.

“These are a different kind of garbage collectors.”

“Slow down, son. Take it easy and take a big breath.” I waited for him to calm down. “Okay, now tell me the whole story from the beginning.”

Patrick seemed hesitant at first but then opened up, letting it all come flowing out. “Kids at school told me that on the night before garbage day the garbage collectors come out and hunt through peoples’ garbage. They look for a sign that’ll tell them which kid will be next to go to the Dump.” Patrick took a deep breath.

“Oh really? And what happens to these kids who end up at the Dump?”

“They’re eaten by the garbage collectors. It’s what keeps them alive.”

“I see. Don’t you think the parents might have something to say about it?”

“The parents are the ones who give the kids to the garbage collectors,” he cried, tears streaming down his face. “If the garbage collectors come, can you give them Kim instead of me? I promise I’ll be good and do everything you guys say.”

I felt a knot starting in my throat and a rage welling up inside. I wanted to go find these kids and give them something to really be afraid of, but I’d worked hard at keeping my temper under control and I wasn’t going to blow all that hard work now.

“Don’t worry, I have no plans to let either you or Kim end up at the Dump.”

“Promise?” Patrick asked, looking at me with pleading eyes.

“Yes I promise,” I answered. “So are these kids sent away because they were bad?”

“No, the families do it to save their other boy or girl.”

“What if the family only has one child?” I asked not so innocently, hoping to poke holes in the story.

“No one here does. Everyone in town has two kids. Haven’t you noticed?” He stopped for a moment to catch his breath. “Danny told me, they only let you live here if you come with two.”

What an imagination kids have these days, I mused. Then I asked, “Why wouldn’t the parents just pack up and leave if they found all this out?”

“We can’t leave. There’s no way out of here,” Patrick answered with all the conviction he could muster.

“Well we came here from somewhere, didn’t we?”

“Yes.”

“So if we came here from somewhere, we can always go back there, right?”

“I suppose,” he answered.

“There you have it.”

“But they said people have tried to leave before and always ended up coming back.”