

GENERAL FEEDBACK SECTION

It's so nice to read another one of your stories. Thank you for choosing Flash Fiction Magazine for your work. I'm happy to provide you with some feedback.

This story made it very far in our contest. I'm sorry to say it wasn't a winner. I'd still like to work with you to publish this piece. Would you be willing to do that? I love the idea of some engineer sending his trash into the past through some trash eliminator. I think it makes great fodder and can have some underlying messages about our planet, climate change and all of those very important themes.

My biggest comments on revision include delving deeper into Matt and his dad's relationship, grounding us in some very specific scenes, and taking out some of those chunky scientific explanations. (I'd either work on eliminating some of them, or peppering them more discreetly into the story. It can distract to read huge chunks of "time travel" science in dialogue and it takes us out of that "reverie" that is story.)

You may also end up writing this out to 1200 or 1300 words and then having to gruesomely (but always possible) cut back.

So first: Let's start with grounding us in a scene.

- You have this nice writerly impulse to start us at a campsite where trash is being dumped. I'd love to get immersed in some of that nature and immersed into more of that trash. I am talking about playing up that physical detail and really grounding us in scene. When you ground us in a scene, you can have that activity of the trash being dumped, but you can also show us a little more of Matty and Dad. (Two for one). I want more details and to be settled in and then I'm looking for that scientific information to be given to us, but not in big chunks.
- It would be fun to play with getting a few good visual descriptions of the trash and contrasting that with the natural environment.
- Having some discoveries regarding the trash happening outside of the dialogue might take some of the pressure off revealing all of that information. [Here's a great article on dialogue you might enjoy.](#) (The key is to go into the situation knowing what each character wants or how they might respond, so you don't get all the information revealed in the dialogue, you just get their own unique reactions to this. Which means you might have to give us some information in exposition or through the Dad or Matty's POV.)

What else do I want to know about Matty and Dad?

- Physical descriptions?

- How old are they? Matty is a college student, correct?
- What is their relationship like? Do they love to go camping together? How do they interact with each other? Are there any issues between them? Or something you can hint at?

Think about how you might spread that scientific information more evenly throughout the story? As a reader, I want it, but I don't want to be bombarded by it. Exposition here or there. A little in dialogue here or there.

Play around! Let me know if you want to work with me to publish this story with us.

Story

I crawl quietly out of the tent, allowing Matty to remain asleep. The air outside is cool, perfect for some exercise. Reaching skyward, I see the sun's first rays dissipating mist around the awesome oaks and pines. I love morning in these woods, especially with my son. He turned twenty-one, and we finally squeezed in some camping. How could so many years slip? The last time we slept together in a tent, he was six years younger and six inches shorter. He now towers over me, and these times won't come any easier. He'll have his own family and camp with them.

Bending forward for more warmup, I'm surprised by the mess. Napkins, cans, and wrappers surround our folding chairs, and a banana peel lies on my jeep's windshield. A squirrel nibbles the peel, cautiously watching me.

"Hey, Matty."

After some whining, his head appears. "What's up, Dad?"

"You forgot to take the garbage to the bins after I turned in last night. Animals got to it."

He glances at the mess. "I didn't forget. This isn't ours."

Looking more closely, I realize he's right, and I grab a bag for the cleanup.

Later, after a hike and campfire dinner, we dispose of the garbage together. Nevertheless, the following morning there's more. "You're kidding me," I yell, while kicking some empty cans.

Matty joins me with a yawn. "Again?" he asks.

"Yeah, but have you ever seen stuff like this?"

He picks up several empty cans and shakes his head. Then he reads the description on

a wrapper and hands it to me. "Look at this, Dad."

The label says: Cow-Friendly Burgers. 100% laboratory-grown beef. No animal was sacrificed, injured, or even inconvenienced to make this burger. "You're the science whiz," I say. "What is this?"

"I don't know. Cell culture replacements for whole animal beef aren't available in stores yet. And did you notice the expiration date? August 2043."

I look at him like he's crazy because that's over twenty years from now. It's a misprint. However, I pick up more items and find similar dates. "This can't be right, Matty." He searches the trash, laughs, and pushes a receipt toward my face. "ToteMart, never heard of it," I say.

"Check the date."

"September 23, 2041. Okay, there's the answer. It's a prank by your college buddies."

"No way, I didn't tell anybody we were camping."

I read more of the receipt. It's for something called a Cyrus Stolly Trash Eliminator, which sounds like a flashy name for a garbage can. "Matty, google this Stolly guy."

"Already on it. Okay, Stolly's a theoretical physicist best known for." He stops speaking and stares at his phone.

"Best known for what?"

"His theories on time travel. We talked about time travel in my physics classes, and it's controversial. Nobody knows if it's possible. It says Stolly predicted a circulating laser light could create something called closed time-like curves and that those curves would allow time travel."

"Give me the dummy's version, Matty?"

"That was the dummy's version, Dad. We're talking Einstein here. Stolly must've solved time travel and cashed out. I think in twenty years he markets a trash can that empties into the past."

I laugh. "Really, a time-machine garbage can?"

"Yes, and dumping trash into the past is a bad idea. It could change the future. Why would Stolly design it so stupidly?"

I hand him a bag. "Exactly, and that's why it's probably some egghead kid's out late making trouble."

“Not buying it, Dad? Okay, let’s stay awake tonight. We’ll keep our eyes on this spot.”

After dark, our lantern illuminates where the garbage appeared the past two nights. Thankfully, Matty fell asleep. He bent my ear talking about paradoxes, where someone goes back in time and kills their parent so the traveler is never born. Just as I decide it’s all nonsense, there’s movement in the trees. Then a glow appears, resembling pixels on a television screen that lost its signal. I shake Matty and point. “Wake up.” Several seconds later, garbage falls from the pixels and lands around us. I snatch a napkin out of the air and stare at it in disbelief. “You’re right.”

“I knew it,” he yells. “How long did those pixels last?”

“About thirty seconds.”

“Good, that’s long enough.”

“For what?” I ask.

“The pixels must be Stolly’s time window, the juncture of future and present. I’ll bet the window is bidirectional.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means we take another hike before tomorrow night.”

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Carson Vega showers for ninety minutes until the Holographic Zoom meeting. Ample time to finish prepping, so he checks financial news while heading to the kitchen. After microwaving a pre-made breakfast, he tosses the wrapper into the overflowing trash eliminator. Then he presses the start button and thinks about today’s ToteMart drone deliveries, hoping the earrings arrive before Sherry’s party.

He steps to get his breakfast and feels something large under foot. A startled snake bites his ankle and Carson falls to the floor screaming. Sherry runs into the kitchen.

“Call 911,” he yells. “There’s a snake in here, and it bit me.”

“Oh my God, Carson, it’s huge.” She reaches for her phone and pauses. “Carson, I think the snake has a note attached to its tail.”

“A note? What does it say?”

Sherry grabs a pair of kitchen tongs, removes the paper, and reads it out loud. “Stop! Only a moron would send their garbage into the past. Send it a billion years into the future, or better yet, keep it. The next snakes we send you will be poisonous!”

Sherry crumples the paper and glares at him. "It's your new trash eliminator, Carson. I told you not to open the back and screw around with the default settings. They shouldn't sell these things to engineers."