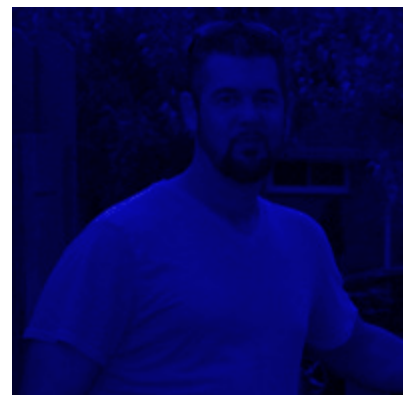


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Garbage in, Garbage out

"This is as good as the day is going to get," Chris says in a resigned sort of way. It is 4 a.m. and we are driving north on La Grange Road out of Orland Park, approaching forest on either side of the empty road. There is no one else--just dark, silence, and the occasional foraging deer. "It's funny how right from the start of the day, the world is out to get you, a stray deer jumping out of the woods, paper delivery people not paying attention." Chris tells me how he T-Boned a Dodge Caravan on the way to work a few years back. "He just pulled right out in front of me, never bothered to look, thought he was the only person out here. That's the way everyone drives though, like they are the only person in the world." We reach the Allied Waste transfer station 45 minutes later. The darkness hides the trash but not the stench. Chris lights up a cigarette, his third one today. I ask if it helps with the smell and he looks at me with an "Are you kidding?" smirk across his face. We approach his truck. It's plugged in to something and I ask with my glance. "It's Effin 5 degrees out, she won't start without some heat in her block." He tells me to hop in the truck. It's pretty massive, diesel vapor scented and remarkably cleaner than I expected. "I carry the garbage in the back, not in here," he says as he follows my surveying eyes. The truck starts with a grumble everything shaking and remains that way the whole day long. "I hope you like Stern" as Chris reaches for the radio. "Every day from 5 a.m. to 10 a.m. He's the only news I care to listen to."



He shifts into gear and with a bouncing start gets the 37,500 lb. front loader moving, the wiz of the turbo creating a tempo all too familiar to him. "I have been doing this for over 19 years, hard to believe how fast the time flies," he says with apparent pride. "We 'only' have 115 stops to do today; we gotta get to Dunkin' Donuts quick before the parking lot fills up else I'm not going to fit." He tells me it's the same ritual every morning, two Extra Large coffees, extra cream and sugar. From the radio Stern starts talking about the Higgs Boson. Chris asks me, "Why do they call it the God-particle?" I quickly offer, "Wonder of the universe, I guess?" not wanting to get into the whole particles and sub particles and atomic mass discussion. Instead I start off with the obligatory, "So, is this what you'd always seen yourself doing, being a garbage truck driver?" Chris keeps looking ahead, but he seems to be drifting. "Nope, not really," he says with disappointment. "I wanted to be a pro football player. If I could be anything it would be that."

He takes me to a time in the past, the day before Father's Day 1976. He was a month away from his 5th birthday and had been sent to his room (with his older brother) as punishment for "getting into stuff." Mom had gone to the grocery store and Dad was in the backyard finishing putting the pool together for a party. Chris and his brother had started sword fighting with a pair of scissors that had fallen apart and his brother had run into the living room and jumped onto the couch like a swashbuckler. Chris decided to run into the kitchen and grab a serrated steak knife to gain the upper hand. As he was running out of the tiled kitchen into the carpeted living room he tripped on the metal strip and knife went through skin, through rib cage, and found an inch and a half of lower right ventricle. He survived open heart surgery then, and again at the age of 13 to remove some scar tissue. "When you drive for a living, you have lots of time to reflect, and go over things, over and over,"

Chris muses. He asks, “Do you think if they can find the Higgs, we may one day be able to time travel? I know where I would go back to,” he says with longing.

He lights up his 12th cigarette of the day and we arrive at the “halfway point,” stop number 58. The 6’5”, 313 pound man that is Chris hops out of the truck and off to position a “5 yarder.” It’s a lot bigger than the 2 yarder boxes I’ve seen at my apartment and he says they are around 400lbs full but he grabs it and tugs and rolls it into place like it’s half that weight. “Ya know, the Marines wouldn’t take me either but I dare one of those soldiers to spend a day with me slinging these boxes and see if they could keep up!” he says as he lights up #13.

We start to head to the transfer station to empty out the truck. “If you’re not careful you go overweight real easy,” he says, while pointing at a County Sheriff parked right outside the gate. “He is scoping out the tires, looking to see how low I’m riding. When I first got the new truck, I let some air out of the tires and they used to pull me over a lot thinking I was heavy and were amazed when I was under by a couple grand in weight. Then they’d leave me alone and I could push my weight after that. It does make the day go faster the more you can haul,” he says, waving to the Sheriff.

We head back out to finish the rest of the route. It is very apparent that Chris is getting angrier as the day progresses. Whether it’s cars cutting him off or people parked in front of boxes he needs to get to; I start to understand what he meant earlier about the day being as good as it would get. “These people are just effin suiciders, I tell ya! I can see them with my rear camera, look, he’s riding my ass!” I look at the screen and it really looks like the car is on top of him, maybe it’s the angle of the camera. “See, watch this jerkoff go” and I follow as the car gets into the left lane and zooms past Chris, only to cut in front of him and do a quick right into a gas station. Chris lights up like a stick of TNT slamming on the brakes to avoid rear-ending the car. “You mother effer!!!” punctuated by an air horn. “Every day all day long, they do it all the time. I just wish once one of them would pull over. I would tear him apart with my bare hands!” he says with some serious anger behind the words. Chris finds the end of the pack, lights up and says “perfect timing, we are heading back with the last load.” No Sheriff this time and it’s a good thing, the weigh-in is 67000 lbs. “That’s 12k over and would be a \$2000 fine!” He laughs but also knows that’s an hour less he has to deal with crazy drivers buzzing around him like bees.

We hop into his pickup and start to head home. It’s an hour and 20 minute drive this time and his temper is starting to rise again. “For the love of God, can’t you guys stop with the cutting in and out already?” he blears, veins popping out the forehead. He opens the next pack and starts into it. “I know I know, for someone who’s been through what I have it’s really stupid to be smoking like I do, but it’s the only thing that keeps me calm.” We pull into the driveway and he offers me a beer to hang out and relax a bit. I oblige. As we enter the kitchen area, an unseen voice calls out, “Honey, would you mind taking out the garbage for me?” Chris looks at me, grabs the bag out of the can, and his pack of cigarettes from the counter and heads out to light up #25.

Works Cited

Willett, Christopher J. "Garbage in, Garbage out." Personal interview. 1 Mar. 2014.