

Trash!
A Garbageman's
Story

by Paré-Poupard
(2026)

BAPTISM BY SWEARING: JESUS FUCKING CHRIST!

I'd promised myself I'd stop swearing. I have friends who are religious, and observant too, and I'd learned to refrain from offending them. I respect religion, though I'm not a believer myself. But when you jump off the garbage truck, squeeze between two badly parked cars, and come upon eighteen fifty-pound bags of construction waste . . . when you know this means you'll have to snake your way back through the cars without scratching them, holding the bags with your arms outstretched in front of you, all

because the dickhead who filled them left the nails in the boards . . . when you're feeling the weight of the twenty tons of trash you've already lifted that day, and the bags are liable to burst open any second . . . and you know that if you get hurt in the process, that'll be on you, because you just weren't careful enough . . . and that if something gets damaged, that's on you too, and you're the one who'll have to clean up the mess, because no matter what happens, when you work for a big waste management company no one ever has your back . . . and you know perfectly well you shouldn't be picking up this guy's goddamned garbage, since he's flagrantly over the weight limit for roadside pickup . . . and he should just have done his job and taken it to the dump . . . and then, when you are almost out of breath, you look up and see the guy watching you through the curtains, with a look in his eye that makes it clear he'll be making a complaint if you don't pick up his bags—it's then, at that very moment, that the urge overcomes you and you let out a cry of rage: "*Jesus fucking Christ!!!*"

I mean, swearing is all you've got left. It may

offend God, but there's no better way to get your mind off that man's condescending look. The lack of consideration is what hurts most. He gets to hide behind his flowered curtains, this coward who can't even be bothered to properly dispose of his own construction waste. Smug fuckwits of his ilk are truly the worst. Knowing that he's the one who failed to take responsibility and seeing the sneaky way he's gone about it doesn't prevent me from feeling like a cleaner fish unceremoniously dumped into an aquarium. I'm the piddly creature that keeps the tank glass clean so the good middle-class people in their little boxes can admire their exotic fish through immaculate surfaces.

The garbageman came, the yard is clean, the grass will stay green. Now good riddance! That's what this guy's thinking as he closes his curtains. I may have made it through without a nail piercing my glove, but there's no time to celebrate. Sixty-five feet up the street, another pile of garbage is waiting at the roadside. This time it's nearly bagged. A little farther on, some crazy dude comes running after me with his bags. And then another calls out to get my attention. He's driven a

mile with his garbage in the back of his car, petrified at the thought of it spending a week at his house.

The garbageman is the Sisyphus of our consumer society, a hapless laborer condemned to go from house to house picking up bags, swept along day after day in the never-ending flow of refuse we produce. And every day he is fated to resume this labor afresh, again and again, for all eternity. If we weren't there to shoulder this burden, everything would fall apart. The rats would take over, the air would turn feid, plague and cholera would run rampant. George Baraille was right: excess is the accursed share of abundance, and no one can afford to get stuck with it.

That's one thing you learn in this business. The garbageman's yoke is destruction—the opposite of construction, the breaking down of things—and its wages are paid in the sweat on your brow and the pain in your flesh. Garbage juice may be the holy water of your baptism. But it's the swearing that makes you a real garbageman. That's when you truly become one with your function. You understand that you're nothing in the eyes of others, that you've got nothing to

prove to anyone. You're at the bottom rung of society's ladder—but there's something reassuring in that, because you can't fall any lower. You're the living vestige of a bygone era, here in Quebec, at least: the age of the “working man.” But not for you the patina of “working-class heroes” celebrated in popular culture, from Quebec's novels of rural life¹ to Zola's miners. Nobody writes novels about garbagemen. That doesn't leave us much to grasp onto, save the freedom that comes with a life on the margins and, in my case, the pleasure of physical labor.

Some take pride in this apostate status. It gives them a feeling of omnipotence. You know, *there aren't many people who could do my job; only real men can back it; if they step on my truck I'll kick their asses*. Beneath the surface of this pride you'll find deep wounds, latent frustration, and even fragility. We are former bikers, dopers, athletes who've abandoned all hope of making the big time, grown-up kids scarred by tough childhoods. Violence is in our blood, and once we're thrown out into the world of waste disposal, it doesn't take long to rise to the surface.

Being a garbageman is itself an act of self-violence. The pace and physical demands of the work would not have been out of place in the first and second industrial revolutions. Some people think they'll find relief from their inner demons in the miracle of modern drugs. But drugs wear you out.

I've heard it said that the average garbageman lasts less than ten years behind the truck. Throwing trash takes a real toll. The human body only rarely achieves a level of stamina comparable to the machines we create. "He's a machine" is a compliment reserved for the very best garbagemen, and rightly so, because these men are as strong as the trucks they ride in. But when we outpace a machine, do we not lose something of our humanity? And isn't the fact that we're forced to work at this inhuman pace a sure sign that we're drowning in waste? Our assembly lines must keep spitting out new things for us to consume at an alarming rate, to keep the factories running and the cargo ships sailing and the airplanes flying and the pistons firing and the servers humming and the screens refreshing and the ads and notifications popping up day and night to

goad us into desiring ever more. Our civilization manufactures new things at breakneck speed, only to have them fail ever more quickly. This keeps the wheels of commerce spinning. The end goal of this system is the obsolescence of all goods and all people—an acquiescent, clean, and happy obsolescence.

Sometimes it strikes me that there's a fundamental truth in the scene I described earlier. A decent-enough guy spying on me through his window to make sure his yard and house stay clean because he doesn't want to see that the real face of his world is us, the garbagemen.

Trash!
A Garbage man's story
by Pore-Poupart
Simon

GARBAGE DOESN'T LIE (I)

DOWN AND OUT

Spandex lives in a shack down by the river, Rivière des Mille-Îles, to be precise. It's a bare-bones version of a house, slightly crooked and short a few teeth, not unlike the man himself. Though his real name is Michel, the guys call him Spandex for the shorts he likes to work in. Spandex runs behind a truck shirtless, in flip-flops and bike shorts, a surprising getup even for a garbageman. When he was thirty, Spandex robbed

a convenience store with a sawed-off shotgun. Or at least tried to. The owner disarmed him and beat him up. As you can imagine, that dealt a serious blow to his street cred.

It's hard not to break out in a smile at the sight of Spandex out on his run, picking up the trash with his gut jiggling around, with nothing but flip-flops on his feet and his bike shorts on his ass. The young kids on the truck—guys just passing through the trade, for the most part—like to have a good laugh at his expense. Success of any kind always just seems to slip through Spandex's fingers.

And it's true no one knows much about Michel. Except for one thing: he talks to the trash. It's like he'd rather have a conversation with a garbage bag full of vegetable peels or broken bottles than human beings. He tells the garbage all about the weather and fills it in on what's new in his life. Now, Spandex isn't heartless: he also asks the garbage how *it's* doing, despite the cold, mud, and heat, and the worms eating away at what few shreds of dignity these once-proud cast-offs are still clinging to. How did Spandex get into

this unusual habit? No one really knows. Some say it's the outcome of a life stracking up failure after failure, a sense of shame, a response to the mockery of others. Of course, it could also just be good old-fashioned substance abuse.

I have a different theory, though. It comes from Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, where you'll find a lovely long passage about the sewers of Paris.

The sewer is the conscience of the city.
Everything there converges and confronts
everything else. In that livid spot there are
shades, but there are no longer any secrets.
Each thing bears its true form, or, at least,
its definitive form. The mass of filth has
this in its favor, that it is not a liar.

I believe that Victor Hugo's observation is close to the reason Spandex carries on dialogues with the garbage: All is laid bare in the trash. Secrets and false appearances fall away, and everything at last shows its true face and definitive form. And I think this ultimate

honesty we find in the trash must be soothing for Spandex.

Victor Hugo and Michel Spandex both grasped an essential truth that eludes all but a chosen few. They understood that our garbage speaks to us, and that its honesty can come as a relief. Once it reaches the end of its service life, the refuse produced by our society is stripped bare of all illusion. It reveals the sometimes-unsettling, unaccommodated face of all we cast off. Garbage bursts our mirages, puts everything on equal footing, and tells the whole story—if you know how to listen.

BREAKING THE RULES

TI-CHRIS

Spring 2004, in the Montreal suburb of Saint-Eustache. The crew from Gauthier's waste disposal is taking a break at a poutine stand. We're sitting around a picnic table, chatting and basking in the sun. A joint is going around, from helper to helper and then to the driver, who passes it back to the helper on his right. A normal, laid-back, everyday scene—until, out of nowhere, Ti-Chris leaps to his feet. (His nickname translates