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MAGNUS INSTITUTE
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STATEMENT

Woodward, Kieran - February 23rd 2009

Thrown Away

*Looks like I'm not the only one
professionally collecting rubbish.*

Woodward, Kieran - 23.02.2009

I work as a bin man for Waltham Forest Council. It's not a bad job, really, as long as you can handle the smell and the early mornings, not to mention that when winter really gets going it can be pretty unpleasant. I've had to chip ice off more than a few bins in my time, just to get them open. Still, the pay's pretty decent; at least it is once you throw in the overtime and the bonuses, and once you've done the rounds you're usually off for the day, so you're working fewer hours than your average office monkey; it's just that those hours tend to be a lot less pleasant than anything you're likely to find staring at some accounting spreadsheet. But I didn't come here to talk about the benefits and problems of working in waste collection. At least, I guess I came to talk about one very specific problem that I encountered last year, when doing the rubbish collection for 93 Lancaster Road.

Now, you encounter weird things in this job all the time. People have an odd mental block – this idea that as soon as they put something in the bin it's gone. It's officially been made rubbish and no-one will ever see it again. The fact that someone had to take it from your bin to the landfill or the recycling centre doesn't really enter their heads, and nobody ever seems to realise that up to a dozen people might be seeing what you throw away before it finally disappears forever. But no, as far as the rest of the world thinks about it, once it's been thrown away, it's gone, far beyond all human understanding. This leaves those of us who work in waste collection seeing kind of a strange side to humanity, but an honest one at that. If you're a bit of a boozer, there's every chance that your bin men know how much you drink better than you do because we empty all the bottles. And yes, we do remember, and we also get quite judgemental at times, although not about the things you might think – you can throw away a mountain of grotesque porn and, as long as you've tied it into neat bundles, we're fine with it, but if you throw away cat litter without properly bagging that, you'd better believe that you've earned the hatred of every bin man that ever slung a sack. Still, I'm getting off topic.

And there we are.
Point is, the bag of dolls' heads didn't bother me. I mean, it was freaky, don't get me wrong – hundreds of small plastic heads, staring out of the refuse sack at me, but aside from a slight rip on the side of the black bag, they were thrown away very neatly, and were easy enough to toss into the truck. The bag was full of them, mind. It was placed next to the green recycling bin and at first I thought that it was just a single doll with its head positioned near the tear, but when I tossed the bag into the truck the rip split, spilling forth a whole bunch of the things. At a guess I'd say there were over a hundred in there. They were made of hard, rigid plastic with that infant doll face that you seem to find on every toy like that. Several of them had different hair moulded or painted on, so it was clear that they weren't simply from a hundred or so of the same doll. Someone had spent time acquiring a whole variety of different dolls, which they then beheaded and stuffed into the sack. They were very battered, but not with age – it looked as though someone had taken the brand new heads and dragged them over rough concrete, though I couldn't say whether they'd have been attached to the rest of the doll at the time. It was creepy, sure, but the sun was shining and there were four of us working the truck that day, so it was easy enough to laugh it off. It was the old crew – me, David Atayah, Matthew Wilkinson, and Alan Parfitt, who drives - drove - the truck.

What it did do, though, was mark out 93 Lancaster Road in our minds as “the Doll House”, since we spent the rest of the day making off-colour jokes about the sort of people who must live there. I said before that your bin man knows a lot about you. Now that's probably not actually true for most people – we service hundreds of homes each day and who can keep track of that many people? Who wants to? You do have houses, though, that you learn to keep an eye on; the sort of places that throw out strange or sometimes even dangerous things. Like I said, we probably know if you're an alcoholic, but it's not because we watch you obsessively or care about your health. It's because smashed bottles and broken glass are dangerous and you learn to keep an eye out around houses

where you're likely to find them. I read once that waste collection is the second most dangerous profession in England. Not sure I believe it - they said the first was farming - but you do see your fair share of injuries, so you learn to keep your eyes peeled and mark out in your mind which houses you want to stay wary of.

I wonder where Archivist ranks on the list.

Now after that the Doll House became one of those houses for our crew. Not so much for any known danger, but when someone throws out a bin full of weird stuff like that, you never know what else they might decide to toss. Also, Alan, well, he had kind of a twisted sense of humour, and he loved the doll heads. When we told him he insisted on stopping the truck and getting out to have a look, so after that he always made a point to ask us to keep an eye on 93. And we did. The next couple of weeks, when we pulled up to 93, I took an extra second or two just to check for anything strange in the bins, but nothing seemed out of the ordinary. Alan especially was disappointed by this but it was hardly something to dwell on, so we put it out of our minds and pressed on with the day's work. This continued for what must have been a few months and the whole doll heads incident hadn't come up, except for a few interesting conversations at the recycling plant where, to be honest, I don't think anyone believed us, or if they did they'd immediately try to top it with their own story of bizarre finds.

It was the start of spring when we got the next strange bag from 93 Lancaster Road. Again, it was an unmarked black refuse bag placed next to the recycling bin. As soon as I saw it, I knew it was another one. The shape of it was too regular to be full of the normal assortment of rubbish. As I picked it up, I realised it was far too light as well. It seemed to weigh almost nothing, but was bulging with what sounded like a whole load of paper inside. I gave the others a look and told them I thought we had another odd bag. David and Matt started discussing whether we should open it, as this one didn't seem to have a rip like the last one, and we were still talking it over when Alan came back to see what was taking us so long. He knew where we were and you could see it in his eyes that he'd been hoping this was the reason for the delay. One look at his face and I knew that if we didn't open it, he would.

I looked up towards the house, checking for anyone watching, but 93 was right near the start of our route, so it was still very early in the morning and all the lights were off. There was no sign of movement so, very carefully, I opened the bag. Inside was paper, as I expected. It seemed to be a single strip of thick white writing paper, maybe an inch wide. The paper was long, so long that it seemed like the whole bag was filled solely with this one piece of it, wrapped and curled and crumpled to fit inside. There was writing on it in another language, I think Latin. Matt, who was raised Catholic and never shut up about it, said he recognised it and claimed that it was the Lord's Prayer, the Our Father, written over and over again. He seemed pretty rattled about it, especially at the fact that at certain points the edges of the paper seemed to be slightly singed, as though it had been passed over a candle or a lighter. He even seemed hesitant about throwing it in with the rest of the garbage, but we didn't have anything else we could actually do with it, so into the truck it went. Alan was smiling the rest of the shift, and there was a delight there that, quite frankly, had started to unsettle me a bit. As far as I was concerned this was a bit of a letdown after the dolls' heads, but the way the others had reacted put me on edge.

The third bag was the one that really changed things. It was a fortnight after the one with the prayer paper in it. As we approached 93, I noticed there was another bag sitting next to the bin. The others clearly noticed as well, as everyone went very quiet. The first two had been the only times there had been rubbish bags at the house that weren't in the actual bin itself, so there was little doubt in my mind that this was going to be more creepy trash. Alan turned the engine off as we pulled level with the house, and got out. Whatever was in this one, he was going to see it. The bag bulged, just like the others, but had a bumpy sort of look to its surface. We all stared at it for several seconds, before I

I must admit to feeling a certain sympathy

realised that the others were waiting for me to pick it up – I'd picked up the others, and apparently this was how it was done now. It almost felt like a ritual. *Always be careful with things that feel like rituals.*

I walked over and lifted it off the ground. It was heavier than the last one, and as it moved it made a sound, like shifting sand or gravel, or maybe more of a rattle. I started to carry it towards my colleagues to open it, when I accidentally caught the bottom of it on the low brick wall at the end of the small front garden. Already filled almost to bursting, the bag tore open easily.

Ok, I'll admit I didn't expect that.
From the newly ripped hole, poured teeth. Hundreds, thousands of teeth; they came streaming down it a waterfall of white, cream and yellow, bouncing as they hit the pavement, and gradually forming a pile of astounding size. When the bag was finally empty, we just stood there in silence, staring at the mountain of teeth that now lay on ground before us. They looked like human teeth to me, but I wasn't exactly an expert and I sure as hell didn't want to check closer. Finally, David broke the silence by vomiting loudly into a nearby drain and I backed away from the grisly mound. Even Alan looked shaken by this – I suppose some things are disconcerting however grim your interests. We phoned the police.

Sensible.

That's something else that people always forget about garbage men – we're perfectly capable of calling the police if we see obviously illegal stuff being thrown away. Usually we don't bother if it's just something small, but this... for this we phoned the police. They came in surprisingly good time and I reckon they were even more freaked out than we were. One of them took our statements, while the other went up to the house itself to check on the occupants, and see if they knew anything about the teeth. As the officer knocked on the door, we all strained to get a better look at what greeted her. There was no way after all this we were going to pass up a chance to actually get a look at the residents of 93 Lancaster Road. Eventually the door opened, and an old woman stood there, blinking in the early morning sunlight and clearly slightly alarmed to see the police. Needless to say, the old lady and her husband had no idea about any of the weird bags that had been appearing in their rubbish and seemed properly upset when they were given the details. The police spent a good ten minutes doing their best to collect up all the teeth, and we were sent on our way. I have no idea what, if anything, the investigation turned up. Certainly I was never contacted by them again, and if any of the rest were, they didn't mention it.

And for a while, that was it. We kept an eye out whenever we were heading down Lancaster Road, but didn't encounter any further ominous garbage bags. I thought maybe the involvement of the police had scared off whoever was leaving them. Maybe the police had caught the culprit and just hadn't told us.

That would certainly be surprising competence on their part.

I did start to notice, though, that Alan wasn't doing well. He was often late to his shift, and when he finally got there he'd be exhausted and grumpy, snapping at everyone and rudely brushing off anyone asking about his health or how he was doing. He seemed even worse whenever we approached the end of Lancaster Road, sometimes speeding up the truck slightly so that we had to run to keep up. Eventually, after I tripped over the curb while hurrying and twisted my ankle, I confronted him, told him that whatever was going on with him, he could talk about it or get over it, but that he clearly needed to deal with something. He got very quiet, and said he'd been watching number 93 some nights. Said he wanted to see whoever was dropping this stuff off. That he had to know.

I don't know what I expected. Trouble at home, maybe, or depression, but this took me by surprise. I told him it was a really bad idea, that if the police were still investigating they were more than likely to pick him up as the culprit, and even if they didn't, the old couple at 93 could just as easily get him

arrested for harassment or stalking. Alan nodded along and agreed with me as I spoke, but I could see he wasn't listening. He just said again that he needed to know, told me he'd be careful, as though that was meant to reassure me. It didn't, but I could see I wasn't going to talk him out of it and we ended in an uncomfortable silence.

What I didn't say, is that I'd almost done the same thing myself once or twice. There was something about this, beyond anything else I'd encountered, that... I don't know. It drew me in almost as much as it disgusted me. Almost, but not enough to do anything, and if I needed any further convincing that leaving it alone was the right decision, I only needed to look at Alan. As time went on, the bags under his eyes deepened, and I'd watch him down half a dozen energy drinks over the course of a morning, just to get through his shift. I could have said something to our manager, but even then Alan was still my friend and I didn't want to be the one to get him in any sort of trouble. Eventually, though, it came to a head anyway. Alan fell asleep at the wheel of the truck and drove it into a parked car. No-one was hurt and the truck was going too slowly to do any real damage but, at that point, it was enough to get him fired. We were sad to see him go, but to be honest, by the end of it he'd become quite unpleasant to be around and no-one shed any real tears over it. We got a new member on our crew, a kid named Guy Wardman, and life continued in relative peace. For a while, anyway.

can't stand misguided co-worker loyalty.

Then, on the 8th of August last year, at nine minutes past two in the morning, I was woken up by a text message from Alan. It said "FOUND HIM". I texted him back immediately – What had he found? Was it whoever was leaving the bags? Had he brought another one? No response. I texted Alan again to ask if he was okay. I sent that text a lot of times, but never heard back. I tried phoning him but nobody answered. As the minutes stretched to hours, the worry that had been growing in my gut settled into a grim certainty, and I knew that Alan was gone. I also knew that I had to go to 93 Lancaster Road and see for myself. I got my coat and headed out into the night.

I walked slowly, with a kind of reluctance, so the sky was starting to get light by the time I arrived. I knew what I'd find when I got there, and I was right. There was no sign of Alan, or of whoever he might have seen. There was, however, a new rubbish bag sitting there in its usual place. It was full, and this time the top of it had been tied off with a dark green ribbon, arranged in a bow like an old-fashioned Christmas present. It bulged in much the same way as the last one.

It's the little extra touches that make a gift special.

I picked up the bag, which turned out to be quite light, and I took off the bow. Opening it, I saw shifting white and, for a second, I was sure it was more teeth. Looking closer, though, I saw the truth: packing peanuts. Polystyrene packing peanuts. Enough to fill the bag to capacity. I almost felt relieved until I realised there was something else in there, something making it heavier than a bag of polystyrene should be. I closed my eyes and reached in, expecting to find something horrible inside. My hand closed instead around cold metal, and I drew out a fist-sized lump of... I think it must have been copper or bronze, and had been roughly carved into the shape of a heart, but like a real heart, not like a Valentine's one. It was cold to the touch, like it had just come out of a freezer, and it almost stuck to my skin. Engraved on the side was the name "Alan Parfitt", the letters carved in with machine-like precision. That was the last sign of Alan I ever found. As far as I'm aware he's never been seen since.

Sounds like an elaborate suicide note to me.

I gave the lump of metal to a friend of mine who works the medical waste run and owes me a favour. I asked him to throw it in with a shipment, as the medical incinerators burn hotter than any I have access to, and I figured that was my best shot at getting rid of it properly. I still work the Lancaster Road route, but since then there haven't been any more weird bags turning up at 93. Mostly I've just tried to forget about it.

Notes

It's nice to have a statement where most of the particulars are easily verifiable. It comes with shorter supporting statements from David Atayah and Matthew Wilkinson confirming the contents of the first three bags, as well as the details of Alan Parfitt's behaviour prior to his termination from the employment of local government. In an uncharacteristic example of actually dealing with modern technology, my predecessor had the good sense to make a copy of the final text conversation between Alan Parfitt and Mr Woodward.

I had Martin conduct a follow-up interview with Mr Woodward last week, but it was unenlightening. Apparently there have been no further bags at number 93 and in the intervening years he has largely discounted many of the stranger aspects of his experience. I wasn't expecting much, as time generally makes people inclined to forget what they would rather not believe, but at least it got Martin out of the Institute for an afternoon, which is always a welcome relief.

Sasha had more luck following up with the old police reports. Alan Parfitt was reported as a missing person by his brother Michael on the 20th of August 2009, and his location remains unknown. The bag of teeth is also corroborated by the police reports of Police Constables Suresh and Atteman, though they can provide no further details, as they never made an arrest or even located any suspects. The medical report on the teeth themselves does give one puzzling detail: the teeth were confirmed to be human, but more than that, as far as the examiner was able to determine... they were all in different stages of decay and didn't match any available dental records, but all 2780 of them were the exact same tooth.

oluntas tua, sicut in cae

A scrap of recovered paper similar to the one described in the second refuse sack.



93 Lancaster Road.
(Slight discolouration likely due to
developing error)