

The Last Days of Landfill . Richard Stern

Thrilled

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Occasionally, Barry Towers was absolutely thrilled by the sky. He would sit in his spacious kitchen looking out of the bay windows, and be rather impressed by it all. He would spot several different types of tree, because they were big and difficult to miss. He might pitch a pair of scrawny eyes on the small bedded patch of flowers and shrubs directly in front of him (tended by the gardener who mended them from time to time). He'd note the whirlwind, explosive ones (dahlias perhaps?), and smile wryly at the green stringy things (cunning creepers!). Barry knew that such things came out in spring, and summer, but rarely winter. After decades of barely noticing them, he had suddenly realised how magnificent they were. He began to take in a still, cool dawn, as if he was investing in it for generous, phlegmatic reason. There was a self-consciousness in his enjoyment of mornings. He made his breakfast with a deliberateness that was over-perfect but rather satisfying. He cut the home-made bread with care and attention. He made his hands and the knife strictly adhere to the most efficient angles. He arranged everything on the table in pleasing geometric patterns. He smiled at the alignment of the conserves and the toast rack (if only the public and private sectors were so elegantly arranged!). Chopin's Nocturne in F sharp major or some such on a shiny new multimedia system, and Barry on hand to answer questions should anybody be on hand to ask them. But nobody seemed to be around these days. And the affluent were suddenly desolate in these parts. He would eat his breakfast with a religious grace, think about where it had come from, what had gone into producing it, how lucky he was to have it: this gorgeous, amber juice; toasted, fresh oatmeal batch loaf; rich and flavoursome coffee; fresh fruity goods. And when he finished, on a good morning, he'd magisterially place the empty orange carton in the correct recycling box. Perhaps then to shiver, coil up, and grimace at the thought of it ending up in the Yangtze river, alongside hundreds of tonnes of dead fish and the spill-out from cities of tens and twenties of millions, Shanghai, Nanjing, Wuhan, Chonqing, possibly to intermingle finally with the sweeping red tides of algae in the East China Sea, past billions of tonnes of untreated water and the odd abandoned, fried river dolphin. And then Barry Towers, area manager for Flingit, Waste management, set off to work as if fortified for a great enterprise. On a good morning.

Barry's decision to take the kids to the Fresh Kills landfill while holidaying in New York was not a success. They might have recovered from the marathon tour of a 2,200 acre site. There might have been a resurrection after Barry's three hour commentary on channel dredging and landfill infrastructure had ended. They might even have raised their arms anew following an embarrassing falling-out between Barry and a Fresh Kills officer on the exact definition of solid waste, but when they discovered that the Staten Island ferry service was cancelled, and the prospect of a pleasant dinner ebbed away, they rounded on Barry and held him responsible for everything wrong with the world. Barry just clapped his hands together, and remarked: 'Well, we'll have a look at the Pleistocene deposit layer again.' His witty suggestion that they camp outside the world's 'premier landfill site' that very night was also a mistake. Fuelled by their recent memories, and an acute understanding of who was responsible for them, there was a rather brutal family altercation on the hard shoulder of the Goethals bridge, where every member of the tribe had to be restrained more or less in turn.

'Engage the brain,' the children were implored. 'The world's premier landfill, bar none. Bar none,' Barry had cried out in vain. Even Emma, who could remember an incident in Madeira where Barry had chased down a dustcart for two miles because two workers were riding on the back of it, contrary to European regulations, was not prepared for this event. The upshot was her disappearance with Barry's fourteen-year old daughter, Jennifer, on a ferocious two-week shopping binge that straddled three states and ended the lives of seven credit cards. Shopping for the slightly desirable, angry shopping, infinite shopping. Jennifer began to wonder what would happen when she had literally everything she wanted. For little James, only thirteen, the adventure on Staten Island lasted as long as it took Barry to consider the disappearance of his wife and daughter as noteworthy. A week cleared off, as weeks do. James had point blank refused to go with his mother, because of a violent argument with his sister on the name of a coastal fish. At that moment the young man disliked Jennifer more than most other things, even after he had had the satisfaction of burning her new bikini and tossing it, along with a treasured handbag, into the Atlantic ocean. Emma could think of no better punishment for her son over the bikini incident than a week with only Barry for company.

Especially when he was in this kind of mood. She advised her son of a forthcoming period of lasting detention when they returned home, and departed with Jennifer early one morning, confident that Barry would devise some suitably dreadful activities in the name of James's education. Barry, proud of his son despite his obvious foibles, secretly congratulated him on his tenacity and observational skills. Yes, that large olive-green fish with the white belly was indeed an example of the Atlantic sturgeon, he told James, clearly not the much smaller Red-fin pickerel that Jennifer had surmised. But if James was destined to be a leading player in waste management, as Barry had hoped, that interminable week spent surveying the precision engineering at Fresh Kills, and exploring the inter-tidal marshes and wetlands around Staten Island was enough to shatter the dream for ever. There was a fresh explosion after James used a civil war replica bayonet to shunt Barry towards the vicious part of a compressing machine. James made an immediate and malicious apology. A smirk that contained all the insincerity of youth. The following day, Barry led the little bastard on a further Fresh Kills foray, or 'more of the old bollocks' as James now saw it. When the divided clan finally arrived home on separate flights, even Barry had to admit that the whole thing hadn't been very edifying. But the Towers set were still together, just.

Barry's admiration for his boss, the man who had first recommended the Fresh Kills exploration, was undiminished, however. The Remarkable Randolph Flowers had embarked on a similar trip with his family, but they had touched home intact.

Reflecting upon this, Barry could only better appreciate the natural authority of a man who had been able to steer his little army through an educational minefield, and bring them back enlightened. Flowers was a class act, a man you could learn from. Randolph Flowers was a key figure in a golden age for waste management. Barry looked up to him, in the old-fashioned way, as a leader. He was a man of great physical presence, self-assured, unconcerned by details, visionary in his way. His ideas were simple but elegant: today's business hero becomes tomorrow's goat; no CEO should stay on for longer than ten years; most leaders are philosophically wedded to one division; few companies can manage diversification; profit was what counted since that was what finally protected the environment. Randolph Flowers was not a theorist. He led by example. He advertised the clean efficiency of his landfill sites by shimmying the paths traversed by dumper trucks in a resplendent executive car. It was an admirable nod to progress, Barry felt, (ignoring the two car washes the gesture took). With men like Randolph Flowers, how could waste management fail in its duties? Randolph Flowers, whom others regarded as a dangerous, greedy barbarian living on the outskirts of reason, was for Barry a guiding light. Despite the constraints it placed upon his idealism, Barry was committed to waste management because of people like Randolph Flowers.

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Having an office adjacent to a landfill was an accolade quite thrust upon Barry. It took the edge off the morning, that office, though the landfill was in marvellous shape, bristling with glittering packaging and other cheerful things. Even the burial of a dog one day was a wondrous sight for Barry. He'd seen the incident on the weighbridge. Done-in by a Volvo FM9, right under the wheels. Barry

gasped as the unfortunate hound's bones were mangled, his strength collapsed, darkness covering his eyes. Barry was very moved when they popped him into paradise. He was fed into a great golden treasure box, Barry felt, ready to conceal, under lock and key, society's nicely monitored Dump (road kill always welcome). Utilitarian activities gathered inside the mellifluous orb; understated, crucial work. But a man might be admiring the great science of landfill, melting in its poem of inimitable precision, and then this, these, the office buildings: dirty-white intruders lurching horrendously into view. Everyone knew that landfill ought to be appreciated from afar, but how could this be done when you were banged-up inside a porter-cabin like this one? Condemned to a thorough lambasting by menacing gulls that flew up close and personal and knew very well how to shit on your jumper. To be then asked to perform your duties there. Under a searching light, and with packets of crisps blowing in through the windows. Keyboards submerged in dust. The real workers outside, doing it all. Nobody was supposed to see that. The brutal whirr of the digger. Every day to witness landfill degraded. Landfill let down. The aesthetics of public utility spurned when the prize was nearest at hand, undercut by a vulgar cost-cutting endeavour. Randolph Flowers knew all about it of course (which was reassuring), but it jarred. *It jarred.*

For Barry, the feeling was not alleviated by the thought of who lurked inside these pale snakes of dodgy Perspex. This was a thing that could also change the flavour of the morning. People you could depend upon when you wanted things to fall apart. Karen would be there. Karen, garrulous, large-limbed, and predominantly hysterical, a woman of unforeseen laughter and surprising emotional outbursts. Breasts tumbling out of sweater. Pulsating thighs on the march, pursued by clothing. Big, colliding shapes in her mind, gigantic objects that bobbed up and down before being let loose, occasionally, to dismantle other minds. Who said hello when there was only goodbye. Who loved Trucker-Fucker, who married Trucker-Fucker, who made babies with Trucker-Fucker, who got Trucker-Fucker a job. A couple of whom it was said, 'The wheel is turning, but the hamsters are not at home'. And there too would be meek Penfold whose nearest ability was continuing to wear a stained velvet theatre jacket in what was still a very male industry. A man who woke up defeated and carried on all day only to clock up further defeats. Who saw a mother around every corner and in every crevice. His only occupation, in fact, was fleeing mothers. He saw them everywhere, criticising his work, watching his cooking, summoning him up in front of the class to do a presentation, glaring at him from billboards, leaping out at him as pop-ups on his computer screen, in the toilet, in the bedroom, spoiling him, dismissing him devastatingly, admonishing him and terrorising him late at night. A man ready to hand you a toothpick as the occasion demanded, but not at all reliable for that. John too, another mainstay, the truck manager, no doubt plastered across two chairs, baseball cap slapped over brow, expertly directing Flingit's finest drivers to entirely the wrong places. And worst of all, Alan. Alan, who probably wouldn't be there, in fact, offering the far worse threat that he might turn up at any moment. To be suddenly in the room with you, all territorial, parading what was euphemistically known as 'the little haircut': a greased red fin pitched atop one side of his head that well reflected the shark in his mind. A man on heat whose bad ideas left his brain to crawl across yours all day. The open-

cuffed shirt, sleek and black, the colossal silver watch, the over-compensating phrases: some irrelevant problem that they needed to do something about 'effectively and theoretically'; sledging someone, usually Barry, who 'didn't know his butt from his head'. Blathering on at length about the 'lack of communication' when it never occurred to him that the 'lack of communication' had always been purely voluntary. Always that possibility that he'd come charging in and abuse everybody for no reason.

Barry's list of enemies in the business was quite extensive. Alan was merely at the top. Conflict might make a good office, but this carries the assumption that some people within the office might tolerate some other people in the office some of the time. If only to share vital documentation they might find it in themselves to speak to one another, or failing that, through one another. Even if it was in some complex network of half-revealed truths and sophisticated lying that enables everyone to keep their vanities intact. Despite an orgy of backstabbing unpleasantness, the warring factions would be able to call it quits at opportune moments, recognising when the over-riding interests of the operation were at stake. They would be able to speak without the kind of general resentment and all-inclusive hostility that polluted the atmosphere at Flingit as well as the top end of some governments. A perpetual state of daggers drawn had its advantages, advantages dependent on large disadvantages such as the very low calibre of the staff, but advantages nevertheless. Unpolished new proposals were summarily rejected instead of being adopted to the detriment of the many. With only one person ever available to support an idea, nothing much really took off. And so the world was spared from so much bureaucratic stomping to nowhere, if only because the staff wanted to save themselves from each other. Spared, for instance, from the worst of Penfold's councils of despair that were disguised as plans for action: some lovely scheme muddied over by countless concessions to the stronger demands of the fly-tipper. Spared from one of Karen's brain-storm doodahs, characterised by an over-sensitivity to all the angles and an attention to none. Spared from John's desire to overhaul Flingit's fleet of trucks without recognising overheads or the finance department in general. Spared from Alan's attempt to pre-empt and thereby expose the rest of industry by firing large quantities of waste into space via rocket, or his inspired revision of recycling credits which amounted to a taxation policy on the sun for continuing to be here. Spared, too, from any of a number of Barry's incomprehensible lurches into policy, cloaked inside acronym-rich documents that begged not to be read so much as struck down with a furious, righteous anger. It flagged stagnation rather than decimation. The danger was that if the fine balance was lost, some or all of these would be enacted and the Flingit animal would really vent its spleen. The only thing that stopped everyone from resigning at once was the thought that it would be intolerable to be the first to go, to feel that *they* were being pushed out and not that other bastard who should have gone years ago. Barry presided over it all like a heavily sedated owl, endowed with an active but slumberous wisdom that was always exceeded by the turn of events. Heroic interventions that always came too late. Ultimately, he was tolerated as a step on the journey to a 'proper' decision, whooshing on the merry-go-round of delegated tasks. He mumbled with intent. He was an renown mumblor. He was full of courtesies, too, abounding with them, throwing them about so that everyone got

one regardless of how underhand their behaviour might have been. Sometimes, he would stop himself half way through a meditation, bored and frightened by whatever point he was about to make. Some of his babbling ran the risk of being picked up by others and marked-down as communicative speech. A dreadful habit that, Barry worried, was chiselling away at the mean image he had cultivated for himself at Flingit.

A plonker with brains. This summed up how Barry was seen throughout the company. Bazza was a plonker with brains. Good ol' Bazza, but what a dickhead!

Times were, albeit infrequently, when Towers wondered what the hell he was doing in waste management. It was a fraught project. When the European parliament gave a grant to boost industrial development and tourism around Jamford, they probably did not envisage the money being spent on the construction of a landfill above a beautiful valley. With high annual rainfall, ferocious wind speeds, and a population of twenty-five thousand living around the base, the decision surprised everyone. Even Barry, who joined Flingit several years after planning permission had been granted, accepted that the location presented unique challenges for the industry. Protest, however, was marginalized and fragmented. Environmental groups were dismissed as misguided and naïve. Organised events were 'uncoordinated' and 'confused,' said to be run by 'eccentrics' and 'extremists'. Local carbon awareness and ecology groups were ticked off and ridiculed for their lack of foresight and realism just as they displayed the largest measure of both. Footage was taken of one or two scowling, visionary stoners as they banged bongos and spoiled the view, made scapegoats by red-faced councillors who called for pragmatism and decried the sentimental wishes of the wishy-washy greens. Others reserved their indignation for the television screen, and were disappointed by the failure of their living room walls to express the depth of their outrage. There was muted talk in the press of a 'bypassing of the usual processes.' In fact, the initial press reports were completely inaccurate, since they relied on information provided by Jamford Borough council, who owned the landfill before Flingit took over, and were responsible for putting it there. But that didn't matter because exactly the same set of journalists that compiled the old reports were able to ignore all their previous mistakes in the new. Besides, the 'burgeoning controversy' had not really grabbed anyone's attention, and nobody much noticed when the information completely changed overnight. Even the journalists themselves, about five minutes after they had re-worded the press-releases, forgot what they had been writing about. The story was stashed away in obscure corners of the newspapers, or, worse, relegated to the letters page and the blog where it became the conspiracy ravings of Liam the Green Evangelist, a figure summarily ridiculed as a man who thought of himself as a reincarnated otter. As everyone was to discover later on, he also had one or two things to say. After all, Flingit was a company with exceptional problems.

The workers had a vague notion of this, but endeavoured to avoid the bigger picture. 'How did I get here? Why am I doing a job like this?' Sometimes they asked one another, but that had everyone flaring up. 'You only get into this business by default,' John observed on a difficult afternoon. Everyone had murmured and grimaced, struggling in memory. They *had* all fallen in, but via their

own degrees of unknowing. Barry was transfixed by the remark. He had the look of a man who had spent rather too long traipsing around an undistinguished collection of ancient moulded earthenware. *You only get into this business by default.* Barry reflected on the opportunities he'd thrown away in life, before his career entered into its sublime calling. He had started out by choosing professions. He chose professions with the unreality of a fine-tuned egotism. He was and was not a probation officer, a nuclear lobbyist, an environmental consultant, a photographer, a journalist, a publisher, a scholar, a psychiatrist, a human rights lawyer. He was in fact a professional rabbit caught in the headlights, a photon on a random walk, the metaphorical last can of beer at the party. If someone had told him that the position of the Last Nawab of Awadh were available, Barry would have felt that he was the man for the job. Focused, determined, and resolute during the several minutes he devoted to each of these careers, in between times, Towers was caught in a mulch of fears and gnawing hesitations. He forgot to work hard. He forgot about qualifications and experience. He forgot about personal competence. He forgot that having a brain is not enough. So he blamed it all on morality. He kept a moral code apart from him, made it flexible, expansive, and durable, and blamed it for being flexible, expansive, and durable. How he could never locate its centre, try as he might, and the agonies it caused him! When it got jammed, Barry just set the problem aside and started all over again. (He learnt this technique at the catholic school they sent him to). He saw himself as driven on by endless good will, but his family knew that the inheritance – endless funds! – was pretty useful too. Despite being capable of killing people with a single statement of monolithic worthiness, the indulgent saw that he was also charitable and well-meaning. He would walk into parties, full of warmth and good feeling, and then bludgeon the company with lectures on the salt content in bread. He consistently stated the impossibility of avoiding carnage on the roads. He once terrified a robust Royal Navy veteran with a diatribe on the impact of global warming on small island nations, making pointed references to a recent statement from the Western Samoan Prime Minister that outlined his country's fears at toxic waste dumping in the pacific, and the knock-on effects for the copra and banana crop. He had received a police warning because he had grabbed hold of a librarian and shook her for taking an excessive number of plastic bags in the supermarket.

Never in a position, however, to addresses any of a wide range of causes, he remained an idealist in search of a role. So that ultimately Barry's career ambitions were toppled under their own unwieldiness. Or obliterated like final sequence supernovae, as an astronomy programme once suggested to the ever modest Towers. Every now and again he would have an epiphany, would regard his status narrowly and scathingly. He would change jobs. He did so once, twice, three times. He lurked in a council housing office for centuries before exchanging that for a good skulk in a regional business development centre, then frosted over in a water company's complaints department for an epoch. Promotions dropped on top of him like avalanches. With each new appointment, his blood pressure shot up, but he fought a way through. He detected a gradual loss of good humour, but he never recognised that if someone had appointed him Director of the Milky Way he would have complained bitterly before seeking a transfer to a larger galaxy. And still, underneath it all, he found the audacity

to ask the same question: Why was he loitering on the periphery, still, as if even *there* he risked being caught off-limits?

He started out as a supervisor, just sorted rubbish essentially, muddled his eyes night after night under the dull glow of conveyor belts carrying the detritus of lives; hidden tales of love, hate, greed, envy, despair, hope, the whole gamut of human behaviour. He looked for signs, invented stories based on the random alignment of objects. He could not quite get at why he was so fascinated. The trip to Fresh Kills was the watershed moment. Until then, he hadn't quite understood what was so marvellous about WM. There was obviously no glory in the waste management business. He fully acknowledged this: you soldiered on, always at the whim of public spite. By this, Barry did not mean, for instance, the waste Mafiosi, the networks of illegal fly-tippers that the industry had to contend with on a day-to-day basis. They were just criminals. He meant the way people still mixed up things in their bins, the bark with the aerosols, the clean foil with the uncooked food waste, the disposable nappies with the bottles of beer, the broken glass with the flowers and weeds, the envelopes with the hypodermic needles inside them, the way you got the recycling day wrong, the way the crap muscled out of the bag because you were too half-arsed to put it in properly. It made him want to preach about bins, these commanders of forgetfulness, hushing up the impact of all this neglect, carelessness, ignorance, casual community malaise. As soon as the object leaves the hand... How it pulled the thread of diminishing lives back in, cleansed the mind, replenished the stock for dumbest consumerism, maybe even embellished delusions of immortality. And it never ceased to amaze him what people did with their lives. The kingdoms of rubbish, the rampant fall-out from bizarre living practices. The endlessness of depravity, the touching exactitude of acts of love. They saw it all from the butt-end. Guns and knives, love-letters and trinkets, everything finally discarded. A beautifully rendered photo album tracing a life in among the old milk cartons. It helped to expose his idle dreams. It put his own life into perspective. He was not quite as odd as he had feared. There was a person out there, for instance, whose household rubbish contained a wooden leg, six dead sheep, a corresponding set of wedding rings, and a manual on bestiality. Barry would mutter grimly as people threw away bagfuls of fresh shopping, or boxes of precious documents. He noted how nobody is really in control of their life. One morning, he stared at an ocean of junk food wrappings, and made probability calculations on the numbers of serious illnesses they had contributed to. He felt vaguely contented to be part of a great cause, and if he could not quite put his finger on what grand thing he was performing, he was affirmed in the knowledge that waste bound everyone together, whether they recognized it or not. To be engaged to waste was a fortifier, it got the blood moving.

At Fresh Kills, Barry found something extra. Majesty, supreme organisation, a sense of the future from a WM perspective. A perfect marriage of burgeoning technologies, unique ecology and social function: waste containment conceived as part of a plan to reinvigorate the environment. Not just shuffled off, ashamedly, but a demonstrably living, breathing element of the community. He rather passed over the way the environment had been moulded in the first place to cope with the giant mounds of household waste, did not look into the adaptation of the

habitat for a succession of species from the time when the area was farmland. It was enough to observe that herons still survived there. That was the important thing. Survival of the herons. Well done the herons. Well done, sirs... Barry was persuaded by the superhero powers of containment, the fabulous morphing, the drawing and re-drawing of space guided by a technology that he understood as a kind of magic. Slick, plasma operators bringing to heel the consumer binge of millions and relaying it in mere thousands of acres. Landfill was a daily achievement. Giant rampaging octopuses of accumulated waste sucked back, delimited, compressed, and pocketed away like so much small change. Waste managers on hand to limit tentacle destinations before they reached out to smother us like a series of suicides on neglected acute wards. He envisaged them as fighters inside a black-hole of complacency, making marvellous adjustments to the limits of space and time. Grabbing hold of the pummelling fists of ever more urgent demand, the blitzed residue of a trillion disingenuous advertisements, the panic buys, the merchandise armies of all important events soon forgotten, the bleary-eyed solace of product satisfaction to enliven the fomenting stasis of drifting lives, the alchemy of beauty products, herbal medicines, sound goods undercut by fashions and summarily rejected, clothes, shoes, the whole detritus of revolutions by the day, electronic, cultural, personal, lap-tops, scanners, mobiles, ancient televisions, tossed away and replaced by others with finer specifications, perhaps never made use of, bought to draw out the wild gazes of the terminally envious, or on the weakest, most flaccid whim. They reined it all in. Dealt with it, sometimes converted it so that it was not entirely a stain on the planet. The subtlety and elegance by which they eked methane out of the ground with intricate silvery-dark rods, the grandeur of a secret chemical garden that helped to sustain a whole city. There was a greatness in all this, after-all, Barry reflected. He saw a route to belonging. He fell in love with landfill.

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Barry gazed after her like a poisoned fish, baffled, as any man would be who has just explained the precise terms of the carbon-offsetting debate in clear everyday language only to get this kind of hysterical reaction.

He asked himself why things had become so tense at home? Why was Emma always raging quietly in the garden?

The reason was clear. Barry's attachment to landfill had reached a new level, and Emma was clearly struggling to cope with that. She rarely appreciated the scope and sophistication of his thinking, Barry felt. Barry, it was true, had become a thorough-going Waste Management obsessive after the Fresh Kills trip, undaunted by the 'emotional issues' it had wrought upon the family. He read the literature avidly, the WM bibles, colossal treatises, reams and reams of pamphlets, articles in venerable journals. He had even branched out into the wider issues of global warming and climate change, so that the big picture took its place against the smaller world of his working life. Lofty tales of trembling cities facing environmental catastrophe jostled alongside waste management minutiae, like the article advocating a national framework for the safe removal of tyre waste. Barry's blood pressure shot up with the GMST as his finger traced worrying projections. Barry was worried, too. At times he was alerted to the possibility that landfill

was not a complete solution to the world's environmental problems, and this filled him with fear and dismay. But at such moments of doubt and pain, Barry felt assured that landfill would evolve. It had to, people depended upon it, and, well, Barry would evolve with it, arm-in-arm. He reminded himself always to think about waste management from the global angle. For example, who took the bins out on the Gaza Strip? What did they do in Baghdad in terms of recycling? Basically, what happened in war-torn countries where people were poor and getting blown up all the time? These were basic questions for the industry leader. Barry now tackled them, and many others, in what was, to his knowledge, the only Waste Management blog written by an enthusiastic insider. The blog was called: WM from the inside: Diary of a Wasteman. Barry was enormously proud of his blog. It had become his *raison d'être*, and he considered himself to be the greatest Wasteman he knew with the possible exception of Randolph Flowers.

Emma may have observed that none of this had anything to do with their marital relationship. Living with Barry was like living with a man who was constantly turning down the Nobel Peace Prize, magnanimously. He was forever pontificating, and then, immediately explaining himself. It ruined the family ambience. On their most recent family excursion they had ended up on a pier, where Barry had spent hours looking at a sculpture made out of rubbish. It was called Wasteman, and Barry was delighted by it. Its body-frame was composed of broken ladders and chairs, a satellite dish for the nose, a toilet seat for the mouth, hair of gnarled ropes, veins of wire, and a heart of scratched-steel disk. It was performing the Nazi salute. The mood was bad. The children had behaved like vipers. Barry had commented that the average person generates as much rubbish as seven times their own body weight every year, but Emma felt certain that this was an underestimation.

'See how it dictates to us!' Barry declared with a touch of admiration. Emma looked away. As much as anything else, she needed to escape his arm-movements. They were becoming ridiculously pronounced, and rather dangerous. At times, he cut the figure of a gigantic cartwheel, which, she felt, might be rolled into the ocean. She thought he might have learnt after the Fresh Kills trip. But the curse went on. This was not the touchingly absent-minded man that she had hooked up with years ago, who, even then, clearly had no idea where he was going, but whose enthusiasm invited you to strike the same path. Now she was more likely to strike him.

He was as lethal at home as he was abroad. She feared deeply those weekends when he just mooched around the house, having buried himself in his basement-lair doing god knows what. In fact, she suspected what was going on down there. He was testing his green credentials by filling in magazine surveys, an activity that could leave him profoundly disturbed, unable to go on. Whole days might be disgorged in eco-doom, but it was not always easy to see what Barry was doing to prevent the demise of the planet. He would emerge from there looking distraught, wring his hands a few times, and proceed to speak in desolate tones. At the dinner-table, he could be completely incoherent. Innocent expressions like 'Can you pass the salt, please?' became unintelligible, like pleas from the underworld. The children started to ask what had happened to Daddy? Barry hardly knew he was a father during this period, as he teared around the place, pulled boxes of stuff out of the loft for no apparent reason, or

suddenly marched the children off to the local Household Recycling Centre. On one occasion he proposed to Emma that they sell everything, move to the coast, and start again. Then, when she was least expecting it, he somehow regained his equilibrium, and was preaching the good fight once more. Had he recalculated his carbon footprint and generated a happy answer?

She asked herself: what did he actually do, at work, or *anywhere*? The word that shot back at her was *froth*. Barry frothed like a neglected cappuccino on a crisp winter's day. At first his froth would be caught with a splash of the mezzogiorno, schemes and projects looked sleek and sexy, and how could anybody ever imagine that all the problems of the world wouldn't just evaporate? Then everything would flummox and sink into creamy white despair, sprinkled with the cigarette ash of scattered resources and dwindling funds. She would learn of vivid but apparently indecipherable meetings with senior management, that clearly won Barry over, but weren't expected to achieve anything. They did tinker with the company logo, which changed by the season, and then they were always updating the recycling guidance symbols on the trucks and bins, as if they set out to confound the general public. Would this save the Earth as Barry imagined? He was only trying to reduce, slightly, the amount of rubbish that ends up in landfill, after all.

Unthrilled

In fact, things at work were not progressing at all smoothly. Flingit was entering its most challenging period. Later on, when Barry asked himself where it had all gone wrong, there were so many incidents vying for the honour, that he didn't know which to rank first. Was it the collapsed offices, the lost children, the community poisonings, the TV investigation, or the protest-movement led by Liam the Green Evangelist? How separable were the problems? By that stage, Barry had been wrong so many times in such a short period that he didn't trust himself to come up with the right answer any more. He also had to prepare for certain eventualities.

The lost children episode was perhaps the most keenly felt by Barry. He saw himself as personally culpable there. He'd made at least one retrograde decision. It was so senseless, he could hardly imagine how he'd done it. He had put Alan in charge of a group of children who were visiting the landfill, as part of a recycling awareness day at Jamford High School. Naturally they were lost, what else could he have expected to happen? Of course they drifted off into their various gangs and spread a wave of petty crime that terrorised the local community for an afternoon. It was so obvious looking back. Their conversations from that time came now as recurring nightmares:

'Well, you know. There are five kids one minute, four the next.... Where's the other one gone?'

'Well you tell me. You were looking after them.'

'Like I say, four kids one minute, three the next. Where's that little bastard dispersed to?'

'What?'

'One of them has ADHD.'

'What?'

'One of them's got ADHD. Attention deficit wotsit. Fuckin' mental. Presses all the buttons. *Enthusiastic*.'

'Any idea where we might find him?'

'Somewhere in the valley.'

'Right.'

'Listen, don't worry Barry.'

'No, I won't worry Alan. You've put some children in the cruncher, you know, Little Timmy's wriggling in the maggot juice as we speak, but his friends are 'somewhere in the valley'. No I won't worry Alan.'

The one good thing about the lost children incident, though, was the sense of finality, of closure, when they discovered that the children were not actually dead. When they found that out, the relief was tantamount to a success. Many of them had only minor injuries, and lost prestige and damage-fees were one thing, but manslaughter charges would have been another. A robust WM company could take that kind of hit and move on.

They could not move on with Alan, though, so Barry advised on his early retirement, which seemed to suit everybody, including Alan himself. He was delighted, and couldn't have been more pleased.

The community poisonings provided no sense of closure, however. They were never-ending. At one point Barry hoped that he himself would be struck down, so he might share in the suffering of so many others, but it was not to be. Unfortunately, he remained as fit and healthy at the end of the debacle as he was at the beginning. Try as he might, he wouldn't come down with the nasty symptoms that everybody else was clocking up that dire winter: inflammation of the eyes, hoarseness, that unbearable shortness of breath, the intense tearing of vision, the blinding pain when looking at light. Hazardous waste was indeed hazardous. That was the lesson for Barry. Although they had no license to dump hazardous waste, the opportunity to do so continually for months proved irresistible to the management at Flingit. When those trucks kept whizzing by, Barry had gazed after them as if they contained either the end of the world or a decent supply of chocolate biscuits. In the event, it was neither. Calcium filter cake is a kind of industrial pollution that rapidly reacts with household rubbish to produce large volumes of hydrogen sulphide gas. Even small quantities encourage a livid raw-egg stink. This stuff was doing all the damage, and it should never have been anywhere near the landfill in the first place. There was a place down the road where they should have been depositing it. There always is. Anyway, the company needed a scape-goat, and they could not have asked for a better one than the man they got.

Barry Towers was a quite exceptional scapegoat. This was because he never had any notion that he might have been one. Barry just thought he was defending the cause. Even when Flingit Waste Management and their landfill project had completed a metamorphosis in the public mind from 'unique business opportunity' to 'thorough going insult felt by the entire community,' Towers remained steadfast and resolute. He reflected that waste management decisions, whatever form they take, are 'bad neighbours.' It was in their nature to be so. So whenever disappointing news was relayed to him, Barry would recall this point, and further reflect on how the needs of an upstanding waste management company are often diametrically opposed to the wishes of the local people. The only problem was that Flingit had amassed many 'bad neighbours' in a very small period of time. There seemed to be some kind of limit to the number of 'bad neighbours' that the community was willing to cope with, before unpleasantness broke out. Already wilting under the continuing fall-out from the poisonings, it was hardly good news to be implicated in a scandal involving the illegal removal of toxic waste

abroad, especially as the case against Flingit appeared to be watertight. The company was soon officially under investigation, and people were starting to go berserk.

Barry was mocked and derided in the local media following comments he had made in reference to the filter cake issue. He had been quoted as saying:

‘Smell at landfill is rarely uplifting, but on this occasion the odours were transient and difficult to substantiate. We’re not dealing with hymns for hedgehogs here.’

What Barry regarded as a rather stoic remark, others attributed to madness. They didn’t believe Barry knew what he was dealing with at all. The part about hedgehogs further raised the ire of Liam the Green Evangelist, now a popular local celebrity. Liam was a marvellous media performer, and nobody worried much about his former thinking on otters. Barry, on the other hand, was not favoured by television or radio or newspapers or blogs. Television, in particular, did not flatter him. He looked like the resurrection of the Giant Ground Sloth, and really did seem like a being that has done very little since his extinction in the first epoch of the Quaternary period. But how could anyone respond to the kind of things that Barry was being harangued about? How could anyone answer a report which stated that your tenure in office was characterised by a ‘lack of strategic thinking punctuated by episodes of hysterical planning for unknown goals?’

After the various problems and episodes and scandals, Barry was a little bit down. And then the office buildings collapsed (which many interpreted as poetic justice) and with that Barry was rendered highly emotional. In other circumstances he might have been glad to see those eye-sores so summarily dismissed, but not when it left so many of the team unfit for duty. Ten minutes later and they would all have been dolling around the burger van for lunch, no one would have seen them for days, but no, they had to be shambling around inside when the foundations went. Penfold got off best with just a minor compound fracture of something relatively unimportant. Karen and Trucker-Fucker fared worse, far worse. They were, as Karen herself commented, ‘a couple of pigs in poo’. Barry did not like to think about what had happened to them at all. That case could last as long as some of the other ones already threatening eternity. What in the name of shitting crikey would he do now? Flingit was hardly a magnet for recruitment at this stage in its history. They weren’t going to break down the doors to join the firm, there weren’t even any left to break. Oh Barry was alone, so alone. How could waste management prosper now? There was, however, one man who had been here before, and possibly seen far worse. Had he? He may well have done.

But Randolph Flowers, leader of men, where are you now? Barry cried out. Flowers had enjoyed the spate of poisonings and other misdemeanours no more than anybody else had. He was even so appalled by them as to sequester himself out of the company and *into* a career in politics, displaying his knowledge of all the disasters as a pretext for election. While it’s customary to reward profound failures in business and life with new contracts and massive pay-outs, few managers have so brilliantly escaped the recognition of personal accountability as Flowers. As far as the world knew, he was a noble defender of justice, a leading citizen, and very much part of the solution to the various problems that he had helped to generate. Apparently they had all forgotten, and he along with them, the long career of self-indulgence,

ineptitude, and, yes, malice. Perhaps this was why he was able to rail against the idiots who had made the original planning decision for the landfill, when he was principal among them, and, having left the company shortly before its collapse, how he then went on to diligently name and shame any staff found to have acted incompetently under his auspices. In fact, these tended to be the competent ones, unfairly blamed for his mistakes, and Barry, who had never done enough to make any truly monumental mistakes, beyond the fairly large error of allowing so many bad things to happen. Flowers was hell-bent on exposing a lunatic fringe of bureaucrats who, on closer analysis, turned out to be himself in various guises: the maverick planner, the reckless spender, the malevolent goader of employees, the out-and-out bastard.

When something massive finally clicked in Barry’s brain, and he realized that he had been thoroughly shafted by Randolph Flowers, his one beacon of light for so long, the depression really set in. Barry was forced to reconsider everything, which was especially hard for him to take, and made him feel very ridiculous. We are entering an era of inner strength, Barry noted, thinking now only of himself, as the company had so thoroughly let him down. When the bricks were not coming through his window, Barry sat back and thought of something else: Even if we are living in a world of indestructible plastics, he reflected, when you really really want to know what something is made of, what do you? Answer: you break it. Barry thought this, and it became his mantra.

In fact, the maelstrom at work was complemented by another one at home. Given the sheer range of the challenges there, it is not surprising that Barry imagined himself to be the cause of disasters back home that had not actually happened yet, but which added to the ones that had. One evening, on arriving back from the travesty of day, Barry was struck down with another unhappy thought. He knew himself to be, during this period in particular, very poor at remembering appointments, meetings, important times in general, and faces. This led him to think that birthdays might go the same way. With this reflection in mind, he strode up to the woman he had some reason to believe was his wife, and prepared himself to face the music:

‘Have I missed it?’

‘What?’

‘Birthday, is it?’

‘No, not yet!’

‘Over? That was a quiet affair.’

‘It hasn’t happened yet.’

‘That’s why it was quiet,’ Barry commented. He hardly believed it, but it was now possible that he had weeks still to sort out a present. Finally, a stroke of luck! But what he wanted now was clarity:

‘When will it happen?’

‘The same time as last year.’

Well, that was one thing off his mind, and there was plenty of time to find out when that time last year had actually occurred. But then, just to confuse matters, she emitted a kind of ‘humph’, and this was simply unquantifiable. It might have meant *anything*. It left Barry very tentative indeed as to his next move.

‘When the day comes is there a place for me?’ he said, all in a rush.

‘Go away, I’m de-worming the cat.’

This was the last sentence that Barry received from Emma for quite some time, and, next to the new ones

that would eventually arrive, it was one to hold on to. The divorce was a long, nasty, shuddering affair, but Barry only wished that the collapse of Flingit had allowed him more time to concentrate on what was happening. He was better at the end than he was at the beginning. At the end, he fully respected the fact that there had been a divorce. But until that knuckle-sandwich of an afternoon when the final judgment dropped, Barry would not necessarily have jumped to the conclusion that his wife really believed that he was an 'enormously boring and one dimensional man,' even if she did, in fact, mention it on more than one occasion. Barry had been in tricky water before, for instance, when James was born after an extended labour, and he had picked him up and said: 'Cor, you *are* ugly, like a small gorilla.' Now that had lost him affection for weeks, but yet still she clocked in and helped pay the bills. This was different, but how? Barry could only conclude that it was all tied up with what was happening at Flingit, that lost status was an element here. Afterall, there is a very great difference between a waste manager in the grandest phase of his career, and a man viewed as a public liability, local pariah, and probable maniac. Even Barry would not have stayed married to Barry if what the papers said were true.

So Flingit was finally ground into dust, and plans were put in place to rename the landfill site. Randolph Flowers suggested 'The Forest Country Waste Management Park' and this delighted everybody. It was an excellent means of advising the general public that there had once been some perfectly nice greenery in the exact spot where those vast idiots had then gone and installed the stinkpits, and that it might even be safe to walk around the place in the months and years to come. Barry had visited the landfill in the interim period following the demise, both of Flingit, and his own personal hopes. This journey had to be conducted by stealth at night, because Barry was regarded as a terrible threat to all future hopes, and security was alerted to the possibility of his appearance as a tenacious saboteur who must be kept far away. But Barry lodged himself there, nevertheless, and spent a night in a shack of perspex panels buried among the wreck of the former offices, contemplating his former life. Establishing this little den amid raging winds exerted a profound influence on Barry's views on the machinations of the landfill business. That night was

hellish, but there were many lessons for Barry. When he woke in the morning, it was clear to him that his analytical faculties were absolutely alive, even as his body raged in discomfort. He was utterly in charge of his thinking now; there was no infiltration from others. He could study landfill in a new way, here, able now to extricate it from his routine daily tasks. This left to one side such distractions as the constant whirr of lorries confounded on the weighbridge; the clanging steel jaws of dumper trucks churning up grit; protests, various, and unwieldy; and not least the rabid, hysterical cries of gulls making kamikaze swoops for edible debris amid alcohol soaked bags, vinegar, shoe-polish, peppermint oil, and other bonanzas. Now Barry's harder eye swept over the picture, and he was no longer sure that he liked what he saw. Yes, the state-of-the-art high density polyethylene membrane overlying the landfill was impressive alright, but was this kind of breathtaking utility really enough? Barry carefully studied the overhanging layers, curvaceous and rather neat in themselves, totted up their allotted tasks, from cap to topsoil, to drainage layers, to the leachate collection system at the bottom saving the ground from our least cherished water. But he failed to discern any real beauty in the structure of this hulking, artificial bathtub of murky blistered browns, and patchy, sickly yellows. He suddenly felt reprimanded by a few dots of still lush greenery lodged around it: vital dark vegetation, sturdy firs; a tranquil pool of light meadow, not quite ruined, just visible in the distance; the translucent, languid blue of the horizon like the promise of earth from outer space. And all the while leachate seeping through, steady pipes weakening under steady chemical attack, acids, solvents, oxidizing agents.

He asked himself searching questions. Could landfill design really stay abreast of the public's voracious capacity to consume far more than it actually needed? What would happen when the landfills really didn't have any space left in them? Who would deal with that? Would only those who had never recycled be forced to pay? Had he been defending the indefensible all along? Was landfill really inescapably brilliant, or was it just inescapable? Was it just *shit*? Could these even be the last days of landfill?

If Towers could only get beyond his record of enormous failure, and all the public shame and humiliation, he really believed that he had a new aim in life. He would start again.