

THREE

What You Think When You Find Your Life in the Trash

A quick and partial inventory of the crap I found collected in our three large garbage bags in only four days: fourteen plastic coffee cups, two cardboard coffee cups, four Styrofoam coffee cups, twelve plastic straws, six plastic straw wrappers, nineteen paper napkins, fourteen small paper bags, nine sets of plastic cutlery (unused), five receipts (never even looked at), three balls of used paper towel, fourteen plastic bags, three plastic and four aluminum take-out containers and their lids, two sets of wooden chopsticks, one cardboard french-fry container, three crumpled balls of tinfoil, and two cardboard boxes that had contained a new pair of desk lamps, along with the Styrofoam packing materials.

I call this a “partial” inventory because I dissected my way through the insides of only two out of the three bags. To the third, we had added the contents of the bathroom garbage pail, the last resting place of Isabella’s dirty diapers. Some of them had burst open, and I couldn’t bring myself to paw through the result without a gas mask. Suffice it to say that the third bag added to our trash a total of about eighteen dirty diapers, a further twenty-five gallons or so of shit-covered take-out containers, some greasy chow fun noodles, pizza crusts, and a head of lettuce gone bad in the fridge before we ever used it.

Surrounded by all this debris, sitting there on my hallway floor with a pen and paper in my hand, I felt like I’d just stepped on the scale and the news was much worse than I’d thought. It was not trash per se that got me. It was the throwing away of things used for less

than five minutes without so much as a thought before reaching for the exact same product to use for another five minutes before throwing that away, too. The truth was that every coffee cup and every water bottle in the corner trashcan gave me a tiny micro-twinge of guilt. For years, I had been giving myself a daily pass with the intention of eventually doing better.

If you had asked me if I tried not to make trash, not to waste, I would have told you that I certainly didn't produce the average American's

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4.6 pounds of trash per day, or roughly 1,700 pounds per year. I would have probably told you I didn't try as hard as I

should but that I tried. I made an effort, I would have said. I'm not all talk. I care about the world.

What had the crumbled-up, grease-covered dross around me demonstrated? That I had a long way to go.

I grew up in Westport, Massachusetts, a little seaside town, just up the road from my grandparents. I'd walk down their gravel lane and sit with my grandfather, watching television. He always held in his hand a switch attached by a long wire to the "box," as he called it. The switch he called the "clicker." When ads came on he snapped the clicker and the volume went off. When the show started again, with a snap he'd turn the volume back on.

My grandmother, meanwhile, carefully folded up her brown paper bags to return to the store or use for garbage. They insisted I climb back up the stairs to the bathroom to turn the light off if I'd left it on. They taught me to take only what food I would eat and never to throw trash on the ground. They wore sweaters and kept the heat down low.

My grandfather, before he retired, had been a very senior assistant deputy director in the CIA. My grandmother had been a model. In other words, they weren't exactly hippie environmentalists. But they