

Trashy Lady and The Unsung Hero

By unspoken agreement my aged, rumpled compatriot takes the street side of our local northeast Portland park. Wisely, he sports a bright orange safety vest as he walks his daily path, picking up the previous night's food containers, detritus, and empty elixir of escapism bottles. These collections he distributes amongst the various trash sacks which hang from his stooped yet determined frame's shoulders, arms, even his belt. He sorts everything into its corresponding bag with obvious plans to recycle what he can, then trudges onward in his determined task. The tong-shaped industrial grabber he carries looks capable of alternately hoisting a lounge chair or being wielded as a weapon, should the need arise.

For my part, as opposed to my friend's daily routine, my perusal of the inner park area is sporadic. My non-descript sweats render me incognito. I stay off the grid so that my anxiety ridden herder pup, Roxy, can run free, tree a squirrel or two and help me hunt trash in the ball field, play area or walking path. I don't sort, nor go out of my way to recycle, rarely going above and beyond, because trash ALWAYS reappears the next day.

It is very disheartening.

This day, my friend watches me as I collect discarded paper airplanes from the children's play area/abandoned temporary landing strip and as I struggle with the small homeless camp on the periphery of the dog run area. Officials placed a laminated sign on top of drenched clothing telling the owners to clean it up or else...or else the city will clean it up instead. My generic

grabber hovers over it all, vibrating over the conundrum of how many days one should wait before the clothing is fair game to toss in the trash fifteen feet away. Unsure, I leave it alone and move on to collect the plethora of candy wrappers mixed with other more dubious items dotting the lawn.

Finally, my compatriot and I meet in the middle. He smiles and says, simply, “If you keep cleaning it up, eventually it will stay that way.” Then he trundles off, bags full, walking his talk.

The city never did make good on its abandoned apparel threat. Weeks later, I collected the camp leavings, laminated sign, and all. I will take my unsung hero at his word.