

Sakrete

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On our street, fourteen garbage cans are now missing. The garbage cans from One Seventeen and One Nineteen disappeared last night. This is not a serious matter, but on the other hand we can't sit up all night watching over our garbage cans. It is probably best described as an annoyance. One Twelve, One Twenty-two, and One Thirty-one have bought new plastic garbage cans at Barney's Hardware to replace those missing. We are thus down eleven garbage cans, net. Many people are using large dark plastic garbage bags. The new construction at the hospital at the end of the block has displaced a number of rats. Rats are not much bothered by plastic garbage bags. In fact, if I were ordered to imagine what might most profitably be invented by a committee of rats, it would be the plastic garbage bag. The rats run up and down our street all night long.

If I were ordered to imagine who is stealing our garbage cans, I could not. I very much doubt that my wife is doing it. Some of the garbage cans on our street are battered metal, others are heavy green plastic. Heavy green plastic or heavy black plastic predominates. Some of the garbage cans have the numbers of the houses they belong to painted on their sides or lids, with white paint. Usually by someone with only the crudest sense of the art of lettering. One Nineteen, which has among its tenants a gifted commercial artist, is an exception. No one excessively famous lives on our street, to my knowledge, therefore the morbid attention that the garbage of the famous sometimes attracts would not be a factor. The Precinct says that no other street within the precinct has reported similar problems.

If my wife is stealing the garbage cans, in the night, while I am drunk and asleep, what is she doing with them? They are not in the cellar, I've looked (although I don't like going down to the cellar, even to replace a blown fuse, because of the rats). My wife has a yellow Pontiac convertible. No one has these anymore, but I can imagine her lifting garbage cans into the back seat of the yellow Pontiac convertible, at four o'clock in the morning, when I am dreaming of being onstage, dreaming of having to perform a drum concerto with only one drumstick. . . .

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On our street, twenty-one garbage cans are now missing. New infamies have been announced by One Thirty-one through One Forty-three—seven in a row, and on the same side of the street. Also, depredations at One Sixteen and One Sixty-four. We have put out dozens of cans of D-Con but the rats ignore them. Why should they go for the D-Con when they can have the remnants of Helen Busse's Boeuf Rossini, for which she is known for six blocks in every direction? We eat well, on this street, there's no denying it. Except for the nursing students at One Fifty-eight, and why should they eat well—they're students, are they not? My wife cooks soft-shell crabs, in season, breaded, dusted with tasty cayenne, deep-fried. Barney's Hardware has run out of garbage cans and will not get another shipment until November. Any new garbage cans will have to be purchased at Budget Hardware, far, far away on Second Street.

Cynthia, at Custom Care Cleaners, asks why my wife has been acting so peculiar lately. "Peculiar?" I say. "In what way do you mean?" Dr. Maugham, who lives at One Forty-four where he also has his office, has formed a committee. Mr. Wilkens, from One Nineteen, Pally Wimber, from One

Twenty-nine, and my wife are on the committee. The committee meets at night, while I sleep, dreaming, my turn in the batting order has come up and I stand at the plate, batless. . . .

There are sixty-two houses on our street, four-story brownstones for the most part. Fifty-two garbage cans are now missing. Rats riding upon the backs of other rats gallop up and down our street, at night. The committee is unable to decide whether to call itself the Can Committee or the Rat Committee. The City has sent an inspector who stood marvelling, at midnight, at the activity on our street. He is filing a report. He urges that the remaining garbage cans be filled with large stones. My wife has appointed me a subcommittee of the larger committee with the task of finding large stones. Is there a peculiar look on her face as she makes the appointment? Dr. Maugham has bought a shotgun—a twelve-gauge over-and-under. Mr. Wilkens has bought a Chase bow and two dozen hunting arrows. I have bought a flute and an instruction book.

If I were ordered to imagine who is stealing our garbage cans, the Louis Ascher family might spring to mind, not as culprits but as proximate cause. The Louis Ascher family has a large income and a small apartment, in One Twenty-one. The Louis Ascher family is given to acquiring things, and because of the size of the Louis Ascher apartment must dispose of old things in order to accommodate new things. Sometimes the old things disposed of by the Louis Ascher family are scarcely two weeks old. Therefore, the garbage at One Twenty-one is closely followed in the neighborhood, in the way that the sales and bargains listed in the newspapers are closely followed. The committee, which feels that the garbage of the Louis Ascher family may be misrepresenting the neighborhood to the criminal community, made a partial list of the items disposed of by the Louis Ascher family during the week of September 12th: one mortar and pestle, majolica ware; one English cream maker (cream is made by mixing sweet butter and milk); one set green earthenware geranium-leaf plates; one fruit ripener designed by scientists at the University of California, Plexiglas; one nylon umbrella tent with aluminum poles; one combination fountain pen and clock with LED readout; one mini hole-puncher-and-confetti-maker; one pistol-grip spring-loaded flyswatter; one cast-iron tortilla press; one ivory bangle with elephant-hair accent; and much, much more. But while I do not doubt that the excesses of the Louis Ascher family are misrepresenting the neighborhood to the criminal community, I cannot bring myself to support even a resolution of censure, since the excesses of the Louis Ascher family have given us much to talk about and not a few sets of green earthenware geranium-leaf plates over the years.

I reported to my wife that large stones were hard to come by in the city. “Stones,” she said. “*Large stones.*”

I purchased two hundred pounds of Sakrete at Barney’s Hardware, to make stones with. You need only add water and stir, and you have made a stone as heavy and brutish as a stone made by God himself. I am temporarily busy, in the cellar, shaping Sakrete to resemble this, that, and the other, but mostly stones—a good-looking stone is not the easiest of achievements. Ritchie Beck, the little boy from One Ten, who is always alone on the sidewalk during the day, smiling at strangers, helps me. I once bought him a copy of *Mechanix Illustrated*, which I myself read avidly as a boy. Harold, who owns Custom Care Cleaners and also owns a Cessna, has offered to fly over our street at night and drop bombs made of lethal dry-cleaning fluid on the rats. There is a channel down the Hudson he can take (as long as he stays under eleven hundred feet), a quick left turn, the bombing run, then a dash back up the Hudson. They will pull his ticket if he’s caught, he says, but at that hour of the night. . . .

I show my wife the new stones. "I don't like them," she says. "They don't look like real stones." She is not wrong, they look in fact like badly thrown pots, as if they had been done by a potter with no thumbs. The committee, which has named itself the Special Provisional Unnecessary-Rat Team (*spurt*), has acquired armbands and white steel helmets and is discussing a secret grip by which its members will identify themselves to each other.

There are now no garbage cans on our street—no garbage cans left to steal. A committee of rats has joined with the Special Provisional committee in order to deal with the situation, which, the rats have made known, is attracting unwelcome rat elements from other areas of the city. Members of the two committees exchange secret grips. My wife drives groups of rats here and there in her yellow Pontiac convertible, attending important meetings. The crisis, she says, will be a long one. She has never been happier.