

Waste Not

Travis Lucas

“Uh, I’m pretty sure one of Newton’s laws is that, like, matter can’t be created or destroyed?”

Mum chuckles, “Oh, no darling. Ha-ha-ha!” She keeps chuckling, “We’re not doing that, not today. A-ha-ha. Are you not keeping up?” There is a silence. “The price tags on this lovely furniture are now that wonderful hard plastic; everything here’s recyclable, no? I’ve tallied it all up and now you are looking at a woman who is responsible for no pollution and a net-zero carbon footprint! The Barrier Reef lives on!” she exclaims, and motions for a high-five.

“What about all those wrappers?” I say, looking at the yellow cling-film debris from her new day lounge. She snaps her fingers, and it all vanishes, just like the foam peanuts. Blamo! They no longer exist.

It’s not right. “No bloody way. No way that’s right, Mum!”

“And there it goes! No more waste! I’m the new face of green, Erick,” she grins, “which—I must say; really—it’s great to feel good again! Ever since those agenda-pushing so-and-sos started guilting the fun out of shopping, I’ve just been so blue! But now, I’m greener than a climate change luncheon a-ho!”

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I’m driving to the spa munching on a muesli bar, feeling the plasticky crackle of the wrapper reverberate in the dead silence of the hybrid. How could this possibly be repurposed? There’s no way this shit can be recycled. There are too many different layers; too much shiny coating to get the logo colours right, too much metal in the foil inside, too many coats of interminably thin and soft plastic to ever be an item that could be cohesively recycled. Impossible! Mum must think me some kind of idiot.

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I pass a servo with some empty plots next door and I swear to you, the air, like, flickers and for a second I'm looking at some kind of garbage dump right in the middle of this block, but it's not like, right in front of me in the block it's more like it's at the end of a tunnel I'm looking through, which I'm pretty sure violates another law about spacetime, but.

It vanishes before I can get my head around the sitch but I swear, truly, I saw the exact yellow plastic wrappers mum just got rid of.

—

"Mum, where does the rubbish go when you vanish it?"

"Rubbish? Oh no, no, silly. It's *excess product*. Nowadays it's off to some lovely depot and they main-line the products, or it's a mainline to somewhere else or, oh, bother, I don't know, but they handle it. I saw a picture of it once, it's a fabulous little place full of pipes and baskets and, oh, for heaven sake Erick, I'm not the bloody architect, I don't know. The excess goes over there and the workers take care of it. I don't know why I'm getting the third degree, I'm doing my part."

"...Riiiiiiiiight."

I'm really starting to get pissed off. She's talking in half-truths at the most; she's absolutely trying to take the mick. I brainstorm on the mini-whiteboard in my study. I've written and circled "mirage" about a dozen times, "Altered Space?" and "Outsourcing—The bush?" are the main branching-off points. "Portal" seems reductive. If I want to know where it's going for sure I either go myself—in which case, how could I convince her to disappear me, and is that legal?—or I get her to clean up something I can track...

I open up the third desk drawer and pull out last year's iPhone. I was supposed to give it to Dennis (one of Mum's wretched ballet friends) but they rescheduled their catch-up because one of them is having a surgery of some sort, whatever, makes life easier for me. I turn it on—still not even fully flat, score—and test the Find my iPhone ping feature, which elicits a shrill noise and I watch the little dot move on the Macbook as I walk it through the house.

"Mu-um? One of my PS4 controllers isn't working properly. Can you go get me another one?"

She peeks down the hallway "Oh Master Erick, I'm totting your maternal grandmother down to Burnside before the border protection fundraiser tomorrow, can it wait until then?"

"If it must, yes."

—

When she drops the box on my bed the next afternoon I'm incensed; it's all cardboard and hard plastic and not even enough packaging to hide a darned iPhone in. Pacing and frustrated by the harebrained nature of my Playstation idea, I scratch some gold leaf off the corner of her newly installed sculpture. I see the weekend market it was sold out of, and, as I lean closer—like viewing through a crystal decanter—it shows, somehow, the artist constructing it in a backyard carport, the welding torch sparking, the pile of resin buckets and plastic applicators for the gold leaf at knee level. Mum thinks she's got me fooled but she hasn't!

She's back in the main kitchen when I'm ready to really test her. "Mu-um! One of my drawers is not working, I tried to fix it but the bottom's split. My chinos are currently being stored on the ground!"

"Oh forsake, I'm trying to get this pork belly glaze just right and now you've dragged my attention to a drawer. Goodness, I'll have to throw this batch out." She plonks the roast in the bin. "Can you not spare me a minute? Pop a post-it on the fridge, I will whittle my way down the to-do list."

Not soon enough, not by a long shot.

I'm standing in the door to Mum and Dad's bedroom, he's polishing one of the old plaques he leaves everywhere. Ready for the real fishing trip boys? Here we go:

"Dad, can you be home tomorrow afternoon if I get this gentleman from Gumtree to drop a set of drawers off?"

Dad shoots to an eleven, swinging his thick neck around and demanding, "What the hell are you talking about, Gumtree?"

Mum's about to regret *"I'll get around to it"*.

"Well, one of my drawers broke and I've got nowhere to store my chinos so since Mum is busy, well, it's easier to just get someone to deliver theirs here. And, you know, this one doesn't look too bad."

"Not too bad!? I'm not having some yobbo drop his old furniture off at my house like it's a wrecking yard." He's gaining steam by the second; the production is starting. "Simone! Did you know this one is trying to get second-hand furniture delivered here? What the hell is going on, I can't be in my office for one day without you all hatching some scheme to completely devalue this house!" Mum appears around the corner with her best retort ready, but Dad now has more than enough momentum to shout over her. "No! I'm not interested in excuses, now I have to take this one to the bloody furniture store and I don't

want to hear another word about anything second hand!" They continue shouting but I've heard everything I'm interested in.

I wait in my doorway and, sure enough, three minutes later Dad and I are in the car. I briefly consider making a fuss at the store to see how crimson he will turn, but a cardiac incident would needlessly draw out the rest of my plan. We have to visit two separate stores because the first has the ever-so trendy emphasis on sustainability, but the second is shabbier; it's dusty and has little styrofoam balls swirling in the corners. I tell the assistant to have it delivered that night and leave Dad to pay.

When I get back from personal training Dad is muttering through the kitchen about "mugs" tracking dirt all over his house, which I take to mean my furniture has arrived. Sure enough there's a huge box in the middle of my bedroom rug. I rip it open and there's the sweet squeak of styrofoam scraping against the cardboard. I dislodge the corner pieces, there's even thin sheets of it between each drawer, and by the time it's all unboxed I've more than enough pure, untreatable rubbish to hide three phones in.

I drag the old drawers halfway out to the shed so Dad has to deal with them, and slip the revitalised iPhone into one of the corner pieces of foam. "Mum!" I yell, "can you come get rid of this for me?"

"Two pops of a moment, my love."

As she's walking down the hallway I start laying it on: "Oh, dearest Mother, I can hardly believe it but I'm afraid my new furniture set is threatening your reputation as a wildlife warrior! As any good citizen I put the box in recycling but from all that I know, I swear that this is the dreaded expanded polystyrene-4, which can't be sorted anywhere but into rubbish." As I hold up one of the pieces to her I see the particles extracted out of the ground as petrol, the sprays of powder the little balls release as they're aerated, crushed, steamed and pressed into the shapes in front of me, rushed through a grey manufacturing plant. "It's just impossible to dispose of environmentally!"

"Oh, tot, everything goes," she says, and when she clicks her fingers the pile is gone. She dallies off, I bee-line to the MacBook and open up the Find My iPhone page. The map starts small, just a couple of streets around the house, each of the seven devices checking in one by one: the Macbook I'm using, iPad2, Mum's iPad, Erick's iPhone, iPhone 1, and Mum's iWatch all form a little cluster on the house. When iPhone 3 finally gives back a signal, the map zooms out and I watch as the whole of Australia comes into view and the cluster forms a single dot over Adelaide, and one straggler dot appears off the coast of Queensland.

Way off the coast, actually, maybe as far as New Zealand. I double click on it, and it zooms in to a tiny island with Waste Disposal in little grey text. "Hah!" I spring myself off the desk into a victory swivel, "Gotcha! I told you!" I call out to Mum. She pokes her head around the corner,

"Told me what, Erick?"

"I said there's no way all your rubbish is being recycled. Here—" I wave her to my desk, tapping the monitor, "that packaging you just got rid of is on an island off the east coast—" and switching to satellite mode, the computer renders a tell-tale image of a garbage heap. "Tell me that's not landfill."

"Oh, posh, you know what I meant." I stare at her. She waves her hand and the monitor switches off. I didn't know she could do digital stuff.

"What I meant—little Erick—is that I don't produce any waste *here*." She examines my blank expression. "Why, in Australia, you nong."

"Wha— That's a bit cheap isn't it?"

"Don't be smart; of course not. If I say the weather's lovely, you know that I mean at this moment in time in Adelaide's glorious foothills. I don't go around saying how expensive goat's milk is getting in aisle three of the Frewville Foodland. You don't have to clarify, when you say nothing's on this Friday night, that you're not talking about the market district of Northern Singapore, for goodness sake. I just cannot fathom why you're in such a tizz, it's not our jurisdiction darling!"

I scoff. "But you sent it there!"

"My point stands, I am one hundred percent waste free and carbon neutral," she puts on an affected tone and walks halfway down the hallway before calling out, "*in Australia*."

"How is that not in Australian waters?"

Her head pops around the corner again, "Well my dear if you must know, the territory is under dispute between four Pacific Islands and New Zealand, so, bop, here I am; waste-free."

TRAVIS LUCAS is a current MPhil student at the University of Adelaide working on 'Tipping Points', a collection of Australian-focused, politically charged, and ridiculous short fictions. He helps to create and edit the student literary magazine Hum, loves rules of three, and researches how texts best fit together, when he's not looking after cats or creating drag personas.