



Fiction

Love in the Garbage Can

Harvey was one of those men who could solve any problem, whether it was a leaky hot water heater or a screen door that wouldn't shut. He'd been handy all his life, but the only thing he couldn't fix was his son.

by CHRIS FABRY

LELAND HAD CALLED in a panic from a parking lot. He had gone to lunch and was trapped. "I can't find my keys, and I have to get back to work."

"I don't suppose you got a key made after you lost the other one."

"Nope."

Harvey was only 10 minutes away from the strip mall. He found his son outside a Chinese restaurant, sitting on the car hood, head hanging down. Hair over his eyes. Staring at his phone. What was he going to do with that boy?

"You think you locked them in the car?" Harvey said, peering into the window. There was a bottle-shaped brown bag sitting on the passenger seat, and he frowned.

"Not unless they fell under the seat. I swear I took them with me."

"Did you check in the restaurant?"

"I looked everywhere in there but the kitchen."

Harvey glanced at the stores along the sidewalk. "You go anywhere else?"

His son nodded, and they backtracked to the grocery store at the far end of the plaza and then to a coffee shop. When they passed the

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liquor store, Harvey didn't ask Leland; he went inside and asked if anybody had turned in a set of keys. The man behind the counter shook his head. Same at the nail salon and the dry cleaners.

It was kind of like a crime scene, putting all the pieces together, just like on those TV shows. And the more questions he asked his son, the more he focused on the restaurant.

"When you finished the meal, did you throw anything away?"

"Yeah, I had a tray with napkins and such. I dumped it in the trash."

"Uh-huh," Harvey said.

"I got to get to work, Dad. I'm late as it is."

Harvey wanted to mention the fact that he was a little inconvenienced by all of this, but he just said, "Get in the truck."

He went inside the restaurant, but the cashier was in the back, which was better for him. He took the top off the garbage and grabbed the clear, plastic liner and heaved. He didn't look behind him at the customers; he just tied the bag in a knot and slung it over his shoulder, put the top on the container, and walked out the door like he emptied the trash every day.

With the bag stashed in the bed of his truck, Harvey drove Leland to the machine shop and watched from the parking lot. Leland's boss met him at the door with hands on hips and a

This is life, Harvey thought. You have no control over the trash people will drag you through to love them well.

stern face. His son pointed to the parking lot, and the man looked skeptically over Leland's shoulder. Harvey waved out the window and shrugged.

The two went inside, and Harvey pulled out and drove home, thinking all the way that this would be the hard part. When he reached the end of the driveway, he hit

the garage opener and retrieved a lawn bag and two plastic grocery bags from the kitchen. He pulled the sloppy garbage from the back of the truck and went to work.

What surprised him most was how much sweet and sour sauce people threw away. And how many half-eaten egg rolls there were in the world. He used the grocery bags over his hands like gloves to paw through the sloppy, soupy mess. Cups of soda. Plastic forks and spoons. Rice everywhere.

His wife came to the door and stood with mouth agape. "What in the world are you doing, Harvey?"

"Looking for keys among the fried rice," he said.

"Whose keys?"

He stood up, and with both hands covered with the grocery bags and egg drop soup on his shoes, he gave her a look as if to say, "Whose do you think?"



“Well, good luck with that,” she said.

“I need it,” he said.

He went back to work and finally got down on his hands and knees on the concrete and nearly crawled inside the mess, reaching like a blind man for any sign of the fob. Plate by plate, fork by fork, he took anything that wasn't a car key out of the big bag and placed it in the other.

It was then that he felt the tap on his shoulder, or something strangely like it. He didn't hear a voice or see words on the garage wall, but he got the distinct impression that God was somehow in this. He'd been praying for Leland for a long time, praying God would grab hold of his heart. Praying He would keep him away from bad influences. He'd prayed that morning that God would give him a chance to talk with his son about spiritual things. And look what happened.

There on the floor of the garage, he got a glimpse of his own father, dealing with some of the messes Harvey had made earlier in life. Struggles that probably broke his dad's heart, but he had stuck with him nonetheless.

If you really care about somebody, you're willing to go through the mess and the struggle with him to the other side. And there are no guarantees about the future. There are no guarantees if a person will respond to the love and tug of God.

Harvey had been given a gift. God had answered in an unexpected way. Instead of him being able to say some words to his son that might

have been forgotten as quickly as they flew from his mouth, he'd been able to show his son how much he cared by going through a bag of trash to look for a set of keys that weren't even in —

Clink.

He heard the sound, and his heart skipped a beat. He reached into the sloppy mess with his bare hand and felt the fob and the metal key, and it was a little like Ponce de León finding the fountain of youth. He held up the key and grabbed a spent napkin to clean it up, ... then he slipped it into his pocket.

This is life, Harvey thought. You have no control over the trash people will drag you through to love them well.

He tied the garbage as tightly as he could, but he knew the garage would smell like dim sum for a month. And he wouldn't have had it any other way. He couldn't wait to drive to the shop and hand the key to his son and drive him back to his car.

Maybe they'd grab a bite to eat together. Maybe they'd sit and talk. Maybe he'd get to tell Leland what was on his heart. Or maybe he wouldn't need to say a word. ☯

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CHRIS FABRY's latest novel is *Under a Cloudless Sky*. He wrote the best-selling *War Room* novelization. His novels have won five Christy Awards and an ECPA Christian Book Award. You can hear Chris daily on *Chris Fabry Live on Moody Radio*. Find him at ChrisFabry.com.