

We gather together

CAN LADY

Students refer to her as “Can Lady.” To most of us in the senior-class housing units known as the Mods, she is as familiar a fixture as the young men who play Wiffle ball on the lawn on sunny afternoons. A petite Asian woman in her forties or fifties, she comes to campus almost daily, wearing loose-fitting sweats or jeans, a jacket, often a baseball cap. Can Lady wanders the maze of brown-sided modular dwellings with an oversized plastic bag, never acknowledging the students who surround her and whose yards she scours for empty Cokes or Bud Lites. After home football games on Saturday afternoons she weaves among the crowds of high-spirited fans, through dirt-packed courtyards blaring with music, past parents leaning over smoky barbecue grills. She is not a municipal garbage collector, nor is she employed by BC, yet no one disturbs her; perhaps we students find strange maternal comfort in her presence because she cleans up after us.

On a cool weekday morning, Can Lady marches past a window where a boy is slumped at his kitchen table, asleep on an open textbook; she rummages outside a bedroom where a girl lies enveloped in down comforters, exhausted from a night of dancing in a smoke-hazed club. Can Lady has finished her routine before most students rise to grab coffee before class, or to lounge on the Dustbowl in warm weather, or to congregate on the steps of McElroy and discuss the weekend’s plans. Having scoured the Mods neighborhood, she hurries away, the empty cans in her bag clinking like wind chimes. She is gone before I open my sliding glass door to check the weather and decide what I should wear.

After the BC–Temple football victory I wandered past celebrating tailgaters, through hordes of rowdy students in Superfan-yellow T-shirts milling around the Mods holding beers or paper plates laden with hamburgers and potato salad. Down one narrow lane I spotted Can Lady; she crossed in front of me, carrying a pole strung with several



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stuffed bags across one shoulder. She walked with her knees bowed and her back slightly hunched. Then she paused, lowered the pole gently, and plunged her arm into a concrete garbage container, fishing for cans. Dropping the few that she could reach into a bag, she hoisted the lot onto her shoulder again. For a moment I considered approaching her. But before I could move, a small Asian girl, about six years old, skittered out from behind a fence. Her thin arms cradled four cans, which she placed carefully in one of Can Lady’s sacks. They spoke to each other in a language I couldn’t understand.

Can Lady hovers at the edge of my thoughts, in my happy collegiate bubble of stimulating discussions, parties, and infatuations. Many BC students pledge themselves to service, venturing into areas of the city where they normally wouldn’t go, offering what they can give of themselves to the less fortunate—but Can Lady brings the blighted city to us and our sheltered environment.

This morning I watched her retrieve an empty Coors can that had been tossed to the ground. She plucked it from the grass like one would a rare stone, wiped it on her thigh, and deposited it in her bag before moving on, hunched beneath her sack. Part of me wants to know where Can Lady goes when she leaves my comfortable world, if she travels far to get here, if her dwelling is littered with glittering aluminum so that every step produces a tinny clink. Part of me does not want to know. But I am beginning to realize that, whether we want to be or not, we are involved in more than just our own concerns. Even if we close our eyes to need, it will come creeping through our backyards anyway, quietly, forging its own path.

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