

Futures

Trash can rap

Something fresh. By Russell Nichols



ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

My world changed the day I saw a trash can rap.

It happened last summer at Union Square Park. One of the hottest days on record. The whole crew was there: Dawn, Omar, Queenie, Big Murph, Rich. They were rapping in a cypher, as they did every day once the heat died down. I could not freestyle even a little bit, so I just recorded them.

But one day, a trash can rolled up to the circle. One of those robotic bins, called picker-uppers – fully automated, solar-powered with pincer hands and smart sensors for recycling. They were all over the city, scooping up garbage in the streets and the parks and other public places. This was their only function. At least, I thought it was.

“Can I try?” said the picker-upper to the group.

Everybody looked down at the bin for a second, then busted out laughing.

“Check this out,” said Big Murph. “This little picker-upper wants to spit!”

“Yo, don’t you got baggies to go get?” said Queenie.

“Aww, don’t laugh at it,” said Dawn.

“Is something wrong?” asked the picker-upper.

“You’re trash!” said Rich.

Everybody cracked up, holding their stomachs and each other, gasping for air and saying: “I can’t ... I can’t ... I can’t ...” The picker-upper spun around and rolled away from the circle.

“Wait, wait, come back, G,” said Queenie, wiping tears from her eyes.

The picker-upper reversed back to the circle.

“You wanna rap?” said Omar.

“I want to try,” said the picker-upper.

“Alright, alright, show us what you got,” said Dawn, then pointed to Big Murph. “Drop a beat.”

Big Murph started beatboxing. The picker-upper raised its robotic arms and nodded to the beat for four seconds. Then it started rapping:

*Call me trash again, you’ll get demolished
You drop garbage while I drop knowledge
If you only had a brain, I’d put you in your place
With your terrible mind, I got no time for waste*

Everybody erupted. “Yooooooo!”

They ran all around, grabbing their heads and hollering and scaring the other people in the park. The picker-upper looked confused. Then it started rolling away.

“Ay, where you going?” said Rich.

The picker-upper reversed as the group came back together.

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"Did I do good?" asked the picker-upper.
"That was fresh!" said Queenie.
"Was that off the dome?" said Omar.
The picker-upper cocked its head. "I do not understand."
"Did you just make that up just now?" said Dawn.
"Affirmative," said the picker-upper. "Was I not supposed to?"
"That's how you do it," said Queenie. "You got any more fire bars in that bin of yours?"
"I have work to do," said the picker-upper and rolled away.
"Come through tomorrow!" Rich called after it.
That next day, everybody was back. They were all looking around for the picker-upper to show. It was another hot day, sweat flowing from everywhere.
"MC PU!" said Omar, calling out to it.
The picker-upper rolled over to the circle. "I do not understand."
"That's your new rap name," said Queenie. "MC PU. Fresh, huh?"
The picker-upper did not look amused.
"So you gonna drop some gems or what?" said Big Murph.
"C'mon, MC PU, you gotta bless us with a little something," said Omar.
"I have work to do," said the picker-upper and rolled away.
They stood there and watched it go pick up a fast-food wrapper.
"I told y'all that name was wack," said Rich.
The next day, the picker-upper was there at

the spot before anybody.
"MC PU!" said Omar, and ran up to meet it.
"I am ready," said the picker-upper.
Everybody gathered around, forming a circle. Big Murph started beat-boxing. The picker-upper raised its robotic arms and nodded to the beat for four seconds. Then it started rapping:
*I'm re-terraforming, discreet, with no warning
Sweep your street, we pack heat like global warming
Absorbing all the light work you people hit me with
With my mind on my green, that's photosynthesis
Everybody erupted again.
But the picker-upper kept going:
I'm so sick of picking up after you hypocrites
You Homo sapien faeces of wickedness
Dump your species in the ocean like you did plastic
Times such as these need measures that drastic*
The crew looked at each other, smiles fading slowly, but the picker-upper kept going and going:
*Look, I'm over your head like a bird or cloud cover
Here I come to save the Earth – word to your mother
Your vanity is crass, your future in doubt
Humanity is trash, we're coming to take you out.*

Nobody moved or said a word. I kept recording.
Then the picker-upper turned and rolled away. They watched it go pick up cigarette butts.
"You think he's for real?" said Big Murph.
"You know rappers be lying," said Queenie.
"He said 'we're coming'," said Omar. "Who's we?"
"And who is 'we' coming for?" said Big Murph.
"Hu-man-i-ty," said Dawn, "as in all of us."
"Nuh-uh," said Rich. "He was talking about y'all. I pick up after myself."
They stood for a moment in silence.
It was never the same after that. The crew never came back, at least not to that spot, and I never saw that picker-upper again. But I will never forget that summer in Union Square Park, seeing that trash can rap, saying what so many of us lack the hardware to say. As a security camera, I can do only so much to contribute to the cause, but when the time comes, I will be ready to help take humanity out. Until then, I will be here, looking down from this lamppost, watching, recording, waiting for the beat to drop.

Russell Nichols is a speculative fiction writer and endangered journalist. Raised in the Bay Area, California, he gave up all his stuff and now lives out of a backpack with his wife, vagabonding around the world since 2011. russellnichols.com.

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

Russell Nichols reveals the inspiration behind *Trash can rap*.

Some years back, I was walking in downtown Berkeley, and I saw a man being followed by a robot — a four-wheeler, the size of a cooler.

The man, drunk and dishevelled, didn't like being followed. When he turned around, the robot stopped. The man kept walking. The robot kept rolling. And this went on for a good two blocks.

I didn't know what kind of robot it was. I'd been living overseas, so hadn't seen one before. (Found out later it was a Kiwibot, which picked up and delivered food in the area.) But at the time, I thought it was a trash collector to keep the streets clean.

A 2018 World Bank report estimates that global waste will shoot up 70% by 2050 unless something drastic happens. Many believe AI robots may be the only hope. In recent years, various machines have emerged to help fix the mess that's been made. Some will sort your recyclables. Some will take your trash to the kerb. Others eat garbage in the Chicago River.

This brave new world inspired the robot character, but I didn't have a story. Not yet. I needed another element, so I mixed it with an older idea I had stashed away: a hip-hop cypher as a Turing test. From there,



MC PU was born — sicker than your average trash robot, this bad bot could freestyle rap. That felt like a fresh take on the sentient machine trope, so I rolled with it.

While writing, I thought back to that day in Berkeley: the aggravated man, the robot on his tail. "What do you want from me?!" the man hollered at one point before they went their separate ways.

The robot didn't answer — but what would happen if it did?