

Local Man Makes Good

by Grant Bailie

A junkyard bison seems an odd choice over the usual dog, but it did the job, trampling trespassers, vagrants and unauthorized salvagers with a violent and admirable efficiency.

“That goddamn buffalo is the best investment I ever made,” says the proprietor. “Gives the place character,” he says, hooking his thumbs into his cummerbund and puffing out his chest. “I’m the most successful dealer in pre-recycled unclaimed materials in the tri-state area, you know.

The cummerbund would have been more impressive if he'd had a tuxedo to go along with it. Instead he just has it wrapped around at the waist of his plaid shirt. The tails of the shirt sticking out beneath it.

“I’m a latecomer to this business,” he tells me. “And in three years time I’m the biggest dealer in the region.”

Behind him is a landscape of car shells, refrigerators, newspapers and diapers. The bison is off in the distance, between a rusting, gutted washing machine and a stack of tires. It is nudging something with its hoof, then rolling it over with its snout. It could be a mangled corpse or a pile of clothes; I try not to look too close.

“I’m thinking of putting him on the sign,” the proprietor tells me. “He kind of represents everything you need to know about this place or me. Perseverance, you know? The triumph of the American spirit, you know?”

I am taking notes and trying not to breathe through my nose. He goes on to tell me how this whole area used to be sacred ground for the Cherokee and how he himself is descended from either Sitting Bull or Geronimo from somewhere on his mother's cousin's side. He feels that Sitting Bull or Geronimo would have approved.

“You know they used every part of the buffalo? The meat, the fur. I think they made wind chimes or something from the bones. Maybe a mobile for the little papoose or something. You know? One of those

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little hang-y things? But every part. Nothing wasted. Just like here.”

He makes an expansive gesture with his arms, indicating the mountains and valleys of trash behind him.

Then he looks with something approaching tenderness at the brown, furry beast in the distance. “I’m thinking of getting him a friend,” he says. “He gets bored out there. And there are not nearly as many trespassers around for him to play with anymore.

I notice a small tree sprouting out from the top of a heap of air-conditioners and for a moment I can imagine the whole area overgrown again, reclaimed by nature, a herd of particularly vicious buffaloes stampeding over the rise. But how can I work this into my story? This is not the triumph of the American spirit, but the ephemeral nature of everything we build, rebuild and discard, and my readers do not want to think about that with their instant morning coffee. Forget the tree. The tree is not important.

“So when is this going to be in the paper,” he asks me.

“Tomorrow at the latest,” I tell him. “The world can’t wait for another success story.”

