

Dump like no other.

by Ryland Walker Knight

Their dump was like no other in the country. It was bigger than the rest. And, unlike their innumerable competitors, this dump—which sat packed with trash on the surf of an ocean—was organized with care.

The Elks took pride in their dump. Three years ago they built a perimeter fence lined with barbed wire and an elaborate entrance gate complete with guardhouse and video surveillance. Mr. Elk had decided, “Nobody is going to dump here without permission.”

“Or without paying,” Mrs. Elk added with conviction. Mr. Elk nodded.

I met the Elks last February, nearly one year ago, on a grey day with skies that matched my mood. Why was I sent to interview the owners of a dump?

My editor was quick to answer, “Because, goddammit, they're the real deal—they're Americans!” We worked for a major monthly publication and I was assigned a photographer to accompany me and “document the filth.”

The photographer, known to our subscribers as K. Richards, insisted I drive us from the hotel out to the coastal dump. We smelled it before we saw it.

The gate was all white: the walls, the arch, the guardhouse, the spiked cast iron bars of the gate itself. White like Superman's teeth. K. Richards got out and took a picture while I talked to the

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all-smiles guard, Toby. Toby told me he was “new out of high school almost a year now and the Elks are surely good people.” Then in a whisper, “And they pay me more than decent, too, mister.”

Toby used the cordless phone and called Mr. Elk, who I heard bark at Toby, “let them in, and, make sure you mark up a map for them.” The map Toby gave us had a highlighted route to the Elk house through the maze of mounded detritus. We rolled up our windows and used our ties to cover our faces but it was no use—the stench was everywhere.

The roads we followed were mostly dirt but I could feel broken wood, metal plates, old bikes, all kinds of waste threatening to pop our tires. K. Richards asked me to stop a few times to take a picture and I obliged to look under the wheel wells. At one intersection the heaps of trash were maybe four stories tall; a mass made chiefly of rubber tires. It began to dawn on us this was more scrap yard than dump. Maybe the Elks were collecting trash, not storing it.

The Elk Mansion—there's no question, that's what it was, a mansion—stood at the water's edge behind a deep green lawn and framed by magnolia trees. The discarded pink petals made halos around the short thin trunks, brightening the shadows. We parked on the gravel driveway and K. Richards began snapping pictures before I cut the engine.

The house was white like the gate, trimmed with a green to match the lawn. Magenta curtains hung in every window. A swing bench swayed slightly at the far end of the elevated porch. I had seen a very similar house during a trip to interview the owner of a steamboat tour company in Savannah, Georgia; however I did not make the connection until I saw K. Richards' photographs months after our visit to the dump.

I stood on the grass and realized the foul air had vanished—I could

smell the pastel colors surrounding us without a hint of the rot we had traveled through. I could also smell rain. There were clouds above the ocean.

Past the house was a long wooden pier, standing tall above the low tide and the end platform resting on the water's surface. One motorboat was tied up, looking neglected at the end of its bowline.

K. Richards joined me on the lawn, took my picture and wound up the roll as we approached the front porch. The front door opened while we climbed the stairs and Mr. Elk stepped out. Mr. Elk stood half a foot taller than either K. Richards or myself and had the face to back up his stature: it was as if his parents had gathered boulders and pasted them together to make a nose, a mouth, a brow, a chin. He had no hair but I imagined it was white before it left him. The glasses he wore were square like his face and thick like his body. His handshake hurt.

“Nice to meet you fellas. Come on in.” He held the door open.
“Wipe your shoes, there, fellas.”

“Thank you, sir.” I felt like a child in his presence, despite my own head of white hairs. Mr. Elk's body imposed its august bulk on a room. He felt unavoidable.

Stepping inside, I thought I would choke. The house was dominated by potpourri. We were led through the foyer, the living room, and finally the dining room into the kitchen where the fake flower smell was replaced by an odor I had known in my youth—one colored by grease, coffee and baked goods. It smelled like a home in the kitchen. And it looked the part for our magazine story: everything was a loud hue to match the house's postcard exterior and encased in vinyl. K. Richards was hard at work already, and paused just enough to introduce himself to the apron-clad Mrs. Elk.

"You can call me Keith, Mrs. Elk."

"Why it's a pleasure, Keith. We sure do love your photos. You've been to so many countries, haven't you?"

"I sure have, Mrs. Elk."

She turned to me, "So you must be Mr. Loomis?"

"Yes I am. But you may call me George." I shook her hand gently but her grip was firm like her husband's. "You have a spectacular house here, Mrs. Elk."

"Why thank you. We do the best we can."

Mr. Elk took a chair that squeaked under his girth. "We do pretty good, that's sure the truth."

"Now," I began, "this is a landfill, right? Not a junkyard, right?"

"Yes, sir," Mr. Elk said, "we are an operating landfill. The only thing we do not touch is hazardous waste. We've got three parts here—three parts to classify. We got the Municipal Solid Waste, the Inert Waste, and the Construction & Demolition Debris Waste sites. We got everything here except that goo—that toxic crap."

"Is it normal for the owner to live on the property?"

"Not that we know of. But we live here on the edge, away from the foulness. See, we're next to that Construction & Demolition Debris site. You musta seen them I-beams all over on your drive. Your tires hold up? That a rental?"

I laughed good naturedly, "Yes, it is a rental and yes, our tires held up. But I got to say, I thought the smell would be too much to live

here, on site. I'm amazed. Your lawn smells like lawn."

Mr. Elk furrowed his brow and looked at me out of the side of his narrowing eyes. Mrs. Elk spoke up, "Well Earl thought the wind off the water would keep that smell at bay, you know, back there in the property, and, sure enough, it has."

"That makes sense," K. Richards said. "We did smell it before we got up to the gate and met Toby back there."

This too unsettled Mr. Elk, and confused me. He does know he's running a dump, doesn't he? He's profited for years, he has a great home, a pleasant wife—is he ashamed? You can't deny it—trash stinks.

"You two want coffee?"

K. Richards agreed and I declined because of my weak stomach. I sat at the table with Mr. Elk, trying to find sunlight from the window he blocked. K. Richards kept buzzing around us until he eventually disappeared to parts of the house unknown. Mrs. Elk remained standing by the stove mostly, ready to refill her husband's coffee mug should it get below half full. Yes, I saw it as half full every time.

Earl Elk was born in Louisiana and raised in a swamp. He said he spent more time in his rowboat than he did in his house. At the age of twelve he rowed to the Mississippi and followed it down to New Orleans where he drove a garbage truck and enrolled himself in high school. He was already "man-sized" and lied to get his driver's license four years early. The school counselor tried to assign him to Junior level classes but after meeting Earl, the counselor sent him back to Freshman English. Within three years Earl had saved

“plenty” and, after receiving his diploma a year early, bought a Greyhound ticket out of the South.

He told me, “I had a sack of two shirts, six socks, three drawers, my diploma and no ties to nobody. I was out to make me new again. And once I got out here to the coast, that's what I did. I met a girl down in the red light district (don't worry, my wife's heard the story) and, see, she said I was big as a elk. I'd told her my name was Earl so when I got my new driver's license, I marked it down like I heard in my head: Earl Elk.”

Mabel Elk was born in Oklahoma and traveled to California shortly thereafter. She graduated from high school at 18 with decent enough grades to go to community college and it was there that she met her boulder husband.

She explains: “It was this class called How To Pay Your Bills On Time. A typical class for young people getting started in life. I'd seen Earl sitting up front, answering questions, blocking people's view of the chalkboard. He is a big man. Then one day we got paired up on a project and we never quit each other.”

The Elks bought their dump on a whim, they say. Mr. Elk was tired of manning meters at the water sanitation plant and used his savings to secure the land. Everything was in place when they bought the property: the liner and collection systems, the storm water control system, the leachate management system, etc. All the Elks had to do was maintain. At first they did the upkeep themselves. But as their site became popular—easily accessible

from the interstate, space big enough for the grandest debris—they “got rich quick.”

They bought a home in town and hired a manager for their property to raise their newborn daughter, Elaine. Elaine's college graduation photo was on prominent display atop the mantle. When I asked what she did for a living, Mrs. Elk sighed that Elaine had died on a cruise ship in the gulf. Neither parent offered anything further. Mr. Elk said, “Yeah, Laney's gone,” to move the conversation along, sweep her out of their story—a memory lost and not sought. He started up again: “But we had an all right time in town, for a while. We went to functions, met richish people, bought a Caddy. But then that S-O-B done robbed us.”

The S-O-B was their former landfill manager and foreman, Bill Huston, whom I never tracked down. The landfill's business office had no record of his employment, for one, and of the six I called from the phone book, none claimed to have worked on a landfill before.

After the alleged robbery, the Elks sold their home in town and moved onto their primary property. Mr. Elk “met a zoning man when [they] lived in town and got him to sign off on [his] new house no problemo.” The Mansion was built in four months and the trailer the Elks had resided in became a part of the scenery. (You can't see it anymore.)

Over the next decade they expanded their lot and built the fences and the first welcome gate that “looked like one of them toll booths on the highways.” Mr. Elk devised the current categorization procedures of the incoming waste and streamlined the business to such a point that “customers began simply raving about our dump here,” Mrs. Elk told me. “And once that word of mouth picked up, so did business. We got into the industrial wastes and as the bigger buildings went up, the older ones came down and through our

gates. We've got all the old city in here, nearly.”

We left the Elk Mansion after dark and Mr. Elk showed us out, driving lead in his pickup. Toby was gone, replaced by another lackluster teen picking his zits named Frank who was eager to smile for K. Richards. He couldn't believe he was meeting Keith Richards the guitar player until Keith Richards the photographer laughed and said, “No, son, I take pictures. I've never been on television.” Frank looked let down but smiled nonetheless.

I shook Mr. Elk's granite hand again and felt my fingers crumble. “Good to meet you, sir. May be giving you another call.”

“Sure thing, George. Fly safe.”

K. Richards was smart to skip the handshake and waved from his side of the sedan, “Nice meeting you, Earl. We'll send you some pictures.”

I drove us off, up to the interstate, and in my rearview mirror I could see Mr. Elk standing next to Frank, a spotlit Goliath shouldering his David, or—no—more like Abraham and Isaac: loving, trusting and ready. Rain started pelting the hood once we hit the highway.

The whale followed the storm. The clouds had parted, the sun was shining and a barnacled whale lay dying on their broken pier and matted back yard. Its mouth was a few yards shy of the porch and its highest point was level with the second story bedroom windows.

Mrs. Elk had dreamed about an earthquake during the rainstorm. She worried what would happen to her home after an earthquake and a storm like the one that delayed my return flight home across the country. When she woke up she was putting on her bathrobe as she opened the curtains “to get some light, finally, when I saw that whale there, just about staring me in the eye.” Mrs. Elk screamed and Mr. Elk, already grumpy from no sleep, rose with his eyes still closed. He was rubbing them while his wife said, “There's a whale, Earl. A whale's out there!”

“Can't be. No whales on this part of the coast.” He stopped rubbing his eyes when he got to the window. “Good God, it's a whale.”

The Elks invited me and K. Richards back to their house to see the cranes at work, lifting the whale off the flattened sod grass, the green gone now and replaced with a drab brown because of the whale's body, the saltwater and the night's torrential rain. We had to find a new route through the trash as much of the dump had fallen in on the newly absent roads of Mr. Elk's meticulous grid. Gone were the lines Mr. Elk had plowed to segregate and categorize his trash. The dump was now an unnavigable mass of cinder blocks, rotten wood, rusted metal, emptied black trash bags of food and soiled clothes, used diapers and the draining rain. The water flowed throughout the landfill, across and through the flotsam and jetsam, past the Elk Mansion and past the whale into the water. We heard the drain all morning.

Mr. Elk's men drove metal hooks roughly a foot long into every five feet of blubber lining either side of the whale, which they fastened to a dozen half foot thick cables hanging from the crane's arm. When the operator engaged the crane the whole site felt the weight of the whale.

The crane whined and its moving parts grinded against each other as if a robot had a growling stomach: ka-chunk, hum, bleat,

grumble.

The metal hooks started to tear the blubber as the whale reached two feet off the ground. It sounded like sticky-wet rice poured onto cement.

The men all hissed in air through their teeth and the sides of their mouths displaying that grimace that looked like they were not quite smiling, but almost.

Mrs. Elk stood in the kitchen with her hands over her mouth. I couldn't hear her.

K. Richards was burning through film.

Then the hooks sliced completely through the whale and it dropped back to earth. The mud and fat flew in all directions, covering most of everybody and most of the Elk Mansion. Blubber spilled out of the whale like cottage cheese—too thick to be fast but too big to be slow. All translucent white, grey in that light, white at this angle, but most of all it slid thick like melted silicone.

Mr. Elk was spewed foul language to match his backyard. "I don't fucking care. Fuck this. We'll blow him sky fucking high. Fuck it, we'll blow the goddamned house to kingdom come. Build a new one, far as I care. I mean, shit, Frank. Think. What? What you think—you think this is all mud? Got to be some whale turds in there!"

I stifled a laugh as I peeled the mud off my pants. K. Richards was standing with his back to the whale, bent over at the waist and slimed head to toe. He was protecting his pair of cameras as best he could.

"Keith, you all right?"

"I think so."

"Your cameras OK?"

"Hope so."

I stood in front of him now and saw his cameras were under his shirt. Did he have time to stow them or were they stained? "You hide those quick enough? Or you just keep doing it after it fell?"

"Not quite sure. They feel pretty clean."

"Want me to wipe you off before you stand up normal?"

"Sure."

I pulled a few handfuls of mud off his sides and flung them to the ground. I tried to clean off his sleeves. He began to straighten up and said, "That'll do. About as good as we can get it, I expect."

His cameras were safe and he burst into a smile.

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Mr. Elk sat on his newly brown back stairs with a mug of black coffee. Mrs. Elk was still inside at the kitchen window, staring at her husband. I leaned on the railing while K. Richards took pictures of the whale, Frank and Toby on the dead sod. The sun was overhead and all our mud had been caked dry into our clothes despite the chill in the air and the misty wind off the water.

"They'll bring the dynamite tomorrow," Mr. Elk said. He finished his coffee and put the cup on the steps. I had finished some tea and

offered to get Mr. Elk a refill as well. "Sure thing, George. Sorry about that language earlier."

"Hey, no sweat."

Mrs. Elk was sitting at the table, hiding her eyes. When she wiped across her cheeks and lifted her head, I saw the whites had turned red to match her nose. "Earl wants more coffee, I suppose."

"Oh it can wait." I urged her to sit down with me at the table. "Is he really going to blow up your house?"

"I don't expect different. Once he gets a notion, there's no changing it."

I nodded. "Will you pack your things, then? Will you take your home with you?"

"I packed my clothes—except my nighttimes—and I called a mover. They said they knew where we were, sure, but they never took anything out of a dump." Mrs. Elk pursed her lips and stifled herself. "I don't know how it never came to me we live in a dump."

"Your home is beautiful."

"Was beautiful. Now it's got whale all over it." Her hand returned to her mouth and she spoke through her fingers. "I heard on the radio yesterday—in the afternoon—a house got crushed by one of the ancient redwoods during the storm."

"Oh yeah? Where was that?"

"Some county north, you know, where they have redwoods. Supposedly, the man who owned the house, the one who got squashed, was a logging man. Made millions from it. All up and

down that part of the coast. But he got crushed there, in the house, along with his second wife.”

“Unlucky,” I shook my head.

“Yeah, that whale coulda hit the house, I guess. I mean, how's a whale get beached on a lawn like we got—off the water?”

Frank threw a handful of spilled blubber at Toby and hit him flat on the back. It slopped off Toby's windbreaker and left a gooey stain. Toby ran at Frank with both hands stretched out forward and knocked Frank off his feet into the pile of whale innards he had just thrown at his co-worker. On the way down, though, Frank hooked his foot around the back of Toby's knee and drew him on top of him. Toby fell awkward with his knee into Frank's stomach and that's when I heard Frank scream. We stood at the window and saw the boys rolling further into the emptied guts of the whale, almost inside its ruptured husk.

Mr. Elk was standing, yelling, “Boys, goddamnit! Quit that shit! I said quit!”

Mrs. Elk and I stood at the window and when we lost sight of Frank's head under a fist of fat from Toby, she grabbed my arm and gasped. “Oh. I wish he'd stop.”

K. Richards smiled, snapping pictures.

I was stupefied by the intensity of the boys' swings and kicks and screams; all were audible inside the kitchen, somehow. I looked at the window and saw it hung open a few inches.

Suddenly Toby doubled up and fell to his side, off the white mass formerly recognizable as Frank. I heard Toby cough and winced at the mental picture of him trying to breathe with his mouth covered

in whale fat. Frank stood up and the blubber fell off in clumps. He flung some on Toby and some on the whale—he even threw some at K. Richards that landed at his feet. Mr. Elk was at the ring of fat now, pointing a finger at both boys, switching from one to the other. We could not hear the words, only the rumble of his voice, like his boulder face was coming apart and rolling down a hard, empty dirt hill into a thicket of tall, broad redwoods. Toby stood slowly, cupping his crotch and spat away from the men around him. He turned his body away from Frank, away from Mr. Elk, away from K. Richards and his camera.

“He looks hurt something bad,” Mrs. Elk said, still holding my shoulder. I noticed I was holding my breath.

I finally understood something Mr. Elk said: “I’ll get the fucking hose, boys.”

Frank turned further, his back to the men, and leaned on the sagging whale body. I could see Toby mouth, “Fuck this,” and turn from the scene towards the water.

“Where’s he going?” Mrs. Elk’s grip tightened.

“He’s going into the water.” I coughed, able to breath again. “He’s going to wash himself off, to get clean again”

-- New York, March 2006

