

My Metal Friends by Gail Loon Lustig



This morning as I pushed open the heavy door of the *palazzo* I live in, I carefully threw my bag of garbage into the grey container with the words *articoli alimentari* written on the front. I heard the plop as it landed inside and standing for a minute, hesitated at what I should do next.

There was something about the timing, alone with them at last, no neighbours in sight to distract me, that made me decide to take the plunge. “To hell with it, I thought, enough *Italiano* for a while, I’ll try my *Inglese* on these guys.”

“So you probably think you’re really cool with Italian words written all over you. Do you know that the last time I saw the word “alimentary” was when I was in primary school in Cape Town and we learned about the gut?”

The container was obviously taken aback and in a whisper said “you mean to say you’re from Africa? And how do they dispose of their waste down there?”

Not bad for a lump of metal, I thought, “dispose”, nothing less. Surprise, surprise. That’s what comes from my petty prejudices, never under-estimate.

“Well for a start, there’s no such thing as four metal containers standing in a row one foot away from the pavement, taking up valuable space in an over-crowded street. I remember that each house had its own plastic bin which was emptied once a week when it filled. Now I live in Israel and there each *palazzo* has its own garbage room.”

The other three containers, each of different colours, gazed at me. They all looked pretty much the same except for the pale blue one which had two round spaces protected by black plastic for openings.

“Mama Mia, here there’s tradition. As far back as Pompey, Italians have been throwing their garbage in the street in some form or other. Then, it actually flowed down the streets in rivers of human waste. The stench was awful. Today we’re far more civilized, there are different containers for different kinds of waste. Look at me, I’m full of paper and cardboard!”

I looked at them all carefully lined along the street, only half full, no smell, but then it was only late morning.

“Well, to tell you the truth, I’m sick of hearing about your history and seeing your ancient sites. Everywhere you go in Rome there’s either a church, a museum bursting with busts of your emperors or bridges bearing their names. I won’t even begin to tell you how many paintings of the Nativity Scene I’ve seen since I’m here. You may not have seen them, stuck out here in the north of the city, but all you guys live in the past. It’s time to move on.”

I was surprising myself at just how honest I was with them. A *straniera* criticizing their beloved city. Who did I think I was?

Ok, well let’s change the subject, I said. “how come you’ve got a pair of new blue jeans hanging at your side?”

The second black container, its mouth wide open, joined in. “Well, talking of history. Did you know that jeans gets its name from Genoa where they were called ‘blu genes?’”

I stood there feeling very unresponsive. I could be when I felt that my opinion was being ignored.

He noticed my deadpan expression for soon he said “ A *donna* passed by this morning. She hung it up. She often does that, she can’t bear to throw away her possessions and decorates me with belts, bags and even shoes. She never waits to see who takes them.”

And who does?, I asked.

“Every evening as the sun goes down two *ragazzi* come along. The one wears a cap, dark glasses and has the same buttoned down shirt each time. He wears gloves and digs deep into our bowels looking for treasures. Sometimes he finds and sometimes not. If anyone notices him, he moves away fast pulling his checked trolley as if he were catching a plane. “

“Pedro is the second one. We call him that”, said the grey container. He has black straight hair and red cheeks. He wears a red scarf around his neck. He only looks for electrical equipment. He’ll sit for hours checking out bits and pieces he finds, taking them apart and fixing them. If you come back later you’ll probably see him.”

I think I had already but decided not to mention it. I needed to move on myself.

“OK, well , nice speaking to you. *Buona giornata* and go on with the good work!” I called out before crossing the road.

“Totsiens and Shalom and thanks for talking to us, can’t remember when last that happened. And you, a total stranger!”

That evening for the first time I actually heard the garbage truck which they had mentioned, coming down the road. I heard the noises of the digitally operated lever hooking onto the first container and from my window watched it swinging in the air, weightless, emptying itself of its garbage. It shook from side to side in slow motion performing its very own ritual dance. From where I stood, I noticed a smile on its face as it saw the swallows flying by desperately looking for somewhere to settle after a day of flying about in the hot, blue sky.

Two minutes of happiness each day is a lot to look forward to, I thought. It makes a difference. Then I heard the engine of the truck rumbling on, reaching a crescendo, a crash as the container resumed its vigil on the street. I watched this repeating itself three more times. And then there was silence. I looked down and waved at them acknowledging what I’d just witnessed. I had shared their momentary joy perched high above the street, losing themselves, their ugly functional presence suddenly transformed into a different sort of poetry of movement. They were free, if only for two minutes in a day. I smiled and knew that my new-found friends and I shared a secret experience; a miracle that repeated itself every evening. I couldn’t wait for the next morning....

~~~~~

## **My Metal Friends, written by Gail Loon Lusting in 2009**

### **A Word about This Story:**

In 2009, we spent a year's Sabbatical leave in Rome. We lived in a rented apartment in the north of the city. It was a truly great experience walking the area, discovering and learning about the attractions that 'spoke' to me, often more than the most well-known tourist sites.

This story is dedicated to our English High School teacher at Settler's High School, Bellville, Mr Cameron, who, in the 60's, taught us while standing with his back to the table in the centre of the class, literally tongue in cheek. His cynicism was, in retrospect, a wonderful stimulus for lively discussion.

The debate I remember so clearly was 'Garbage is more beautiful than the rose'! Of course, we, naïve students fell for the challenge and certainly gave it our best trying to convince him that our point of view was the accepted one !

Who would have thought that 40 years later I would actually write about the subject with affection?!

**Posted on the CHOL 'Share Your Stories' Website in February, 2026**