



SCRAP CITY

by D. S. Thornton

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Summary: Fifth-grader Jerome Barnes of Shoney Flats is exploring the town junkyard when he finds a strange mechanical robot-creature named Arkie who is made of a collection of spare parts, but seems remarkably alive--and when Arkie shows him the city that exists beneath the junkyard Jerome realizes that he must find a way to save his friend and the junkyard that the town wants removed.

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To Donald

CHAPTER 1

Jerome Barnes was exploring the junkyard when something curious caught his eye. Off in the distance, past the stacks of tires and dilapidated automobiles and ancient water heaters and bales of wire: crows. First there were two, then four, then eight.

Of course crows weren't out of the ordinary in Shoney Flats, but soon there were a dozen of them, and they were behaving in a way Jerome had never seen before: swooping and calling excitedly, as though they'd cornered something they weren't quite sure about.

Which made Jerome want to see what it was.

So he made his way to the far side of the junkyard, being careful not to walk into rusty old fenders or mufflers or sheets of metal, doing his best not to lose sight of the great black birds. Then, as he found himself in the shadows

of sleek, gliding wings, the birds—perhaps rattled at the interruption—let out deep angry caws, and took off.

And that was when Jerome heard it. Somewhere in there, among the piles of junk, was a whir. A peculiar sort of whir. If you were to ask him in what way this whir was peculiar, he couldn't tell you. He just knew it was something he'd never heard before. It went "wrrrlgh" in the strangest way. That must have been what had excited the crows.

The whir came every few seconds. It was definitely nearby. And it was definitely peculiar. Each time it came—a whir here, a whir there—Jerome took a step in its direction, like a game of Hot and Cold.

At first he thought it sounded like an old refrigerator, but then he realized there probably wasn't electricity this far from the junkyard shack, which was a good fifty yards away. *It's probably a generator*, he thought, like the one behind his house that sputtered and coughed when the electricity went out. *No, not a generator. Something else.*

"Wrrrlgh!" it came again, a little louder than before, which meant Jerome was getting close.

Then—the whir abruptly stopped. Jerome stood still and listened, straining his ears. He waited. He waited some more.

Whatever it was, he thought with a sigh, *it's over now*. He shrugged and turned back to the broken-down shack where he'd left his dad and uncle, who were meeting with the old junkman.

His dad was a commercial real estate agent. That meant he helped businesses buy and sell property. Sometimes it was land and sometimes it was buildings. After a whole year without a single sale, Jerome's dad had a client. A client who wanted to buy the junkyard.

Earlier at the shack, his dad had told him to wait on the porch while he went inside to talk to the junkman. But after a half hour of listening to the men inside talk—or, really, his dad talk—Jerome couldn't take it any longer. The more his dad tried to press his points to the old junkman—how a shopping center would be good for Shoney Flats, how the junkyard didn't have the customers it once had, how it was good to retire while he still had the energy—the more frustration Jerome could hear in his father's voice. Jerome knew this frustration well, because it had been there, just under the surface, for months.

They called the junkman "Wild Willy." Wild Willy wasn't his *real* name, of course; his real name was William Videlbeck. But everyone in Shoney Flats called him Wild Willy, even Jerome's dad. Or they called him a "crazy old goat." When Jerome was little, he had thought Mr. Videlbeck's name really *was* Crazy Old Goat, because he'd heard it so often. "That crazy old goat out at the junkyard," people would say.

While he waited on the porch, Jerome had tried to get a glimpse of Wild Willy. He'd never seen the old junkman before. But it was hard to see through the screen door,

and the most Jerome could make out was a hunched-over shadow as the old junkman hobbled about the darkened shack. Every now and then Jerome would hear the shadow grunt, “Nope, not interested,” or “Yer wastin’ yer time,” and then Jerome’s dad would start talking again.

That’s about all the junkman said the whole time Jerome was on that porch.

After some time, he’d called through the screen door to ask if he could walk around, but he wasn’t sure if his dad had heard him. He’d tried a second time. Fact was, he’d wondered if his dad would even notice he was gone. “Whatever,” Jerome had said, and took off into the junkyard, which looked to be full of all kinds of interesting things.

Now, just as he was turning back to the shack, the whir suddenly sputtered out again.

“*Wrrrlgh*,” it went. Then: “*Wrrrlgh wrrrlgh*.”

Jerome peeked around a mound of hubcaps, hoping he could catch whatever it was mid-whir. He looked behind an old propane tank and a claw-foot bathtub. The whir was coming every few seconds. He checked some metal drums, a couple of engine blocks, and a mangled-up weight bench. Then, at last, when the noise sputtered out louder than ever, he was sure he’d found it.

“Got it!” he called as he poked his head around a broken-down washing machine.

“Aw, it’s just an old ice chest,” Jerome said, disappointed.

It was a metal ice chest, the kind his dad would bring, back when they used to go fishing together.

Jerome frowned. An ice chest shouldn't be whirring.

He knelt next to it and put his ear to the red-and-silver words that read ARCTIC ICE. Again the whirring stopped. *One more time*, he thought. *I can figure out just what this sound is if I hear it one more time.*

The whir complied. And when it did, the ice chest wobbled.

A mouse! Jerome decided. It had gone inside and the lid fell down and now it was stuck in there. *Or maybe it's a nice fat rat*, like Petey the Rat in science class. (The best thing about fifth grade? Watching Petey nibble his way around a piece of cheese.) Then Jerome had another thought: *Maybe it's hurt*. And if it *was* hurt, trapped in there, Jerome was going to have to move quickly.

"Don't worry, little guy," he said as he lifted an old bicycle wheel out of the way. "I'll get you out of there."

The next whir surprised him because it sounded just like, "Out ub way-uh?"—as if someone with a bad cold had asked, "Out of where?" And then Jerome was sure it *was* someone with a bad cold, because after that it said, "I'm not id eddythink."

"If you're not *in* anything," Jerome asked, "where *are* you?" He looked up and down and even behind the ice chest.

"I'm right here," it whirred (sounding more like "I'm

wight heeyuh”). All at once, the ice chest moved. This time, it did much more than wobble. In one smooth motion, it turned around and sort of . . . sat up.

Jerome fell back on his rear end, amazed. The ice chest was moving? On its own? Or was there something even bigger in there, like a cat? Wait . . . a *talking* cat?

And was that a coffee can on top of the ice chest? And connecting them, the base from a blender? Just what was he looking at?

He studied the thing. If he didn’t know any better, he’d say the coffee can and blender part looked just like a head and neck. And when the whirring voice said, “I can’t fide my doze,” Jerome knew it *was* a head and neck.

He frowned at the thing. “Your what?”

“My doze! I can’t fide my doze,” it answered, turning to him.

Two gauges with dials in them faced him now. Eyes! And below that, a curved piece of metal that was surely a mouth and jaw.

“Oh, your *nose*,” he said. “You can’t find your nose.”

Jerome couldn’t help but stare. Mouthpieces from old telephones looked like ears; little springs poked out crazily from the top of the coffee can like wild hair sticking out from under a baseball cap; arms had been cut from a garden hose; and at the end of each garden-hose arm, there was a glove. Well, one arm had a glove and one had a mitten,

neither of which were normally found in that part of Texas, where it was warm all year long. The glove had different-colored fingers, and the mitten was bright orange.

Jerome watched as the brightly colored glove and mitten busily rummaged through a wooden crate, tossing aside gears and drill bits and beat-up ancient wrenches.

“What do you mean, you can’t find your nose?” Jerome asked, still not understanding.

“It was wight here, wight on my face,” the ice-chest thing said. “And then it was *gone!* It falled right off.” It touched the empty place on its face and whirred, “I *pwamissed* Nanny Lux I’d *dever* lose it again. She’s gonna be upset someding awful.” Dials in its eye-gauges darted about worriedly as they searched the ground. “If I can’t find it, I have to find someding else.”

Jerome squatted to help. He was now on the same level as the little contraption. He felt for a second as though he were getting down on the floor with Max, his little brother, helping him look for a lost action figure or metal car that had disappeared under the couch. But it had been a long time since he’d done that.

He surveyed the ground. “What am I looking for?”

“You doe,” the ice-chest thing whirred, “someding *dozey.*”

Jerome watched as the crazy contraption moved a few feet away. Jerome saw now that beneath the ice chest was

something else that looked familiar—the bottom half of a barbeque grill. And under that, three wheels, exactly like the wheels on the chair in his mother’s old sewing room.

What in the world was he looking at? Was it a toy? Was it a robot? Was it dangerous? It didn’t *seem* dangerous—in fact, he had a sneaking suspicion it was anything but dangerous. But still, he was reminded of what his mother used to tell him: “Pay attention. Keep your wits about you.”

He thought about a time he and his mother had been on their way to the laundromat. She couldn’t hold his hand because she was pushing the stroller, where baby Max was sleeping soundly. Jerome was probably four or five years old at the time, and as they began to cross the street, he clutched the folds of his mother’s dress. It was her yellow dress, the one with the little white flowers.

“Look left, look right, look left again,” she told him before stepping into the crosswalk. “Pay attention. Keep your wits about you. Safest town in the world, Shoney Flats, but you never know. Bad things can happen any time.”

Jerome brushed the thought away. He didn’t want to think about that, about bad things happening. Not when he’d just thought about his mom. Not when he’d just thought about Max.

Suddenly, the little contraption took off. Jerome watched its curious form as it nimbly skittered away through the junkyard, its wheels keeping it level, even though the path was rocky and uneven.

Jerome glanced quickly toward the shack. If he rose up on his toes, he could just make out the sign on the roof—SCRAP CITY—in big letters made of rusty old tools and gears. He couldn't see the other sign, the one he'd seen when they drove up, the handpainted one that read ONE MAN'S TRASH IS ANOTHER MAN'S TREASURE.

He had but a split second to decide what to do, because the ice-chest thing had gone all the way to the end of the path and was just about to turn down another path and out of sight. He bit his lip. What if his dad and uncle were already out on the porch, wondering where Jerome had gone? *Nah, they're still with that crazy old goat*, he decided. *They just have to be*. Because no way was he going to lose sight of that ice chest.

He ran after it, but already it had disappeared. Rounding the corner, Jerome found himself in an area where some piles of junk were so high he couldn't see over them. No wonder the junkyard was called Scrap City! It really was like a city of junk. Rusted-out water heaters and broken windows and craggy sheets of metal were everywhere.

He spotted the little contraption at the end of the path. He could see it was holding something in its gloved hands, cocking its coffee-can head, turning the item this way and that. By the time Jerome caught up, he could see from the pile nearby that the ice-chest thing had already gone through quite a few other items. Whatever this crazy thing was looking for, it sure wasn't having any luck.

Jerome picked up something, too. A cabinet knob. “How about this?” he asked.

It stopped examining an old metal wagon and turned its eye-gauges toward him. “Uh-uh,” it whirred. “Too small.”

“Here’s something,” Jerome said. “At least it’s bigger than the cabinet knob.” He held up a bicycle horn.

The little contraption dropped the wagon. “Yes!” it cried. “Dat’s it! Almost *just* like my old one!” It slapped its gloves together and spun around in a circle.

Jerome watched in fascination as the ice-chest thing took the horn and deftly popped it onto its coffee-can face. Odd noises came from inside—squeaking and grinding and grating—as if a small factory were at work. Then, with a final squeak, the horn was in place. A long, funny-sounding honk followed as the ice-chest thing took a deep breath through its new bicycle-horn nose.

“Wow!” it cried. “Just wait until I tell Nanny Lux how *good* everything smells! She’s not gonna mind at all that I lost that stupid *other* nose. She’s gonna think this *new* nose is the bestest nose ever ever *ever!*”

It slapped its gloves together and took in another breath of air. The needles in its eye-gauges spun with delight. And then its whole little body spun, too. “Do you think it’s gonna rain?” it asked, mid-spin. It pointed its new bicycle-horn nose into the air, and with the slightest beep, stopped spinning. “It smells like it’s gonna rain. I just know it. I have a *excellent* nose now. The most excellent nose there ever was.” The

needles in its eye-gauges went straight up and one of the corners of its metal mouth rose just slightly. It was smiling.

And with that, with its bicycle-horn nose in place and a smile on its face, the ice-chest thing suddenly didn't look like an ice-chest thing at all. It looked like a boy. Rather, *he* looked like a boy. A little mechanical boy.

"Oh my gosh!" he said, suddenly looking up at Jerome. "I been so worried 'bout my dumb ol' nose, I didn't even thank you for getting rid of those awful *crows*. I think crows are the meanest, nastiest things in the whole wide world, don't you? The very meanest. Do you know they'll just swoop down and pick you up and take you way up in the trees somewhere, and . . . and pick you apart like you're nothin' but a . . . a *walnut*?" He looked to the sky and shook his little body, as if shaking away the thought of it.

Jerome looked skyward as well. "Looks like they're gone now," he said, trying to sound reassuring.

The little guy's eye-gauges seemed to blink when he turned back to Jerome. "Oh my gosh again!" he said. "What a rotten new friend *I* turned out to be. The very rottenest. Nanny Lux says it's rude not to introduce yourself. Rude as rude can be." A garden-hose arm jutted out, and with it, a mitten hand. "I'm Arkie," he announced with a big nod. "And know what? We're gonna be good friends. The bestest friends ever." Another nod made his wire hair jiggle.

Jerome bowed. "I'm Jerome," he said with a smile. "And know what? I don't like crows, either."