



Yormie Aboe Dzaki 🦋 Oct 1 12 min read

# Letting Go

Yormie Aboe Dzaki

*Listen to Yormie reading his own Mammoth:*

Civilization did not rise and flourish as men hammered out hunting scenes on bronze gates and whispered philosophy under the stars, with garbage as a noisome offshoot, swept away and forgotten. No, garbage rose first, inciting people to build a civilization in response, in self-defense. We had to find ways to discard our waste, to use what we couldn't discard, to reprocess what we couldn't use. Garbage pushed back. It mounted and spread. And it forced us to develop the logic and rigor that would lead to systematic investigations of reality, to science, art, music, mathematics.

— Don DeLillo, *Underworld*, p. 287

Poor Tony Rasher is watching the world become smaller and smaller. The city noise of cars and trams and people has faded. The air here smells of nothing. His pulse is thumping in his shoulder joints. All Tony Rasher can hear is hissing sounds and the soft strokes of the wind. He can hide his hands from the wind's chill, which he does, in his jacket's pockets, but his face remains exposed. The cold is nibbling on his cheekbones and earlobes, making them tingle. Tony Rasher remembers how someone once told him you can feel less cold by thinking intently of a warm thing or memory. So he does.

It was a warm summer's day and Tony Rasher was near the end of his morning pickup route when he witnessed Samuel Litt become the first person ever to throw a piece of trash onto the street. The man didn't seem to realise what he had done. Licking the white frosty layer of condensation off his freshly shucked popsicle, he walked some ten more steps before coming to a sudden halt. He must have seen, slowly turning round, the dozen pairs of bystanders' eyes all intently watching the little red-and-blue wrapper being tugged at by the wind; how it was picked up, for a moment, and put down again. Tony Rasher, too, gazed motionlessly from across the street, holding the full bag of trash by the neck like a freshly plucked chicken, halfway up and out of its container. Samuel Litt—everyone would know his name eventually—took a hesitant step towards the wrapper, not sure of what he should do were he to reach it, when it was picked up again, floated, and was pulled suddenly and violently into the thicket of streetside foliage. Gone. Never before had anybody seen what just happened and already it seemed like it had never happened at all. Bystanders started walking again. Samuel Litt remembered his melting popsicle. And Tony Rasher finished attaching the Fulton Hot-Air Retrieval Tether® to the trash bag. With the little remote that he retrieved from his tool belt he controlled the balloon's ascent, watching as the rising thing pulled the bulging bag out like one would some dried-up, beige, semi-hard excrement from a clogged skin pore, after which he placed a new bag in the empty container and listened for the approach of the low rumbling sound high above his head.

Back at the Tetherers' station, in the cafeteria, Rasher had his lunch and strongly felt that he needed to share with his colleagues what he had witnessed.

"He just... let go of it..."

"You're sure that's what happened?" someone said.

"Look, I know what I saw."

"He probably didn't notice," another suggested.

"He definitely noticed."

"So you're saying this guy, instead of appropriately depositing his trash in a trash can, just *let go* of it and it ended up on the street?"

"Yeah. And then it blew away."

"Come on, Tony, that's impossible."

"You're messing with us."

"I'm not."

"Yeah, he's messing with us."

"Maybe he's got heatstroke. Probably. Tony, are you feeling okay? You should go see Dr. Proctor."

"Yeah, it's quite common in the summer, Tony. Especially among you new guys."

Tony Rasher fell silent. Maybe they were right. Had he really seen what he thought he'd seen? He didn't have heatstroke, no, he could feel it, but what else could it have been? A mirage, perhaps. If only I could find that guy, he thought. Then a bell rang. He had to start on his afternoon route.

The afternoon was sweltering. Despite his thin logoed shirt and khaki shorts, Tony Rasher was pouring sweat. The intermittent rumbling of retrieval planes sounded muted, far away, modulated by the hot air. While pulling his cart—restocked with tightly folded hot-air balloons, coiled tethers and a fresh roll of garbage bags—he walked from Tether can to Tether can and thought about the man who had let go. Let's say it's true, he thought to himself, and the guy really did discover a brand-new way to deal with trash. Is it a viable alternative? Not for me. I'm a Tetherer. I need trash cans to fill up, otherwise I'll be out of work. If I were an average Joe, though, what reason could I have for *not* doing it? It's easier. It gets rid of my trash. And there's more than enough street to go around onto which I can deposit any amount of trash I could possibly produce. Then again, what if everybody were an average Joe? Most people are, I believe. But say everybody were. Then everybody would let go of their trash and I'd be out of a job... But I'm an average Joe too in this scenario, so I wouldn't care—just like everybody else. But then everybody would use the street to deposit their trash onto it, and there is no system—like the great Fulton Hot-Air Retrieval Tether System®—to process all that street trash. Surely, we'd run out of street to deposit trash on soon enough... and then what? No, Tony Rasher concluded, it would not work at all.

For the second time, Tony Rasher wished he could come across that man again. Now he even had something to say to him. And, for the second time that day as well, he wondered whether he might actually be under the deliriant effects of heatstroke, because there he was, right across the street: the man that had let go.

Tony Rasher called out to him. The man turned, saw Rasher approaching him with an upraised arm, and bolted. Stunned for a second, standing in the middle of the street, Tony Rasher watched as the man turned the corner. He pursued, rounded the corner as well, calling after the man, who was already approaching the next corner. He was clearly faster and not at all as debilitated by the blistering heat as Rasher was now, even after a mere short sprint, and Tony gave up and stopped running, bending over to catch his breath while trying to not feel overwhelmed by his body excreting moisture like a squeezed wet sponge. Someone asked if he was okay. All he could do, still bent over, was raise his hand.

The next day, Tony Rasher was called up to the office of Henry Zoloff, the Tetherers' station's supervisor. He didn't know why he had been called up, but on the way there he recalled how he never liked being in that office. Zoloff maintained a kind of management style that, for Zoloff, involved spending almost as much time sitting in one of the two hard-backed guest chairs in front of his desk as he spent in his own chair. To get a sense of how his subordinates felt when they came into his office, presumably. It was clear that every accolade, souvenir, office ornament and piece of furniture was directed at some invisible focal point in between those two chairs. Even the framed pictures of Zoloff's wife, children, and dogs were turned towards it.

Zoloff was so dedicated to this oppressive setup that, when Tony entered the office after having knocked and being told to enter, he found him sitting in one of the hard chairs, with his back to the door, reading some documents and motioning Tony toward the ergonomic high-backed adjustable leather executive chair behind the desk. Some air escaped from the cushioned leather as Tony sat down. There was a TokTok video playing in a loop on the computer screen facing Tony. The chair smelled faintly of dog.

"Care to explain the TokTok?" Zoloff, not looking up from his printouts.

Tony looked at the looping thing and stayed silent.

"Isn't that you, in your work clothes, running and yelling after some innocent person, like a madman?"

"I... I had to talk to him."

Zoloff raised an eyebrow.

"It was the man that threw a piece of trash on the street yesterday morning. He... Look, it's hard to explain, but I needed to tell him that he shouldn't do that, because then others would see, and they might think it's a good idea and start doing it as well but then the problem is that if everybody started doing—"

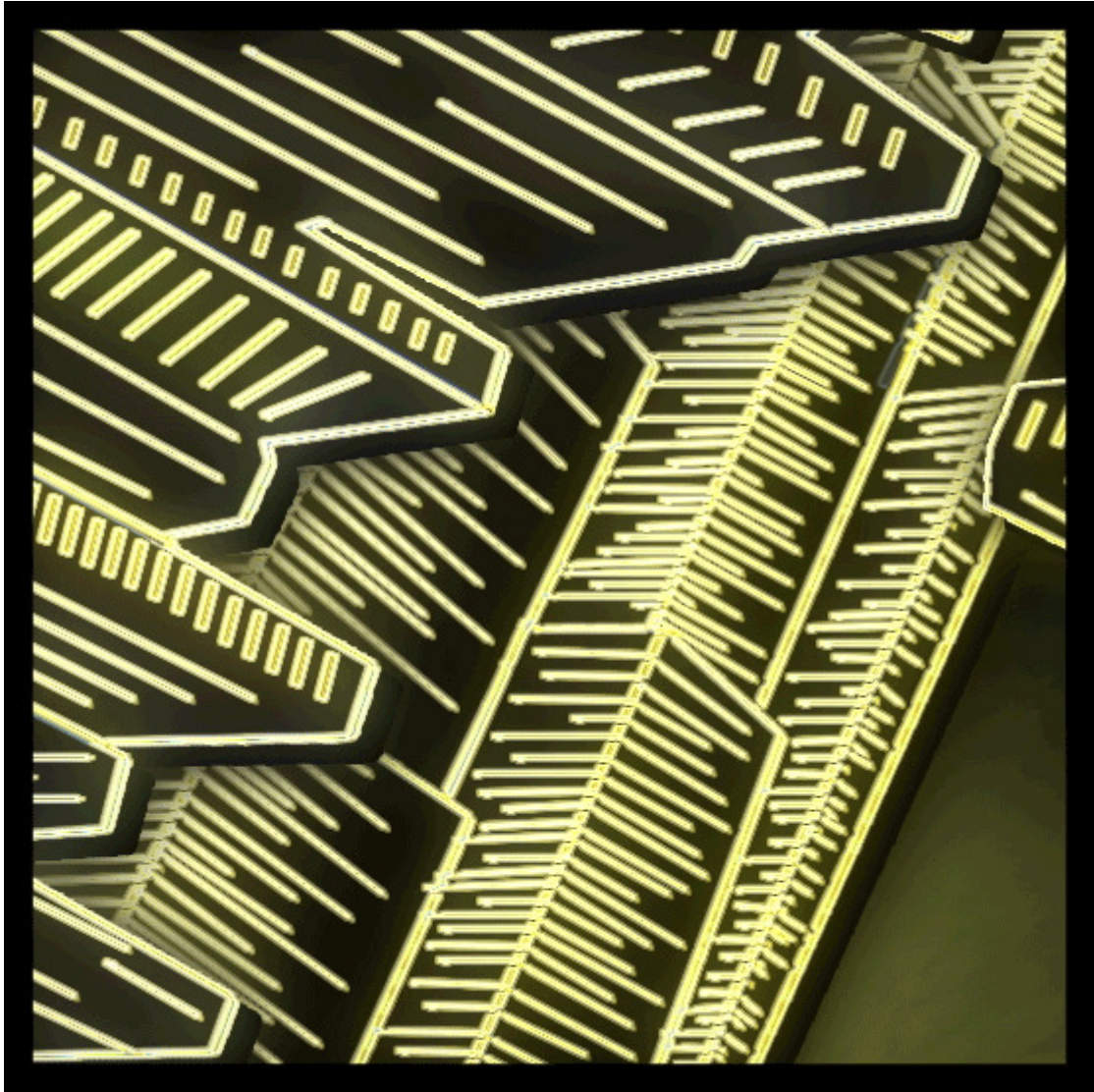
"Problems, schmblems," Zoloff yawned. He slouched further down into his chair. "O, Tony. God knows what you're talking about but let me be clear: this is unacceptable." He was squeezing his eyes shut and pinching the bridge of his nose. "We are Tetherers, okay? We tether, we retrieve, we replace. That's it. Chasing down strangers to tell them what to do with their trash is not a part of our jobs."

"But if everyone started copying his behaviour, we wouldn't even *have* jobs."

"We wouldn't even have jobs," Zoloff parroted in a whiny child's voice. He bent forward now, clutched his head in both hands, elbows on his knees, as if he was going to be sick all over his shoes. "You know, I've been married to my wife for over ten years now and for each of those ten years, every day, without fail, I've moved the bottle of ketchup from the fridge to the cupboard, because you don't need to refrigerate ketchup. I've never told her; I just *show* her. But I know for a fact that tonight, when I come home, that godforsaken bottle of ketchup will be in the fridge again, cold and tasteless. Do you see what I'm saying, Tony?"

Tony Rasher saw, on the edge of the desk, a scale model of the Fulton Hot-Air Retrieval Tether System®, encased in a clear plastic box. It contained a miniature trash bag attached to a miniature balloon balancing on a wafer-thin needle, the small retrieval airplane with its line and hook hanging above, and a tiny hand-painted man standing below, looking up.

"I'm going to let you off with a warning, Tony. No more chasing people down the street; no more telling them what they should or shouldn't do. And remember, you can always visit Dr. Proctor if you think you need help, yes? But be careful, Tony, you're on thin ice."



He is shivering now. Between the small city and him, clouds pass by from time to time. His nose and earlobes and cheeks have gone almost completely numb. Tony Rasher is finding it hard to keep his attention on the warm place in his mind—on anything, really. Does he even remember how he ended up here?

Henry Zoloff had been right. In the months after the official write-up, nothing really happened. Rasher never ran into that man again, and it seemed like no one else had decided to follow his example, if they'd even seen it. That is, until one Friday night, when Tony came home after a night out with his colleagues.

Drunk, munching on a cold leftover piece of pizza and sipping from a bottle of beer, he turned on the TV, and a talk show came on: Nate Light with Fimmy Jallon. He enjoyed watching Fimmy Jallon while he was drunk on Friday nights. He told jokes, Fimmy that is, and Tony Rasher could yell out things for fun at the TV with the face on it that was Fimmy's. Tonight, Fimmy Jallon had a very special guest, he said. When Tony saw the guest's face, he stopped yelling out things at his TV.

"So, Samuel, tell us, how did you become the first man ever to just... *let go*?"

"Well, Fimmy, I really didn't do anything special, to be honest. I was just having a bit of a rough day that day, and I decided to get myself a nice, cold popsicle. And when the time came to appropriately deposit the wrapper in a Tether can, well... I just did not feel like doing it, you know. So I didn't."

"That's amazing. But how did you even come up with the idea of throwing it on the *street*? Nobody had ever thought of that before."

"I truly couldn't tell you, Fimmy. I think the Good Lord just thought to himself, oh, that ol' Samuel Litt deserves some divine inspiration today, you know."

"Wow. Well, you've become quite the inspiration yourself, for a lot of people. A TokTok of you getting chased by a Tetherer went viral a few months ago, and just last week some people finally tracked you down to ask you what that was all about. You showed them that invention of yours, and a video of that *a/so* went viral..."

"...and now I'm here."

"And now you're here indeed. It's really caught on, hasn't it?"

"Yeah. In fact, Fimmy, right before I came on just now, I got a message on my phone saying that people have started using my name to refer to the act of letting go."

"Really? Like... Something like 'Litting'? Or 'Litting go'?"

"Littering, Fimmy. They're calling it Littering."

"Wow. That's amazing."

The segment continued with Samuel Litt giving Fimmy Jallon and the audience a demonstration of how to do Littering. They had even built a small stretch of street for the occasion, right there in the studio. Rasher didn't see much of this demonstration because the bottle he threw broke his TV.

It didn't take long for Tony Rasher to need the help he had been offered. In the weeks after his appearance on Nate Light, Samuel Litt became a worldwide sensation. The thing he had invented—Littering—was truly revolutionary. There was an astonishing excitement and energy going around that made it hard, if not impossible, *not* to embrace this new way of living. Soon enough everybody was Littering, and with that, the retrieval planes ceased to fly and there were no longer any full trash bags to Tether. Thus, Tony Rasher found himself in Dr. Proctor's rosewood-coloured office where, as it turned out, he would have an epiphany.

"...and of course, yes, Tony, it does indeed seem like you were right all along. Now that everybody's Littering, the streets are slowly filling up. I think most people haven't noticed, though, or don't even care much. But even if they did, what can we do about it? What are your feelings on that? Tony?"

For over a minute now Tony Rasher had seemed to be in a trance-like state, staring into one of the high corners of the room while Dr. Proctor had soliloquized. The idea was so simple, he couldn't believe it at first. So he turned it over in his head. But no matter how he looked at it, it was a solution. Finally, coming back to the office he was sitting in, he whispered something.

"What?" Proctor said.

"We just pick it up."

"Pick what up?"

Tony didn't answer. He jumped up from his chair and ran out of the office.





It is at this point that Tony's memory seems to fail him. Or, more accurately, he is unsure of whether what he remembers is really what happened. But the thing is, he doesn't have any other way of explaining the predicament he is currently in. So one thing that Tony now remembers is his realisation that if everybody, after doing their Littering, would just pick one piece of trash back up and appropriately deposit it in a nearby Tether can, everybody could just go on Littering forever without ever having to worry about running out of street to Litter on. Another thing he remembers is that he knew it was no use to just putting his idea into practice and hoping that others would follow his example, regardless of how good it was. It was of the utmost importance that he did the picking up for its *own* sake, and likewise that he *intended* it that way. Though of course he would like everybody else to do so too. So what he needed was publicity, like Samuel Litt had gotten: something to make everybody at least aware of his solution. After that, they would naturally follow suit. Now, why Tony Rasher decided in that moment that his best course of action would be to Tether himself, armed with a megaphone, to a Fulton Hot-Air Balloon® and float over the city to proclaim his imperative, seemed a mystery to him now. He recalls the slanted roofs, the weather vane he kicked with his dangling feet, the Littered streets below, and all the surprised and fearful faces looking up; he recalls how he had his megaphone in one hand, orating through it to the people below about how they should all pick up something after they did their Littering, and how he had held the remote control with which he controlled the height of the balloon in the other hand, and how then it had slipped from his hand, the remote, tumbling down and disappearing into an ocean of trash, sinking, but somehow sending out a last signal to open the balloon's burner all the way. He recalls how the hissing had started, and how the city had gotten smaller and quieter and the air colder and thinner.

Now he is here, poor Tony Rasher, hanging up in the clouds in his harness and trying to remember warm places and wondering why he's seeing darkness despite feeling that his eyes are open and wondering, too, somewhere in the back of his mind, about that strangely familiar, low rumbling sound right above his head, becoming louder and louder.

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Yormie Aboe Dzaki has a Bachelor's degree in Philosophy and a Master's degree in Writing and Translating. Before, during and after his academic career, he wrote/writes novels and short stories. That his two interests often intersect becomes clear from the fact that he rarely wrote papers without narrative elements in them, and that his creative work almost always has a philosophical angle to it.

This is prominent in this story as well. But the reason that this story was written at all is thanks to Jan Willem Wieland, a professor of ethics at the VU in Amsterdam and one of Yormie's old teachers. It was Jan Willem who wanted to turn one of his philosophical essays into a short story, and who approached Yormie for this task. The essay is about Kantian climate activism and the question why, as an individual, you should do anything about lowering your own emissions at all, when those individual emissions don't make any meaningful difference for the global human contribution to climate change. One of Jan Willem's reasons for turning this concept into a short story is that he wanted to make philosophical/ethical questions such as these more accessible for non-academic audiences—after all, these issues concern all of us, not just philosophers. Just like Yormie, he believes that (literary) entertainment serves as an exquisite platform for doing so.

*The animations were made by Omar Aboe Dzaki. He is an Audiovisual Design student at the Willem de Kooning Academy in Rotterdam.*