

Intro

Forget about the New York you know. In the next few minutes, you're about to explore a land of invisible treasures, accompanied by people who work hard to make a living out of our trash. They call themselves canners, and they collect empty cans and bottles on the streets. Once their shopping carts are full, they redeem their collection and they get five cents a piece.

This is Francesca Berardi, an Italian journalist who worked with a group of canners for more than a year. I'm sharing intimate details about their stories and some names have been changed to protect their identities. The canners I worked with all go to the same redemption center, Sure We Can, located in the concrete heart of Brooklyn.

Ambi: Maria laughing and pointing at the Williamsburg Bridge

Francesca: In South Williamsburg, Maria is a local. Walking with her is like being with a tour guide with a superpower: she can see her neighborhood the way it was 25 years ago.

Maria: Oy mira! Esta era una factoría! Si, era una factoría...Donde quería había una factoría.

[Look! This used to be a factory! Yes, it was a factory...everywhere you saw there were factories.]

Francesca: Maria arrived in New York in the sixties and began canning 20 years ago. She was out of a job because the clothing factory where she worked closed. The company moved their production from Williamsburg to Taiwan.

Maria: Trabajaba con mil personas y hacía ropa por los nenes para compañías grandes, para Macy's, JCPenny ...y para el ejercito también.
Pero todo esto lo fueron mandando para allá porque pagaban menos.

[I worked with a thousand people and I made children's clothing for big companies, for Macys and JCPenny...and for the military too.
But they sent all of that over there because they can pay less.]

Francesca: Canning was natural to her. After all, she grew up working in the fields, walking, harvesting, carrying weights, in any weather whatsoever.

Maria: Yo soy del campo

[I'm from the countryside]

Francesca: Maria collects cans in two ways.

The first is very local. She walks from the apartment she rents in South Williamsburg to the redemption center in Bushwick, collecting what she finds on the streets and what her neighbors have put aside for her. One is Carmen from Panamá who says she can't move far because she has cancer. Carmen collects cans and bottles on her block and gives them to Maria, who redeems them and shares the money with her.

Ambi: Maria opens the door and say "Buenos dias" to Carmen who speaks with a sick voice.

Francesca: The second way is the most adventurous. At 6:30 in the morning Maria takes a bus - a guagua she says - to go to Forest Hills. There she walks to a 21-story building where a superintendent she knows sits at the door. He's from Puerto Rico.

Francesca: Maria goes to the basement - a rather dark and smelly place - where she sorts as many cans and bottles as she can fit in her small cart. Then, she walks back to Bushwick.

Ambi: Sounds of the street

Francesca: Maria pushes her cart for six miles by cemeteries, industrial sites, and pockets of residential areas. She will turn 80 this year.

Ambi: Maria naming the dead people. Nanda, Rate, Heno, Margaro...mio tio...

Francesca: Maria is in front of a cemetery and says "adios" to her friends and relatives buried here.

Maria: Pero yo siempre que paso de acá le digo adiós.

[But whenever I stop by and say goodbye]

Francesca: The Saturday I went canning with Maria, I walked with her, carrying two bags, one in each hand. It was the end of August last year, about 95 degrees Fahrenheit and humid. Surrounded by all those graves and crosses, it felt like being in a Catholic procession, a redemption of sins instead of bottles and cans. At some point Maria told me she wanted to introduce me to a friend. We took a detour to pass in front of his place.

Francesca: Ma è Italiano il tuo amico?

Maria: nodding. Tu no lo conoces?

Francesca: Ma esto es Padre Pio.

María: Por eso

Francesca: The friend in question was the statue of the Italian Catholic Saint Padre Pio. Soon I realized that Maria's devotion to saints goes hand in hand with her expertise in the funeral business. Lidia knows the cost of being buried in every cemetery she walks by.

Maria: eso es un cementerio diferente, católico, católico.
Es más caro, es más privado,
Talvez 2000, 10000, 15,000
Lo de allá. talvez 7000, 10000, menos
Y quemarte cuesta caro, también, cuesta como mil dólares

[That's a different cemetery, it's catholic, catholic.
It's more expensive, more private,
Maybe two thousand, ten thousand, fifteen thousand
Over there, maybe seven thousand, ten thousand, less
And cremation is expensive too, like a thousand dollars.]

Francesca: The most interesting thing she told me is that more and more people - especially old immigrants - are choosing to be buried in New Jersey because it's cheaper. Basically Brooklyn is also gentrifying underground.

Maria: Cuando tú vas a la funeraria te dicen en este vale \$5,000, este vale \$8,000/ \$10,000 y especialmente si uno no tiene la tierra. Entonces ya hacen todos los arreglos para que te entierren en New Jersey.

[When you go to the funeral home they tell you "this one is five thousand, this one is eight thousand, ten thousand," particularly if you don't have a plot. Then they make all the arrangements to bury you in New Jersey.]

Francesca: I asked her why she's so knowledgeable about the funeral business, but her answer was vague. She says she knows many people who are getting old, and has 30 cousins in New York. A fellow canner and member of the Catholic church Maria belongs to gave me another explanation. She says that Maria leads rosaries at funerals as a side job.

[That Saturday we went canning together, Maria had to run to the church, right after walking more than three hours to the redemption center. I asked her if she was tired - I was exhausted - but she said no. "So - I asked her - Maria, tell me, what's your secret?"]

Maria: No voy a mirar la hora, no vale la pena, me voy a desesperar.

[I'm not going to look now, it's not worth it, I'm going to feel desperate.]

Francesca: Never look at the time while you're walking. And of course, keep praying to the saints. All of them.

Maria: Me gustan todos porque yo a todos le pido! Ah! [she laughs] A todos le pido.

[I like them all because I ask them all! All of them!]