

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.

It's easy to know when Venzen is around. His gunmetal grey car - a 30-year-old Cadillac Brougham made in Detroit - is hard to miss.

Ambi: Sound of the car

Francesca: From a quick glance, you can tell the car has gone through to several DIY makeovers. It has the shape of the American dream - Venzen came to New York 50 years ago from the Virgin Islands. And it's big enough to contain the memory of his longest nightmare.

Venzen: After I have gone through what I have gone through, I wouldn't wish it on anyone. But it happens constantly.

Francesca: On the morning of April 24, 2008, Venzen, his wife and three daughters, lost their home, joining millions of other victims of the subprime mortgage crisis. They had nowhere to go. Out of pride, Venzen avoided taking his family to a shelter.

Venzen: You see that car that we just been in? My family and I slept in that car for a little while until we got money and go to a hotel.

Francesca: Venzen is pushing his shopping cart up and down the fields of Highland park, on the Brooklyn-Queens border, his hunting ground for cans and bottles. Since 2008 - from April to when it gets too cold - he walks around the park three, four, five times a day.

Venzen: I never think about how many times I go around the park. As soon as I get to the car, this is unload and I'm gone again. So I never have time to think about how many times I walk around the park. I just keep on going until I accomplish my goal.

Francesca: Which is?

Venzen: To fill up the truck by the time I leave out of here tonight. The backseat will have boxes all the way up. About 12 boxes. And the bag with the cans. And my trunk will be filled. Yeah.

Francesca: Venzen has been a canner since he and his family were homeless. After spending a few weeks sleeping between their Cadillac and a hotel room, they ran out of money and had no choice but to look for a place in a shelter.

There, they spent three months, but it felt like an eternity. Venzen didn't have a job: he had worked for 18 years as a carpenter and then had to stop for a knee injury. Since then he has been walking with a cane and getting a small pension.

In the morning, when the closed its doors, Venzen would drive his wife to the school where she worked - and then he had nowhere to go. One morning he went to Highland park for a walk. And this is when he noticed the cans.

Venzen: And I started seeing 5, 10, 15, 20 and when I got to 25 I stopped. I looked for garbage bag in every can that I find. And when I leave from here, I had four of these bags in the back of my car. I went to cash them in at the machine. I end up with \$54 and I said holy moley. Pride have to leave me right there. And I left my pride there. I was the first one that was picking up bottles and cans out here.

Francesca: Over the past decade, Venzen has become a canning expert. The Sunday in October we went canning together, he shared a few tricks with me, plus a recommendation. Don't shake hands with people you don't know, you never know whether they have just peed behind a tree.

Venzen: Knuckle to knuckle, knuckle to knuckle, right? Okay.

Francesca: Venzen considers canning as a means to make some extra money. Canning is also a way to exercise and stay in shape, like he used to when he was taking part in foot races back in the Virgin Islands.

Venzen: There's a lot of walking. In the wintertime, I will weigh 219 pounds. When I come out here in the summertime, I can drop my weight to 195 pounds just by walking around here.

Francesca: Ultimately, canning is a way to raise his spirit

Ambi: Venzen singing

Francesca: and accomplish a mission.

Venzen: My mission is to put myself in a better situation financially, physically and mentally for my family and for my grandchildren. That's my goal. And it's going to come. I told you before. Up in the park, it's going to take place.