

## 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: Angel singing despacito and counting cans

Francesca: Angel is a teenager, which is an unusual thing in the canners community. The Saturday morning we go canning together, he is wearing a white button down shirt with toucans. We meet at around 7 am at Sure We Can, the redemption center where he's been going since he was a child. He gets a JB's cart - he likes it because it's big - and we set off. After a few blocks, we bumped into a woman.

Angel: Antes she was my baby sitter

Francesca: Her nickname was Cookie.

Angel: Cookie, Cookie

Francesca: Angel doesn't pick up bottles and cans on the street. He goes straight to his primary supplier, a Mexican restaurant where the manager keeps empty beer bottles aside for him. He gets there just after they open, before the first wave of customers come in, when the cooks are still slicing lettuce carrots and in the kitchen.

Francesca: He heads towards an area behind the restaurant, a small dark storage space.

Angel: Aquí è donde guardan la basura.

Ambi: sounds of cans and bottles in the room

Francesca: Canning is only one of Angel's many activities. He studies during the week, he cleans his home on Saturdays and attends mass at a Pentecostal church on Sundays. He's

approaching his last year of high school and applying for college. His biggest dream is to become a Broadway star.

Angel: singing a song.

Francesca: Angel performs for me in a container at Sure We Can. His favorite musical is Hamilton.

Angel: Really good show. And on top of that it's with a mixed cast, a minority cast so that back in the day- it would only be white people, Caucasians and what not. 43:50 But the way he did it is with hip hop music, modern music, hip hop R&B, and music that's from today with colored people. Latinos and Asians and everybody. So that it seems more relatable, you know?

Francesca: His eyes sparkle when he speaks about his own experience on Broadway, when he played the role of a guard in Aladdin. Just before going onstage, he's-

Angel: Nervous like hell. I was like [panting]. Breathing crazy. Going insane backstage. Just jumpy all over the place. And finally it was like, "oh, you're going onstage! Oh ok!" Take a breather and just went onstage. Because you know that's what I do.

Francesca: Very few people in the canning community are aware of his theatrical talent. They call him "Angel Carmen" because for years he was his grandmother, Carmen's official canning assistant.

Angel: I've been helping her since forever so everything I do with the bottles is to help her. And then I've also been doing canning since I was little. It's something that I'm used to, you know?

Francesca: Carmen, who's Puerto Rican, is actually Angel's stepmom's mom. Carmen can't do this harsh work anymore because of her arthritis. So Angel does it for her and gives her all the money he makes. He's eternally grateful to Carmen because she was an inexhaustible source of care and love when his mom died. Angel was only eight at the time.

Angel: When she passed away, it was completely different from everything. I had to move on very fast. I never got a chance to get away from it.

Francesca: A few years later one of his older brothers died too, hit by a car while skateboarding near their home.

Angel: He was going to school for airplane mechanics. He wanted to be a pilot and an airplane mechanic.

Francesca: The day of the funeral Angel had a performance. He didn't know what to do. He knew his brother would have told him to go on stage and perform.

Angel: This is what I do as an actor, I put everything inside and I perform. So the day of the funeral, I went in the morning and I would go and stay there with everybody. And in the evening I went to my performance.

Francesca: For Angel the theater has become the place where the agony of loss becomes art, a celebration of his identity - Latino, queer, politically active, committed to working hard. It's the place to be.

Angel: singing a song