

Salma didn't have the heart to tell them that her heel had been stuck for 15 minutes

RISE *of the* 'BINFLUENCERS'

You know the saying — one woman's trash is another woman's treasure. Now, a new breed of freegans are proving you can get cache, and cash, from the things other people chuck. Cosmopolitan went along for a rummage >

Words SALMA HAIDRANI
Photographs ANTONIO PETRONZIO

S

o I'm in four-inch-high black leather Chelsea boots outside an upmarket supermarket, knee-deep in bin liners that are bursting at the seams. Pooling at my feet is that suspect yellow liquid that I usually only have to face up to on bin day (and even then, I mostly rope in my flatmate to do the dirty work). A girl I've met only 20 minutes ago keeps watch as I desperately wave a torch. I pick up a can of beans – own brand, nope. I throw them back into the pile. Ditto the cheap-looking shampoo. There has to be something here. But as nausea begins to rise up my throat, I admit defeat and clamber out of the pile of bags gasping for air.

This isn't exactly my normal Saturday night stomping ground. I'm usually traipsing around Dover Street Market or Brick Lane hunting out a bargain, but tonight I'm here, in a bin, Marigold-clad, at close to midnight (for the record, there are no bargains here). It is – and I appreciate the irony here – my love of luxury that has me tearing open these bin liners, searching, desperately, for hidden treasure. Because according to a new fashion-



What would Steve Jobs say...

and-beauty-orientated breed of freegans (bin raiders to the uninitiated), there's some seriously luxurious loot to be found down these dark, pungent alleys. And I'm determined to find it.

What was once the pastime of the socially conscious (or skint) is fast becoming a social-media sensation. On both YouTube and Instagram, a growing number of 'binfluencers' (if you will) are gaining a following that is eager to see what

haute hauls they dig up next. The Zoella of the pack is Shelbi Lee (@shelbizleee). Now a household name in the US, her vlogs show her unearthing Chanel No5, a Smashbox foundation and even a Keurig Coffee Machine (worth £333!) from bins at the back of department stores.

Armed with a GoPro and a headlamp, her 68,000 (and counting) YouTube subscribers eagerly wait for her advice videos, which

include tutorials on how to clean your finds, and the grub she managed to unearth during a month-long experiment of eating only from bins.

Search hashtag #dumpsterdiving on Instagram (54,752 posts and counting) or #freegan, and hauls of high-end perfume, from Gucci to Burberry, fill the screen. That, or posts of elaborate meals made entirely with spoils stolen from skips.

And this isn't just a hobby – there are women making a living from the things the rest of us cast off. US-based @dumpsterdivingfanatic now brings in money by selling her treasures part-time through Ebay. She does keep some for herself, though, including a Smashbox contouring palette and a beautiful Nars foundation, accompanied by the

caption '#whathaveIbeenmissing'. If social media is to be believed, the bins of the world are an untapped source of luxury beauty, fashion and food stuffs that we just can't quite afford, but that are ripe for the taking.

SPOILED FOR CHOICE

You don't need me wading around in a bin to tell you that we're a generation more skint than ever before. Soaring house prices and rents have seen the bank of Mum and Dad bail out 450,000 18- to 24-year-olds this year alone*, while food prices have risen at the fastest rate for more than three

years**. Yet while our grandparents would have buckled down and cut back, our generation is under a huge amount of pressure to live a perfectly curated, glossy life that we can shout about to our friends (read: followers).

And I'm no exception. But scratch beneath the surface, and it's far from the full picture. Take the time I uploaded a snap of myself clad head-to-toe in luxe sportswear at a boutique festival last year all to clock up a decent amount of likes... but ended up too skint to afford entry to any of the activities – or even any drinks at the bar. It seems, for some, the answer to comparing ourselves to our peers lies at the bottom of a bin.

Take Lara, 32, from Manchester. She got into bin raiding this year after seeing people post about it on Instagram. "I did a little research and found dumpster divers vlogging on YouTube," the gamine author and part-time drummer says. A self-confessed make-up lover, her first target was Boots. "I got my boyfriend to drive me to a nearby retail park. He stayed in the car while I went around the back where the dumpsters were kept," she recalls. "It was floodlit, but unmanned – and easy to get into. I had to rifle through a few bins before I [found] the one with the make-up in."

While she doesn't bin raid as often as she'd like to, she's all too aware of the potential perks that lie inside the bin bags. "I actually found two bottles of high-end foundation [that time]."

For Teresa†, 27, an Aberystwyth-based student, it's the chance to treat her mates that has her rifling through rubbish. High-end chocolates and lipsticks have filled the drawers of their student kitchens and bedrooms since she took up bin raiding several years ago. Others, like mother-daughter duo @good.girls_gone.trash, sell their finds and donate to charity, or

"Our generation is under huge pressure to live a glossy life"

dig out the best food to donate to those less fortunate than themselves.

No one I speak to seems to worry that they're flouting the law. While it's not technically illegal, it's still punishable if caught. Paul May, Jason Chan and William James were charged under the 1824

Vagrancy Act (yep, that's a thing) back in 2014 for helping themselves to tomatoes, mushrooms, cheese and Mr Kipling cakes, worth £33, from a skip behind a branch of Iceland, although the case against them was later dropped. But with supermarkets now throwing out £230 million of perfectly edible food a year***, some see lifting bin lids come dusk as a small price to pay to stop it all going to landfill.

BIN CITY

Lurking around a set of communal bins after dark, I admit my motive wasn't purely altruistic. Primed with information from my fellow dumpster divers, I roped in Guste, a 20-year-old artist I met on a bin-raiding Facebook group, as my lookout. If you're going to bin dive in earnest, do your free-search properly – freegan Facebook groups have the best tips.

On my first night, scouring behind the cafés and coffee shops of London's Tower Hill, I find nothing. There's a reason freeganism isn't quite as popular as it should be – it's really hard work. The next night, in a different part of town, we spend four hours spying on staff, trying to discover when they throw their food out so that we can follow them to the right bins. We're wearing high-vis jackets – it helps legitimise you, so you look less suspect. A couple of times the loot is under lock and key, or out of reach behind chained gates.

During my third night, I end up scarpering down the road, leaving a trail of rubbish behind me, after ▶

being chased away by a burly security guard. Before we're caught, I notice a load of other bin raiders sneaking out in the other direction, arms loaded with freebies. A red-hot streak of competitiveness runs through me.

The conversations I had with freegans – plus all the YouTube videos and Instagram snaps I saw – made it seem as if there was something valuable loitering in every bin. Not so. By day three, I've kicked so many bin bags in frustration, the toes of my black ankle boots are forever marked. I've shamelessly cried on the train home because some kids laughed at me, and only have some measly croissants and some bog roll to show for my efforts. Oh, and a nasty tummy bug that leaves me bed-bound for three days.

Another tip: antibac the shit out of everything after you go.

Disappointed, I offer up a silent whinge to the bin-raiding gods. Where's my brand-new Charlotte Tilbury palette and Nike trainers? Perhaps like #squadgoals, #dinnergoals, #eveninggoals and #outfitgoals, the amazing bin finds that lured me into this are nothing but another social-media hoax, designed to make us feel even worse about ourselves.

Then, hauling my arse out of my sick bed, I don a pair of wellies (ankle boots? What was I thinking!) and head off alone. There's just something about this that is addictive. I head back to the same place as the second night. While I half-wish there was someone to 'keep guard,' I can't quite shake off the heady excitement of doing it by myself.

"There's something about this that is addictive"

of me. I'm on the hunt in some communal bins near Tottenham Court Road, but I find a crayfish sarnie – and it makes me want *more*. I've got braver after three nights on the job, and the bins I'm in are pretty public. Still, I get to work ripping the bags, drowning out the multiple pairs of eyes boring into me from people dawdling at the bus stop across the street. Now in the second bin, I notice there's clothes and shoes in it. I give it another rip and a brand-new pair of Adidas trainers fall out. Digging further, I pull out a box-fresh pair of Timberlands. I'm elated... even though they're two sizes too big for me.

Across the road, a group of teenage boys on the upper deck of a bus are pointing and laughing at me. Thank God they're sniggering too much to whip out their phones and make

Cinderella never had to put up with this shit

a meme out of me. I look straight at them and join in. The adrenaline from my new-found spoils is coursing through my veins.

The next day, I'm hit with the mother of all comedowns. The elation of my freebies has subsided, replaced by regret and a little bit of shame. The experience might have been about finding high-end loot, but it soon gave way to something darker: trying to outsmart other freegans, being there before them to get first dibs. Isn't freeganism, then, just another way of competing with our peers – only without parting with your cash? And what about

all those people who can't afford any food at all? Why should I take things for free, when I have the luxury of being able to afford a weekly shop?

If bin raiding has taught me anything, it's that you can *sometimes* get your mitts on some luxury perks – but just because it's free, that doesn't mean there isn't a price to pay. Whether that's a dodgy stomach bug, your dignity, or just never being able to walk past a bin on the street without that voice in your brain whispering, 'Could you? Should you?' More than that, it's the sense that it's impossible to be happy with what you have, when even other people's rubbish becomes a source of possible competition. What's next? #Bingoals? ♦



BEHIND THE SCENES

Salma Haidrani

"One man I met, Jim, was homeless. He said he never had to pay for food, as he

knew 'every single great bin in London'. It was an honour meeting the city's most in-the-know skipper, but there are people who have no option but to bin raid, so doing it for 'fun' didn't feel right after that."

*ACCORDING TO SHELTER. **ACCORDING TO THE BRITISH RETAIL CONSORTIUM. ***ACCORDING TO THE EVENING STANDARD. *NAME HAS BEEN CHANGED. STYLING KOULLA SERGI. HAIR AND MAKE-UP EMILY-JANE WILLIAMS. SALMA WEARS DRESS: ASOS.COM. JEWELLERY, BUTLER AND WILSON. SHOES, NEW LOOK. ALTO GALVANISED KITCHEN BINS, FROM £30, HABITAT.CO.UK. ADDITIONAL PHOTOGRAPHS GETTY IMAGES, ALAMY, REX FEATURES, STUDIO 33, SHUTTERSTOCK, RUSLAN KUDRIN-FOTOLIA

The UK's best bins

An entirely imaginary map of the country's most aspirational refuse (and who might frequent it)

Where Chipping Norton, Cotswolds
Famous fillers David and Victoria Beckham, plus Soho Farmhouse, the member's club loved by Kate Moss and Mark Ronson, is nearby.

What you'll find in them (that you want) Anything David Beckham has touched, read, sat on or licked. A fluffy dressing gown, Cowshed miniatures from the SF bathrooms.
What you'll find in them (that you don't want) Empty bottles of Grey Goose, bloopers from Brooklyn's photography book, so much hair gel.

Where Millionaire's Row, Hove
Famous fillers Adele, Fatboy Slim, David Walliams.
What you'll find in them (that you want) Cast off vinyl that's worth more than you spend on rent, a Post-it with James Corden's digits written on it, crates of cider, birthday cards from Emma Stone and Jennifer Lawrence.

What you'll find in them (that you don't want) Lots of used throat lozenges, horrible, horrible patterned dad shirts and a couple of seagull wings.

Where Primrose Hill, London
Famous fillers Suki Waterhouse, Daisy Lowe and Georgia May Jagger.
What you'll find in them (that you want) Bradley Cooper's boxer shorts and spare gym kit (used), and enough Rimmel make-up to last you until you start looking like Mick Jagger.
What you'll find in them (that you don't want) Fake eyelashes, and the underwear that D.Lowe has apparently given up wearing.

Where Edinburgh, Scotland
Famous fillers It's a literary playground north of the border, home to both JK Rowling and Ian Rankin.
What you'll find in them (that you want) Back-of-a-beermat scribbles that turn out to be priceless alternative endings to *Harry Potter*. The one where he goes off the rails and uses his powers to invent a wizarding version of crystal meth? Definitely our favourite.
What you'll find in them (that you don't want) Discarded copies of 'How to win at Twitter', a voodoo doll of Piers Morgan and 1,400 chewed biro.

Where County Durham
Famous fillers Scarlett Moffatt – as if there needs to be anyone else.
What you'll find in them (that you want) Fluffy slippers in a variety of colourful faux furs, nearly new teeth-whitening kits, leftover khaki shirts and unused walking socks from the jungle.
What you'll find in them (that you don't want) Ant and Dec's autographs scrawled on a half-eaten kangaroo testicle.