

FREE PLAY PUBLISHING

Cleanup on Pod Six

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FREE PLAY PUBLISHING · SHORT FICTION

COLOPHON

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Set in Lora, Inter, and JetBrains Mono. Designed for screen and small format.

Genre: short fiction / science fiction.

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by Austen Tucker



When you are a luddite in a cybernetic world you clean shit for a living.

I am reporting to Pod Six for my shift. The streetlights were fading from sunlight white to a warm yellow - the only indication inside of the Pods that the sun was setting. We the janitors spread across the tight thoroughfares like ants between the cracks of paver stones, scittering about with mops, buckets, and on-board trash incinerators. My boots are dry and crackled like the sun-dried streets below, its only moisture coming from dripped sweat from my brow.

Today my bosses have paired me with a little child named Dunby. His family drives horses with black buggies and makes furniture for a rapidly shrinking luxury crowd who enjoys having real, solid objects in their home. He tells me this is his job for Rumspringa, which all in all sounds like a downright decent way to get out from under building furniture and scooping horseshit onto your soybean crop.

Then again, today we were scooping human shit from the bottoms of isolation tanks, so there was that. Dunby keeps a nice face about him as he takes to the task: all smiles and bopping around the tight halls of Pod Six. He swings his wide shovel around much like a parade master may swing a baton. His back was much younger than mine: he would scoop three pods in the time it would take me to scoop a single person's waste away, and by the time the crick in my back started speaking up he was still whistling and smiling.

He turned to me after his row was finished. That smile. That joy. I guess when you spent your life reading by candlelight the whole idea of “fully realized virtual reality pod” was exciting, even if he was tasked with scooping out the shit. “You know what they used to call this, Martin?” he asked, pointing to the drum full of shit.

“I’m sure you’re going to tell me.”

“Night soil.” He was proud of the knowledge. For weeks I’d seen this kid ask all my coworkers about the simplest things: isolation tanks, cerebral caps, haptic interfaces, uploading - every last question about uploading, from how the data gets stored to how they scan someone’s brain into the system one slice of the knife at a time. Lots of talk about souls, I noticed, but there wasn’t much traction there. Janitors aren’t known for their philosophical aplomb.

“Is that so.”

Watching him beam and parade about I wished that I never answered his stupid question to begin with. “Sure is! I read it in a book once. They used to have people go out and collect the night soil from the cities. It went out of style when we started having plumbing, but now here we are, doing it by hand again. Artisan shit-cleaning. Isn’t that neat, Martin?”

“They used to use it on crops too - until people started getting sick.” I stepped into room three seventy-five. A young lady hanged from the ceiling, her body trussed up like a marionette from long, twisted pairs of data cables. Her skin hadn’t seen sunlight in at least a year, and the pick line that

supplied her liquid nutrient was starting to look infected. Below her was a mess of *something nasty* that no amount of dessicant could contain. I keyed the information into a data-pad on her wall. A voice informed me that an attendant would be out tomorrow and to kindly continue with my work.

Out came the shovel. As I scooped the slightest hint of a smile crossed her face. Her catheter jiggled, and then I heard the tell-tale sound of urine splashing into a cistern within the wall. I wondered, however briefly, what she was seeing in that little land of Oz in her head. Was she flying? Swimming with a mermaid's tail? Maybe she flew among the stars with a small crew on the weekends, just for giggles. It wasn't like there was much she couldn't do there, given the powers of virtual reality.

Dunby stepped in, whistling. "Some party she's having," he said, pointing to her face and then the pile of goo on the floor. "Night soil?"

"Congealed skin cells, sweat, hair, and... well, yes." I shrugged. "Night soil."

"You think she's happy?"

"A lot of people on this floor do high speed trading. Brains on speed, y'know? The financial institute across the street pays college kids to do these piddly little transactions, over and over again. Then they dupe their brains into thinking that less time is going by. Work 'em fast, use 'em up, dump em. Some dude at the top of the chain makes a killing."

Dunby wasn't taking that. "I read that people had a good time in there. Simulations, the like. People get to be cats if they want to, or pretend to be wizards, or they make up drugs to take in the world. That's what the books said, anyway."

I shrugged and shook the pile of brown goo on my shovel in his direction. "Everyone's got a job, kid."

He walked into the room. That smile. "I think I'd be okay with that job. Hook me up to one of those crazy machines, give me some numbers to crunch, and let the world sort itself out. At least I'd be free!"

"Friendly advice, kid? Go back to the farm. Food's better there, and you can make an honest living off the land."

"Right. Fighting off groundwater squatters and Running poachers out of our forest. Definitely my idea of a good time."

The words hit me like bricks. "I didn't know."

"I didn't expect you to." Dunby ran his finger along the lady's wires. She was a beautiful woman at one point - the curves were there, and the soft features still shined through her skeleton-like face - but that was all gone now. Dried up, she stood as a scarecrow's warning to all comers. *Run, you fools!*

Dunby shook his head suddenly. "There were riots near our farm. I think... Pittsburgh? It's so hard to know what's still city limits and what's corporate territory anymore. The meatheads hanging out in the city ran out of water."

Rationing didn't help. The Guard didn't help; spent their time protecting the aid trucks and when those got too difficult the raiders looked elsewhere. The Amish make no secret of their living. Everyone knows where to find the furniture and the cheese in tourist traps outside of town." He shrugged. "It was only natural that they'd look to us."

"That must be hard."

"I've killed people," Dunby said. His head lolled as the words came out of his mouth. "I tried to talk the guy down. He kept... *jumping*. Up and down, up and down, complaining that he couldn't fly. When the police came they found a burned-out port on the back of his head. Guy spent so long in sims that reality didn't fit anymore."

"Dear God," I said.

"I shudder to think of it. Tired, insane, dehydrating. Their body betraying their brain, and their brain too cooked to care. Just... they don't deserve this, you know? It's unfair to let those people out of sim after they've been in for so long."

"Or they shouldn't go in the first place."

Dunby shrugged. "Not enough water as it is now, Martin. My family barely has enough to make it through the harvest in our well - that's not counting all the diesel water those frackers left behind. Instead of opening our doors we have to bring out the shotguns to protect what's ours. Some Christian faith, eh?"

I wanted to comfort him but there wasn't much I could say. We cleaned the lady's leavings in silence. Her smile was

now accompanied by a little giggle - figuratively and literally she rose above the conversation below, happy and oblivious to what was left behind.

Dunby cleared his throat to break the silence. 'Do you know her name?'

"Not this one. This slot used to belong to Scarlet. She was a part-timer, apparently."

"No shit."

"Yeah." I pointed to the corner of the room and started tapping on the windowless wall. "She had a tea set right here. The hotplate was... well, not legal, but she always had a kettle on the boil for me. We'd talk about the weather, politics, her garden - ah! There it is."

I pulled a latch and pushed out the shutter. The light from outside was bright - too bright, even. A headache slammed right through my skull at the very sight of it. Still, the rooftop was just as Shelby left it: planter boxes, paintings, tea set. There were even perennials in bloom there - marvelous things, exploding against the cold concrete in brilliant yellows, oranges, reds. It had rained recently, and the jostled topsoil wafted through our nostrils with the smell of raw fertility.

Dunby's jaw dropped. "That's illegal."

"Very," I shot back. "She used to put a kettle on for me every time I came to clean. She had catnip for her stomach - apparently the nutrient they gave her caused her the *worst*

stomachaches. Sad, really. But there was always a cup waiting for me.”

“Ubiqu is supposed to supply everything for the people inside of it. Once you go in you’re not supposed to go out.”

“Supposed to,” I said, snickering.

“It’s better that way. Everyone can get a fair shake. Everyone gets fed. Everyone gets water. No riots, no haves and have-nots. There’s just the sim.”

I gave him a side eye. “You honestly think it works that way?”

“I’m pretty sure, yes.”

“A world of infinite resources and power at your disposal, and you honestly believe people won’t try to take more than their fair share of the pie.”

“I’d hope so—”

“You’re a fool, Dunby.” I picked through the weeds of the garden. There were dandelions there - catnip and mint too. I picked the leaves with this silly little grin on my face. “I had you pegged as smarter than that. People like you and me don’t often end up shovelling shit. We both got reasons, but still. Figured you as smart.”

“I just hope for the best.”

“Which is laudable, I guess.” I had a decent set of leaves picked. A bit more fishing led me to her old teapot and a single can of sterno fuel. I pushed past Dunby, opened the wall, and pulled away the water main for our floating friend. She barely noticed - gauging from the look on her face she was

disposed with some carnal doings - better not to interrupt. I rinsed the pot a few times and let the remnants drain down and out of the room's central drain. Then I pulled a lighter from my pocket, lit the fuel, and put a pot on the boil, leaves and all.

"I just figured that this was the solution, you know? The antidote to a world gone mad with too many people and too few resources. Everyone could be *happy* in Ubiq. Everyone could have their own world to shape."

"Give it a few years, kid. The innocence wears off fast." I pointed to the hallway and led him out. "Give people endless power and they'll find reasons to want more. Remember the internet? Remember how nasty people managed to be with just some text and photographs? People killed themselves over that. Did you honestly believe that a simulated world would be any different from the real thing? Did you believe it would be any easier?"

He shook his head. "I just wished for a better world. That's all."

"Let's take a tea break," I said, and then I pulled the pot from the roof. "World may be going to hell but that doesn't mean we can't be civilized."

"I'd like that," he said.

"I had a feeling," I said, and then I busied myself with steeping a weedy tea.



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