

Rocket-Bye Baby

The garbage capsules erupt from the sleeping chimneys at five AM. The sky is a trying shade of grey at five in the morning, a struggling bleak. But the mile high plumes of white fill the sky over the cul-de-sacs and dice up the cold grey backdrop. The white plumes trail behind the capsules as they leave the chimneys. A new pope is elected every morning in the living room of Mrs. Featherstone.

The launches used to take place later in the day, around ten or eleven. This was on account of the noise. The chutes would roar and whoosh with the ignition of the rudimentary thrusters and the capsules would rumble loudly into the stratosphere. A five AM launch with the whole neighborhood asleep was simply out of the question. The technology has certainly come a long way. Physicists and rocketeers have sine developed a nearly silent launch system. Now it is possible to sleep through such an event, even when it is taking place in your very own living room. The family dog might object to the distinctive whistle of the capsule as it rushes up the chimney, but the luxury and convenience of such a disposal system seems to have convinced many homeowners in Radium Springs to abstain from such attentive house pets. Those who have found they can't live without their furry quadruped by their side tend to live a few miles outside of town out of respect for their neighbors.

Yes, everyone seems to be quite content with the new five AM launch. The white smoke trails usually drift away into indistinguishable clouds by eight o'clock, which makes it particularly easy for Mr. Aedlewood to convince himself on his morning commute that he *doesn't* in fact live in a world that must eject its volatile waste into the

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depths of space in an effort to prevent the Earth from eating itself like a giant radioactive ulcer.

Elizabeth Rainswell emptied the waste paper baskets into the compacter. Everything went in: cardboard, glass, food, plastic, battery acid, banana peels, sponge curlers, and of course the used up U-cores from all the household appliances. Elizabeth saw that she would need more capsules from the store, the cheap aluminum pills that all the neat and compacted garbage is crammed into and then launched out into space. She was fine on everything else: fuel, U-cores, sponge curlers.

She woke early in the grey morning at six thirty AM. She woke up when the long white straws still hung, stilted, in the air across town. On mornings like this she would often stand before her window and look out onto the skyline. Never could she find a meaningful enough simile, however, to describe the unnerving feeling that she sensed each time she stared from her window and observed haunting columns of smoke.

The drive across Radium Springs to the General Electric Store is short. In a town the size of Radium Springs there isn't much need for anything else besides the GES. It has just about everything anyone would need: groceries, tools, odds & ends, and always a fresh stock of U-cores straight from the factory.

Elizabeth walked through the decompressing pneumatic doors and sent a friendly wave towards Mrs. Weatherby behind the counter. Mrs. Weatherby was an old, wide-eyed maid who'd been working behind that counter for years. She was the type who desperately wished to become everyone's mother and to give advice to anyone who wasn't asking. Capsules and U-cores were all at the back of the store, which forced the customers to be led astray through the aisles of household toys and foodstuffs. "A pillow

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that warms and cools itself! Powered by U-core!” The fine print for health risks was too small for Elizabeth to care to read. Elizabeth placed a large package of 30 capsules in her cart. They were wrapped together with a crinkly ream of cellophane, but the smooth, shiny, round tops of the capsules were visible through the packaging.

“Did you hear?” said Mrs. Weatherby, as Elizabeth steered the cart in front of the counter.

“Hear what?” Mrs. Weatherby was an unashamed lover of scurrilous gossip, and Elizabeth knew well enough not to sound disinterested.

“Terra Ash! Do you know her? Police took her away this morning.”

Elizabeth unloaded her cart, placing cans of beans and peaches on the counter with a cocked eyebrow.

“Oh, it’s just terrible. She kept to herself, you know, and she had that little baby?”

“Yea, I know it. What about her? What did she do?” asked Elizabeth, undeniably interested.

“It’s just the most awful thing you’ve ever heard,” said Mrs. Weatherby as she shook her dewlapped face in dismay. “Now I don’t know for sure--but that evil woman! She must not have been right! This morning—now this is just rumors now, but Deputy Forester come in here and told me what he could. This morning, she took that baby of hers and put it inside one of them capsules.” Mrs. Weatherby’s eyes were peeled behind her glasses, and now so were Elizabeth’s.

“Who told you that?” exclaimed Elizabeth.

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“Deputy Forester like I said! I haven’t been thinking about anything else since. That poor-sweet-little baby. How could a mother do that to her own child? There ought to be a law against letting cold, evil people like that have babies, and I ain’t afraid to say it, I hope she burns for what she did. That poor baby.” Mrs. Weatherby turned up her nose. Her face was pointed like a brooding hen.

“That is if it’s true. That’s crazy though. *Whew*. Terra Ash. I’ve never once spoken to her.”

“Well that’s what they’re saying. Saying she went crazy and snapped, but I don’t think it’s any excuse, doing a thing like that to a helpless-sweet-little baby.”

“Crazy.”

Mrs. Weatherby leaned in, “I heard she dressed it up. Made it look all nice in little baby dress shoes and a little white gown, the baptism kind. Gave it a bath, combed its hair and everything. I just don’t understand it! And I can’t help thinking about it. All day since Deputy Forester came in I haven’t stopped thinking about it. Who would do something like that when you’re just planning on killin’ it? And in a place like Radium Springs too!”

“How do you know all this? About the gown and everything? Happened just this morning right?”

“She called the police right after she did it is what I hear, told ‘em everything and turned herself in.”

“Was it compacted?”

“Oh no, she did it manually, dear. Loaded it straight through the chute.”

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The two stood silently for a moment, eyes diverted to the ground or the counter, both of them realizing the implications of losing a child in this day and age. Elizabeth took the bags from the counter and turned to leave.

“Say, when are you going to have some babies?”

“Doctor says I’m barren,” said Elizabeth.

“Oh you just keep trying. Never know with this stuff. Give it a month.”

An embarrassed smile was all that was needed to satisfy Mrs. Weatherby’s matronly pecks. Elizabeth exited through the pneumatic doors and looked up to see that the sky was still early morning, still grey. The wind was beginning to blow the long white plumes, making them look like grass in the wind. That didn’t mean anything to Elizabeth though. Like Mrs. Weatherby, Elizabeth was thinking about Terra. She had been one of the few fertile women left in Radium Springs. After all, the town had originally been a colony for the infertile. It had since grown to serve other purposes, but the majority of the older women in the town were first generation settlers-- Mrs. Weatherby included. Terra was of a small, lucky handful-- the crown jewels of the town. The moment Dr. Sandall confirmed Terra’s pregnancy it was in the local newspaper. That had been the first time Elizabeth had ever heard of Terra. She was a quite girl, a sad looking girl from what Elizabeth could see from the picture.

The child’s birth was on the front page of the newspaper, a healthy baby with no more than four appendages. The birth had taken a toll on Terra. The papers described it as a “rough birth” and said little more about it other than that Terra would need a few days recuperation. One only needed to look at Terra to understand that her recovery was far from a few days recuperation. Elizabeth had seen her in the GES a few weeks after

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the birth. Her skin was a sickly translucent grey, the bags under her eyes a ruddy yellow. Burden was lined in every wrinkle of her face. She did not speak. She did not smile. She turned away the town's visitors who were all desperately wanting to see the baby, understandably ruffling the feathers of a few clucking maids. It had been so long since any of them had seen a child.

The baby was hardly seen by anyone. For many who lived nearby, the only indications of its presence were the ceaseless cries that rang out from behind the shut curtains of the house. Always the cries, and always at five AM. There was talk among some of the neighbors of asking her to move outside of town, but nothing came of it. For the most part her introverted nature disturbed and angered the citizens of the town who felt that the well-being and nurturing of the child should be a community undertaking.

Elizabeth pulled into her driveway and left the bags in the car, the shiny neat capsules in the back seat, strapped in. She left the front door open and stood in the middle of the living room floor. It was the same floor plan as the house next to her. If she walked a hundred feet she would be standing in the middle of the living room next door, another hundred feet, the middle of the next. Perhaps many of them had fresh capsules stocked and ready for tomorrow's launch. Turning, she looked out the large bay window onto the expanse of the town. White trails from the chimneys rose high into the sky and disappeared into grey. Perhaps they were all little white babies, thought Elizabeth. Perhaps they were all the burden of a mother who could not cope. All of them packed up, nice and neat, off to some place far away and out of sight.

Rain began to fall on Radium Springs. The people went inside and closed the doors, for it would sting them.

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