

*“The turd in the toilet was coiled, and long. Unrelentingly long. It seemed to stretch down directly into the deepest recesses of the toilet. As if it had come up from out of the pipes, a foul excrescence not of any human but of the very bowels of the city sewer itself.”*

**AARON WINSLOW PRESENTS:**

## **A Steamer for the Steamer**

What keeps me up at night, you ask? More like “what doesn’t” keep me up, amirite? I mean, you looked outside lately? We got genuine psychos running the country, nukes hanging over our heads, cops killing people in the streets. All it’s gonna take is a match, you know?

Plus there’s all the stuff they’re *not* talking about. I mean, there’s seriously freaky shit happening all the time. Weird lights in the sky above Los Angeles, shadows where there shouldn’t be shadows, half-man/half-fish kinds of things being drug up by fishermen in the Gulf.

My pal Lloyd’s a real brainiac, always reading, and he says all this is because of a rupture in the inter-cosmic dimensional plateau. I don’t know much about all that, but something’s sure out of whack.

But you want to know why I can’t sleep *lately*, don’t you, doc. Alright, well, here goes.

I’m a professional steam cleaner. A steamer, if you will. I like it just fine, but it’s not really a passion. More of a job of convenience. See, I moved here to Brooklyn from Philly. Philly’s a great place. I was born and raised there. I hope, when my time comes, I’ll die there. But Philly is not a great place to be when you’re on the wrong side of certain people.

Yeah, I’ve heard about this whole doctor-patient confidentiality thing, but I don’t want to mix you up in it. For your sake, if you know what I mean. It’s the kind of thing that more than a few grand juries’d be plenty happy to hear, but too bad for them I ain’t no snitch.

Where was I? Oh yeah. Long story short: I fucked around in Philly too long, did some things I shouldn’t of done, and decided to make a move and get someplace nobody knew me before it all caught up with me.

My old friend Núñez, most definitely to be trusted even if he’s pretty annoying, he owns this steam cleaning company. Quality Steamers of Brooklyn, LLC. Pretty legit. Not all the way, but basically. He hooked me up with a job, no questions asked. A sweet gig if I ever had one. Mostly offices, and some fancy apartments. Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens. Everywhere in the five boroughs.

Like I said, steaming’s not something I’ve spent my life dreaming of doing, but there’s something highly satisfying about getting things clean. Spotless. Everything in its place. I’ve never been what you’d call an orderly guy before--if anything, my life was mostly based on *disorder*--but when I pushed that machine in front of me, chrome glinting gently beneath the

fluorescent lights, motor softly purring like a panther kitten, I'd be in a deep, relaxed, meditative state before you could say "dirtball." Real Zen.

Sometimes.

I worked mostly at nights and alone, so I had plenty of time to think. To ponder. To reflect on what I'd done, where'd my life had gone wrong, and what I might do to make amends, or at least fix it. I usually came up with zilch, nothing, nada. There I was, forty-five years young and all I could visualize for myself was being eighty and still pushing around that steam cleaner. Not the worst life. But not the best. Not by a long-shot.

And then one day I felt it. This weird sensation in the back of my mind, almost on the back of my neck. Spidey sense or what have you. Like I'm being watched. Followed. Everywhere I go. Naturally, I'm wondering if any of those Philly guys have decided to seek out my splendid company, but after a few weeks I relax about that. No way those dudes would wait that long. Too impatient.

So I feel okay about that, but can't shake the sense that someone's on my tail.

It's a Tuesday. 11am. My first cleaning isn't until 8pm, a dentist office in Astoria, so I'm just getting going for the day. About to head out to the gym. Pump some iron. Stave off inevitable bodily decay, you know. I'm opening the door, about to step out, when my phone rings. It's Núñez.

"Yo, Whistler, you up to anything?"

This guy. Some friend. Am I up to anything? Nine hours before my shift starts and he asks what I'm doing. I could see where this was going.

"Just doing my thing, brother."

"Mhmm, right," he said, distractedly. I could picture him there, driving around in his white van, bluetooth stuck in his ear. "Listen, so if you're just doing your thing, think you could do that thing at work?"

"At eight o'clock. That's when I'll do my thing. At work. As scheduled."

"Don't fuck around with me, Whistler. Some guy called, said he had an emergency job. Gave me the specs, it's a primo deal. Way out in Forest Hills. At 1pm. Problem is, I'm still down in Bay Ridge."

"Well I don't know if I can make it either at this point..."

"Just do the damn job, Whistler," he said, then paused. I didn't know if he was going under an overpass or simply being thoughtful. Or, as thoughtful as Núñez could be. Eventually he said, "Tell you what. You do this, I'll cover all your cleanings tomorrow and give you half-wage. Just for sitting on your ass."

"Well, I can't really say no to that, now can I," I said, wryly. But it was true. That was an extra two hundred bucks. Free money. Who am I to turn that down? I sighed, loudly and theatrically. "Text me the details. I got you."

"Ataboy. I knew you'd come through."

Disconnect Bluetooth. Exit Núñez.

His text came a minute later. Texting and driving. Probably gonna hit somebody someday.

Sure enough, the job was up in Forest Hills.

So I gulped down a cup of coffee, loaded up the equipment in the truck, grabbed a Mountain Dew for the road, and sallied forth from my East New York domicile up the Jackie Robinson to Forest Hills.

Forest Hills is a nice, middle class neighborhood where the edge of Queens bleeds into Naussau County. So far out it's almost suburban, a lot of free standing houses and yards. But the address Núñez sent me had "Unit 30Q" attached to the end, so it damn well wasn't a dentist's office unless it's the worst-located dentist in the city. I pictured one of those giant pre-war brick apartment buildings chock-full of a bunch of elderly old people who've been in the apartment for sixty years, landlords just waiting for them to die or move into an old folks home so they can jack up the rent. Or maybe a public housing unit. Either way, didn't get many calls for steams from those type of places.

Sure enough, the building was a giant, especially compared to the generally low-lying area. Big, grey concrete. Slabs of concrete. And it was long, too. Really long. Maybe almost as long as it was tall. Felt that way, at least.

Looking at it messed my optics all up. My vision started to blur a little. I saw spots, sunspots almost, and the letters on the street signs scrambled.

I tried to get myself back together by practicing some breathing exercises I'd read about online. I'd been having mild panic attacks since the events-that-shall-go-unnamed in Philly. A sense of unrelenting fear gripping my throat and my chest. As strange as it sounds, the breathing exercises--counting in and out, putting my hand on my chest, and, I kid you not, hugging myself-- actually helped. Something about tactile feedback loops or what have you.

The panic subsided. I wasn't seeing double anymore. But I sure as hell had the feeling that I was being watched. I looked around the street. I felt pretty sure I'd notice anyone out of sorts, but nothing. Just a few old men and old ladies. Some yuppie walking his dog. Mom pushing a stroller. But I knew, with absolute clarity and conviction, that someone or something was watching me, peering at me. Not just tracking me, but seeing into and through me, as if I were made of glass. Listen to me, here, getting all poetic when really I was just scared shitless.

And then, for some reason, a calm passed over me. I accepted that I was being watched, seen, surveyed, with utmost detail by some force I did not know. I had a job to do. I popped out of the cab and unloaded the steamer.

The concrete slab exterior, impassively solid and opaque from afar, was filled with chips and dents and even a few huge chunks had fallen out. Like it'd been shot with buckshot or cannon balls.

The buzzer didn't seem to work, and since the door was swaying open, at the behest of some strange interior breeze, I let myself inside.

There was nobody in the lobby of the building. Not even a doorman or security guard. But no surprise there. The inside actually looked kind of shabby, too. More concrete walls,

cracked and crumbling. The floor was covered with a thin layer of dust and debris, which I assumed was falling from the large ceiling, an atrium almost, in the center of the lobby, which narrowed into a hole that cut straight to the top, running straight up and headlong into pitch black. Impressive, sure, but it also created a deafening wind-tunnel effect.

A battered metal desk stood abandoned, waiting for a doorman who'd never come.

Fortunately, the elevator still seemed to work, and even though I prayed the whole time, it got me and my steamer to the top.

I knocked on the door. No response. Silence in the hall. The hall that stretched down for dozens of units before turning and continuing on its winding, unending way. Only sound was the sound of wind slowly coursing through the building, and I had the sense that the hole in the lobby worked as a ventilation shaft, or a coolant system. As if the building were some kind of factory, or an oven.

What the fuck was I even doing here, I asked myself.

I knocked again. Still no answer. I checked the text again. Right place, alright. Was about to put my phone away when a bar appeared, and a text slipped in. Another from Núñez.

“Tenant says you can go in if she's out. She's just down the hall at a neighbors.”

I tried the handle. Unlocked. I turned it, swung the door open all the way.

Núñez has a policy that all of his cleaners wear little plastic booties over their shoes. We're supposed to be removing dirt, not add it, he says. It's a bit finicky to me, but I always do it. But I took one look at this place and realized that wouldn't be necessary.

Furniture strewn everywhere, most of it in pieces. Like somebody was trying to start a fire and had given up after they'd created the kindling. The walls, though were streaked with putrid black stains, some of which looked like smoke damage, some of it like the worst case of black mold I'd ever seen. Accidentally brushing against the walls, they felt slick and greasy. Almost pulsating. Breathing. Well, I guess that mold sort of was breathing, huh?

But what stood out most was the smell. A suffocating stench of rotting food, putrid water, and wet, decaying wood.

And above it all, the smell of shit. Unvarnished, freshly laid shit, infiltrating my nostrils and my lungs and nearly knocking me out.

I remembered being on a subway once, late at night. A sparse train. And then all of a sudden, the smell of shit hit me over the head like a hammer. I looked up, and met the eyes of the guy sitting across from me. Knew immediately he smelled it, too. His eyes lit up and his nose crinkled in confusion and alarm, he said to me, looking into my eyes, “What the fuck?”

This was the same thing: same panic, same force of smell, same confusion at its utter intensity.

Muffling my nose with a wrag, I left my cleaner in the hallway and stumbled my way through the wreckage of the apartment to the bathroom. The longest yard, indeed.

The turd in the toilet was coiled, and long. Unrelentingly long. It seemed to stretch down directly into the deepest recesses of the toilet. Almost, rather, as if it had come up from out of the pipes, a foul excrescence not of any human but of the very bowels of the city sewer itself.

I know what you're thinking, doc: why was I looking at a turd so long? It's hard to say, but I couldn't look away. Compelled by a higher power, as the good Thomas Aquinas says. And the more I stared at the shit, the more I saw. Veins of purple and green threaded around the turd's cylindrical shaft like veins, pulsing and shimmering with an incandescent energy. Incandescent and otherworldly.

This couldn't be human shit. Not by a longshot. Inside its fibrous mass it contained a febrile energy just waiting to burst forth, to let loose some sick and disgusting spores of decay into our vulnerable and guilty world.

I had to get rid of it.

I flushed. The water ran down, dousing the turd in brackish water. But it refused to budge. I flushed again. The turd quivered slightly, but remained still, as if implanted in the toilet, an appendage to the plumbing, the building, the city itself. I flushed until the toilet gave a sickening gurgle and the water began pouring over the edge of the bowl, brown and slick.

The turd still refused to loosen.

I stumbled backward from the cascade of shit water, and banged my head on the shower rod.

Looking up, rubbing the back of my head, I caught a glimpse of the mirror. A message had been carved, delicately yet precisely, into the surface of the glass:

"A steamer for the steamer."

And I suddenly saw the shit for what it was: a message; a warning; a threat. That I'd always been watched, and that I always would be watched. That everything buried deep inside me would always and ever come to the surface.

Oh, times up, eh, doc? Well, long story short, that's why I can't sleep at night. See you next week.

Oh, yeah, I'll bring your check, too.

Peace.