

Finalist, Fiction

God's Scrubber

By Dr. Suzanne Conboy-Hill

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[Author's note: 'scrubber' in the UK can mean 'scrub nurse' in operating theatres, cleaning tool, or 'woman of questionable morality'.]

*A job half done is a job not done at all, isn't it Valerie?*

*Yes*

*Well, get on with it*

*I am*

Valerie's mother is nagging and she's doing it, frustratingly, from under the screwed-up paper towels and muddy-looking wipes in the sluice so Valerie can't dig her out. She's doing her best with the unfinished business but it isn't easy with the constant interruptions. This time though, despite the noises, she hopes she has succeeded because, a few yards away in the communal dining room, Pete is turning blue.

Deanna hauls Pete upright and wrestles him into a straight line for a Heimlich, 'Who gave him chips?' She punches hard, folding the two of them up in the middle like a Zed-bed. Pete's knees have gone but Deanna keeps straightening and punching to make him cough.

In the sluice, Valerie's mother is still banging on.

*You were a good girl, took care of your brother*

*Only because you wouldn't get your hands dirty*

*Couldn't*

*Couldn't then*

These conversations all go the same way – *you should, I couldn't, poor me,* but her mother is right, the job must be finished or there'll be trouble. Even if the little wretch didn't get dragged off by whatever demons her mother's brain conjured up, there might be repercussions for herself.

*I have to go*

*See you clean him up properly this time*

*I will*

There is no need yet to mention those noises; she'll shut her mother in here in her smelly bin, make her wait until she knows what's what.

Deanna cranks Pete upright, knuckles him in the midriff one more time and finally gets a result when a bolus of soggy chip, followed by a spew of green slime, is ejected from Pete's throat. The gasping and wheezing that follows is a relief to Deanna, but now there is a mess on the floor that some of her charges will find attractive. Deanna calls out for someone to *get in here sharpish, please,* but mealtimes are busy – stuff going in one end, coming out the other. She turns back to Pete who is pinking up and looking less starey-eyed, then she checks the doors into the room: one is already locked so that's good; the other she shuts with her foot and leans on it to keep out the scavengers while she considers what to do next. Ida is sitting on her sofa, muttering; maybe she can be recruited to supervise Pete while she fetches a mop and bucket and gets reinforcements.

'Ida? Give us a hand here will you, love?' Ida lifts her chin which has sunk onto her chest, and a little snail trail of spittle follows it upwards. 'Keep an eye on him will you, and don't let anyone near?'

Ida shuffles over and pats Pete's cheek. Her sofa is near the table where Pete had been sitting, she saw the chips going into Pete's mouth and her eyes are pointing at the door that clicked shut just afterwards. But Deanna doesn't notice, and because Ida's just saying dirty dirty over and over, she decides against asking her what happened. Deanna won't be asking Pete either because Pete never says anything about anything, let alone how the chips got down his throat. She thinks maybe it was one of the kitchen staff – half a mind on the job, the other half on a fag break. 'Back in a mo.' Deanna opens the door a fraction, shimmies through and bustles off to the cleaners' room.

Just along from there and next door to the sluice is the medical room where Joan is taking temporary respite. She's been wiping dirty backsides all morning and the smell of it has got everywhere, but a slather of antiseptic scrub with its pink bubbles is doing the trick and now she is leaning against the sink, flapping her hands dry. Joan likes things to be clean and she peers closely at the lines on her hands and between her fingers – little bits of dirt could get in there and then into her body. She sniffs – a slight odour of warm flesh lingers but this will have to do until she can give herself a good scrub at home. She pulls out another pair of sterile gloves and puts them on. Cleanliness, she has come to appreciate, is next to Godliness, although whose God she is aligned with is unclear. Joan ties on a clean plastic pinny, draws in an antiseptic breath, and heads back out into her denominationally indeterminate church.

Ida squats down next to Pete who curls up tight and begins to whimper. It's one of his few vocal expressions, the others being loud squawks at TV cartoons and anything that comes near his face. She fetches a rug from the sofa and covers

Pete up to his nose with it. Then she bends down to pat his cheek again, 'Dirty dirty dirty.'

'You ok there, Ida?' Deanna is back with paper towels, a mop and a bucket. 'How's Pete? Oh, that's better, snug as a bug; thank you, Ida.' She dunks the mop in the disinfectant, 'The new girl won't be here till tomorrow, Ida, so for now it's just us.' Deanna parks the mop and surveys the scene. 'How's about you take care of Pete while I clean up?' She turns to Pete, 'That'll be nice, won't it?' Pete screeches and Ida mutters something, then starts humming and pulling at her hair.

'Hush, Pete, you're upsetting Ida.' Deanna gathers up the mess on the floor with practised sweeps of the blue towel roll, and drops it into a yellow plastic bag. Then she slaps the wet mop over the vinyl, thankful they never got round to fitted carpets like some of the adjoining units. She looks around: Ida is still humming and Pete is still foetal but he's not about to die and there's nothing left for the scavengers; a good job all in all. She hefts the yellow bag, 'Behave yourselves, you two.'

When the new girl does arrive, she is not new at all. She's been working shifts on one of the connecting units, and at about Deanna's age, she isn't much of a girl either. Deanna sends her off to get Pete's feed to see how she does with this for starters, and a faint whiff of antiseptic trails after her. When she returns, Deanna exposes Pete's belly and flips out the end of the tube that goes into his stomach. The new woman glances at the reddish stoma, 'Just the feeding, is it?' she says, sniffing. 'Nothing else?'

'What sort of 'else'?' Deanna asks.

‘Colostomy bag.’ The woman pulls a face and waggles her purple-gloved fingers in the air. ‘Filthy things.’

‘Oh, no - no crap-bags here, just straight forward rear exits,’ says Deanna with a little together-laugh to share. The woman raises her eyebrows, ‘Language,’ she says, then turns back to Pete’s exposed abdomen. ‘Can’t stand filth, wherever it comes from,’ she says, not quite to herself. Deanna makes a grin of appeasement and feels immediately guilty about colluding with the nose-wrinkling. She has been admonished, and by a new junior too.

After another moment, with the feed almost run through, the admonisher says, ‘This is the lad they caught Ida trying to suffocate with half a loaf.’ She tilts her head back and forth, appraising him, ‘Skinny kid, he was then; and a right little blighter, shouting the odds all the time. Drove Ida batty with it.’

This is news to Deanna; management kept *that* little nugget to themselves. ‘Was she trying to shut him up, then?’

‘Probably. Had a mouth like a sewer, so I shouldn’t wonder.’ The new careworker is flapping her hands dry after sloshing two coats of alcohol scrub over them, gloves and all.

‘So, where was this --’ Deanna cranes for the name badge which is slanted upwards on the woman’s ample chest. She catches the shape of the name and guesses ‘—Jane?’

‘Jane?’ The woman leans back, pulling her chin in tight, then leans out again, ‘Jane?’

‘Sorry, I mean --’ Deanna squints again at the name badge which is resting now at a different angle, ‘—Joan; you - reminded me of someone.’ She can’t mention that escarpment of a bosom. Deanna pulls an apologetic face but Joan’s

eyes seem to stick her to her mistake like a daddylonglegs to wet skin. 'Who - staff?' she says.

'Oh, no. Someone in an old telly ad, I think.' Deanna congratulates herself on her quick thinking, and slaps on another smile. Joan pauses, her face blank, eyes like pins. Then she cracks a smile back, 'Well, it beats some of the names I've been called.' Names like Holy Shit Shoveller and God's Scrubber, for instance, that she's gone to great lengths to shake off. She gestures down at herself and goofs at Deanna.

'Ah, yes.' Deanna has permission now to appraise Joan's substantial frame and jiggles her own chunky hips, 'We've all had our share.' She prepares a line with a gossipy hook on the end, 'So, *Joan*,' she says, 'This thing with Ida and Pete – were you there when it all happened?' She tries an appeal to Joan's superior knowledge, 'I bet you know a lot more about both of them than we do.'

But Joan doesn't bite, 'No idea,' she says, 'Place was driving me nuts, so I left and went off travelling, y'know?' Deanna doesn't know but she nods anyway. Getting Joan on side will be handy because she might let drop something else about Pete and Ida that Deanna can use to advantage with management.

'So, what's he been saying then?' Joan says.

'Zip – he's been mute for years, not a peep.'

'That's a plus then, put a stop to his filth.' Joan nods at the feeding tube, 'Not eating, either? Well, it's enough to put anyone off their food, having a loaf rammed down your throat by Mad Ida.' She looks down at Pete, 'Crazy old lady, eh?' Pete gurgles, hawks, and spits. 'Ach, you mucky pup!'

'Oops!' says Deanna. She's indulging in a giggle until she sees Joan isn't finding it quite so funny. She hands her a wet-wipe.

'Sorry,' she says. 'Couldn't help laughing. Usually it's me gets gobbed on.'

'Makes me sick, dirty creatures,' Joan says, scrubbing at her face even though the spit didn't land there. She glances at Deanna, 'Makes you dirty too.'

'Dirty Deanna, that's me!' But Joan pulls a face as if Deanna is something disgusting she got on her shoe so Deanna diverts to the original topic, 'So why's Ida not banged up?'

'Bucks getting covered somewhere, no doubt,' Joan says. She closes the discussion by gathering up Pete's feeding equipment in a paper sheet and sweeping off with it dangled at arm's length.

Valerie's mother is shrieking now from the biscuit tin in the kitchen cupboard.

*Careless, stupid girl! What if he tells?*

*I'll sort it; I found him, didn't I?*

*And messed up again. Very clever*

The cupboard door is vibrating, she's sure, and she can imagine the biscuit tin dancing about in there, heating up, getting ready to explode.

*Shut up, Mother!*

*Clean him up, Valerie, like you did your little brother*

Her mother had shut up for quite a while after she'd stopped the puke and the swearing that poured out of the little shit all day, every day. But then she'd started on about all the other dirty boys and quite a few mucky girls Valerie ought to save, now she knew how. It was God's work, she said, although Valerie had remained unsure about both the provenance of this deity and his methods. Her mother was right about one thing though, there was plenty of dirt to be eradicated and up to now she'd only made two mistakes. That foul-mouthed little string bean

both times. Valerie shakes her head, feels for the tube of antiseptic cream in her pocket, and squirts a blob into each ear. Then she squirts another two blobs; it should shut the racket out for a while; let her get on with things.

Pete sits and stares at his social worker who is staring at the model Pete's just made for her. Pete's notes, she has discovered, include some intriguing comments about how vocal he used to be, and she's on a mission to get him talking again. Up to now, her therapy sessions have been somewhat barren with Pete repetitively encasing a range of inanimate objects in plasticine and then liberating them. Now, however, he's produced something she can talk about: it looks like a crib and in it lies a green blob.

'Pete, that's lovely – a baby in a cot!' she says, 'And is that you, the baby, in there?' Pete smiles. Then he picks up a pair of scissors from the desk, makes a hole in the baby's face with them, and plugs it with a piece of desiccated blu tack. He smiles again and sits back with his hands in his lap. The social worker stares, her smile fixing to her teeth while she figures out what to do. Then she retrieves the scissors and a few other items, slides them surreptitiously into a drawer, and tries to summon a breezy response, 'Well, that was interesting, Pete,' she says, her voice tight as a drum skin, 'can you tell me about it?' She doesn't expect him to because she's no closer to getting his voice back out of him than she was before. But Pete does in fact tell her something – he opens his mouth, sticks his fist into it, and holds his breath until he turns blue. She hits the alarm.

Ida is in a methane fug in front of the TV when the bells start clanging. She spits, huddles into her blanket and hugs her knees up to her chin. Deanna comes charging through, 'Ida, hold onto your hat, love, we'll have the noise off in a minute.' She's gone by the end of the sentence and Ida is left alone with just her blanket and a trickle of wee that was warm and pleasant to begin with but will soon be cold.

When the noise has abated and Deanna comes back, she stops by Ida's sofa. 'There now,' she says, 'Order restored.'

Ida scrunches up the hem of her blanket, 'Nurse,' she says, and spits.

'Nurse? What do you mean, what nurse?' One thing they don't have in this place is proper nurses – just low-paid fakes like her. Deanna is considering how far to pursue this when Ida starts up again.

'Shuts them up, all the dirty ones.'

'Shuts them up? Who, Ida? Who's shutting who up?'

'Val shuts them up. Shuts them up for good.'

'Val? Who's Val?'

'Night night, dirty boy.' Ida covers her head with the blanket and begins to rock. Deanna decides to leave her to settle while she starts lunches.

Pete picks up Sooty, and Sooty picks up a light sabre that Pete has broken off a one-legged Darth Vader. Sooty hits a stuffed caterpillar with it and Pete goes into a spasm from laughing.

'Why is Sooty beating up the caterpillar?' the social worker says. Pete drops Sooty, picks up the caterpillar and shoves it in his mouth. The social worker is not fazed because, now that he's not wrapping things up, he's sucking them.

Compensation for not eating, she theorises. She is about to pursue this idea when a face appears at the open window.

‘Val’s coming,’ Ida says into the room.

Pete shrieks and throws the caterpillar to the floor, then hits his head on the table.

‘Shut him up, filthy boy.’ Ida grins, pulls back from the window and ducks away up the garden.

‘Well, that wasn’t very helpful, was it?’ the social worker says, looking at Pete in a way that is supposed to include him in her affront at the intrusion. Pete stops and eyes her from just above the level of the table.

‘Fuck you,’ he says, Ida’s news breaching a dam in his head where his voice has been drowning.

Now that Pete’s got going, there’s no stopping him, especially when he sets Ida off and they stream obscenities non-stop.

‘Repressed anger,’ says the social worker, ‘Good to get it out.’

‘I think I liked him better when he was quiet,’ Deanna says, sticking her fingers in her ears. ‘And the language – who’d have thought?’

‘They’re all better when they’re quiet.’ Joan nips off her plastic pinny with two fingers each side and bundles it up for the bin, ‘Especially the ones needing their mouths washing out.’ She gives Deanna a stern look that Deanna interprets as a reminder to step up to the plate in that regard. ‘And you’d better keep Ida away from him, now he’s squawking fit to bust.’ Joan taps the side of her nose, raises an eyebrow, ‘Never know what she might do,’ she says, and heads for the kitchen where Valerie’s mother is waiting.

*The Devil's coming for him, Valerie, it'll be your fault when he gets dragged  
screaming down to Hell*

*It's harder, he's grown up*

*Always were useless with men. Big and gormless – couldn't get you off my  
hands*

*That was you, screaming hellfire, dirt, and damnation at them*

*Don't you let me down again, Valerie*

Valerie's lost count of the dirty souls she's saved but the old witch is never satisfied. Admittedly, though, this one does keep getting away.

*Filthy brat is still here*

*I'm dealing with it*

*Promises, promises*

Ida appears suddenly at Deanna's shoulder, chittering and poking her tongue in and out like a lizard, 'Quiet now. Val makes them quiet, you'll see.'

'Ida, what do you mean Val makes them quiet? Who's Val?' But Ida's laughing now and does the tongue thing again – in out, in out. 'Dirty dirty,' she says, and breaks wind. Deanna wafts the stink from under her nose and something occurs to her but she decides to let it stew a while to see if it makes sense. Later, when Ida is back on her sofa, gnawing at her blanket, Deanna serves it up, 'You were just trying to make Pete quiet weren't you, with the bread in his mouth?' Better a misguided idiot than a homicidal maniac. 'That was it wasn't it? You were trying to stop Val getting him?' Ida stares at her.

The next time the alarms go off they don't stop because something is jamming them. Deanna's charges are running amok, Ida has her head in her hands under the blanket, and Pete is drowning in the bath. Deanna doesn't know about Pete until a kitchen hand comes puffing up the corridor, then she is down there like a dose of salts and getting her arms under him.

'Who the hell put Pete in the bath without telling me?' she shouts. The hoist is nowhere to be seen, the water is deep, and Pete is slipping. He might be a skinny little runt, but he's a long unwieldy one, and he's thrashing. Deanna is on her knees, wrestling with Pete who is sinking and churning up water like a holed paddle steamer. At this rate, he'll have the bath emptied in no time. *Damn! How stupid could she be!* Deanna pulls on the plug, but it's stuck. She yanks at it but it doesn't shift. The kitchen hand's red face is hovering at the door frame.

'Go fetch someone – quick!'

It's the week of the meeting about Pete's first incident when they find Ida out cold on her sofa with Pete leaping around, shouting about Val. Deanna starts to wonder if she's been jinxed, what with the chips, the dodgy fire alarm, and now this. Ida has someone else's pills under her tongue which she could have snaffled easily enough if they'd been spat out, but this isn't one of her things. Deanna punches the emergency button and sets about fishing the pills out of Ida's mouth while she waits for the ambulance.

*You useless girl, Valerie*

'She was going to say something'

*You should have waited*

This is true, much as Valerie would prefer her mother not to be right. But she's losing patience – *scrub this, stop that, don't swear, better use gloves Valerie or you don't know what germs will get in your body* and now she's lost her stooge after all that work setting her up.

With Ida in the hospital, Pete is adrift so he's taken to following Deanna like a puppy on a short lead. 'Bloomin' heck, Pete – shift yourself will you?' Deanna teeters with a tray of beakers, almost tipping the lot over Pete's feet as she lifts the tray from the counter top to set off on her drinks round.

'Make Val go away.' He bites his hand.

'There's no Val, Pete; it's just someone Ida invented. Why don't you go and watch the TV? I'll put the cartoons on for you.' Having Pete trailing her all day is wearing a bit thin. 'Go on, I'll be there in a minute.' She gives him a gentle shove in the right direction and Pete mooches off, looking back over his shoulder and muttering about Ida and Val and saving dirty boys from Hell.

Deanna does her round, then returns to her office to collect the stack of papers she's put together for yet another pointless meeting. But then she thinks, what about dropping that gem of Joan's, about Ida trying to suffocate Pete? Couldn't Ida have given him the chips? And whose fault was it she hadn't been told about that past incident? Maybe she should ask Joan to step into the meeting; nothing like hearing it from the horse's mouth. She changes direction and goes to the kitchen to see if Joan is there and if she's free for a few minutes.

But Joan isn't there and nor she is free. She's busy, in fact, doing the work of her mother's capricious God. Most other Gods seemed happy with a bit of small change on a Sunday and some singing, but not this one.

*Don't you chicken out, Valerie, you make sure that boy is saved*

'Leave me alone, let me get on with it'

*I would if you weren't being so feckless. I could do better myself*

'Well be my guest'

*Maybe I will*

'That'll be the day'

*Judgement Day, Valerie*

Deanna, unable to conjure Joan from the thin air of the empty kitchen, remembers her promise to Pete about his cartoons. They'll keep him occupied while she gets this benighted meeting out of the way.

Joan though, is already keeping Pete occupied with a bag of peanuts, two pairs of rubber gloves, and a bottle of bleach.

*Sloppy work*

'I'm having to improvise.' The peanuts are to make him quiet, the gloves are to keep his spit off her hands while she stuffs the peanuts as far down his throat as possible, and the bleach should get him clean enough for anyone's God. But Valerie's mother has begun screeching.

*A job half done, Valerie*

'I can't concentrate if you don't shut up.' She's opening the bleach ready to pour, but Valerie's mother is squealing like fingernails on tin and she's right on Valerie's shoulder.

*Be sure to get him clean now, Do it Do it Do it.*

'I'm doing it, I'm saving his filthy little arse of a soul so shut the fuck up!'

'Oh, Valerie, such shameful filth.' Valerie's mother is so incensed that she pokes her tongue into Valerie's ear and drills through the bone with a noise like sawing through metal, right into Valerie's head. She lands, razor-toothed, behind Valerie's eyes, and there catches sight of Deanna standing in the doorway.

'See what your sloppiness has done, Valerie? Now I have more of your mess to clear up.'