

Singing The Dead to Sleep

by Richard Kadrey

Story Copyright (C) 2006, Richard Kadrey.

Images Copyright (C) 2006, Rudy Rucker.

750 Words.

What people forget these days is that no matter how clever our nano-servants might be, no matter how powerful the AI systems that run our homes, our jobs and our cities, no matter how perfect and pliant the engineered materials that form the infrastructure of our daily lives might be, eventually your toilet is going to back up.

When all those cleverly layered, sublimely intelligent redundant systems go wrong and the shit no longer flows, you have no choice but to resort to human intervention. A real life man or woman will come to your home and stick his or arm down your toilet to root out the problem.

We used to call these people “plumbers.” Now, all these secret and wretched jobs fall under the general and deliberately vague *nomme-de-guerre*, “Manual Integration Engineering,” plus the name of some sub-specialty. That’s us. We’re the Invisibles. Your secret shame, digital dalits, the untouchables of a perfect world.

I work with the dead. I touch them, comfort them in their confusion and ease them into their final sleep. Being dead has never been easy, and we demand so much more of our dearly departed these days now that death, which in other times was seen as a blissful release from all obligations, is now just another appointment in your date book, another chance to commit a social faux-pas.

It’s shocking how little the average person knows about the dim technological afterlife we’re all fated to inhabit in that interval after our “*petit-mort*” and before our final “*extant-death*.” But why should most people know about these things? Why should you? This inter-death period isn’t for the family to mourn or the clergy to provide comfort, it’s for we Invisibles to make right.

Here’s how it breaks down. While you’re dying, you’re still you and your body is still yours. When you achieve brain death, an army of nano-engineered biobots is released from a small shockcase that was installed in your cerebellum at birth. These molecular bots take over your body’s basic functions until it can be properly disposed of.

The bots stand you up and walk your freshly dead corpse to the nearest designated medical rest area. Every neighborhood has one. You probably haven’t noticed yours. They’re designed down to the smallest detail to blend into their surroundings and be utterly unmemorable.

By now, your family is aware of your passing. The biobots are networked, so your family was quickly

informed of your death by a suitably mournful videofax.

From the rest area, all the bodies waiting to be processed board sterile transports for final disposition. This is where we Invisibles enter the process.

Picture your body coming into our little post-mortem clinic. You dead wander in like sleepy children, lost and confused. Some of you retain residual memories and vestiges of your pre-death personalities. Most of you, though, are total blanks, well-scrubbed automata responding to simple electrochemical instructions from the bots that are schooling, like tuna, in your cerebral fluid.

Singing comforts the dead. That's not something they teach you in medical school. It's something you learn from experience. We lay the dead down on stainless steel tables and switch them off, singing the whole time. What we sing doesn't matter. It could be a hymn, a show tune or some pop chart hit. The act of singing is all that matters, as if we humans have become neurologically dependent on a final lullaby to ease us out of life.

We Invisibles are the true angels of death. We power down the biobots with micro-pulses of electromagnetic radiation delivered through the top of the cervical spine, bestowing a final, true death to each of our charges. Then we drain the bots through the carotid artery and prepare your body for biomass processing.

We're the last friend you'll ever have. We're the source of the last kind word or gentle touch you'll ever receive. And we do our job well. Forgive us, then, if we help ourselves to a bauble or two along the way—jewelry, expensive cognitive or muscular implants, or currency cards you no longer need. Just think of these as the pennies that your family should put on your eyes. We are the boatmen who usher you safely from the land of the living to the land of the dead, where, sadly, I'm sure that your type will immediately start clogging the ectoplasmic toilets so that even in the afterlife untouchable spirits like us will be clearing your pipes until the end of time.

A-fucking-men.

--End--

About the Author

Richard Kadrey is the author of four novels, including the classic *Metrophage*, and over 60 short stories. His newest novel, *Blind Shrike*, will be published by Night Shade Books. His short story, "Carbon Copy" was made into a hideously bad feature film starring Bridget Fonda. Kadrey also takes pictures and creates digital art under the name [Kaos Beauty Klinik](#).