

Tougher than Us

By Nicholas Stillman

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Sandra fidgeted on a blanket practically made of her sweat and oil. Lenny sat as far away as he could, leaning on the steel wall and hugging both legs. Even his toes curled to keep back. They both sweated and stank about the same in their metal capsule called home. Ten years of this. Ten years, knowing the flavor and mood in here would worsen each hour. The couple had gotten thin, but not grotesquely so. They'd need to have children after getting out.

Lenny hated that prospect. He avoided looking at her as she avoided him. Falling out of love with someone could burn forever. People needed alone time, some space and privacy. Few on Earth could get it now. Even before the ATP, the Automated Terraforming Project, the cramping happened all over Earth. Men forced themselves to stay in marriages or face the law. Women got stuck with kids and low-grade men who reluctantly supported them. Both sexes stayed too close for too long in sickening mortgage plans or small apartments. They chained themselves for decades. But coupledness in capsules became far worse. The geoengineering outside took only one decade, but it locked man and woman to the same ball and chain.

The tiny room looked almost spherical. The walls curved in to eat up corners of the floor and ceiling. The machinery hidden inside each corner kept folks and their neighbors alive. Capsules filtered the dustclouds from outside into sweet breathable air. They converted the sewage and table scraps of the capsules above into edible slime. Each day, the bile-green stuff dripped into Sandra and Lenny's one cupboard. That squalid shoebox could only hold one mug, and it did, for slime collection.

Lenny remembered the portentous burn in his gut when purchasing the capsule. He had peered inside it like checking out a new microwave oven at the mall. The metal walls gleamed then, like an inside out sports car. Now, every surface hid under smudged oily excretions. The couple could scrape off the skin sheddings and grime with their thumbnails. Sometimes, Sandra did.

They could spit on their browned palms and rub off aggregated filth. But Lenny hated the futility. The rags tied around their waists had saturated with stench years ago. Oil shot out Lenny's face, ran down his neck and body, and pooled underfoot. It took weeks, but the sebum always flowed to the steel floor. Sandra's stupid mat stank so bad, they folded it up for use as a footstool. Sometimes, it made the least rank pillow.

Lenny resented her for bringing in so much furniture. He knew it would jumble and kill space like junk in a purse. Now, most of the crap lied broken down and stacked. The piles reminded him of a fistful of playing cards hastily bunched. The couple needed every cubic centimeter just to get a semblance of exercise. At least the stacks let them do precarious bench dips and decline pushups. And even that humidified their 3 by 3 meter room. The machines could only vent out so much air at once. Capsules did so reluctantly. Just filtering safe air into thousands of connected units took a feat of engineering. No room for internet or any of that shit.

Sandra stood and stretched, banging her knuckles on the steel wall as usual. They occasionally heard neighbors pounding the walls. A faint vibrating sound, probably screams, would accompany the thunder. You could destroy your capsule and die, either from slime loss or suffocating on the outside air. But the damage would never affect other residents. The capsules, though all connected through sewage treatment, could reroute systems. The pipes sent the slime and life support around the smashed rooms of those who had given up. So Lenny and his girlfriend survived their ten year terraforming sentence. And according to the digital calendar on the door, they'd go free in two hours.

Sandra walked over, in one and a half steps, and opened the transparent cupboard door. She took out the measuring mug and sipped the slime. Lenny started hating her grimace of disgust years ago. If one percent of it ever settled in, he'd break off their relationship. *You swallow it fast*, he wanted to shout. *Just chug it, like I advised a hundred times.*

But she baby sipped, and her face turned into a sphincter. In here, everything came from sewage and became sewage. No soap or facecloths. No baths or showers. Not one for ten years. The floor slid under their stale, smelly feet. It felt like a carpet of drool. The capsule couldn't store a decade's supply of toilet paper. So three times a day, the pitiful shoebox toilet sprayed up a jet of old-school seawater. It detected when someone started rising off the place where a toilet seat should exist. The couple took turns capturing the daily unused jet on a rag. They'd sponge one or two body parts with it and cycle throughout the week. Lenny had learned to accept all this.

Sandra, though, wanted them to spit on the walls and floor every day and scrub hard. Lenny said to just wait for the whole damn stay to end. They went with Lenny's plan. He refused to stoop to degrading, albeit tempting, sanitary measures. One desperate deed would break down the fence to the next. Surely, other couples succumbed to urinating on themselves for a taste of a real shower. And because the only dietary water came from the cupboard slime, the urine would come out dark and concentrated. The steady stench of rot must have induced suicide.

But the families up top peed clear. The highest levels of the towers had all the luxuries: bottled water, canned goods, emergency rations, and games to play while eating it. They wasted some food down the sinks, of course. It all got blended and filtered by machines before dripping into the capsule cupboards one floor below. Lenny would love to try that slime tap.

And that second-tier floor would shit out some quality things to get processed and filtered for the capsules below. And so it went on, one ape grooming the back of another, a chain of consumable sewage dribbling down 50 floors. And no one could get out or crack a window. Residents may slam their heads on the sealed doors or rig up a suicide tool, but no one physically left his or her capsule. First, the air outside must meet a nerd's standard. Second, you wait for your turn to vacate.

For Sandra and Lenny, the last day felt like the easiest wait ever. They had already left in their daydreams, and those felt damn real.

“Do you want to play Jenga?” Sandra asked, finishing her slime.

“No,” Lenny said, rubbing his bewhiskered face.

“What do you feel like playing?”

“Lego.”

“We don't have any Lego.” She replaced the mug for the last time and sat next to him.

“I know. Thus I want to play it.”

Sandra and Lenny spent their last two hours of capsule life holding hands and watching the calendar timer tick down. They put on sandals, worn down and repaired multiple times with cloth strips. Sandra's fingers drummed on a kit containing a comb, nail clippers, a nail file, razor blades, seeds, ten toothbrushes, tiny scissors, a whetstone, and other serviceable tools. Lenny's free hand squeezed the Swiss army knife in his rag's pocket.

“What will you do if it doesn't open on our turn?” Lenny asked. He regretted it. That practically counted as a tease. And teased women will either poison their partner's supper or fuck a hundred guys for each syllable of the tease.

“I won't even think about that,” Sandra said. “It hurts my stomach.”

It hurt Lenny's stomach too. He felt it raising a lowering like an elevator.

“Everything worked for ten years,” Sandra added. “It all kept going despite the noisy neighbors. People know how to build. The doors will work too.”

“And if they don't, we can still use me,” Lenny said, smiling for the first time in weeks.

Years earlier they discussed methods of ramming the door open. Lenny had a list of ideas. He had exercised for months, training for today's door fight.

The red counter reached zero and faded to black. The digits died, humanity never needing them again. With a thunderous clunk, the little round door burst inward a few centimeters.

Sandra fell and screamed in joy, though it sounded more like terror. Lenny crawled over and clutched the door's available edge with hooked fingers. He grinned, hunched every part of himself, and waited for his girlfriend to sit up and watch.

When she did, barely recovered from her conniption, Lenny flung the capsule door open. A gray-blue sky flew in and walloped them. He could almost see their capsule's smelly air rushing outside, like ghosts of themselves. A vast freshness enshrouded Lenny's skin. It felt like multiple cold showers, all in a second. And they heard a glorious greeting outside—wind.