

CLEANING HOUSE

by  
J.E. Clarke

**FADE IN ON:**

**A SMALL CIRCULAR COMPUTER PANEL**

The size of a large serving tray. Glossy black metal surrounds a digital display. The logo reads: RUMB-8.

Pretty benign, really. Early iMacs had more flair.

KEVIN (O.S.)

Not much to look at, is it? Back in the office, the boys nicknamed it "Roomba Deluxe. Get the pun? Because of how it looks. And its goal is to 'clean up.'

Lights strobe over the device. A different voice barks:

BERGER (O.S.)

That's classified, Missy. Cut it out!

**INT. NASA - SMALL CONFERENCE ROOM - DAY**

Definitely not a space for VIPs.

A NASA logo decorates one wall. A MONITOR beneath it plays a news channel, on "Mute".

Plugged into a nearby outlet and landline, the RUMB-8 rests on a table. No Jeff Bezos space rockets are getting launched from here. This is as low-tech as it gets.

Dressed in Khakis and a name-tag which reads: ECO-D, KEVIN NEWTON SINGLETON (20s) stands besides the disc.

...and eyes REPORTER MOLLY LEE (20s).

Molly raises a camera for one more shot. LT. BERGER (40s, uniformed with his own name-tag) grabs her arm.

BERGER

You know what 'classified' means? In here, no photos allowed!

MOLLY

Sorry. I just wanted a picture for the lead. That's all.

BERGER

You're working for a neighborhood news rag. You're lucky we even let you in.

Molly deflates, pockets the camera. Kevin flashes gentle sarcasm her way.

KEVIN

Yeah - the first test run of the RUMB-8!  
The press are beating down our door. This  
is such a standing room only event.

Leaning over the device, he whispers dramatically.

KEVIN

For a local reporter, I think you're  
doing great!

MOLLY

You mean it?

KEVIN

Yeah. I really, really do. We're lucky to  
have YOU here. 'Cause when you reach the  
Big Leagues, you'll be covering way more  
exciting stuff than this!

MOLLY

Thanks!

(reads his name tag)

Eco...

KEVIN

Oh - that's just my department: ecology.  
My name's Kevin. Though they sometimes  
call me Newton, Ms. Lee.

MOLLY

And they call me Molly.

Earnest romantic interest flicker between these two.

KEVIN

That's a pretty name. What're you doing  
after the demo, "Molly"?

MOLLY

(shrugs)

Emailing the story and shots to my  
editor. But dinner's kind of open.

KEVIN

I know a great vegan joint downtown.

MOLLY

Cruelty free? Sounds delish!

Berger grunts, interrupts.

BERGER

"Newton", you gonna fire this bad boy up?  
Or should you meet-cute lovebirds get a  
room?

A BEEP from the RUMB-8 yanks Kevin from his reverie.

KEVIN

Let's do a quick interview first. Get to  
know each other -

MOLLY

Totally!

KEVIN

Get you the scoop, I mean.

Molly whips out her CELL PHONE, hits play.

MOLLY

(to Berger)

Are audio recordings kosher?

BERGER

From him? Who gives an orbiting shit?

(under his breath)

And hey, take your time. My kid's first  
little league can wait.

Awwwwwkard. Molly and Kevin exchange looks.

MOLLY

So Kev, what does your RUMB-8 thingy do?

Kevin gestures dramatically at the device.

KEVIN

Behold! Great things come in small  
packages. What it'll ultimately do, we  
hope, is save the world.

BERGER

Tree hugging drama queen.

KEVIN

Ecologically. And that's not drama. It's  
true!

(to Molly)

The RUMB is first gen quantum computing.  
Networked to a few of NASA's...

Well, less used mainframes, it's been programmed to analyze climate change on a *holistic* level - in order to come up with solutions our more primitive human minds can't!

MOLLY

Wow. That's sci-fi cool!

KEVIN

No kidding: carbon capture, environmental equilibrium. Those terms may not *sound* sexy, but after we get that all important breakthrough...

BERGER

They'll stop all this bullshit and let us go home.

KEVIN

(glares at Berger)

Stopping the *apocalypse* matters!

BERGER

I never said it didn't. But that's not the point.

Berger pulls Molly's phone closer.

BERGER

You really wanna play with the Big Boys, Connie Chung?

KEVIN

Excuse me? That's racist!

BERGER

Yeah, I know. So what?

Fire flares in Molly's eyes. She yanks her phone back.

MOLLY

Listen, Lt. Hamburger-

BERGER

That's Lt. Berger to you. Miss.

MOLLY

Ms. Lee. Thank you very much.

Berger thinks it over, backs off.

BERGER

(to Kevin)

That one's got spunk. If you win her over, Geek Boy - hold on.

(to Molly)

But Ms. Lee: it ultimately doesn't matter squat what this hockey puck computes. Bottom line, no solution for climate change can work unless the human world signs on. Which they won't. You wanna tell countries - hell, the entire globe - to alter their way of life? You know what they say: you can't teach an old species new tricks.

KEVIN

Sure you can! They just have to listen.

BERGER

Talk their ears off all you want. But there's too much profit in what we're doing wrong. No-one's gonna have the will to change.

Kevin stares at the RUMB-8. In its glossy black coating, his sullen reflection frowns back.

KEVIN

Maybe you're right. Let's just boot it up, get this over with.

BERGER

Good. Then I can go home, catch my kid's game.

MOLLY

And we'll go to dinner?

KEVIN

Works for me.

Reaching under the RUMB-8, he throws a switch. The digital read-out lights up:

CALCULATING.

Kevin and Molly hold their breath. Berger rolls his eyes.

In seconds, the read-out changes:

SOLUTION REACHED.

KEVIN

*That fast? Can't be.*

He reaches under the RUMB again. Molly extends her phone.

MOLLY

What are you doing now?

KEVIN

Rebooting.

The RUMB-8 buzzes. Displays:

WARNING: SECURITY BREACH. DISABLING MANUAL OVERRIDE.

Berger leans over, squints.

BERGER

Got a problem, kid?

Over them: The news broadcast interrupts. BREAKING NEWS.

Followed by the video of a HOUSE EXPLODING. Berger grabs Kevin by the collar.

BERGER

Hey Einstein!

KEVIN

Uh, they call me "Newton."

BERGER

You know how all this tech stuff works.

KEVIN

I *thought* I did, but-

Berger barks, points at the screen.

BERGER

No, not your Eco-tinker toy. That monitor. Turn it up!

Kevin punches buttons. An unseen NEWS ANCHOR narrates:

NEWS ANCHOR (O.S.)

We're reporting live from Mobile, TX, where an unauthorized missile launch has practically vaporized the home of Oil Lobbyist Harlan Whitaker. It's currently unknown if Whitaker was home.

BERGER

A missile launch? Holy Hellfire drones!

Berger whips out his cell, starts to dial.

BERGER

Guess I won't see my kid bat today, after all.

NEWS ANCHOR (O.S.)

Wait. We're receiving news of more... incidents. Another missile strike at Fracking Heir Sheryl Columbine's Arizona Home. A pattern's emerging.

Berger's jaw drops. His phone, too. He points:

BERGER

That... that thing is responsible! It's assassinating Fossil Fuel Folks. Shut that homicidal slab of circuit boards off!

Kevin tries to power the RUMB-8 down. Blinking, the display changes for a third time:

CALCULATING ADDITIONAL COORDINATES.

MOLLY

How is it doing that!?

KEVIN

I dunno! It jacked into NORAD, I guess?

MOLLY

Oh. My. God. Epic. My first reporting assignment ever: and it's the birth of Sky-net?

Overhead, the news report chatters on.

NEWS ANCHOR

Seven pipelines have been destroyed. As well as Harlan Whitaker's limo. Although he escaped the initial strike, as you can see, very little of the vehicle remains.

Berger glares at RUMB-8.

BERGER

Fucking Frisbee! You're not gonna start WWIII on my watch!

He races towards the wall.

MOLLY

What are you doing?



BERGER

What you do with any rogue computer that disobeys. I'm gonna unplug the fucker, and drown it in the nearest sink!

Berger grabs the cord. ZAAAAAP. Electricity blows him clear across the room.

The military man lands on his ass, uniform smoking. He's dazed, but alive.

BERGER

(mumbles)

Batter up?

Another RUMB-8 readout:

FINAL TARGETS LOCATED. EXECUTION NOW COMPLETE.

The machine powers down, suddenly silent. In terrified anticipation, all three humans stare up at the screen.

CONGRESS and the WHITE HOUSE are in flames!

Static rolls on the monitor. Overly cheery stand-by MUSIC and a banner display:

We'll be back in a few minutes. Don't Change That Dial!

KEVIN

(whispers)

Well, it was programmed to find solutions.

(snarls at the RUMB-8)

Is that it? Are you done?

No answer from the machine.

MOLLY

I'll interpret "no comment" as yes?

KEVIN

Where there's a will...

MOLLY

I guess there really was a way?

(beat)

Think they'll sue you for this?

Kevin and Molly exchange looks.

KEVIN

Screw dinner. How about drinks?

MOLLY

Are you kidding? Hells, yes!!

A stunned Kevin and Molly wander off.

The monitor screen cuts to black, displays a final quote:

"The Earth is not dying. It is being killed, and those who are killing it have names and addresses." - Utah Phillips.