

## “Obsolescence”

By: Mara Batt

John Timber lay, partially sedated, in his hospice bed. It was a sleek and sterile facility like a hospital, but spruced up to provide an illusion of hominess. Beside an orange armchair in one corner, a potted fern rested on a small end table. Midday sunlight streamed through the half drawn shades at a harsh, suspended angle that cut off at the foot of his bed. Fluid drips, a heart rate monitor, a blood pressure regulator, and a cerebrum stimulator connected John to an array of machines. At one hundred and fifteen years old, he had lived a long life, even for the times.

John huffed. The nurse was late in her rounds. Lunch always arrived promptly in his room at 11:45. The clock had just struck twelve and his mouth was beginning to water in anticipation. He knew it was not the kitchen's fault. Everything in there was automatized and set to timers. The only reason his meals were not delivered to him on a conveyor belt was because the Department of Civil Conservation had decided that the dying needed exposure to human care. In his case, the DCC apparently thought he needed a good dose of Marcy, the timid nurse who made small talk about the weather while she changed his catheter bag. John wished they would all stop pretending.

The nurse interrupted his scrutiny with her entrance. “Here’s your lunch, John.” She sat the tray on his bed table. “And you have a visitor.” Too polite to look surprised by this she added, “Would you like me to send him in?”

“Who’s visitin’ me in the middle o’ lunch hour?” He acted too preoccupied with his jello to make eye contact with her.

“He said he was your grandson.”

He sighed. “Yeah, send him in I s’pose.” No one from the family had visited since he was admitted. But he was expecting someone to come by soon, now that he was closer to death. He wondered which of them had drawn the short straw. No doubt there had been a fuss over it.

A knock sounded from the open door, alerting him to the presence of Thomas, the youngest of his grandchildren. He was a man of forty-two with children of his own, two of which John had never met. “Hey, pops.” Thomas had always been more amiable than his brothers, more forgiving.

“Thought I’d be seein’ one o’ you sometime soon. Thought it’d be your father or your uncle though.”

“Nah, mom and dad are in Mexico on vacation. And Roy said he had too much work before harvest deadlines to leave the farm.”

John nodded slowly, his expression was guarded. “Thought they’d have machines to do all that labor by now.”

“Well Roy has to operate the machines. The N.A.I.F still enforces operator dependencies so they stall out every hundred yards or so without someone redirecting them. And someone has to stay around and take care of the cattle. They’re scared of the robots.”

"I don't blame 'em." John grumbled. "Worked as a scrap loader in the thirties an' trust me, you don't wanna get caught up in them machines. They don't stop for nothin."

"Yea." Thomas agreed. "It took a while to get the new mills up to code."

"Ha!" John laughed bitterly. "You're tellin' me. Had a friend that lost a hand to one of 'em. Put 'im outta work nearly for good."

"I've heard the transition was rushed... with moving new equipment in with the old, that is."

"The old huh?" John frowned and scratched his greyed whiskers.

"I just meant-"

"Yea yea, 'nough small talk boy." John's voice turned gruff. "I 'spose you're here about the will?"

"Er... yes." Thomas rubbed the back of his neck, his posture stiffened. He felt crude approaching the topic so directly. That had always been the old man's way though, he knew. "Why haven't you made one, gramps?"

The old man scowled. "Hardly have anythin' to pass down considerin' the government owns all my property." He grunted.

"They don't own all your property, pops. We've talked about this. You still have investments and furnishings that need dealing with."

"I don't got any land I can call mine. The rest is just details." The whole country had moved in a direction that excluded him. Once the bank foreclosed his house, John began the orbit of begging each family member for money or pity. Both wells were dry.

"Well gramps, that's no one's fault but yours." This had been a topic at many a family gathering before John stopped going to them.

"No one's fault but mine...?" He shook his head in unspoken anger. "Don't you understand boy?" His rage was building. "This is all your father's fault. And the rest of his generation. They let this happen to me!"

"Pop, the government gave you money to take trade classes. You don't think we know you squandered it on booze?" At first, his family had been sympathetic. They tried to explain the new way to him. But after years of having the same conversation, over and over, they stopped trying. John would not listen. "Now your skillset is obsolete."

Thomas felt he may have said too much. He wasn't being productive. John needed to blame someone. There was no time for change now that he was so close to the end, so he clung to his convictions. Thomas wanted to be sensitive, but his grandfather's resignation to ignorance frustrated him. "If you don't make a will, we won't be able to handle your remains. They'll be given to the state."

John grumbled. "The government took my job, my home, my free-will practically. Like hell they're gettin' my body too."

"Then you have to make a will." Thomas felt relieved now that he had the upper hand. John would not let it end so easily though.

"You can tell the lawyer..." He thought for a second and then, with a snide expression, decided. "I want to be put in a rocket and shot into the moon."

Thomas openly rolled his eyes. "You know we don't have the money for that."

John was purposely being difficult. "Well maybe we would if your father and Roy weren't always going to Mexico, prancin' around on vacations and takin' time off. Those boys have got no work ethic." This was another phrase Thomas had heard many times as a boy from his grandfather over the dinner table.

"The government encourages leisure. You know that. People don't need to work all the time. Our economy is thriving. We've made so many advancements in technology and society since we've had more time to ourselves to think. It's good for us."

The old man crossed his arms in denial. "Yea, yea I've heard the pitch. I still think you're all kiddin' yourselves. I'm no great thinker and neither is your father. We're workers, we contribute our hands and our time. That's what we have to offer."

"Maybe you're not giving yourself enough credit." Having been raised in the New Age, Thomas had the value of education and progress instilled in his very core. "Dad's started making bird houses in his free time. It's good for him, I think. Relaxing. He's been talking to a shop owner in town about selling them."

"Bird houses?" John scoffed. "So, what? Me an' the thousands o' other people who got laid off years ago are all supposed to sit around makin' bird houses?" He chuckled, sardonically. "Pretty quick there'd be more houses than there are birds."

Thomas could not contain himself this time. "Most of the thousands of people who got laid-off did as the state suggested, went back to school, found jobs and lived out the rest of their lives. All that's left is you and a few other stubborn fools."

They were both past the point of no return. "Fools huh? Why don' you show a little respect? I don' need you standin' around here, tellin' me what's right when I'm three times your age." Spittal sprang from his lips with his intensified speech. The beeping of his heart rate monitor quickened. "Your generation is even worse than the last one. With your father's generation it was smartphones, and to think we thought that was bad."

Thomas vaguely heard the beep of John's cerebrum stimulator shutting off, indicating a natural spike in brain activity. He disengaged from the conversation in momentary worry, only for John to demand his attention again with more slander. "Now a days I hardly see one of you about without a drone hoverin' over your shoulder. God forbid you have to tie your own shoelaces."

"Gramps..."

The heart rate monitor still quickened. If it got any faster it would alert one of the nurses. "I'm surprised you managed to get here without one. Or did you leave it in the lobby?"

John's blood pressure monitor was making an alarming sound. Thomas phased out of his grandfather's yelling, eyes frantically darting around the stats on the health console. He pressed the button for the nurse. John did not seem to notice. "And that wife of yours an' her A.I. activist groups. I'll never understand what went wrong with you kids..."

His rant went on as the nurse appeared. She rushed to the health console. Her hands hovered over the controls. John clutched his heart but continued to yell. "Lazy..." He panted. "Selfish..." His eyes drooped as the beeping of the monitors leveled out. "Traitors..." The nurse's heavy exhale indicated that the danger was past.

Thomas turned to her. "Thank you."

She shrugged. "These machines do it all." She laughed. "Thank goodness for that."