

## 'Mr Cleaver's Next of Kin'

by Chris Brake

### Synopsis

A cleaner recalls their experience of clearing a hoarder's flat.

### Age Range

18+

### Gender

Neutral

### Length

3 minutes

### **THE CLEANER:**

We got to the council block ten minutes tardy.

Dolly had stopped at the Nutsford services to pick up a pink Lady snack pack, so that put paid to our morning itinerary.

She was old hat at this game though, and no slave to routine.

But me, I was green round the gills, that being my first day and all, and not over-keen to be tarred with the turned-up-late brush.

I'd only ever done industrial cleaning before; bread-mixers, vinyl floors, the occasional conveyor belt.

But this were altogether a different kettle.

The bloke from the Council was waiting there, when eventually we did arrive.

Gave us the keys and a dressing down, and then he gave us a briefing.

The owner of the flat, Mr Cleaver, had sadly passed away.

They couldn't find the old bloke's next of kin, and Council wanted the place back in shape, so we were brought in for a polish-up.

Wanted it spotless for the next poor wretch.

Though quite who'd want to live in there I truly haven't the foggiest.

Had every shade of mould going, it did.

Red, black, yellow, green.

A rainbow of residential rot.

And then of course, there was the *stuff*.

Mounds of it.

A lifetime's worth of accumulated clutter, and never even a tissue thrown after he'd blown his nose.

I'd seen the likes of it on telly before; mad old codgers who couldn't part with the carcass of a microwave meal they'd mildly enjoyed in their youth.

But I'd never seen or smelt it in the flesh.

Laid out, it was, like a grand museum of filth.

I can only describe the experience as a violent nasal assault.

That stench will live rent-free in my nostrils 'til the day I can sniff no more.

And the masks did close to sod-all, save for fogging up my varifocals when I dared to breathe.

Dolly brought her apple slices up.

Karma for making us late.

In one bit, which, judging from the rusted pans was formerly a kitchenette, he'd papered the wall with Mystic Megs.

Cut them out of The Sun, he had.

Every horoscope she'd ever done since 1996, all stuck up on his cupboard fronts.

Waiting for his fortunes to turn, no doubt.

And all around were spent tealight cases, burnt right down to the wick, and a foot deep wherever you trod.

We spent the morning clearing a path to the biggest pile in the room.

Come lunchtime we'd unearthed a patch of cord carpet, or one square foot of it at least, but progress is progress and it let us get close.

This horrible, big, dank lump it was.

Pregnant with horrors and grot.

We picked away at it layer by layer, unleashing new odours on the way, in our efforts to make a dent.

It soon became apparent we were sifting ground zero; the original spot from whence his shit so fruitfully sprung forth.

You could date the layers from the newspapers, like going back in time.

Sediments of national events.

Queen dies, referendum, Millennium Dome, Blair gets in.

All the way back to '96, the year of his first Mystic Meg.

And there we found her.

Not Meg.

His wife.

Mr Cleaver's next-of-kin.

Poor cow shuffled of *our* mortal coil and onto the ones in the couch, which then became the basis for a dirty burial mound.

Police took over not long after.

Said she'd been there some time.

I said "I should coco. They've not sold that skirt since C&A closed, not to mention the fact she's all bone."

So they took some pics and bagged her up, then shortly shipped her out.

Had to try and gauge it, they said; the approximate time of death.

"Check his horoscopes", I told them. "Mystic Meg knows all."

They laughed. Then I pocketed one as a token.

Earliest one I came across; 12th of September, '96.

She had it in her hand.

I can't imagine it'll go on her headstone, but somebody should know.

Someone has to remember that date.