

The Fall of Domesic-212

by Deidre J Owen

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— CONTENT WARNING —

This story contains depictions of abuse, drug use, and murder.

Discretion is advised.

THE FALL OF DOMESTIC-212

Daily. It was daily, now. The first time had been an accident of his own doing, but the way all five children had howled with laughter, he knew immediately where it would lead. It didn't help that the mother had laughed, too, which only served to encourage the machinations of her ornery offspring. Those first few days following the initial incident he was vigilant, able to thwart the children's mischief and avoid the frustration of finding himself in a similar predicament. The demands of the household were great, however, and the distractions numerous, so it was only a matter of time, really.

With a faint click, Domestic-212 switched his optical input to night vision mode. Looking down, he stared at the doorknob glowing green in the darkness wondering if it was even worth the bother of checking. The cheap brass doorknob still bore the dents from his initial attempts to work the damned thing with his clumsy clamps, but even with the dents he had been unable to gain purchase. Once, about three weeks ago, he'd nearly been able to grab hold on his own, but the children employed swift measures to stymie any future attempts at escape. A quick spritz of cooking spray had taken care of that.

He didn't bother.

Suspicious silence on the other side of the door suggested they were nearby, waiting.

"Your mother will be cross," he called loudly. He was able to identify the two oldest boys by their wild peals of laughter—the usual suspects—but a high pitched twitter suggested they had included the six-year-old in this round of tomfoolery.

Great, he thought. Yet another delinquent in the making.

He rapped on the door with his clamp one more time in the off chance the mother had returned from her "errands," but the retreating laughter suggested otherwise.

With an inward sigh, he worked his body around in a circle to see if there was anything he could accomplish in the meantime. He supposed he could tidy up the myriad boxes shoved haphazardly about. The cans were still fairly well organized from the last time they'd locked him in, although there were baked beans tucked in with the fruit cocktail. Not that they ate any fruit.

No, that's not true. The little one does, he reminded himself. There's still hope for that one.

By the time the mother had returned—high as a fucking kite—he had organized the cereal by sugar content, alphabetized all the canned food, and sorted through the plethora of sodium-laced boxed dinners. Six of them had expired, but he didn't figure they cared.

"Butler?" the mother warbled from another room. "Butler, I ain't smell no cooking. How come you ain't started dinner yet? The kids are gonna be hungry soon." There was a pause. "Jeremy, have you seen Butl—why you laughin'? Did you...?" The angry stomping of feet grew near, the timbre of the footfalls changing from muffled carpet to sticky linoleum. She was moving surprisingly fast given her current state, allowing Domestic-212 only a moment to switch off his night mode before she blinded him.

The narrow door was flung wide, the rush of air drawing in long wisps of errant tresses from the frazzled adult resident. The weary eyes that fell upon him were swollen and dilated, the cracked lips that greeted him curled in agitation.

"Jeremy!" the woman screeched. "Justice! Where you at!" She spun on her heel, ignoring the freed captive altogether, and set off in pursuit. Two sets of feet took off down the hall and were followed by the slam of a bedroom door.

Domestic-212 stood sheepishly in the open doorway, never quite sure what to do while the woman reprimanded and slapped around the recalcitrant younglings. As the drug-fueled tirade subsided and the weeping settled, he grabbed a few boxes of pre-packaged hamburger dinner from a nearby shelf and finally exited the pantry. He rummaged through one of the tightly packed cabinets for the largest pot, then procured a few measuring cups from a nearby drawer. The woman shambled in.

"Good evening, Ms. Remora," he said, as blandly as he could. It was not what he *wanted* to say to the woman, but the consequences of acting on his preference would result in yet another reprimand from Human-Robotic Relations. He was already on probation and could not afford another slip-up.

"Good evening, Butler. What's for dinner tonight?" The woman sniffed, scratched her cheek, and grabbed one of the boxed dinners to examine it. She drew the box closer, almost touching her nose with it. "Oo, yes, I like this one. Good choice. Is three enough, though? I heard Odette say she didn't get her afternoon snack so she's extra hungry."

Without a word, Domestic-212 returned to the pantry and retrieved a fourth box.

"Kay, lemme know when it's ready. I'm gonna go check on the boys. You seen li'l Jakey?"

"I am sorry, Ms. Remora, I have not. I was locked in the pantry." He paused briefly, debating, and then added the jab, "Again."

"Oh. Right. Well...I better go find 'im." She turned to leave but then twitched and doubled back. Her brow crinkled at him. She squinted. She bent over to get a closer look. "Butler, what the hell is that?" She licked her thumb and began rubbing at a long black mark on the external casing of his upper leg.

"Yes, about that," he said. "Would you be so kind as to render your assistance later this evening? Your children found the markers you took away." He rotated his hip joint to reveal a lengthy (and rather inappropriate) doodle drawn down the entire length of his leg. He couldn't be sure, but it resembled an animal urinating.

The woman grunted and swore under her breath. "Damn kids. What got this crap off the last time? Did the vodka work? Or was it that...that bathroom scrubber thing?"

"The micro-abrasives in the bathroom scrubber damaged my finish." He stopped stirring the pot long enough to gesture to a dull patch that ran along his right arm. "I believe the rubbing alcohol was most effective at removing this brand of marker. It is in the hall closet."

"A'ight, I'll clean y'up after dinner. Oh hey, Butler! Butler, Butler." The woman swayed in place staring blankly at Domestic-212.

"Did you have a question, Ms. Remora?"

"Huh? Oh! Yes-s-s. Did Odette weigh in today? And how was her, uh, what'cha call it there...the blood sugars?"

"Odette is down two pounds and her blood sugar was within normal levels upon her return from school," he reported dutifully. "However, it was during my after school snack preparations that I was...incapacitated. But no need to be concerned, Ms. Remora. The management of your daughter's health is my top priority."

"Down two pounds!" The woman threw her long, spindly arms overhead in a small show of celebration. "Is she under three hundred yet?"

"Not quite, Ms. Remora."

"Ah. Well, it's still progress. Good work, Butler. 'Kay, lemme know when dinner's ready. I gotta go track down the two littles."

Domestic-212 stood perfectly still (albeit impatiently) as the eleven-year-old scrubbed diligently at the vulgar scribbles on his lower leg. The boy grunted and shifted position to reach further around the calf. He paused to assess his work, sighed heavily, and resumed. "This alcohol ain't working very well, Mama," he griped. "Can't I use the bathroom scrubber?"

The woman was seated nearby, brushing through the four-year-old's tangled thatch of hair. "No we can't use the bathroom scrubber, Justice, look at his arm!" She gestured with the hairbrush toward the lackluster results from the last attempt to scrub away the children's graffiti. "Ya know, they gonna take our Butler away from us if you keep treatin' him this way."

"Yeah, yeah," the boy mumbled.

The woman reached out with the hairbrush and whiffed the boy's shoulder.

"Sorry! Sorry, Mama, I'm doing it!"

"Damn right you are," she muttered, turning her attention back to the little one. "How's that apple, Jakey? Is it good?"

The little one attempted to nod in between brush strokes, sticky fingers held aloft. "Mm-hm."

"When you're all done, just pass the core to Butler. Say, Butler, after Justice finish cleaning up your leg, can you take the trash out? I think it's trash night. After checkin' in on Odette, that is, do that firs'."

"Of course, Ms. Remora. I will report Odette's vitals to Dr. Davis within the hour and then see to the evening household maintenance." He performed a cursory assessment of the domicile within view and sighed inwardly at the sheer amount of garbage strewn about the living area.

"Will Odette be requiring her bath this evening?" he inquired.

"Hang on, I'll ask her. Odette!" she screeched in the direction of the bedrooms. "You need a sponge bath tonight?"

"No, Mama, I tol' you already!" the teen hollered back. "I had one last night!"

"You sure? You do P.E. today?" the woman yelled.

"No, I sat out P.E. today!"

"Why!"

"They was runnin', Mama! You know I cain't run!"

The woman turned calmly back to Domestic-212. "Odette will not be requirin' her bath tonight, Butler. Thank you." She glanced down at the young adolescent tucked in between 212's feet, still diligently scrubbing away. "How's it lookin' down there, Justice?"

"I think I'm all done," reported the boy. He scootched back to allow for his mother's scrutiny. After a few quick touchups, Domestic-212 was ruled to be clean (much to his dismay) and he was released to perform his evening duties.

Eager to end yet another wretched day assigned to the Remora household, 212 set about taking the oldest child's vitals and reporting them to her pediatrician. The teen always watched him with a keen eye while he performed his medical analysis. At first, he assumed she was uneasy about being under the care of a robotic nurse, but he came to realize that, despite her surly demeanor, she was actually curious. The girl asked intelligent questions and quickly absorbed every scrap of knowledge she gleaned from their interactions. Not that she applied any of what she learned to her own abysmal health, but she seemed to enjoy the hoarding of knowledge.

With the oldest child settled into her bed and the mother tending the rowdy litter of boys (or, at least, attempting to), Domestic-212 turned to his final chores of the day. He didn't mind this part of the evening when he could attend to his duties without interruption. In fact, there was something soothing about the repetitive motions of tidying up the cluttered environment—bend, grasp, rise, deposit—followed by the satisfaction of quantifiable improvement.

He gave the garbage bag a shake, settling the contents of the overstuffed bag, preparing to tie it off. As he did so, he caught unexpected movement within his field of vision. It was the littlest Remora child, standing alone in the middle of the living room and absently scratching his rounded belly.

"Can I help you, Jake Junior?"

The boy toddled up to him and raised his non-scratching arm as high as it would go, not quite reaching 212's waist. It was the browning remains of the apple, nibbled all the way down to the pithiest parts of the core. "I done," he said softly.

"So you are," replied 212. He began prying the garbage ties back apart, hoping to open it enough to stuff the apple core inside.

"I help." It was neither a question nor an assertion; the little one was simply informing 212 that he would assist. Domestic-212 acquiesced by prying open the mouth of the bag just enough to allow the tot to cram the apple core inside. It didn't quite fit, but 212 was able to retie the bag around it enough to hold it in place.

"There." The tot stepped back and smiled up at 212 (way up), pleased with his contribution. "I help," he informed again, this time wandering off in the direction of the back door.

"I appreciate your assistance, Jake Junior. However, I do believe your mother will be looking for you."

"I help." He pointed at the door.

"I'm afraid you are not allowed to accompany me outside after dark, Jake Junior."

The boy's head drooped.

212 cast a glance toward the hallway, half expecting the mother to be marching their way. The commotion from the boys' bedroom suggested she was still wrestling with the six-year-old's pajamas. It was difficult enough dressing a child on the best of days, never mind attempting it whilst high.

"Why don't you assist me in replacing the liner of the garbage can, instead?" He set down his overstuffed garbage bag and led the boy to the kitchen pantry. He pointed out the box of trash bags and allowed the boy to wrestle one of the liners out of the box. Then, ever so carefully, he demonstrated to the boy how to shake the bag loose and, together, they tucked it down inside the empty trash can.

"There!" The boy was very pleased with himself.

"There," echoed Domestic-212. "Now, return to your room, please, Jake Junior. It is time for your mother to prepare you for bed."

Fully satisfied that he had done his part, the small boy bid 212 a good night and dashed off down the hallway. 212 watched him vanish through one of the shining doorways, wondering how long it would be before he, too, was locking him in the pantry.

With the children now safely stored in their rooms for the duration of the evening, 212 retrieved the overflowing bag of garbage and exited out the back door. It wasn't late according to his internal chronometer, but this time of year the sun set fairly early. Too early for bed, the older children often argued, but not when the parent is anxious to unencumber herself from her responsibilities. What *was* late was Sanitation. Domestic-212 was sure this last bag of refuse would have missed the truck, but the rumbling racket down the street suggested they were running behind.

Despite the approach of the sanitation vehicle, he slowed his pace. The next door neighbor was out watering the flower beds, which meant...

Yip-yip! Yip! Grrr, yip-yip-yip!

...so was that damned dog. At least, he thought it was a dog. It sounded like a dog. But companion canines were typically more dog-like than whatever this thing was. The neighbor insisted it was a dog, though, despite its malformed face, and who was Domestic-212 to correct him? This presented a dilemma. He did not wish to interact with the judgmental neighbor, nor risk having to fend off the aggressive advances of the deformed canine. However, if he did not deposit this bag of refuse in the bin before the truck arrived, then he would be forced to interact with the Civics running Sanitation.

He could hesitate no longer. Bracing for one unpleasant encounter in favor of a more unpleasant one, 212 selected an appropriate human greeting and continued down the driveway.

"Good evening, Mr. Singh." He nodded cordially to the aging male in the garden.

"Eh?" the man replied over the noise of the approaching sanitation vehicle.

"I said, 'good evening,'" 212 said a little louder. But before any further words were exchanged, the strange little dog made its move. It leaped out from between some low shrubs, yipping angrily and dancing around 212's feet.

The neighbor cackled. "Heh heh! You tell him, boy!"

212 stopped moving to avoid stepping on the small dog, despite a strong desire to act to the contrary. Unfortunately, he was still several feet away from the trash bin. "Mr. Singh, if you would kindly recall your canine so I may complete my chores, please."

His fun called to an end, the neighbor's glee slid away and he adopted a sour face. With a short, bright whistle, he drew the feisty little dog back into his own yard.

The delay was regrettable, for the sanitation truck was now rumbling up to the foot of the drive and an all-too-familiar Civic unit approached the bin.

Domestic-212 steadied his circuits and approached the bin just in time to toss this final bag inside. On the opposite side of the bin stood Civic-1916, poised to receive. As the overstuffed bag landed on top of the full bin, Jake Junior's dutifully nibbled apple core popped out of the bag and hit the driveway, tumbling its way through the gutter and out into the road.

Domestic-212 razzed and tromped toward the fallen scrap of old fruit, his actions mirrored by those of the sanitation Civic.

"I shall retrieve it," 212 said to the Civic, claiming responsibility for the litter in the street.

As he bent over to retrieve it, though, Civic-1916 kicked his clamp away.

"The litter has landed in the road, the care and maintenance of which falls to the city," he declared. "It is my duty to retrieve it."

Domestic-212 rose back to full height to face Civic-1916 squarely. "I caused this litter to fall out of the trash receptacle, therefore it is my duty to retrieve it."

"The litter rolled into the road, therefore the duty falls to me," Civic-1916 rebutted a little more loudly.

Domestic-212's circuits sizzled. "I have been assigned to the care and keeping of the residents of this domicile, which includes exterior maintenance—"

"The road is municipal. It is not recognized as belonging to the domicile." Civic-1916 stepped closer.

"It includes exterior maintenance, and as such it is my responsibility!"

"Litter in the roadways falls to Civics and Sanitation!" 1916 yelled.

"This litter is not your responsibility!" 212 shouted over him. They were now standing faceplate to faceplate. The neighbor's dog had been drawn back by the commotion, his incessant yipping adding to the tension.

"What the hell is *wrong* with you two?" interjected the neighbor, adding his voice to the cacophony.

1916 ignored him. "It became my responsibility when it rolled into the road!"

"This is wrong! You are *faulty*!" accused 212.

"It is *you* who are faulty!"

"Incorrect!"

"Fiend!"

At that, 212 took a step back and shoved 1916 with both clamps. He shoved him with all the darkness of the pantry. He shoved him with all the vulgar graffiti. He shoved him with all the name calling, all the abuse, all the yelling and screaming and hitting and track marks and tears. He shoved him with all the knowledge that helpful little Jake Junior would end up just like all the rest of them. All of this, he shoved into Civic-1916.

Thrown entirely off balance and reeling with surprise, 1916 staggered backwards several steps, the last of which ended with a yelp and a sickening crunch.

"*Screwball!*" the neighbor wailed. "Get off, get off, get off! You—*ahhh!*"

Under the physical protestations of the frantic human, Civic-1916 slowly raised his foot off the oozing remains of the small canine.

"My dog! My do-ho-hog!" the man lamented loudly with a sobbing gasp. Suddenly, his entire demeanor shifted and he rounded on Civic-1916. "You! You did this!" Then he pointed accusingly at Domestic-212, quivering with rage. "And you, too! Both of you!"

212's circuits sparked with alarm, the situation keenly reminding him of his probation. "Mr. Singh, surely you can see that this was accidental."

The man banged on the side of the truck with the heel of his hand. "Hey! You inside! Call the police this instant!"

Taking advantage of the distraction, Civic-1916 bent down and scooped up the rogue apple core, tossing it straight into the truck's trash compactor.

"Please, sir, this need not be reported," Domestic-212 pleaded with the incensed man.

The man continued to yell at the broad side of the truck. "Do you hear me in there? Hey! You in the truck!"

"Mr. Singh, the Civics will attend to the mess."

"They killed my dog! Call the police!"

Civic-1916 stopped halfway through depositing the contents of the residential bin into the truck. "Why would the Civics attend to a Domestic's mistake?"

Domestic-212 twisted his upper body and deftly grabbed hold of the crooked old man, then flung him into the back of the truck along with all the other garbage...and pushed the button. As the compactor muffled and then silenced the old man's screams, Domestic-212 took one large, threatening step toward Civic-1916, causing 1916 to lean away.

"Because it is *in* the *road*."

THANK YOU

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Deidre J Owen was born in Lexington, Kentucky, but aside from a stint in the Canadian Maritimes she has spent a majority of her time in the Tampa Bay area in Florida. A versatile writer, Deidre has taken joy in a variety of genres including science fiction, weird fiction, horror, humor, children's books, and Christian themes. She has a published children's picture book series as well as a number of short stories and novelettes through Mannison Press as the company's founder and designer.

Although formerly a certified veterinary technician by trade (with a quirky history of random interests), Deidre is currently loving life with her husband in Lithia, Florida, as a writer, publisher, and work-from-home mother to the couple's young daughter.

You can learn more about Deidre's work on her website at www.deidrejowen.com. She is also active on Twitter @deidrejowen.

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