

One Lucky Volunteer

A short story by Henry Cavanaugh

To say that Norman Jones didn't enjoy his job would be something of an understatement. Being a janitor was hardly the most elegant of professions and it certainly hadn't been what he'd wanted from his life, but various situations throughout Norman's life had derailed him from his original path. Now at fifty-eight years old, he didn't exactly have much else going for him and the janitorial job at least had reliable hours and paid *just* enough to cover the rent on his hamster cage of an apartment. Given how tight money was, Norman didn't exactly have much in the way of luxuries and any time he actually wanted to get something to treat himself, he was forced to either give up his lone day off per week or volunteer to do odd jobs in the hopes of earning even just ten dollars for his time.

It was during one of those 'odd jobs' that Norman's life would change forever. By complete chance, he had seen an advertisement looking for a volunteer to test some new VR equipment at the very same tech company where he already worked as a janitor! They were offering two-hundred dollars for just three hours of volunteering and considering that was more than Norman normally made in a week, he saw applying as an absolute essential.

The advertisement had a phone number attached to it, so without wasting another minute, Norman grabbed his old-fashioned brick cell phone and dialed as fast as his arthritic thumbs could manage. The call connected him with James, a junior assistant on the VR project who sounded extremely relieved to finally receive a volunteer. James explained that they had been running the ad for over a week and were experiencing pressure from their boss to run an alpha test of the equipment as soon as possible, but couldn't do so without the help of people outside the project. Norman explained that he was more than happy to help them out and even explained his existing connection to the company, which seemed to intrigue James greatly. It was perhaps the first pleasant conversation Norman had enjoyed in months, so he ended it with great reluctance, but happy in the knowledge that it would only be around twelve hours before he was meeting James in person.

Discovering that the team working on the VR project were experiencing pressure from the CEO of the company had hardly been surprising, as Norman had lived through a number of his own unsavory experiences with Frederick "Rico" Salvatore throughout the length of his employment at Salvatore Tech LTD. It just so happened that the CEO's office was part of Norman's daily janitorial route and although it wasn't too common, there were occasional evenings when he entered the office to find that Rico was still

present. Every single one of those experiences had left Norman with the impression that Rico had one of the ugliest personalities that a man could have, despite his undeniably attractive exterior. The businessman was quick to raise his voice and ridicule Norman for the disturbance, never hesitating to remark upon the size of the janitor's gut or make jokes about his bald head and bushy mustache. It angered Norman that such undeserving men got to lead such successful lives and be blessed by genetics too. Why couldn't Rico have an exterior that matched the ugliness of what was inside?

Despite having worked in the building for almost six years, Norman had some difficulty locating the offices where his volunteering shift would take place. As such, when he finally made it to the correct place, he had worked up something of a sweat and was feeling nervous.

He was immediately apologetic to the small group that was gathered there, but one stepped forward to assure him that it was alright. Norman recognised the man's voice from their conversation over the phone the previous day and James continued to prove that Norman's initial assessment of him being a fine gentleman was correct. He was at least half both the janitor's age and weight but he never treated him as a lesser being, as most people Norman encountered did.

While they waited for the second volunteer to arrive (apparently they had roped in an intern from the HR department to help), James happily provided Norman with some more detail about what they were actually hoping to achieve. Although he wasn't the most knowledgeable when it came to technology, the janitor could easily tell that the hardware and software combo they were developing wasn't an average virtual reality set by any means. "Customers will be able to use the system to live virtual recreations of the lives of their favorite celebrities," James explained. "We have a machine that does a full brain scan of the subject and then simulates a world for the user to occupy. The idea is that the simulation will randomize every time to allow for endless replayability. Rico already has contracts in place with Chris Evans and Ryan Reynolds for when we finish constructing the hardware." The junior tech developer could hardly hide the proud smile from his face as he spoke and his expression was mirrored by various others in



the room. Norman was delighted to see so many people actively enjoying what they did for a living. He only wished that he could feel the same way!

“For now, you’ll be testing an early version of the tech that connects two users together and allows them to experience the events of the past twenty-four hours as each other. Right now it’s more of an interactive movie than a gaming experience, if I’m being honest,” James continued, showing the janitor to a pair of treadmills that had been set up side-by-side. Above each of the machines was a bulky VR headset with numerous cables connecting them to a large box resting on a table behind them. “We’re hoping to downsize the tech before public release but this will do for now. We just need to make sure we’re on the right track with the software and that’s what you’re here to help us do. A fresh set of eyes is going to help us iron out any bugs and issues we might find.”

Norman wasn’t sure how useful he would actually be considering his general tech illiteracy, but he was fascinated by everything that the younger man had just shared with him. It sounded like something out of a science-fiction novel but here it all was right in front of him! “This brain scanning thing... Does it hurt?” he asked cautiously, inspecting one of the helmets that would be placed upon his head in the following minutes.

“There might be some discomfort and we’re anticipating that you may experience headaches after usage, but we’re not anticipating anything major,” James replied honestly. “Of course, if you experience anything in the next few days, we would request that you let us know as soon as possible.” It wasn’t the most reassuring of responses but Norman was choosing to be optimistic. Besides, he could really do with the two-hundred dollars and if he had to put up with a few lingering headaches to get paid, then so be it!

Before Norman could ask any of his remaining questions, the doors to the office opened and everybody’s attention turned to the new arrival. It wasn’t the intern they were all expecting but rather someone who provoked reactions of fear and dread in the vast majority of them: Frederick “Rico” Salvatore. He regarded the occupants of the room with his trademark sneer before approaching who Norman presumed to be the senior technician on the product. The janitor couldn’t hear everything being said but there was no mistaking Rico’s abrupt and demanding tone. After barely sixty seconds of conversing (most of which had been Rico talking and the technician listening), the CEO clapped his employee on the shoulder and then strode towards the chairs, beside which Norman and James stood.

“So you’re the volunteer, hmm?” Rico asked, showing absolutely no signs of recognizing Norman as the janitor he had chewed out several times. “It’s going to be your lucky day, whoever you are. I’m taking the second spot, so you’ll be getting a brief look into the life of a millionaire CEO. I suspect you’ll remember this day for the rest of your life.” The

man's tone left nothing to the imagination: he regarded Norman as nothing but a human pile of trash. Why Rico would volunteer to take part in the testing process, Norman really didn't know, but he seemed to lose the ability to speak whenever the other man was present, so he meekly nodded and avoided eye contact.

Under the guidance of James and the senior technician that Rico had confronted, the two men were guided onto the treadmills, where they were then instructed to don a pair of gloves. These were no ordinary gloves, as they featured numerous small pads along the palm and fingers, which James explained to Norman would allow them to interact with their surroundings in the simulation. Then came the helmets (although not before Rico warned them that it better not mess up his perfectly coiffed hair) and the janitor winced as the device was put into place due to the sudden pressure it caused against his skull. *No wonder they warned about headaches afterwards*, he mused to himself. He could already feel the throbbing pain building at the back of his skull and he'd barely been wearing the helmet for a handful of seconds!

Once the helmet's visor was placed over his eyes, Norman was confronted by complete darkness for a few seconds before it was contrasted by a blinding white light. The change was so startling that the janitor almost thought he'd been blinded until a whole new world started to fade into existence all around him. It seemed he was in a bedroom of sorts, only it looked to be the size of Norman's whole apartment and the huge windows allowed for the most spectacular view of the city he had ever seen. He could only imagine how much a place like this had cost, but the extravagance of it all seemed perfectly in line with everything he knew about Rico and his elitist tastes. Norman was stunned by how *real* his new surroundings appeared to be; he knew it was nothing more than a virtual simulation but it looked much better than any video game.

While the janitor was already impressed with his surroundings, his delight only escalated when he looked down and found himself staring at a torso that was worlds away from what he had in reality. Instead of the sagging moobs and planet-sized gut, he was greeted by a powerful pair of pectorals, below which was a washboard of sculpted abdominals. This was the body of a man who spent hours in the gym every day and stuck to a carefully crafted high-protein diet, rather than Norman's own (admittedly rather poor) eating habits. It wasn't just the pecs and abs that demanded admiration though, as his arms appeared to be mighty cannons given how much muscle was



packed into them, and his quads looked like they were capable of crushing watermelons between them! Even though Rico had always been fond of wearing tight shirts and pants that confirmed the presence of a muscular physique beneath them, Norman had never really stopped to imagine it for himself. Now he didn't need to imagine because he could see it all for himself thanks to this miracle invention!

It was only through remembering the fact that he was actually in a room with at least ten others, all of whom would be studying his responses closely, that Norman was able to stop himself from pulling back the waistband of the briefs (the lone item of clothing he was wearing in the simulation) to inspect his boss' manhood. The temptation was definitely there but Norman didn't want James and the rest of his team to think he was some sort of pervert, so he held back and elected to leave it to his imagination.

Taking a few tentative steps forward, Norman couldn't help but let out a low whistle of appreciation in response to how seamless the world around him was. It would be so easy to lose himself and forget he was effectively just playing a video game! "This is gonna make you guys a lot of money," the janitor declared, although he couldn't hear any responses due to the noise-canceling headphones built into the VR helmet.

He had been intending to make his way into the en-suite bathroom so he could get a good look in the mirror and see if the technology was powerful enough to make Rico's mouth move in response to his speech, but before he could make it any further than three steps, the perfectly rendered world around him suddenly started to glitch. Various colors and shapes flashed across Norman's vision, prompting a sudden wave of nausea, and the tightness around his skull intensified tenfold. That pain became so consuming that in just mere seconds, Norman was violently snatched away from consciousness and his overweight body tumbled from the treadmill.

Outside of the simulation, the tech developers had watched in horror as the device they had been working on unexpectedly started to spark and then started to emit smoke. The two subjects they had strapped into the VR helmets began to have full-body spasms before tumbling to the ground. In the process, the various cables connecting the helmets to the simulation machine (and thus to each other's helmets) snapped free, causing several thousand dollars of damage and a serious setback to the progress of the project. While most of the developers were dismayed at the damage to their work, James was more concerned about the health and wellbeing of Norman. He had no great love for Rico, but the janitor had seemed like a pleasant man and James really didn't want to be responsible for him having a medical emergency.

The tech developers carefully removed the broken VR helmets from both Norman and Rico, then worked in small groups to reposition the heavy men (one heavy from muscle and the other from fat) in more comfortable positions on the floor. Both men were still

breathing and had regular heartbeats but James insisted that one of the interns called for the company's first aider. Considering the CEO of the company was one of the people currently unconscious on their office floor, they had to treat the situation as completely serious. Knowing Rico's hotheaded nature though, James was expecting the millionaire businessman to fire every single one of them on the spot as soon as he regained consciousness.

Norman was actually the first of the pair to rise from his unplanned slumber and although he still felt incredibly groggy, he also detected a level of strength that he wasn't used to. As he opened his eyes he found himself surrounded by the majority of the development team, all of whom were inquiring as to his well being and apologizing profusely. What stood out to Norman most though was how terrified their expressions were and how they addressed him as "sir", something only James had done previously. The reason for this wasn't a mystery for long though, as while Norman was being helped up to his feet, he took notice of the tight dress shirt that he was wearing rather than the XXL green tee had donned that morning. It wasn't just the shirt that stood out to him though but also the muscular body that was contained beneath the fabric - a body that the janitor had ever so briefly admired in the simulation.

I'm in Rico's body, he realized with a racing heart before looking past the panicked developers surrounding him. Sure enough, on the floor just a few feet away was his own body, with only James next to it. "What happened to us?" he asked slowly, shivering in delight as he heard Rico's trademark bass speaking the words. Truthfully Norman was so wrapped up in his amazement that he barely paid attention to the lead developer as he tried to explain that their machine had unexpectedly short-circuited. His gaze was locked on the overweight body of the janitor as it began to regain consciousness and a plan very quickly began to form in Norman's mind.

Seconds after the other man had pried open his eyes and looked down at himself, he started to scream in outrage. "This isn't my body! What the fuck have you done to me?!" the man in Norman's former body shrieked while pushing James away from him. "I'm Rico fucking Salvatore, not this fat slob!" At that point the two body-swapped men locked eyes and the real Rico's panic escalated even further. "That's not me! That's my body! ***I'm Rico!***"

Given the dramatic nature of his outcry, the attention of everyone in the room was quickly fixed upon Norman. They wanted him to either confirm or deny the other man's claims and he really didn't have to think twice before replying: "What an absurd thing to suggest!" Twisting his new face into an expression of deep disgust, Norman did his best to emulate Rico's typically judgmental tone of voice. "*Clearly* I'm Rico Salvatore," he insisted, "Whatever your stupid little machine did, it's evidently fried this tub of lard's brain! He really thinks he's me! How ridiculous."



“No, no, no! That’s my body, you’re not fucking taking it from me!” the former CEO screamed as he lunged forward with his arms swinging. The team of developers rushed to hold him back from the man they understandably perceived to be their boss and dragged the body of the overweight janitor towards the doors. Only James remained separate from the situation, looking between the two volunteers with deep suspicion in his eyes.

“Have security escort him out of here!” Norman demanded with a sneer, all while his heart raced and his manhood began to rise to attention. Never in a million years would he have expected his day to involve switching bodies with a self-made millionaire, but he definitely wasn’t complaining. Anybody with even a single brain cell could see that Rico’s body and life were better than Norman’s own, so why would he ever want to go back?

Before the former Rico could be fully removed from the room though, Norman locked eyes with the junior developer who had treated him with such kindness before the testing began. The new CEO winked, trusting that James would understand the intention behind it. For a moment it looked as if the other was about to say something - perhaps even to expose the truth - but ultimately he remained silent and nodded in what Norman interpreted to be approval.

Once the crazed janitor had been escorted out of not just the room but the building he had once owned, the new Rico ascended to his office on the top floor of the skyscraper. As he settled down in the leather chair behind his desk, the muscular millionaire let out a sigh of contentment. His employees were going to see a big change in their boss’ attitude over the coming weeks, as he had no intention of remaining the arrogant and unapproachable CEO that the original Rico had been. No, this new Rico was going to be a better boss and a better man and to prove that, he was giving every single one of his employees a pay rise and James would also be getting a much deserved promotion to senior developer.

Turning around in his chair, Rico looked out at the city that he had just become the most eligible bachelor of and reflected happily on the thought currently circulating through his mind: *Damn, it’s good to be the boss!*