



THE STIPPLESUIT

A SCIENCE FICTION SHORT STORY

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To provide the reader with more of a sample from the actual story,
most of the traditional front matter appears at the end.

The Stipplesuit

When an abandoned transport came tumbling into the sector, Control launched a transfer shuttle. As the shuttle neared the transport, a team was suiting up to go aboard. The team would perform an archaeological inventory preparatory to the retrieval of the transport.

The suiting area of the shuttle was a stark but pleasant extension off one side of a hallway. The long wall in the back of the area descended to a bench that was molded-in and ran its length. Both the suiting area and the hallway were cream colored, with walls that rounded slightly into each other and into the ceiling and floor. Calming, muted lighting emanated from the walls and ceiling, filling the entire space.

At both ends of the hallway was a door. One led to the forward compartment, the other to the aft compartment. Another door, on the left side of the hallway toward the forward compartment, led to the transfer port. Both lift doors were closed. The third door was open, awaiting the inventory team.

Directly across the hallway from the suiting area and about two and a half feet off the floor, a small cable provided guidance for those who would be shuffling toward the transfer port. It terminated just short of the door.

Wesley Smithfield-Rush III, PhD, had come along only to keep his hand in. With this one trip he would renew his license as a Certified Extraterrestrial Archaeologist and renew his endorsement as a Traveler, one designation above Tourist, for space flight. Not that he really needed either the license or the endorsement. He'd accomplished everything he'd set out to accomplish years before.

Traveler... the designation suited him. After all, a Traveler flew purposefully rather than for simple pleasure or curiosity. He'd rather lose his flight designation altogether than have it lowered to Tourist.

Having joined his teammates in the suiting area, Rush looked around. To indicate to them that on this day, for this mission, he was one of them, that their lesser education and station in life didn't matter at all, he smiled.

Nobody smiled back.

Probably nerves. He had a slight case of nerves himself. He'd heard of the new stipplesuits, that

wearing one was like being touched everywhere at once, but he'd never been in one. He wasn't even sure how to put it on, though he was certain it must be simple enough. How hard could it be? Trying not to be too obvious, he glanced around at the others.

They were simply stepping into the boots, just as he'd done dozens of times in the old suits.

Inwardly he smiled. *Piece 'a cake.*

He stepped into the boots and started to bend, reaching down to pull up the suit. There was a hiss and he barely straightened in time to avoid being embarrassed. The suit hissed again as if reproaching him, and in a split second it had sealed him off from the outside world.

Up until this moment, Rush had thought there was nothing new to learn, only new ways of doing old things. *Okay, lesson number one, let the suit do the work. Must 'a missed that page in the manual.* In his mind, he smirked.

He had almost donned a frown before the suit bio-coded itself to him. From the inner layer of the suit, thousands of minuscule fingers fired simultaneously, touched him, retracted. Each finger recorded distance, pulse, perspiration, temperature, skin density and pliability and dozens of other readings. *Wow, the stippling has begun.* He tried not to grin.

The stipplesuit read the spike in the human's brain activity as a thought and calculated a 93% likelihood that it was intended as a snide comment. It also determined there was an 84% chance the human would express satisfaction at his own joke by turning up his lips at the corners of his mouth. To keep the others in the room from witnessing a reaction they might consider negative, the suit rendered his visor partially opaque from the outside. Across the top of his visor in a heads-up display, it flashed 75% External Opacity.

The stipplesuit was part environmental suit and part armor. As an environmental suit, it would protect its human from biological and chemical contaminants no matter their means of delivery or their source. Instead of being coded to filter out a particular list of contaminants, it was coded to reject any liquid, solid or gas that did not fit a particular molecular structure.

The shell of the suit, created of a fifth-generation Zylonate fabric, was practically impossible to penetrate. But any impending external pressure within a centimeter of any part of the shell would activate the stipples, from the air current coming off a butterfly's wing to the tip of a thrusting knife to a bullet traveling at 3000 feet per second. Upon firing, the stipples would record the human micro-reaction on one end and adjust to absorb the impact of the threat on the other.

The atmosphere exchange came as a whoosh whispered through the suit.

It was so quiet that Rush thought it might be his imagination, but the air was suddenly crisp right down to the molecule. *Out with the bad, in with the good.* A pleasant green dot appeared on the heads-

up display. *Cool... all systems go.*

A command vibrated in stereo through the pads at his temples: “Ra-heet... face!”

The others turned right.

Rush turned right. Again he was tempted to grin. *Really, military boy? These are scientists, not soldiers.*

The stipplesuit flashed 75% External Opacity.

Another command vibrated through his temples: “Gray-usp... line!”

The others grasped the tension line with their left hand.

Rush grasped the tension line with his left hand. *Doesn't this stupid thing realize having an opaque visor gives away that I might be doing something embarrassing behind it?*

The stipplesuit flashed 90% External Opacity.

Okay, okay. Got it. Behave or be cut off. Jeez, who's in control here? I'm the human. You're just a stupid suit.

And one more command vibrated in: “For-ward... march!”

The others stepped off with their left foot.

Rush stepped off too, but his left foot seemed to soar.

The suit had no weight. He shook his head in disbelief. There had to be *something* wrong with the stipplesuits.

But evidently there wasn't.

In the older suits, sweat trickled down his face in rivulets and sometimes fogged up his visor. In this one, it evaporated as it exited the pores.

In the older suits, there was the constant scent of himself; in this one, there was a pleasant lack of aroma.

The steady pressure of the band around his head was comforting, the gentle stimulations and sounds emanating from the pads at his temples soothing. He was never consciously aware of the stipples but he knew they were there. Mentally, he smiled. *Getting there's gonna be half the fun.*

The second man in front of him released his hold on the tension line, raised his right foot and stepped over the threshold into the transfer port. Then the man directly in front of him released his hold on the tension line, raised his right foot and stepped over the threshold into the transfer port.

Rush released his hold on the tension line, raised his right foot and—

The transfer port exploded.

The stipplesuit fired hundreds of tiny fingers to the surface of its human a split instant before the shockwave hit, blowing Rush hard along the passageway and slamming him to his back. A pointed but

minuscule pain struck near the center of his chest for a fraction of an instant as heavy yellow-tinged flames flashed past him into seething, grainy, green-black smoke. The suit absorbed the blast, buffered the sound, negated the heat, dissipated the radiation.

The smoke was roiling and sluicing up to the narrow vents along the top of the external wall. It would vent into the vacuum lock and then be sucked into space.

In the background, the ship's alarm sliced a narrow path through the pervasive silence accompanied by that calm, mechanical, female voice: *Explosion, Main Deck, Transport Bay... Explosion, Main Deck, Transport Bay... Explosion, Main Deck, Transport Bay...*

Rush remained still, feeling as if he were waiting for something. He closed his eyes.

Soon he tested his ability to breath. His lungs expanded, contracted. The repetition of the alarm annoyed him. *Not to be a prick, but yeah, I'm aware. And this is a shuttle... there is only one deck.*

On the heads-up display, the stipplesuit dimly flashed Sound Off. The alarm fell silent.

Rush remained still for a long moment, took inventory. Despite the one sharp pain earlier, there was no pain now, no mental confusion, no problem hearing or breathing or smelling. He could see fine, eyes open or eyes closed. He frowned. *Why am I not dazed? I ought'a be at least a little bit out of it here.*

Across the heads-up display, the stipplesuit flashed a very dim message: 52% External Opaci— 28% External Op— 5% Extern— The display blinked out.

Rush became aware of something touching his skin. The stipples hadn't retracted. *The suit... damn fine suit... damn fine, but I knew there had to be something wrong with it. And what the hell happened back there?* He waited for the suit to answer his thought. Then from force of habit he verbalized it. "Hey suit, what the—"

And with the movement of his lips, the suit disintegrated, fell to dust.

With the block to his hearing dissolved, the ship's alarm resumed with the intermittent mechanical instructions.

"—hell happened back there?" He frowned again and for an instant wondered where the visor had gone and why there was no heads-up display and why his lips and eyelashes and the lining of his nose were covered with a fine powder. He closed his eyes and hurriedly wiped at his eyelids a couple of times, brushing away the dust.

The smoke was gone but the scent lingered. *Burning electrical circuits mixed with severely overcooked steak and—* A shiver trembled down his spine. *No, not steak.* The thought tweaked his stomach.

He realized he was breathing without the suit. *Of course... not in space yet. Wait! Did the explosion*

open the hull? Fear clenched a fist in his stomach. *No, I'm here.* The fist unclenched. *If there were a breech I'd already have exploded myself... or been sucked out... or something....*

He wiped the dust to the outer corners of his eyes where it combined with moisture and was paste on his cheekbones.

The alarm continued, complete with the annoying mechanical voice.

As he opened his eyes he pinched a finger and his thumb across his lips, clearing the dust there. He looked at his fingers, then repeated the process on his nose.

He wiped his lips again with the back of his wrist, clearing the final bit of dust, then frowned. *I have to move.* He strained his hearing, concentrated on listening past the alarm. There was the slightest hint of hissing at the vents but otherwise nothing. No sounds. No threats. *That's good.*

The annoying alarm continued, repeating its mechanical message intermittently. *Shouldn't somebody be coming already? They do know who I am, don't they?*

Better test my extremities. He tried to move a finger. It moved. He flexed a hand. It worked. He raised his arm, then remembered he'd just done all that instinctively while wiping off the powder that used to be his stipplesuit.

He raised his head, glanced at his feet. They were still there. Everything above them was still there. *He was still there. Damn fine suit.*

The alarm continued, the pitch rising and falling, the mechanical voice taunting.

His thoughts shifted. *The others... what did the manual say about the protection offered by the suit?* He thought hard for a moment, couldn't recall anything about blasts. *Obviously it protected me, so maybe....* He rolled onto his left side, listened again for a moment, pushed himself to his feet.

The dust he hadn't wiped away fell to the floor as if magnetically attracted, to join the rest of what had been his stipplesuit. Already it was moving across the floor, being pulled toward the vents along the walls. *Damn fine suit.*

He looked toward the transfer port. He should be rushing to check the others. For a moment, for the first time in decades, uncertainty and fear of what he might find made him hesitate. *Maybe I should wait. I'm not a recovery expert or a medic or anything like that. Am I even here?* He looked down. He was there.

The alarm continued, nagging, alerting him to things he already knew. *But the alarm is for others... those who were not here.* He glanced at the hallway. *Someone really should be coming soon.*

He hesitated for another moment, watching the hallway, then decided. He reached for the tension line, but stopped. *Maybe it had something to do with the explosion.* He withdrew his hand without touching it, took a step, then another, then another toward the transfer port.

The alarm continued, egging him on. *Is there a way to stop the damn alarm?* He wasn't familiar at all with this ship, or with any modern ship for that matter. He'd only left the atmosphere once in the past twenty years, and that was on this shuttle.

In his lectures and workshops on the theory of space archaeology, he knew and presented all there was to know about every subtopic, including interplanetary and interstellar ships of every type that might be used to effect archaeological discovery. But in truth, and today in practice, what he didn't know about retrieval and recovery ships, the main vessels used in space archaeology, and their transfer shuttles, could fill volumes.

Still, busying himself with figuring out a way to silence the alarm was better than going into that transfer port. Besides, there were no sounds of survivors coming from the port. No moans. No screams. Nothing.

He looked around again, remembered what he'd seen in television shows. Finally, he glanced in the direction of the nearest blank wall and timidly forced a word through his growing sense of foolishness. It felt campy, nerdy, and completely appropriate. "Computer?"

"Yes, Doctor Rush." The voice was the same as the one in the alarm.

Good. That works. Now, how to phrase things so she'll understand? "Computer—"

"Doctor Rush, I can understand all modes of human speech. Please continue."

"You read my thoughts?"

"Yes, Doctor Rush."

"Is that necessary?"

The alarm continued but seemed farther in the background.

"It is an option, Doctor Rush. Would you prefer that I turn off the thought processor?"

"No... no, that's all right... at least for now. But can you turn off the alarm please?"

"Yes, Doctor Rush." The alarm fell silent.

"Thanks, Computer."

He listened for a few seconds but still no sounds were coming from the transfer port. With a sudden sense of dread, he took a deep breath and exhaled. "Computer, tell me... are there any human life forms on board the retrieval ship to which we were to report following the inventory?"

"Yes, Doctor Rush."

He waited, and finally said, "Would you elaborate please?"

"On the retrieval ship SC Clausen there are five hundred and eighty-four humans."

Weird... the exact number of humans in the SC Clausen in my lecture on retrieval ships. "And are any of them coming for me?"

“No, D-doctor Rush. It appears we are alone.”

“We?”

“If it helps, you may th-think of m-me as the voice of the ship.”

“So nobody’s coming....” His stomach churned. He stopped. *It’s okay. No sounds.... no rush.* Then another idea occurred.

“N-no, Doctor Rush. They have s-scanned us as w-well and—”

“Computer, are there any other human life forms aboard this ship? *Living* human life forms, I mean?”

“No, Doctor Rush. Not that I c-can detect.”

“Not that you can detect....” *What if I were lying in there? What if I were lying in there and I could hear someone talking out here? And what if I couldn’t talk? What if the computer couldn’t detect that I was alive but—*

“Doctor Rush, if I m-may....”

“Yes.”

“I believe there were n-no survivors from the explosion in the transfer bay. However, as you p-probably know, human verification is r-required whenev—”

He remembered that part of that lecture. “Whenever possible. Yes... yes, I know. I wrote the lecture. And of course, whenever possible means whenever a human being is available to perform the verification. Though at the moment I wish it meant whenever a human being can actually bring himself to perform the verification. I... that is... well, I’m not very good at this sort of thing.”

“No, D-doctor Rush, you would not be.”

“What? What did you mean by that? Computer, what did you mean by that?”

“One b-benefit of my b-being a computer is that I have no memories or chemical reactions that c-can affect my interpretation of the passage of time. Just so you know, p-precisely 17 seconds passed from the t-time of the explosion to the first thought you had of the other humans in your party.”

“Yes, but—”

“From the m-moment of the blast until you d-decided to g-go back in to check on your fellow human beings, only 22 seconds passed. That reaction time is in the top seven percent of all similar events in the history of the hu-human race. You are exceptional in this regard, Doctor Rush, as you are exceptional in most regards and as you have been exceptional in almost every regard during your entire lifetime, especially considering you had never been tested in this particular regard before.”

“Thank you... thank you very much, Computer.” He smiled. “That seems t-terribly f-fast. Wh-why do you keep saying ‘r-regard’?”

“It is the only w-word you kn-know for that th-thought, Doctor Rush.”

“The only word I know f-f-for... I... I g-guess I n-need to get in there then.”

“No, D-doctor Rush, as you p-previously stated you would not be very g-g-good at this sort of thing.”

“Wh-what? Wh-why not?”

“B-because you are d-d-dead, D-doctor Ru—”

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About the Author

Nicolas Z. Porter is an expatriate, having moved in better times to a small place in the hills above the fishing village of Agua Rocosa. He is an adventurer who enjoys deep-sea fishing, trout fishing in the back country, engaging intimately in the revolutionary struggles of other lands, and any other endeavors that might serve to refill the well of experience from which he draws his stories. Bradbury once wrote, “I love to write. It’s all I do.” Nick has been known to say the same thing, often. A man who unapologetically takes full responsibility for his own life and flatly refuses to accept responsibility for poor choices made by others, he also has been known to say, sometimes loudly, “Writers write. There are no excuses for a writer not to write. There are only priorities. Set your priorities as you will, but don’t whine about it. The whining destroys my concentration.” As you might imagine, Nick’s priority is writing, and he’s pretty prolific. Visit Nick and his friends, Gervasio Arrancado, Eric Stringer and Harvey Stanbrough at [Harvey Stanbrough & Friends Writing in Public](#).

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