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Opening Extract from...

Occupy Me

Written by Tricia Sullivan

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TRICIA SULLIVAN

**OCCUPY
ME**

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For the care-givers
with their eleventy-billion kinds of strength
and for anyone
who is a long way from
Home



HD waveform launcher instructions

Appendix F

Warning: Internal gravity subject to change. If device is to be moved we recommend engaging an optional anti-slip app available as freeware.

Switching from scan to launch mode:

- 1) Engage HD mode bio template
- 2) Ensure docking port has been cleared to prevent **leakage** from host system (see section 3.8)
- 3) Reset clock and localization parameters
- 4) Remove launcher from host
- 5) Reconfigure according to expected local conditions

Notes on configuration:

If rendering backward-compatible choose a configuration with a temporal range of 1–2% centred on the desired locale to avoid achronality errors. Commonplace personal items with practical application are usually the most effective. Eyeglasses, hand luggage, writing implements, and simple garments are easiest to make backward-compatible.

Forward compatibility is not advised.

The briefcase

Out of the blue. That's how the briefcase turned up in your life. The Audi's security camera shows images of a man very much like you approaching the car. GPS records put the time at 4:37 this very morning in the parking lot of Short Hills Mall. The man opened the door using your own biometric signature. A hand very much like your hand placed the briefcase on the passenger seat gently enough to suggest that its contents were fragile.

Or explosive.

But you weren't there.

The Audi is now in the VIP parking area at IIF headquarters near Amagansett. Its records claim that you drove it to the mall at 3:53 – you have no memory of that, either – and then you drove here. Now you sit in the driver's seat, yawning, trying to piece it together. You remember bringing a bottle of Kathryn Hall Cabernet home to Ayeisha in tacit apology for the long hours you've been putting in by Austen Stevens' bedside; that's all gone on far too long. But Ayeisha was on her way out to kendo class. She paused only long enough to remind you to check the kids' spelling homework before you put them to bed.

You accepted the snub the same way you accept the condescension of Stevens himself – with equanimity. Long ago you renounced the way of violence. You do not allow your will to collide head-on with others. Not anymore. There are better ways to live.

Equanimity does not come easily at this moment. Why did you leave the house in the middle of the night? Whom did you meet at the mall? There are no records in your phone. You haven't a clear memory of coming back to your senses after the fadeout – for that's how the episodes feel. They aren't blackouts,

as such, because their edges are always indistinct. Usually you can feel yourself *going* for some time before the event; coming back is gradual.

Evidently this person appearing to be you was driving east on the Long Island Expressway in a semi-conscious state when a pickup cut him off and activated the car's emergency evasive routine. The jerk of the chassis roused you from microsleep. You took control of the vehicle, blinked a few times, and flailed for memories that would not give themselves up.

This isn't the first time you have gone away from yourself, but it is the first time you have returned in possession of an object that you aren't supposed to have.

You noticed the briefcase when you pulled into your usual space at the IIF compound and opened the door. The interior light illuminated the thing on the passenger seat, big and awkward and too cheap-looking to be anything you would have purchased for yourself. The corners are brass, battered and scratched, and the faux-leather outer covering has begun to crack. It's heavy enough not to have slid forward onto the floor when you braked suddenly on the expressway.

You can't bring yourself to open it.

You message Mort. He has a snot-laden bass voice that makes him sound old and fat; he is twenty-nine and willowy. There's white noise in the background and he is panting through his morning workout.

'Hey, Kisi! You in?'

Still fuddled, you murmur, 'I'm sorry? In?'

'Climbing weekend? Vermont? It's all I'm living for right now. Tell me you're in.'

'Oh . . . Well, OK, maybe. Depending on my patient.'

'Your patient is tough as shit, I'll give him that.'

'Mort, I have a question for you. It's quite sensitive. Are you alone?'

'Yep.'

'I suspect I've got a neurological condition. I've been having memory lapses.'

The white noise stops.

'Just turning off the treadmill. Tell me more.'

You tell him about the episodes. How they started several months ago, seemed to stop, and now have returned with a vengeance. Sometimes you lose five minutes. Sometimes hours. Mort asks questions and you omit nothing – except for the briefcase. Mort is a neurosurgeon, not a detective, so?

'I can give you a referral,' Mort rumbles. 'You'll need scans. But if you want to know what I think as your friend, I gotta tell you there's every chance it's stress.'

'Stress?' Your laugh sounds alien. You glance around the interior of the Audi in a haze of disassociation. You stare at the top-end phone in your hand. You think: stress is growing up with people around you dying of mysterious illnesses. Stress is being shot at. Stress is being twelve years old and bleeding out in the forest, alone. You laugh.

'What stress?'

'I mean, come on – when is the guy going to die, already?'

'Soon,' you say softly. 'It will be soon.'

'And you don't see any conflict of interest between you taking care of Austen Stevens in his last days and your history with the company? No problem, huh?'

A whiteness passes before your eyes. You hate talking about these matters. Everyone knows that. Mort is using the conversation as an excuse to wedge open a door, to air all his opinions about the choices you have made, professionally and morally. Choices that Mort, privileged scion of a New York City medical dynasty, could never begin to understand.

'I am not stressed. I am not neurotic. Something else is going on. Could I... You don't think this is part of a disease pathology?'

'I can't diagnose you over the phone, Kisi. Remember, my job is to cut people and fix their brains. I'm sending you the name of a friend at Mount Sinai.'

'Not a psychiatrist.'

'You say that like it's a dirty word. No, not a psychiatrist. A clinical neurophysiologist. OK? And take a vacation. Not with the kids! Take Ayeisha to Barbados or something.'

Ayeisha. You put your hand over your eyes.

'I have to go,' you say.

'Cheer up, dude,' Mort says, turning on the treadmill again. 'Maybe your guy will kick it today.'

That is what you hope every day. Every single day.

You almost don't bring the briefcase in with you. It is insanely heavy. Just as you are about to give up on dragging it out of the car it makes like a punch line and lightens. Its contents shift and it actually jerks in your clenched hand. As you stagger across the damp lawn of Austen Stevens' estate you ask yourself what you will do if its contents turn out to be *alive*.