

Live Free or Die

There is a crash and a curse in the dark. I wake up. There is a woman in my room with a gun. She holds it against my throat and whispers “Is there a digital assistant in here?”

“No,” I gulp.

She takes the gun away, although not far enough away.

“What do you want?” Although my heart is hammering, I’m pleased that my voice only shakes a little. Thank goodness for the sleeping pills I took after my supper pouch. If I wasn’t only half awake, I’d be screaming my head off.

“The old Mazda Miata outside in this apartment’s parking spot, is it yours?”

“Yeah. No. It’s my sister’s boyfriend’s, and I’m fixing it up, only he’s supposed to be buying the parts and...”

“Does it run?”

”Yes.”

“Well?”

“Well?”

“Does it run good?”

“Oh, yeah, right now, see, it’s missing some of its lights, and I’m going to be getting new seat covers, and someday I’m going to give it a repaint, I’m thinking maybe with a racing stripe ...”

I always talk too much when I’m nervous.

“It has gas?”

“About three quarters of a tank.”

“Get the keys.”

“Ok. Are you stealing my car?”

“No, I’m stealing your sister’s boyfriend’s car, and kidnapping you.”

“What do you want with me?” I ask as I pick up the keys from the crate beside the bed. I consider the phone beside them, but I don’t pick it up. I grab my glasses and inhaler. I need those.

“Nothing, but I don’t want you phoning the police the second I close the door behind me. Let’s go.”

“Okay,” I say, and we walk out down the building. She’s carrying a backpack. I finger my inhaler nervously. I try taking a couple of deep breaths, but it doesn’t help much. I don’t want to use the inhaler in front of her. She has amazing huge hair.

As I come out the building’s gliding front door, I can hear sirens in the distance.

I squint and put my glasses on. “Why is it so dark out here?”

She says, “I was just after the keys. I didn’t want to get anyone involved. Can you drive?”

“Yeah,” I say, because it’s true, although most days I hail a podcar to take me to and from work. The Miata is not a daily transportation option, not with gasoline costing \$12 a gallon.

I open the car doors.

“Involved in what?” I say.

She doesn’t answer; she’s busy rummaging in the bag. I start to back away.

She pulls out a paper map, and I blow my chance to escape by blurting out, “No way. You’re a Smasher?”

“Just get in the car and drive where I tell you,” she says.

We get in and drive, keeping to the speed limits as we pass the traffic cameras. She squints at the map in the dimness until she sighs and tells me to turn the overhead light on for a minute.

In the stark light from the overhead bulb, as she holds the paper map, I can see the wreck of a scar on the inside of her forearm. The skin looks tight and stretched and painful.

The small lump in my own forearm, where my ID chop has resided all my life, itches.

“We’re not ‘Smashers,’” she says, “Or Neo-Luds. We’re Liberators.”

We drive in silence for a while, taking side streets, working westward through the strangely dark city.

I've never seen someone actually using a paper map before.

Smashers, or Neo-Luddites, are a sometimes violent political movement.

They started about thirty years ago, in protest of the spread of the internet of things and its negative effects on personal liberties.

The Smashers crashed the original Googleplex. They got in and smashed in windows and started smashing computers. That's how they got their name. After arrests, the group splintered. Some Smashers kidnapped two senators about fifteen years ago, trying to get a law about personal data changed. Some were suspected of collusion with the Sino Alliance in downing three satellites over Idaho. Some live quietly in their own communities, ignoring the world, and hoping it'll leave them alone in return. But when other members are domestic terrorists, the world can't ignore the communities they come from, now can they?

I don't have a digital assistant. That's partly because I can't afford the subscription, but also it is creepy that those things listen all the time. I agree with Smashers that suicide and addiction are at an all-time high in part because of the stress of personal profile management.

I've signed a couple of Smasher-friendly petitions. But my job is reliant on modern technological infrastructure. I'm a design coder for a second-rate VR studio. One day I'm going to get a job for a first-rate VR studio. I enjoy the modern conveniences. I disagree with violence.

The Smasher woman is sort of pretty in a somewhat feral way. She can't be that much older than me. I don't think she's wearing any make-up, but she has an earring with spikes sticking out behind the ear lobe.

When I was taking secondary school lessons, I went to a rally in support of traditional inter-personal instruction. It mostly involved carrying signs and posting solidarity selfies. I don't think this Smasher would be overly impressed.

There is a police blockade at the end of the avenue.

"Turn off the lights!" I turn off all the lights I can.

"Whadya do?" I ask again, as the woman directs me into a back lane. She tells me to take a couple of lefts and I should get to the access road alongside the freeway.

It's way darker on the roads then it should be.

"Did you...turn out the street lights?"

"Yes, some of them."

"Um. Why?"

"Never mind."

"So...you blew something up at a power station?"

"Relay station."

"And your escape plan was to carjack some random guy?"

“There were...complications. This is the backup plan to the backup plan.”

“Great plan.”

“Just drive.”

I drive slowly along the access road. The streets are deserted, except for the whoosh of a robot street sweeper . The sirens seem to be coming closer.

“Drive faster,” she says.

I press my foot down slightly.

I can't keep my mouth shut.

“So, do you guys still think the robots are going to rise up and enslave humanity?”

Even in the dark I can see her roll her eyes. “No. I don't think tech needs to enslave society, the mainstream has enslaved itself to tech.”

I yawn, and apologize. “Sleeping pills,” I say.

She says, “Perfect example. Look at you. Are twenty-somethings naturally skinny, yet flabby, in need of glasses and an inhaler, and hunched over, dependent on pills to sleep? A century ago, you might have grown into something strong. Now you're a slob with a chip implanted in your arm, recording nearly everything you do.”

I'll have enough saved up to get laser eye surgery soon.

“A century ago I might of died of polio.”

“You’re not dead so you’re doing great? Pathetic.”

Well, when she puts it that way, my zinger does seem a bit feeble. “So what do you believe?”

“It’s simple,” she says, “We don’t think people should be treated like things, to be tracked and logged and rated. We believe in trust as the default between people. Innocence until proven guilty. Saying you trust someone only after you’ve scanned their chop and checked their profiles is not really trusting. ”

I say, “Implanted chops aren’t required. They’re offered for newborns because they make life convenient, but they’re not required. And anyway, you just blew out power to half a city. Not too innocent.”

The woman does not reply. We drive in silence. I yawn again.

The police drone buzzes us twice. I can see its video recorder light.

“We gotta get onto the freeway and out of city jurisdiction,” the woman says, “Drive like bananas.”

I push the gas pedal down. Soon the old car, burning fossils, is up to 110 miles an hour. We start to drop some of the electrics behind us, although I can see the big bad boys starting to come up, low and silent and capable of hitting 200 miles per hour. We are rapidly approaching the expressway.

It’s like being in a chase sim, only better. And, as I glance over at the woman, she’s looking better all the time.

I say, “So what’s your name?”

“AAAAOOOHHSHIII” she screams.

The car launches over a temporary speed bump at the base of the on ramp, and police are everywhere, and they’re starting to shoot at us. I see the gleam of night vision goggles.

I’m no longer sleepy.

Somehow I manage to get on to the freeway, and there is hardly any traffic. I push the pedal down as far as I can. In my favourite race sim, I can drive a freeway at about 150 mph before I lose control. Some of those Nikola police cruisers are coming up fast.

As soon as I can talk again, giddy with adrenalin, I squeak, “Interesting name. Is that Irish?”

She doesn’t say anything and I glance at the odometer. Up to 130 mph.

“So…” I say, “Wyoming? Montana?” I’m just guessing.

In the rear view mirror, I see cars suddenly screeching to a halt, some blasting their horns in frustration. We must have passed beyond the city limits.

“Are you kidding?” she says. She sounds different than before and I look over quickly. She’s got blood all over her face and hands.

“New Hampshire,” she says, and passes out.

Ahohshi indeed. Now what?

I slow down to 100mph, tuck into a self-driving freight truck train. It'll be harder to see us inside the "train."

I've been photographed flying past a police barricade in the company of a pretty saboteur. I'm sure they've already linked my image to my profile, and taken note of those petitions I signed, my presence at that rally years ago. I'm travelling with a dangerous criminal. I have no idea what else she did besides knocking out the city lights. Perhaps she's not just a saboteur, but also a murderer. It's fair enough they're willing to sacrifice me to get her. I have a decent ranking, but it's not fantastic.

The woman might wake up again. I don't know where the gun is. Someday I might be able to explain to the authorities what happened tonight, that I'm an unwilling partner to this flight. Tonight I'm going to New Hampshire.