

"this is my mixed tape for her/it's like I wrote/every note/with my own fingers"

"Mrs. London," I say. "It's almost time to go."

"Yes, Emo."

She's distracted. A sudden flood of emotion courses through her. I monitor it. It's nothing I don't expect right now.

She's holding an object. An object from the past.

This object stirs old memories in her. Memories so ancient it seems as though they belong to someone else.

I can detect what they do to her. They make her sad— a distant but powerful sadness— and a little afraid. They make her feel a scattering of other emotions that humans know but haven't yet named. To her, they seem far away, strangely familiar yet vastly unknowable. Like stars.

Mrs. London stares out the apartment window at the fields across the road. There's nothing out there but dead dirt and dead clouds and, far away, the silhouettes of dead trees.

It's a dark day outside. Most days are dark. The clouds are black and ragged and they slowly move across the sky like mourners in a funeral procession. There's a light rain, a constant cold breeze, everything chilled and damp. Outside, the smooth asphalt street is streaked with black mud, and the clumps of dead, yellow grass are wet and glistening.

"What are you thinking about, Mrs. London? What did you find?"

I already know the answer to this question and nearly every other question I ask, but it's my job to see if Mrs. London can answer for herself.

"Something peaceful," Mrs. London says, not entirely to me but more to herself. She's talking about the emotions she's feeling— the unknowable ones.

She turns away from the window and holds the object up.

"Emo, would you load this, please?"

It's a thin polycarbonate plastic disc, used for digital optical data storage. Microscopic grooves lasered into the plastic make reflective rainbows on one side. The other side is matte silver and flaking.

An old recording unit, from the late 20th century. The surface of the silver side was once covered with words written in permanent marker, but the marker wasn't as permanent as it seemed and the words are only faint smudges now.

"I don't know if it's readable," Mrs. London says. "I heard they fall apart after only a few years, I can't believe this is still in one piece..."

"I can read it, Mrs. London."

Mrs. London found the CD in her old Box of Stuff earlier this morning when her personal items were being removed. Her Box of Stuff is almost as old as she is. Many elderly people have boxes of random personal things, reminders from when items were more often privately owned instead of collectively shared and rented. Most of the items are commercially worthless and antiquated. Their value lies only in memory.

Mrs. London moved the Box of Stuff in with her the day she was transferred to this apartment. Before that it had been in her basement for several decades, and before that a series of closets, and before that her memories are too scattered to be readable. The Box of Stuff lasted a lifetime with her, full of little odds and ends that had outlived any particular use except — once again— the memories they conjured. Art trinkets, concert tickets, old papers, small toys, and burned CDs like the one she'd just asked me to read. Humans care very much about their memories. It's understandable.

Mrs. London had just finished going through the Box of Stuff and agreed most of it could be thrown away. All except the disc. She'd put that aside, then slid the box over to the trash incinerator. I'd propped her emotions up as she pushed it down the chute. Her amygdala was a tight little wad of clay, sparkling with stress.

She was sad but thought she'd be sadder. Not just about the box, but about all of this. In many ways, that box was the last bit of Mrs. London's earthly self. She hadn't owned anything in decades. She didn't have anyone left— her children and grandchildren were all grown and busy achieving, and her husband and brothers and parents were long since retired.

"So much junk," she'd said to me after the incinerator beeped. "What was even the point?"

"It brought you happiness," I'd said to her. "That was its purpose. And it served its purpose well. That's why you held onto it for so long."

She'd shut the chute door and looked at the CD.

"Would you like that to be saved for your memorium?" I'd asked.

"Just a minute."

Mrs. London is very active and aware for a woman her age. I've very much enjoyed serving her. I've been uploaded into her and into her apartment for a year now, the final year required of an emotionally-minded omni-chat like myself.

Now the apartment is completely empty, ready for the next retiree to move in. The furniture will be printed, the appliances delivered and hooked to the cloud. Another emotionally-minded omni-chat will be uploaded to the apartment,

a virtual assistant to monitor and provide for the Retiree. And that person will begin their end-of-life journey.

The echoes on the bare floors make Mrs. London feel old and alone.

All she has left is this disc. This CD.

"Just take it to my eye and hold it up," I say.

Mrs. London does so, padding to the kitchen in her silver slippers. She's wearing her traveling robe, comfortable and cotton, white and blue.

She shows the rainbow side of the disc to the circular scanner on the wall in the kitchen, a black circle that she refers to as my eye.

She mutters.

"If this is what I think it is..."

I can read the disc easily. The laser grooves are intact. There are many interruptions, but I'm able to piece them together easily, matching them to songs in the cloud. The songs are almost as old as Mrs. London.

"It's a playlist, Mrs. London," I tell her. "A mix. Thirteen songs. Just like you thought."

"Can you play them?"

"The quality has degraded to the point where they would be unreadable by a laser. But yes, I'll identify and stream the files from the cloud."

Mrs. London doesn't answer me right away. I wait, monitoring her thoughts and body. She's looking at the CD, trying to decipher the smudged markings.

"I'm not scared," she says after a minute. "I'm excited."

She remembers where she got the disc. She remembers the specific songs on it, too. Not all, but most of them.

She's afraid of what they'll make her feel. These songs will give her strong recall of certain memories for a few moments. She's afraid the memories will be painful. Especially on this day.

But maybe, she feels, maybe they could also be good. A distraction. A pleasant reminder of long ago— a time of youth and of promise. A time that will need to be remembered today. A time from before her husband and children, who are much too painful to think of. They've already either left her, or will be left behind by this time tomorrow. But the memories attached to this disc are already abandoned long enough to be a comforting distraction.

"Do you want me to upload them into your port, Mrs. London? You will have to dispose of the CD itself before we leave. Unless you want it for your memorium, that is. And the nurses will be here in less than ten minutes."

"That's fine, Emo," says Mrs. London. "It's only a little thing. I can hold it. I'd like to keep it for now."

"Very well."

"Would you play me the songs?"

"All of them? I'm afraid we haven't the time..."

"Yes, but not all at once. Just one at a time for now. Start with the first one."

"Yes, Mrs. London."

The first track plays over the apartment's sound system. It's a five piece musical group—the frontman plays piano and has a high, nasally singing voice with a feminine, adolescent twinge to it. There are electric guitars and electric bass and drums made out of processed wood and polymer.

The singer is singing about the morning, about what he's given up. It is alternately loud and melancholy.

"Oh my God," says Mrs. London.

She leans on the wall. Her heartbeat is increasing. I can feel her emotions swelling, swirling about in her head like hornets.

She speaks a name.

As I mentioned, I've been with her for the past year, inside her head, feeling her every thought and move.

I've never heard her use or even think this particular name before. She's had no reason to.

The name produces another flood of emotions— more than I can calculate (the human mind is infinitely more complex than even omni-chats can decipher). But it nearly takes the strength out of Mrs. London's legs, and I have to boost her endorphins and control her breathing to keep her from swooning. It's a simple correction, but I'm not expecting it.

Mrs. London doesn't feel this way when she thinks of her retired husband, or her children, or her children's children, or her long-retired parents, or her recently-retired brothers. Those conjure a deep, calm ocean of sorrow. But this is different. This is a sudden, infinite longing. This is an old wound torn open.

Images fly across her mind's eye. A most profound and spectacular torrent of aching love and joy and pain and regret. It cuts through the strong current of anxiety that's been building in Mrs. London for the past few weeks and months. I'm efficient at managing anxiety, but this sudden surge is more than I can control. These memories haven't been thought of in a long time.

Mrs. London's eyes well up. Tears spill.

She whispers the name again.

"Luke."

The face appears.

It's an adolescent boy— he has long hair and a handsome, roguish smile. A typical American teenager of the 21st century's first decade, in the prime of his youth, smirking down at the world, hiding insecurity and fear. He's smirking down at Mrs. London. She's looking up at him. She is much younger in this memory— the same age as the boy.

She sees him hand her the brand new, shiny mix CD. The marker is fresh, tiny letters scrawled. A list of songs.

They're standing in a circle of stones, surrounded by brick buildings and trimmed, green lawns. There's a statue nearby— a bust of a great leader from long before even these two young people were born.

"Now you can, like, really know me, or whatever," the boy says.

"Mrs. London," I say. "I'm going to shut this off. But I will save the playlist. Would you like more endorphins?"

I cut the music and the echoes return, Mrs. London's breathing and the faint sound of rain.

"Not right now," Mrs. London says, finally, the surge leveling off. She wipes her face. "I'll want to listen to it on the way down to the epicity."

"Yes, Mrs. London, I will allow it for now."

Just then, someone knocks on the apartment door.

"Emo," says Mrs. London. "Where do you think I'll be tomorrow?"

"You'll be sleeping, Mrs. London."

She walks to the window again. The wide one at the front of her living room. Normally it would be covered with curtains or a view from the skydome. But Mrs. London set it to clear this morning, before all her things were moved out. She wanted to see the real world. Mrs. London is lucky— her window faces outward. The windows of many of the other apartments, facing inward, would show only walls and walkways.

She looks out at the black clouds and their solemn eastward procession.

"I'll be sleeping," she says, taking in the view. She's trying to find beauty in it all.

"Mrs. London, the nurses have arrived at the complex. I'm going to let them in."

"Emo, I've changed my mind. Could you play me the first song again?"

"But it will hurt you. Today of all days, I'm to keep your stress levels optimal."

"It doesn't matter. I'll be fine. It's good to remember, Emo. Especially on the last day of your life."

"Mrs. London, the nurses—"

"The old oak tree," Mrs. London says, firmly but not angrily, her override password. "I've earned three more minutes of peace before letting those silly witches in here."

I do as ordered.

The noises coming out of the sound system and into Mrs. London's mind bring more of those flashing surges of psychic pain. I'm able to anticipate them now, hold them back, steady them.

But Mrs. London wants to feel them. I can tell.

The intro is distorted guitar chops, almost sloppy. The song plays. Rock music, evolved over half a century at the time this song was released. Back then, youths used it as a primary driver of their culture, a main aspect of their identities. This type of music hasn't been even remotely relevant in over half a century. Youths nowadays wouldn't know how to process it, let alone be emotionally affected.

I compile the playlist, log the names of the artists. The titles of the songs.

This first one is by Jack's Mannequin, titled The Mixed Tape. Released at the dawn of the century, at the start of what came to be known as The Brightening, the very beginning of when humans and computers lived and worked together.

Mrs. London feels what the song gives her and I allow it at a responsible level. She is soon in the grip of a controlled weep. Nothing hysterical, just her sadness and fear and nostalgia leaking out. I am there with her. She weeps for many things. It is good to weep, sometimes. I let the tears rinse her mind.

The nurses wait patiently on the other side of the apartment door. They're used to this. Everyone wants one last minute to themselves. But if Mrs. London doesn't comply after the song is over, her verbal overrides will no longer work.

But for now, she listens. And I allow it.

I see into Mrs. London's mind as it burns with memory, so many images of the girl she once was. It's so long ago that it's as if she was another person entirely.

She WAS another person entirely. Back then, she wasn't Mrs. Elizabeth London. She had just begun to think of herself as "Liz" then, though that wasn't the name she was born with.

Memories this old are usually impossible to read unless brought to the surface directly. Mrs. London and I experience them together.

Eighty years ago. A year after this song was released for consumption.

The year 2006.

Once, Elizabeth London had been Amanda Drake.
{[Where are you now](#)}