

Welcome to the Occupation

by Neil Serven

*Did you **SEE** this shit the cops pulled?!!* said Mark's email. There was a link to a video, but Randy had already watched it more than once that morning. It was everywhere.

We have to go. This is what we talked about. We can't just sit on this.

Randy minimized the screen, read the other news, checked Facebook. He read the comics. He glanced at OKCupid but there were no bites. Then he wanted to put the decision off some more so he did a little work.

He didn't have the time off coming but he asked his boss anyway. Stansky replied with a sigh that lifted up some of the papers on his desk. Finally he said, Do what you have to do, all right? We'll figure it out when you get back. Just don't get yourself tossed in the slammer, all right? We'll need you back here.

It was easier for the others. Carly cancelled her sociology classes for the week, with no complaints from her students. Mark found someone to fill in at the restaurant. Glenn filed his radio reports over the phone. Janet left the bakery in the hands of her assistant manager. Erin closed the yoga studio and left a sign on the door. Heather touched base with her clients to keep them at bay.

Mark's Prius couldn't fit them all, so they cleaned the toys out of Carly's minivan and took that instead. Carly's sister agreed to watch the girls. Everyone chipped in fifty dollars for gas. There were seven of them total; Erin, being the smallest, got to sit in the wayback with the duffels and blankets.

Someone asked, should we bring the grill?

No, Mark said, nothing you're not willing to sacrifice, in case we get hauled off. Mobile is better. Oh, that reminds me: no pocket

knives, nothing they can call a weapon. And leave your weed at home. Don't give them cause.

What about goggles? For the pepper spray.

I don't think that works, but go ahead.

Janet brought a box of raspberry scones from the bakery. They departed at six in the morning.

Google Maps laid out the route: ten hours from Toledo to Manhattan mostly by way of I-80 through Pennsylvania. Glenn put himself in charge of the tunes. He had created a special mix for the trip called ***MASS UPRISING!*** on which he had included every social protest song he had in his collection, but which ended up being too heavy on R.E.M. and Indigo Girls and Summer of Love-era kitsch.

They made fun of the lyrics. Then they made fun of the band names: the Strawberry Alarm Clock, the Chocolate Watch Band, the Peanut Butter Conspiracy. Everyone in the sixties must have had a fiending case of the munchies, called Erin from the back.

Janet requested "Welcome to the Occupation," not knowing that it was probably about El Salvador. Carly said it was sad that R.E.M. had split up but had they really put out anything good since *Automatic for the People*?

Heather, without being asked, had secured them lodging. She had been sitting on a ton of Starwood Points from her old job, so she put them toward three rooms in a Sheraton near Tribeca. Continental breakfast was included in the rate.

Guys, said Mark. I packed sleeping bags. His eyes searched the group, confused. I'll probably be camping out, but you guys do what you want. I suppose having a base of operations off-site wouldn't be a bad thing. We can park the van this way.

Randy wondered about room assignments. If each of the couples got a room, then would he be put with Heather and Erin? Would Heather be persuaded to room with Carly if Mark took to the street? Erin had to be a swell fuck with all those poses she knew. The kind that would leave her socks on.

They hit rain near Akron and rolled the windows up.

Between bathroom stops they sought ways to stay busy. Travel Yahtzee and Uno were hard to play in the van. Carly graded a stack of term papers, reading aloud from the more ludicrous ones. Glenn searched for reports from the front on his iPad. The mainstream media was useless. One blog said that pilots had joined the fray; transit workers were next. This thing had legs, for sure.

Now we'll be underdressed, said Janet.

No, now they have to take us seriously! said Mark. His eyes were intense in the rearview mirror. It's not just the dirty hippie scum now, see? Chip away at the whole paradigm. You just watch, the schoolteachers'll be next and *then* you'll see shit go down. Imagine what happens when a fifth-grader sees his teacher getting frog-marched through a crowd on YouTube.

Traffic came to a stop near Harrisburg. It was getting dark. A Saab convertible had wedged itself under a tractor-trailer. A trooper somberly waved cars through one at a time. Mark had to pull over to the breakdown lane to avoid the glass, sprayed across the road in crystal flakes. Two bodies were on gurneys with sheets pulled up over their faces. The group looked, then looked away.

Then, in the city, they got lost. Bad enough it was pouring again—the exit they were supposed to take was blocked off by construction barrels and a sign flashing new directions, cryptically abbreviated. Once they could get off they were stuck going the wrong way for a mile before they could turn around.

Eventually they found the hotel. In the lobby Heather worked out a plan: one couple would get a room (Glenn and Janet, via rock-paper-scissors), then the two other men in the second and three women in the third. No one else had a better idea.

The rain was not letting up, and they were exhausted, so they stayed in and ordered room service, then gathered downstairs in the bar for drinks. Carly called her sister to check on the girls. Janet searched for local kitchen stores on her phone. Randy got quietly

drunk on hotel bourbon while he listened to Erin tell the others about the new guy she was dating—a horse groomer, of all things.

They would get themselves some shuteye and head down to the park in the morning.

Mark called the other rooms before breakfast. Guys. Put on New York One.

Police had surrounded a cluster of marchers on the Brooklyn Bridge. Hundreds were arrested. Footage showed kids, some of them awfully young, with their faces pinned down on the wet asphalt.

The fuck! They're only *marching*, for fuck's sake! Where are we, fucking Warsaw? God forbid we get in the way of a few taxis.

Randy sat up and squinted at the TV, making out only blurry figures. His mouth was sand-dry and his head felt tight, as though cinched by a strap. He had slept well, though, even with César Chávez over there drawing up the revolution on his iPhone for half the night. These hotel sheets were cool on your skin.

Now Glenn and Janet weren't picking up. The girls said they weren't going anywhere without pancakes.

Fine, said Mark impatiently. You guys do what you need to do. I'll have my phone on, meet up with me when you can. I'll try to get the lay of the land.

He hung up; his shoulders slumped. He tossed the phone on the bed and began to assemble his knapsack.

You're staying with them, I gather? You're useless without your coffee even when you're sober.

Randy yawned and nodded. These things take time, bro. We'll be there. Don't forget your key.

