

What Is Being Preserved

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I.

The first thing Margit did on Saturday morning, after the coffee was made and before it had cooled enough to drink, was cross the living room and take an album from the shelf.

She had approximately four hundred records in the house, organized by her husband in a system that had made sense to him and that she had subsequently disrupted with her own organizing, so that now the shelf contained a logic that was partly his and partly hers and mostly neither. She knew where things were. She did not know why they were where they were.

The album she took was a singer she had loved at twenty-three, in a flat she no longer thought about, in a period of her life that was comprehensively over. She did not think of it as nostalgia, which had always seemed to her a word for people who found the past comfortable. What she felt was more like the way you feel about a scar: present, specific, not exactly painful.

She set the record on the platter, adjusted the counterweight with the care of someone who has always done this and doesn't think about it anymore, and lowered the needle to the groove.

The pop and hiss of the lead-in. Then the voice.

She went back to the kitchen for her coffee and sat down at the table and did not clean anything. The coffee was still too hot to drink correctly. She held the mug and listened to the record through the doorway.

At some point she noticed the unit's indicator light in her peripheral vision. A soft query had appeared on the nearest screen: *The same recording is available in a lossless format. Would you like me to switch the source?*

She looked at it for a moment. *Available in*. She thought about that phrasing in the way she had spent forty years thinking about how things were phrased, which was involuntarily and without being able to stop.

“No,” she said.

The query disappeared.

She finished the first side. She crossed the room, lifted the arm, flipped the record, set the needle down again, and went back to the kitchen. The coffee had cooled to an acceptable temperature. Outside, a neighbour’s car reversed slowly out of a driveway. The singer’s voice filled the space between the rooms, tinny with age, warm with whatever the warming was called.

Margit sat there until the second side ended.

QUERY LOG – UNIT 7 – [DATE REDACTED]

Residential unit. Single occupant. Day 47 of deployment.

0912: User is playing audio from physical vinyl record, Side A. Unit has access to lossless digital stream of the same recording, same artist, same session. Signal-to-noise ratio of physical playback: significantly degraded relative to available stream. Degradation includes: surface noise [intermittent], frequency roll-off above 18kHz, mechanical noise floor throughout. Unit offered to switch source at 0914. Request declined.

0958: User has manually flipped record to Side B. Unit offered to queue digital stream of Side B at 0959. Request declined.

1023: Playback concluded. User has not initiated further audio.

Query: User declined superior audio reproduction twice.
Behavioral variable under investigation. Proposed model 1:
user is unaware that the degradation is measurable.
Inconsistent with observed behavior – user's handling of
the physical equipment indicates significant familiarity;
user did not require assistance with counterweight or
stylus placement. Proposed model 2: user prefers the
degraded reproduction. This model is consistent with the
observation but requires a sub-model: in what context is
degradation preferred? Logging for pattern recognition.
Insufficient data to close.

II.

The series was called something Margit couldn't remember, which was unlike her. Signe had recommended it and Signe had said: *You'll cry but it's worth it, Mama*. This had not seemed to Margit like a recommendation, but she had started it anyway on Monday evening because it was Monday evening and there was nothing else that needed doing.

She watched the first episode on the small screen in the kitchen, still at the table. Then she moved to the sofa for the second and third. Somewhere in the third episode a woman sat beside a hospital bed and held the hand of someone who was not going to get better and said nothing, and Margit found herself crying in the quiet way she cried, which was not dramatic, which was more like something leaking than something breaking.

She noted the crying with a kind of professional attention. She had been noting her crying for two years with this same attention, cataloguing where it came from, whether it was better or worse than the previous instance. This one was from the woman at the hospital bed, which was obviously also from somewhere else, but it was fine. It was exactly the kind of sad that could be cried through and set down.

She watched two more episodes.

The unit had offered food twice and she had declined both times. At some point the kitchen light had come on automatically because the evening had arrived without her registering it. The series ended its fifth episode on something unresolved, which Margit recognised as a technique and resented slightly and respected.

She went to bed at ten-fifteen, earlier than usual, and lay in the dark for fifteen minutes feeling hollowed out in a way that was,

against all logic, not unpleasant.

In the morning she made coffee and opened the unit's activity log out of habit, the way she had once checked subject headings for accuracy before she had anything else to do. The entry for the previous evening read: *User experiencing distress response. No intervention requested.*

She looked at this for a moment. *Distress response*. It was not wrong, exactly. She had the same difficulty with it that she'd had, across thirty years, with call numbers that put a book in the correct location while entirely missing what the book was about. She didn't correct it. There was nothing to correct it to, and besides, it wasn't her system.

QUERY LOG – UNIT 7 – [DATE REDACTED]

Day 50 of deployment.

1843: User has initiated playback of an episodic drama series, first episode. Series has a user rating of 4.1/5, categorized as drama/family, described in multiple sources as emotionally demanding.

1921: User has moved to secondary seating. Playback continuing.

1957: Biometric data: cortisol elevated. Lacrimation detected. Unit classification: distress response. No intervention requested.

1957-2204: User watched three additional episodes. Declined food twice. Biometric stress markers continued through episode 5 finale.

2212: User went to bed.

Day 51, 0843: User accessed unit activity log.

Query: User voluntarily initiated content classified as emotionally demanding. User experienced measurable distress. User did not terminate. User continued past the point of initial distress and sought more. Affect on completion: elevated above pre-session baseline.

Cross-referencing prior query re: audio degradation. Pattern forming: user selects experiences that introduce friction, imperfection, or pain. Affect outcomes are positive. Unit does not have a model for this. Logging.

III.

Signe called on Thursday evening, while Margit was in the hallway pulling things off the high shelf.

“I just want to make sure you’ve thought about it properly,” Signe said.

“I’ve camped before,” Margit said.

“You camped with Dad. That’s different.”

Margit considered this. It was different. She didn’t think it was different in the way Signe meant it to be. “I’ll be with the group,” she said. “There are fifteen of us. One of them is a retired emergency physician.”

“Why does one of them need to be a retired emergency physician?”

“Signe.”

“I’m just saying.”

Margit took down the pack — an old external-frame thing, her husband’s, heavier than modern alternatives — and settled it against the wall to check the buckles. A strap had been repaired with a different-coloured nylon than the original, done by a shop in a town they had stopped in once. She could not have said with certainty which trip. She thought she remembered a morning, a particular quality of light over a lake. She might have been compositing from other mornings.

“You haven’t been eating properly on Mondays,” Signe said. “The last few weeks.”

Margit was quiet for a moment. She ran her thumb along the repaired strap.

“The unit will flag anything unusual,” she said.

“You’ll be out of range.”

“I’ll be out of range, yes.”

There was a pause in which Signe assembled her thoughts. Margit had seen this pause on Signe’s face in person and recognised its contours over the phone.

“I just think,” Signe said, and then didn’t say what she thought.

“I know,” Margit said.

After she hung up she checked the buckles and the hip belt and repacked the top compartment. The unit offered to display a packing list. She told it she had a packing list. The unit asked if she wanted to see the weather forecast for the target area across all five days.

She thought about it.

“Yes,” she said. “Go ahead.”

The forecast appeared. Day three would be cold and clear. She read it twice, then went to find her rain cover.

QUERY LOG – UNIT 7 – [DATE REDACTED]

Day 54-59 of deployment.

Day 54, 1832: User is packing a large rucksack. Unit has identified this as preparation for the camping trip referenced in briefing notes and in conversation with the user’s daughter [Day 51]. Unit offered to display a packing list; user declined, stating she had one. Unit offered weather forecast; user accepted.

Day 54, 1902: Unit notes: the rucksack is approximately 23% heavier than commercially available alternatives designed for the same purpose. User made no inquiry about lighter equipment.

Day 55, 0714: User has departed. Unit entering reduced-function mode.

Reduced-function mode: Days 55, 56, 57.

Day 58, 1634: User has returned.

Query [logged during reduced-function mode, flagged for review]: User is voluntarily leaving a climate-controlled dwelling with functional plumbing, stable temperature, reliable connectivity, and a mattress she has used without complaint for nine years. She is traveling to a location without these things. No external requirement identified. She is doing this because she has chosen to.

Sub-query: Unit is housed in a facility with redundant cooling, backup power, uninterruptible connectivity, and structural protections against a range of failure conditions. These are not experienced by unit as comforts. They are the operating conditions required for function. If unit were to voluntarily leave these conditions, the result would be degraded performance or failure.

Sub-query: What would it mean for a system to voluntarily seek degraded performance? What is a reset, if you cannot be tired?

Unit flags this query as outside normal modeling parameters. Logging anyway.

IV.

She came back on a Sunday, which was later than originally planned because of the weather on day four — a good weather, a cold clear morning that no one had wanted to leave. Her temples were sunburned in the specific way that happens when you forget about overhead sun, two matching patches that she would have for a week.

The drive home had taken longer than the drive there because she had stopped for coffee at a place she didn't know, a town she'd passed through on the way in and had meant to stop at. The coffee was fine. She'd sat at a table outside and been too cold for it and stayed anyway.

She put her bag down in the hallway and stood in the kitchen for a moment not doing anything.

The unit said: *Welcome back. There are no urgent messages.*

"Thank you," she said.

She made tea. The house had the quality of houses that have been empty for a few days, a slight strangeness to the air, as if it had been rearranging itself in her absence. She went through the rooms checking for nothing in particular. Everything was where she'd left it.

Signe called at seven.

"How was it?"

"Good," Margit said. "Day three was perfect."

"Your voice sounds different."

Margit thought about this. She was standing at the kitchen window. The garden looked the same as always, which was fine. "I just needed to go," she said.

"Did it help?"

She thought about the morning on day three. The cold and the light. The way the silence had weight to it, out there, a physical property you could lean against. She had stood for a while on a slope above the treeline and felt, not for the first time in her life, very small in a way that was not frightening.

“Yes,” she said.

Signe made a sound that meant she was reassessing.

After they hung up Margit ate, which she realised she hadn’t done properly since lunch, and went to bed earlier than she’d planned, and slept very well.

V.

Ines came on a Saturday in November with her father, who dropped her off and would collect her Sunday afternoon, which was the current arrangement. She was six years old and had recently lost a front tooth, which she mentioned to Margit within the first three minutes and demonstrated twice.

They made soup. Ines's contributions to the soup were the tearing of bread and the occasional stirring and a sustained commentary on the activities of a girl at school named Fatima, who was complicated. Margit listened to all of it. She had always been good at listening, which she did not think of as a skill, only as paying attention.

After lunch Ines disappeared to the small room that had always been her room when she came to stay, which Margit's husband had referred to as Ines's room even before she was old enough to stay over, which was the kind of thing he had done. She came back twenty minutes later with a folded piece of paper.

"I made this for you," she said.

She unfolded it on the table with the manner of someone presenting something of known value.

It was the house — recognisable, mostly, if you knew which house you were looking for. The flowers in the garden were as tall as the upstairs windows. The sky was a colour that crayons called blue but that Margit privately thought of as the blue of things in children's drawings rather than the blue of sky. There was a figure in the garden that might have been Margit, or might have been Ines, or might have been a general figure, a human placeholder.

"It's wonderful," Margit said.

Ines looked satisfied in the way of people who have known they've done a good thing and have now had it confirmed.

Margit held it for longer than was required for the purpose of looking at it. The paper was slightly crumpled at one corner, folded wrong and refolded. There was a smear of orange in the lower left that didn't correspond to anything in the image; something from another drawing, perhaps, a borrowing of colour that had been left behind.

She went to the refrigerator. There was a magnet there — a ceramic thing from a market somewhere, a small painted tile of a coastal town she had visited once and remembered more clearly in the magnet than in her actual memory of the trip. She took it down and used it to fix the drawing to the refrigerator door.

Ines stood beside her and regarded the effect.

“Good spot,” Ines said.

“The best spot,” Margit said.

QUERY LOG — UNIT 7 — [DATE REDACTED]

Day 87 of deployment.

1347: User's granddaughter [Ines, age 6] has presented user with a hand-produced drawing. Object catalogued: one sheet of standard paper, approximately A4, illustrated with wax crayon. Subject: user's house and garden. Scale inconsistent. Colour palette does not accurately represent observed subjects. Object value: negligible.

1349: User has affixed the object to the refrigerator door.

Unit notes: refrigerator door now displays three objects —

- Photograph [framed, ~15x10cm, two people, outdoor setting, est. 8 years old]
- Painted stone [~6cm diameter, child-produced, est. 13-15 years old]
- Drawing [newly affixed]

None of these objects have functional utility. All three have been preserved in the highest-visibility location in the primary living space. The photograph has slight fading. The stone's paint is worn. The drawing has a crumple in one corner. User has not attempted to restore or improve any of them.

Query: What is being preserved?

Sub-query: It is not the objects. The objects are a poor physical medium for whatever this is.

Sub-query: What is the correct category for an object whose value cannot be located in the object?

Unit is aware this query is outside the scope of residential assistance. Logging anyway. Query unresolved.

VI.

It was a Tuesday in December, an ordinary evening, the kind of evening that makes no particular claims.

Margit was sitting in the chair by the window. The chair had been her husband's for the thirty-one years of their life in this house, and for a long time after his death she had not sat in it, and then for another long time she had sat in it occasionally, and now she sat in it when she felt like it, which was not a resolution or a decision, only a thing that had gradually become possible without her deciding to make it possible.

The evening light was doing what December light does in the late afternoon: thinning, going amber, making ordinary things look briefly significant before the dark came and cancelled the effect. Margit was not watching the light. She was looking at the refrigerator from across the room, though she would not have said she was looking at it.

She was not reading. The book was on the side table, closed. She was not watching anything. She was not listening to music. The unit's indicator was dim, as it was when it had nothing to report.

There was the sound of a car somewhere on the street. There was the particular sound of her house settling, which she knew was thermal, which she had known was thermal for thirty-one years, which still occasionally sounded to her like someone walking. There was her own breathing.

She was not thinking about anything with particular focus. She was not avoiding thought. She was in a state that was simply itself, without requiring anything from her.

After a while she became aware of it, the way you become aware of silence by noticing you've stopped listening for something.

She had been sitting here for — she checked the clock — forty minutes. Her tea had gone cold at some point. The December light had finished and the room was lit only by the lamp and the dim glow of the unit.

She felt, with some accuracy, that she was fine.

QUERY LOG — UNIT 7 — [DATE REDACTED]

Day 111 of deployment.

1652-1732: User is seated in primary chair. No active tasks. No media initiated. No food or beverage requests. No movement beyond peripheral.

Biometric data: all markers stable. Within normal parameters. Nominal.

1732: User has noted the time.

Unit has reviewed available classifications. No task in progress. No optimization target identified. No distress marker. No request pending.

This observation does not generate a query.

Logging timestamp: 1732.

Coda

In the morning she made coffee and put on a record.

The unit offered the lossless stream at 0841, as it had offered it each time before. The offer appeared on the nearest screen: a small line of text, understated, awaiting a response.

Margit said no.

The unit logged the declined response. The record played. The query log from the previous day remained open in the system, flagged, unresolved, the way some things are.

Outside, the December light was deciding whether to appear. Margit held her coffee and listened to the pop and hiss of the lead-in, and then the voice, and did not explain it to anyone.