

Homeostasis Man

by Michael P Calligaro

Todd Lucas acknowledged the gentle blinking of the "Incoming Call" light. The viewscreen before him came to life, showing the friendly face of his agent, Alec Dresden. "Hey Alec, what do you have for me?"

"It's an easy one, Todd. A rich guy named Jack Kraxon wants to get into shape. I've seen him, and he doesn't look bad now. They asked for you specifically."

Todd laughed good-naturedly, "That's because I'm the best!"

Alec smiled and nodded. Then his face fell, and he glanced down off the screen. After a moment's hesitation, he spoke in a troubled voice. "Todd buddy, I'm going to recommend that you turn this one down."

This struck Todd as extremely strange. After ten years of working together, he trusted Alec as more than just a business associate. But while Alec usually looked out for Todd's best interests, he couldn't imagine why his agent would tell him not to take a cushy job for a rich guy. "Why?"

Alec hesitated again, as if he were afraid to bring the matter up. Finally he said, "Here's his wife, Kiyoko." The image on the screen split into four parts. One remained Alec's face, and the other three became still images of a knockout of a woman in various poses and levels of undress. "As you can undoubtedly tell, she's a model."

She was tall for an Asian, with long black hair that fell in tresses around her shoulders. Her round face with its brown eyes and petite smile reached out of the screen to draw him in. Alec continued, "She'll also be having a homeostasis treatment while you're working on the husband."

Todd blinked rapidly, trying to make sure he was actually seeing the right images. The bathing suit pose showed her to have an ample chest that went down to a flat stomach and an almost barbiesque waistline. If Kiyoko had a gram of fat in her body aside from her breasts, she'd done an amazing job hiding it under that few inches of fabric. "Surely not for the same thing?"

Alec laughed. "No, she wants to give up smoking."

Todd nodded. Her image paled a bit in his eyes, but if she was going to quit, that was good. "Who's going to work on her?"

"It's someone from that new coed agency, Out Of Body Experiences. Her name's Jane Singleton."

"I've never heard of her. I hope she's good. So, why are you suggesting that I not take the job?"

Alec stared at him with soft eyes. "Are you sure you're up to it, buddy? You know what will happen if we have another situation like two years ago. I mean, someone who looks like that hanging around in skimpy clothes, being controlled by another homeostasis man, er woman. I think it's . . . risky."

Todd thought about it for a moment, staring the whole time at the images of Kiyoko. He knew Alec was speaking out of genuine concern. Still, he needed the work. "I'll control myself; I promise."

Alec sighed. "Fair enough, but you be sure to do that. I don't want to lose my best client. Sending the info you need now." The images of Kiyoko disappeared and text began to flow across the bottom of the

screen. "They want you to start tomorrow, if you'll be ready by then."

With a grin, Todd replied, "I'm not going anywhere."

* * *

The body and spirit of a man named Jack Kraxon sat in a waiting room inside a branch office of Homeostasis, Inc. He thumbed through flyers that heaped platitudes upon the process of letting an expert get his body past its homeostasis, its natural resistance to change. The expert would take on his body's cravings, aches and pains, while his soul just rested peacefully in some sort of suspended animation. Though Jack had originally come up with the idea of getting the homeostasis treatment, he didn't really like the thought of some stranger controlling his body and spending time with his wife. Kiyoko, however, had convinced him this was the best way to go.

"Mr. Kraxon?" Jack put down the flyer and followed the nurse into the transfer room. He laid down on the table, and the nurse hooked a machine up to his head. The machine hummed, and the mental essence (or the soul, depending on one's religious beliefs) of Jack Kraxon left the body of Jack Kraxon and went to rest in a comfortable place where time moved slowly. The mental essence of Todd Lucas then entered the body of Jack Kraxon.

Todd opened "his" eyes and looked down at "his" hands. His mind reeled in shock, as it always did, from the apparently foreign input it now received. He closed his eyes and clenched his fists, breathing slowly and letting his body and mind get used to each other. His mind had done this many times before and would get over it. While he had called himself "the best" jokingly, he was actually very good at this.

Mary, the pretty blonde nurse, gave him half an hour with the lights dimmed. Then she came in and took off the headgear. "How are you feeling, Todd?"

Todd always loved to hear her voice through a new set of ears. Sometimes it became more sultry, other times, higher pitched, but it always came through as sexy. He sat up slowly and smiled to her, stretching his arms above his head as he did so. "I feel wonderful, Mary. How else could I feel?"

"You got a good looking body this time, Todd."

"Tsk tsk, Mary. You're nothing but a temptress."

"Oh, I wouldn't dream of tempting you." She fixed him with that heart-wrenching smile of hers.

"Strange, because I dream of you tempting me all the time."

They laughed a trifle uncomfortably, and he followed her out of the room. Of the few cardinal rules hanging over the heads of Homeostasis Men, the biggest (after obvious ones like not getting the body killed) was to never ever engage in any sort of physical sexual activity while in someone else's body. The fact that Todd was still on the Homeostasis team after having breached that rule was as sure a testament to his skill as anything.

Todd touched his fingers to his thumbs in increasingly fast and complex patterns as he walked, staring at Mary's rump sway back and forth the whole way. She dropped him off in the acclimation room with a pat on the back and a peck on the cheek. "Take good care of his body, Todd. See you in a few months."

He nodded and stepped into the small, dimly lit room. "Hello Todd," said a disembodied male voice.

"Is that you Dr. Franklin?"

"That's right, Todd."

"I thought it was Dr. Joshua's shift."

"It should have been, but she came down with the flu and I've had to cover for her."

"My condolences for the long hours then. I'll do what I can to make this go quickly."

"Thanks Todd. How would you like to start?"

"First, let me see myself."

"That's my Todd, never one to wade into the cold water slowly." The lights came up to normal daytime light, and a cabinet against the wall opened, showing three mirrors. Looking at himself in the mirror was always the second hardest part of getting acclimated to a new body. After that it was usually smooth sailing. He walked over and took a good look. He was a tall man with dark hair and an angular face. Quite different than most of the exercise jobs, he wasn't overweight nor flabby. His muscles didn't feel or look particularly strong or defined, but they weren't that far gone. This really would be a cushy job.

"Okay, let's see a color spectrum."

They ran through a series of tests letting Todd get used to how this body saw colors, heard sounds, and felt heat ranges. "That's good enough, Doc. Is someone here to take me home?"

"Yeah, Jack's wife just arrived. We've told her you're almost done, and she's waiting in the car. Take care of that body, Todd."

"Will do, Doc."

The door opened and he showed himself to the waiting room. He waved to Sharon, the receptionist, as he walked out into the warm Southern California sun. A red convertible Mustang waited for him. Todd recognized the very attractive body behind the wheel and got into the passenger seat. "Out Of Body won't discuss its clients. Are you Kiyoko or Jane?"

She proffered her hand, "Jane Singleton. I've been in Kiyoko's body for about a week now. Man, talk about a chain smoker! I don't know how she kept herself looking like this with these cravings."

Todd took her soft graceful hand and squeezed it ever so slightly. The body looked as good in person as it did in the pictures. "Todd Lucas. Pleased to meet you."

She nodded and retrieved her hand. With a glance over her shoulder she floored it and launched the car out into traffic. Todd grabbed the door handle and held on. He yelled over the wind, "Don't you Out Of Body people have rules about killing your clients?"

Jane laughed. "Sure, but how often does a girl like me get to drive a car like this?"

Great. She's an amateur. Maybe this wouldn't be such an easy job after all.

* * *

At first Jane didn't get in the way of his doing his job. The Kraxon estate was an amazing place with its five bedroom ranch and complete Nautilus training room. It also sported an Olympic-size outdoor pool that fed into an indoor grotto complete with a small waterfall. In a house that large, it was easy for them to avoid each other--which they did for the first few days. Todd took care not to swim outdoors while she sunbathed, and she made sure she never worked out while he was in the training room. The sight of

that body only slightly covered in spandex and glistening with sweat might have been too much for him.

They slept in the two bedrooms farthest apart from each other. Sometimes Todd would let his mind drift as he wandered to his bedroom, and Jack's body, on autopilot, automatically went to the master bedroom. He always caught himself when he saw the giant bed and, embarrassed, rushed back to his own, more spartan accommodations. Fortunately, if Jane had the same slip ups, and he suspected she did, she never ended up there at the same time as he.

Then, after two weeks, she joined him for breakfast. He was eating fresh fruits and trying to ignore his body's cravings for Honey Smacks. She sat down across from him at the thick wooden table and sighed. "I didn't realize how tough this would be. I'm dying for a cigarette, and I've never actually smoked one before."

"That body has, and most of a person's cravings come from their bodies, not their minds. Your job is to be stronger in resisting those cravings than the person who really owns the body. Is this your first time with a smoking case?"

She nodded, then smiled devilishly. "To tell the truth, this is my first time with any sort of case."

Todd's head shot up from his strawberries, and he looked at her wide eyed. He'd expected she was pretty new, but a homeostasis virgin? Why would the Kraxons pay for a seasoned veteran like him to just get Jack into shape but then skimp on Kiyoko for the much more difficult problem of giving up smoking? Convincing a body that it did in fact like being healthy was much easier than breaking it of an addiction. "Your first?"

She nodded. "Kiyoko's an old friend, and I was having trouble getting a job, so she promised to give me a chance. I figured if I could break a smoker on my first try, I'd have no trouble convincing any of the places to hire me. But I didn't realize how damn hard this is!"

"So you're not really an Out Of Body employee?"

"No, they just performed the transfer. They'll disavow all knowledge of this if I don't do a good job. They're too worried about their success ratios right now."

"As they should be, for a startup." Todd drummed his fingers on the table. "How are you holding up?"

She sighed. "This is hell. I don't know why I ever wanted to do it. I mean, I was always careful to never start smoking so I wouldn't have to go through the pain of stopping. And here I am, doing it anyway. Why do you do it?"

"It's a job, and it's what I'm good at. There's probably nothing else I could do to put food on the table."

"Oh, I don't know about that. Surely there are better things you could do with your life?"

He shrugged. "I don't mind this. Well, I don't mind it too much. Sure, it's rough to go through all the work and never see any of the payoff, but I hold my accomplishments in my memories. Working on these jobs brings its own rewards."

"Well, right now, the only reward I want is a cigarette!"

"There's a bunch of carrots in the fridge. I suggest you stick to them."

Later that night Todd worked especially hard in the training room. He watched himself in the wall to wall mirrors and wondered what was wrong. Why was this body resisting his training so much? Every time he

tried to push it for an extended time, he felt that pain in his side and became short of breath. Frustrated, he hopped off the stair machine, grabbed a towel, and headed for the showers. The showers were in a room off the indoor grotto pool. As he walked by, the pool's lights came on, and Jane swam through the underwater tunnel connecting the indoor and outdoor pools. She surfaced and started swimming laps. She'd come from the outside, so she was wearing a bathing suit, but the tiny bikini hardly left anything to the imagination. Todd watched her swim a lap then shook his head and entered the shower room. Watching her like that might drive him crazy.

He stripped off his sweaty clothes and stepped into the first stall. The warm water beat down on him and relaxed his tight muscles. He closed his eyes and let the water roll down over his head and back. Then he felt a draft. He turned around to see Jane, naked as the day Kiyoko was born, step into the stall. He stared down at her, his mouth agape. She looked up at him expectantly, then her eyes went wide and she covered her mouth.

"Oh my God! What am I doing?"

He tore his eyes away from her large breasts--her body more sexy wet than he wanted to admit--and tried to focus only on her eyes. But even those dark, inviting eyes drew him in. "Lusts and cravings come from the body, not from the mind. I'm sure getting in here felt quite natural to that body."

She glanced down at him and giggled. "I can see it feels natural to yours too." She slid closer to him. "So, why is it that now that I know why I'm here, I still don't want to leave?"

Todd knew there was an answer to that, but with her so close to him, he couldn't focus on it. His hands reached out and caressed her shoulders and then ran down to her breasts. It felt right, like these hands had held these breasts many times before. The fact that they had but were supposed to be under different control didn't seem to matter.

* * *

They lay in each other's arms in the shallow end of the grotto. That was amazing, the warm shower, the cold floor, to the pool, under the waterfall, behind the waterfall, the deep end, the shallow end. Even with the pain in his side, these bodies had stamina. Jane nuzzled up against him and kissed his chest. Then she froze. Her head shot up, and she stared at him with terror-filled eyes. She pushed away and tried to cover herself with her hands. "What have we done?"

"Surely you haven't forgotten already?"

"But we're not supposed to . . . oh no!"

"No, we're not supposed to, but we did. If we never tell anyone, they probably won't know."

She shook her head emphatically, her long wet hair ending up across her face. She pulled it aside and pointed up at the ceiling. "Yes, they will. The Kraxons knew about your reputation and had video cameras installed in many of the rooms.

Todd's heart began to race. He looked up but only saw the fake rock covering that helped make the room look like a grotto. When he looked closer, however, he saw holes drilled in some of the rocks. The cameras Jane referred to must have been behind those holes. Oh shit. He'd gotten an explicit warning the last time he transgressed like this. The current religious political climate really didn't like the moral implications of the mind transferal process and had seen to it that stern laws regarding its use were passed. This time he wouldn't get off with just a warning. He'd do jail time at the very least. And he certainly wouldn't be allowed to work at Homeostasis, Inc. ever again. "What do we do?"

"We've got to get out of here!" She leapt out of the water and raced upstairs, dripping as she went. Todd followed her and ran into his room. Not even taking the time to dry off, he threw on some clothes and grabbed some more. Jane met him in the hallway, holding out the keys to the Mustang. He grabbed them and they raced out to the car. Was that sirens in the distance?

Todd leapt in while Jane took the time to open the door and sit down. The engine turned over immediately, and they peeled out down the driveway. "Which way?"

"Left!"

They hit the end of the driveway doing forty and turned onto the street with a squeal of tires. Jane laid a hand on his arm. "Take it easy. We don't want to be pulled over for reckless driving."

He nodded and laid off the accelerator. They drove on into the night and up into the mountains. After about ten minutes of hugging corners at high speeds and accelerating down straight-aways, Todd glanced over at Jane. "Do you have a destination in mind?"

She nodded, "There's a turnoff to the left coming up in a few miles. I'll point it out."

Surprised, he searched ahead for the turnoff. "I don't suppose you've got an idea for how we're going to get out of this?"

"Hey, I'm a smart girl. I've got plenty of ideas. I'll explain more after we get to the turnoff."

They drove for a few more minutes before she pointed ahead. He took the turnoff and stopped the car on a wide gravel field overlooking a cliff. Only the moon above provided any light. "I don't see anywhere to go." He turned to Jane and gasped. She held a snub nosed .38 on him. "Jane?"

She shook her head. "No, it's Kiyoko."

His eyes darted back and forth between the gun and her face. He wasn't sure which surprised him more. At least that explained why he'd never heard of "Jane Singleton" before and why the rich people paid for anyone but the best to help Kiyoko quit smoking.

"Jack knows?"

"This was his idea."

He crossed his arms and stared at her. "Why?"

"You've been in his body for the last few weeks. You tell me."

Suddenly the difficulty in exercising made sense. "There's something wrong with this body, isn't there?"

"Smart boy, Todd. Terminal cancer. My loving husband only has six months to a year to live."

He nodded understanding. "Unless you can get him another body."

"Right again, but people are so squeamish about that, you know?"

With good reason. The potential for abuse with people permanently trading bodies was horrendous. If society allowed people to change bodies, a whole illegal underground in abducted ones would spring up overnight. "You want mine."

"We figure the world will understand. After all, you, a noted sex offender, went crazy and destroyed his

body, killing yourself in the process. It'd only be fair for him to get yours." Todd laughed, causing Kiyoko to frown. "What's so funny."

He shook his head. "Nothing. Did he know about the sex?"

The gun quivered and her voice wavered as she said, "We both understood it was a necessary part of the plan."

Smiling broadly he said, "Well, it almost made this worth it. Sex with you was amazing. Of course, I've only got one other time to compare it too, but I'm confident I wouldn't get it like that again no matter how long I lived."

She frowned. "Only one other time? You mean in another body? Of course--"

He cut her off. "So, how am I to die? Are you going to shoot me and tell the cops I tried to abduct you?" He giggled. "No, I tried to kidnap you. You *and* your husband. That's good. You can tell them I didn't know you always keep a gun in the glove compartment."

The gun shook now.

"What's this, dearest Kiyoko? Are you finding it a bit more difficult to kill someone than you originally thought it would be?" He laughed again. "I'll tell you what, I've got a better idea. What happened is I went totally insane and tried to kill us both. I raced the car at the cliff, but you jumped out, just in time." He floored it, sending twin plumes of gravel shooting out behind them.

Her eyes went wide. "No, wait!"

"Better jump soon, Kiyoko. You don't want to go over with me!"

She looked frantically at the rapidly approaching cliff. "Stop!"

"Or what? You'll shoot me? That won't look very convincing. He tried to kill himself but there was a bullet in him. You'd better jump soon!"

She looked at the cliff again, opened the door, and leapt away. The second she was out, Todd slammed on the brakes. He'd hoped she would jump out sooner and he'd be able to get away. But the car's wheels locked up and it slid at high speed toward the cliff. "Oh shit!" he yelled as the front wheels went over the edge and fell forward. He got a great view of the steep-angled hill leading down to the rocks below.

* * *

Kiyoko rolled side over side numerous times before coming to a stop on the hard gravel. Her whole body aching, she twisted around to see the mustang roll over the edge. Clenching her teeth, she forced herself up and limped to the edge. Tracks ran down the side of the hill and ended five hundred feet below, where burning wreckage was strewn about on the rocks. As she watched, the remaining hulk of the car sank into the ocean. Her hands shaking, she limped back to the road and started the long trek home.

* * *

Though some wanted to form a search party to hunt down the fleeing "Jane Singleton," most everyone was sympathetic. All the daytime talk show hosts and most of the newspaper editorials agreed that the victims here, Jack and Kiyoko, needed to be compensated. They decided that, in this very unique

instance, Jack Kraxon should get Todd Lucas' old body. Homeostasis, Inc., under intense scrutiny, had little choice but to comply.

Kiyoko paced back and forth in the waiting room, freely ignoring the numerous "No Smoking" signs. Todd Lucas' first sexual transgression had earned him the dubious honor of a face-shot picture in the papers. Though he didn't hold a candle to her Jack, he wasn't too bad looking. And having her husband in a healthy, yet plain, body was far better than losing him outright. Todd, who used to make bodies healthy for a living, must have kept his in good shape.

A nurse rolled out a man in a wheelchair. Kiyoko ignored him and kept pacing. Then she heard her name spoken by a strange, weak voice. "Kiyoko?"

She spun around and her heart sank to her feet. Todd had said he'd only had sex twice in his life. He said he couldn't do many jobs other than that of a homeostasis man. He said he liked working through other people's difficulties with their bodies. Those difficulties must have seemed inconsequential to a quadriplegic.

She bit her lip and limped over to the wheelchair. The face from the paper looked up at her with sorrowful eyes. Her voice quavering more than she wanted, she asked, "Jack?" He nodded his head. From the pencil thin arms and legs on his new body, she could see his neck and head were all he could move. "Come on, I'll help you out to the car." She took the wheelchair handles from the nurse and pushed. Now behind her husband, where he could not see her, she let the tears flow freely.

* * *

A man in dark sunglasses and a baseball cap pulled down over his forehead sat at a bus stop eating a hot dog. Across the street, an amazingly attractive woman pushed a man in a wheelchair through the front doors of the branch office of Homeostasis, Inc. He smiled from ear to ear as he watched her help the man and his desolate, broken body into a car. The last look of her tear-stricken face as she drove away gave him such joy he laughed out loud.

Todd finished his hot dog and licked his fingers, savoring every moment. He had a body that worked, and he didn't need to care the least bit about what he ate or what he did. This was going to be a great few months.

The End

Copyright Michael P. Calligaro

All Rights Reserved

If you enjoyed this story, there are over 35 more available for free download from <http://www.mystikeep.com>

About this Title

This eBook was created using ReaderWorks™ Publisher, produced by OverDrive, Inc.

For more information on ReaderWorks, visit us on the Web at "www.readerworks.com"