

(Static starts and fades.)

Hello? Hello. (Static stops.)

Frick, am I even doing this right? (jostling of the equipment. Soft music fades in). Well, it looks promising. If not right. And I guess... That's... Not good enough, but it's the best I'm going to get. I mean, I don't know to fix it. I don't know how I learned to broadcast or to take over someone else's broadcast, which is kind of a jerk move, I admit, but here I go, doing just that. Sorry to the dude that runs this channel, but I doubt anyone was listening to your ambient music hour anyway. I mean, someone probably was, but the rest of us have better things to do with our night.

Assuming... (Equipment jostling. Static. Pause) I don't even know. I don't even know. I don't even know. I'm just going through the motions, hoping that this works. I'm convinced that it will work, but don't ask me to explain myself.

Is this what autopilot is? Assuming a plane or craft could feel something when we put them on autopilot, would they feel like this? Would they feel this way? Like... Like my body isn't really my own anymore.

(Clears throat). That was an unnecessary tangent of the highest order. It didn't even make sense. But story of my life, I guess. Literally nothing makes sense anymore. And I don't know how to make it make sense. I don't know how to start this story, but my body is falling into certain patterns. I just don't know where those patterns came from.

And the not knowing hurts a lot. I can't... I can't feel myself. Like, I don't know where I am, but I'm also here. It's just... this is a body that I am dwelling in and somehow that's supposed to be me. I can reach up to my face and touch it. I can run

fingertips over my cheeks and chin, and most people, when they do that, they know that they are touching themselves, but I don't. I can't trust that. Anything I think or feel or touch is just... Tainted. But I think therefore I am, right? Cogito Ergo Sum, and how the actual frick do I know Latin? Assuming I got that right. I don't know why I'm so confident.

I don't know anything. I don't know where I should go or how or why or anything. Literally anything. But I'm not a blank slate. Though I definitely wish I could be. Because when you have a blank slate, though I definitely wish a could be. Because when you have a blank slate, a Tabula Rasa, you wouldn't have a reason to doubt what does get written on it. But no, I didn't have a blank slate. There were a lot of lies written on it, and lies by omission are still lies but lies from the deliberate removal of information are the big brothers of lies by omission, and they're also way more mean and aggressive, and frick, I'll say it, outright abusive.

And this is the fallout, I guess. I don't know what to believe or trust, and I can't even trust myself. I don't know who or what I am. I don't know where I end or begin. And everything is gone. Everything that I thought I had was a lie. Probably. Maybe. But once the precedent is set for such pervasive, life-defining lines, then anything could be a lie.

(softer) It's so... weird to say. (louder) Freeing somewhat, but then again, not really. (normal) I don't choose to have these breakdowns. These... Moments of vulnerability? Frick where did that phrase even come from... (breathe) They either can or can't happen because the world around me has decided if they can or can't happen. Of course, Dad won't let me have them. (anxious breathe). And maybe you will or won't. I guess, it's a toss up.

(Pause and start softer). But I think you will. I can't explain it, but I'm hopeful. Or so I think. But I don't remember what that emotion felt like. I want to say it's this, though, that it's me in this moment.

(Static. Music fades out. Equipment jostling. New music fades in)

Right now, while trying to reach you, I've found yet another gap in my memory. If you showed me how to do this transmission thing, and I am doing wrong... O--Okay, I feel dumb, but I guess that's proof, right? To the thing that I need you to believe: that I don't remember you or anything. And that's why I never called or wrote or met up at whatever rendezvous point we had. Or whatever. I don't know what it was (sharp inhale.)

I found out in an online forum that this is the sort of thing you're interested in: this... archaic transmission system. I don't know if I believe it because I also read that you hate it, on a different but similar forum, so I don't know what to believe, and I'm going to pretend that I didn't just strike my own nerve right then. For my own sake.

(exhale) Really though, completely and truthfully, no theatrics, no defenses, I don't want to think too much about it because, well, what if you aren't listening? What if you turn it off the second you recognized my voice? Maybe it made sense to do that. Maybe that was the only thing you could do. I mean, I'm taking over your usual nightly entertainment to bring you a story you may not believe or want to hear. And taking several steps back to before (sharp inhale), maybe I did something very heinous, and the fact that I don't remember it means very little. Because I proved to you that I can cause quite a bit of damage. And maybe I was really callous about it, so what feels like

a tragedy to me was actually a great service to the rest of the world. Once again, I don't know.

It seems like I'm damned if I do and damned if I don't, though. I know that much. That I'm trapped in a great state of uncertainty. I could drown or I could swim (breathe), but I'll never know which it will be until I try right? Or I guess after I try. After it's too late to go back. After what's done is done. I guess.

(Music fades out as static builds)

(Mic taps). So... (Music fades in). A few weeks ago, everything changed. On the day my life changed or fell apart or shattered or the day my soul died a little bit on the inside or outside or what the actual flip ever, well it started off as an ordinary day. Said literally everyone ever, I know, but give me some slack.

Do you... (sigh) Do you have any idea what an ordinary day for me is like? Okay, dumb way of wording it. I mean, did I ever tell you about my family? Because that would have given you the necessary pieces to understand what an ordinary day for me looks like. Because it kind of revolves around them.

Look, I'm... I'm not going to know where to begin. I'm sure you think that the best starting point would be the moment I left you, but there's a huge gaping hole in my memory around... everything related to you, so that's not going to be possible. In its place is a bunch of garbage filler that neither of us care about. I mean, I guess, sometimes life is little more than garbage filler, but whatever I'm stuck. I'm stuck just wiping all of that off the slate and attempting to move on with things and life and a story that might have never made sense anyway. I can only start with what I do know.

So Dad was always the stupid sad (Knocking. Music Pause. Static. Music cuts.)

(softer). I need to be careful. So... so careful. He can't know about this. (Music fades in) For one, he could try to stop, and two, when he's angry, he's... (voice cracking) a monster. It's hard to get him to that point, but once he's there... (sigh) I am afraid of him a little bit. More so now than I was a few days ago because now I see the full extent of this. But I think that maybe it was always like this. That deep down I always hated him as a way of coping with my fear. I felt a sense of disdain for him that I could never fully explain. And I never trusted him.

When Mom was alive, I never had to interact with him. And then she was gone. And as the eldest daughter, I had to fall into a sort of household management type role, which involved answering to him in one form or another but not that often. Even then he doesn't exactly listen to me. At all.

Oh, yeah, and I probably did bury the lead on that one a bit. Mom's gone. She has been for a while. I don't feel anything about it. And I don't know if I should.

But now, I'm the pseudo-matriarch of a family with an absent father, or absent on a good day, and four little children. There's a pretty hefty age gap between me and the second oldest. My only sister, and that makes this pseudo-mother role even more pronounced. But it's okay. I love them all so dearly, but especially my darling Roslyn. And I know I would have mentioned her to you, don't try to convince me otherwise. Even if you could somehow respond. Just... just leave this be. Let me believe I would have mentioned her because how could I not?

(Music fades out and new music fades in)

Roslyn was always my darling. Since the moment she was born. She was this little pink bundle so small and cooed so softly as she slept against our mother's chest. Our father was hardly around when she was born or in the following days. I mean, why would he be? He already had one daughter, so he had lived that experience already. No need to go through it a second time when he could be working. Working on what I still don't know.

But I did not care. Not after she was born. Because I had her. And her love. And then came my little brothers. The first birth, that of Raymond, he attended because having a boy was slightly different than having a little girl. Then he stopped showing up. He missed the birth of first Brian and then Dylan and didn't bat an eye about it. At some point, neither did we. It was part of a pattern, and for all that's wrong with that pattern, you can't say Dad wasn't consistent. He was there for my firsts and nothing else. And I could tell my siblings all about how little he added to any moment, but they never ask about him. Or Mom.

I guess... I guess we had all come to accept that it was just the five of us: we are a not so little family of younger people trying to make it work which was completely possible if we stayed together. I mean, everything is possible when you aren't worried about money. And to Dad's credit, his obsession with his research still pays our bills. The many bills that went into an upper middle class, lower upper class lifestyle for so many people.

(Music fades out and new music fades in)

But I'm getting behind myself, I guess. I woke up while the house was still bathed in night because seasons. It's winter here. The heater was running, and the hallways were lined with the small lights I had installed because having so many hallways and spaces completely lightless was creepy and deeply unsettling. And sure, Dad had raised his eyebrow at the bill, but he still paid it. So I woke up and took to the hallway, where my feet and only my feet were bathed in a soft, warm light.

Tough question, but was I a morning person when you knew me? I don't remember ever being one. I'm still not, really. But practically speaking, I have to get up early now. The kids need to eat before school. And Dad should also eat something, but that's secondary, considering he is more than capable of feeding himself. The main thing with Dad is that... well (sigh) I really hate saying this, but he's my boss. And breakfast is something like our morning check in.

I'm his office manager. More like office assistant when you consider some other factors. , but my business cards say office manager. As a general rule, either position is fine to have. But Dad sucks. And being accused of nepotism in this context is just triply awful.

Nobody says it to me, but I can see it in their eyes. They say to themselves how badly did she screw up every other facet of her life to need her dad to come through and give her this very low tier prize. Not objectively low tier. Not even when you're working in a medical practice, but it's... Okay in this particular medical practice, everything is just sad. Literally. I am knee deep in a well of other people's sadness every single day trying to restock the coffee.

Dad's a neurologist more generally, but specifically, he's essentially the neurologist of last resort. He's the person you bring your family member to when all else has failed. And yes, generally speaking that's how it goes. You bring someone else because they can't willingly go because, they can't make their own choices anymore.

And it's not that he can do anything for them, but that he's just trying to help someone else's parents or grandparents who aren't as far gone yet. It's research is what I'm trying to say. That's what he does. He researches these destructive conditions. Patients are a part of his work, but they aren't his priority. In some ways, they are just means to an end, but before you get offended, the patients seem to know this, and those who come before it gets too bad are either altruistically offering themselves up to save others or selfishly hoping that he can make them the exception to the glaring prognosis stitched into their diagnosis.

(Music fades out and new music fades in)

And I don't think there's anyone in any family who goes there that won't admit that their loved one is pretty much gone already. It's the sort of thing you can't hide from. And this doctor who sired me is trying to find a cure, but there are going to be a lot of things that aren't cures. He has to go through them all, and we-- I mean, the patients and their families are along for the ride with me. And magnify the family's concern by a thousand if the condition is genetic, and they're looking at their future as well.

There's a lot sobbing, regularly. We put families in closed rooms, but you can still hear it through the walls. But they don't care about privacy, anymore. It's sort of the last thing on their list. All the same, I had the walls of the practice reinforced twice and the



door jams redone, but all the crying still seeps through. And once the sobbing has managed that, it isn't so hard for it to cut into the skin of your scalp and into your mind where it promptly starts echoing.

Even now, as I talk into this mic alone, I still think I can hear it.

At first, you try to comfort them, or that's what I tried, but then I realized it was impossible. That I couldn't do anything to help them. It sucks, it's a bit callous to say, but it is still true.

And there was this one patient who... Well, he smiled when he saw me, and for the first time in well over a year, he found it in him to speak. His other doctor--the one before Dad--had thought he lost the ability long before he came to our practice. But there he was in our lobby: talking and smiling. He didn't recognize his kids, but even still they were so happy to hear his voice one more time.

I found out later that I look like his first love, and that's who he thought he was talking to. Not the wife who bore him the children I saw, who were now taking care of him, feeding him, and changing him. But a lover that came before her. And those aforementioned children did not take it well.

Even when you have a good moment, it's coupled with a bad one. Or several. Because their reaction was something I could have gone my whole life without experiencing but there I was because of that stupid job, in the midst of it.

I used to pretend that I didn't understand the judgment that up when people found out that the office manager was the great doctor's daughter, but I thought I got it after that talk or yelling match it turned out to be. I mean, if I really were going to dive

into this world, why not going to medicine and do what he was doing? Why not go into medicine and do what my dad was doing. Why not actually do something? I mean, I should have been more than capable of medical school. Genetics and all that. All that determines someone's outcome in life was going for me. I had the genes, the money, the powerful connections. So how did I screw all of that up? Why am I now the office manager, dealing with the worst of it? And I don't mean the families or the coffee or the crying. I'm talking about the powerlessness. All the powerlessness. The helplessness. That's what really sucks. No one would choose this.

(Static builds. Silence. New music fades in.)

Dad likes fixing things, you could say. That's what a lot of people say about him or print in their newspaper features or bring up in conferences when they have to introduce his presentation. It comes up a lot. But I would say that he really likes conquering things. And this is the ultimate obstacle course for medicine. These diseases that wipe out the very thing we understand to be our shelves: our brain, our mind, our thoughts, our memories. It's not the technical last front. It's the glammers one. For those who win, anyway, and he wants to win. Not so much take care of other people. But better things have happened for worse reasons, so whatever I guess. We can't really know what anyone is actually thinking, so we have to trust them. Or decide that it really doesn't matter. I mean, it does get to the point where you can't keep ignoring it. I've... I am standing at it. But he hasn't pushed anyone to that point like he has me.

So even though I knew he was going to be in the kitchen when I came out to start breakfast, the mere sight of his silhouette was enough to chill my blood. My heart was in a vice, instinctively. All of it was... instinctual. And that had always confused me.

(Music fades out and new music fades in)

He's always been a terrible dad, but that does not mean I have to be afraid of him. Or that I should have been. I might have my reasons now, but then was not now. And that's what I was: afraid of him. Fear of him not a mysterious silhouette in the darkness. I knew it was him. He cuts a very particular figure. It's all in the shoulders in the angle of his shoulders; they're overly pointed and perfectly symmetrical. No one else has that. Or no one ever should. They look so unnatural and almost painful, like the bone itself is trying to cut through his skin.

Maybe, I thought right then, because for some reason, I was looking for an explanation, his body is how animators drew cartoon villains when I was growing up. I could see it being the sort of shorthand that becomes almost a trope in that or any context, but I didn't... And I still don't... I try to envision a television screen, but nothing comes up. The glass or plastic whatever it was, has nothing but static. I don't remember. Of fricking course. I don't.

I should probably explain something else about Dad's practice before I go on: he does not--to his credit--charge his patients for his services. It would likely seem extra cruel, to you, to charge an obscene amount of money when you're in all likelihood not going to make anything better. Which is what would be happening there. I mean, sure, he is trying to make things better, yes, and he'll try and try and try to help them, but it

won't do as much as anyone hopes it could. Even to him, who doesn't fully care about his patients. He always does want to do more. And he has some successes, yes, but not enough for anyone in that office to feel good about putting a price tag on it.

And yet we aren't destitute and the practice isn't suffering. The thing about neurodegenerative diseases is that they are very equal-opportunity. You can't say that about every illness, but this class of disease doesn't fucking care who you are or how much is in the bank or how much you can make in a second by calling for a dividend on your company's stocks. It doesn't care about those things. It takes, and it takes, and it takes. But it will always take the things that you can't put money on, not that some people haven't tried.

So some patients have the ability to throw money at him. And they do. A lot. Sometimes before they even become patients.

(Music fades out and new music fades in)

So on the morning everything changed. Dad was sitting at the kitchen island that's attached to the rest of the countertops, making it more of a peninsula than anything else, but I'd never heard it be called that. Whatever. Dad was sitting there, and he had the coffee maker running, and nothing else because coffee was the only thing he cared about. And when I went to mention this to him, as a repeated criticism, he grunted, largely ignored me, but slid a paper closer to me.

Well, it wasn't a paper; it was cardstock: thick cardstock with ink all over it. It was just printed with high end ink on high end paper. I mean... Okay. It was an invitation to a fundraising gala being held in his honor and for his benefit by Ms... Okay well, the name

doesn't matter to you, but I recognized it, and maybe you know what even I am talking about. For my side of the story, both of her parents were patients of ours. Both had genetic conditions, so it was almost a guarantee she would be following down that same road. And she was scared. She wanted a cure developed now, and Dad was her best chance at it.

All of that was understandable. But my eyes fell further down the page or invitation. And by fell further, I mean I just lowered my eyes one line of text, to see the date.

"This is tonight," I told him.

He hummed to confirm but nothing else.

"And you expect me to go?" I asked him.

But it wasn't really a question. You might be calling it a bold assumption, but I knew how things went with him. He would expect me to go, despite the short notice, and likely in his place to make apologies and to greet the new donors, to network, and try to pull more money out of pockets.

(Music fades out and new music fades in)

Even though these galas were a huge part of how he paid the bills, he could never be bothered to show up. But he could send his dutiful daughter and office manager. That was something he could do. Minimal effort on his part. But I could smile and court donors while apologizing for his absence. I'd done it hundreds of times before, maybe. And that's not a big deal by most standards, but I hated to do it all the same

because I would have to paint him the dutiful martyr, and those words, however I phrased them, always felt disgusting in my mouth.

“You have got to be kidding me,” I said.

“It’s art, Zaneta. You like art,” he rebuked me.

Simple statements as rebukes. That’s how our relationship is: how far we have fallen if we were ever somewhere else at all. He was right. I do like art. Or I did, and I think I still do, but this has been a wild ride for me. (Nasal inhale). I’m sorry. (Exhale) Art is the sort of interest that he did not approve of so it was shelved But by now, you must have noticed that he does not care about me at all. Nor my siblings. Nor really anyone.

(Pause). Sorry. I was listening for Roslyn. It’s late here. And she doesn’t sleep well at night.

Back to the story, I guess. Back to the kitchen that morning. I was angry at Dad for this inconvenience, and he was aloof and distant like he always was because he did not care to not be. The invitation had been sent out months prior, of course. And while I was the office assistant, I was not his assistant, so I had no way of knowing until this scrap fell off of his table. When he tossed me this scrap from his table. And here it was: now in my hand, when it should have been for a long time considering it had always been his plan for me to go.

(softer). No, I didn’t have plans that night. I never do. I always thought I had this instinct to be home to take care of my siblings, but now as with everything, I don’t know.

(louder) I really don’t know.

But there was something... (sigh) The invitation was beautiful, beyond anything I had seen normal printers do. I mean, we had to make our own invitations to things before, and I had never seen a sample of any price look this magnificent. Then again, Ms. So and So could pay for the high end stuff. She always did. Everything was high end.

(Music fades out and new music fades in)

So this actually was going to be a nice party, I thought. Good food, good wine, and nice entertainment. Not a band, I figured out quickly, but an art installation. Because what else are going to do when you can throw around that much money. But you already knew that.

My eyes lowered to the text beneath my father's name. To the line of text that carried my destiny, it turned out.

'Featuring the work of the mysterious: Lucent, provided by the artist's manager,' the invitation read, and once I saw your name, I couldn't turn my eyes of it. There was no turning back. In that line was the first crack. It was the spark that lit the fuse, that set this fault line on fire. That was the beginning of the break. I could feel it. (shaky breathe) I could feel it shaking my soul. As something began to come out.

When I looked up, Dad seemed to notice. He was staring at me. Or into my eyes but through my eyes, into my brain. So it seemed. (Knocking). So it seemed. I'm sorry. I can't stay any longer. (Sigh) I've said everything and nothing. And I can't do anymore. I can't risk it. I can't risk him finding me. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'll be back soon. I'm sorry. (Static builds. Static cuts. Silence.)

This has been a production of Miscellany Media Studios with music licensed from the Sounds like an Earful music supply. It was written, performed, edited, and produced by MJ Bailey. If you like the show, please consider leaving a review and-or telling many friends about it. Thanks.