

(Static fades in and cuts. Four brief beeps. Static fades in and then out)

Well, I'm here. I'm somewhere. Unspecified here. I'm somewhere. I can't really tell you where right now, but I'm safe. And as always my timing could have been better, maybe.

(Music fades out and new music fades in)

I didn't mean to make you wait. Genuinely. Nothing like building suspense and panic, though, you know? But definitely not my intention. That's... I don't know. Maybe, just maybe you were worried about whether or not I was alive, and that must have been stressful. But that does seem like a stretch. And phrasing it that way makes it seem like I am attacking your feelings, and I didn't mean to do that, so I apologize. If I should.

It's not even that one-sided conversations are hard, which they are. Dad always said I had a flair for the dramatic, but who knows if that's true. Dramatics can be fun and often the product of a broken reality. And I am firmly in the latter category right here.

Maybe things were going to get better once I left, right? I think I assumed--yet again--as much. And I probably should stop doing that. I knew this was going to be hard, but I didn't think about the details. And the concept of 'hard' can only take you so far. Like out your window, down the street to the bus stop, onto the bus etc, etc, etc. It gets you past the point where going back is a viable option. I mean, I'm sure you're saying I could have at any time. Technically. But no.

Anyway, there was a lot there that I didn't think about. And I'll spare you some of those details. It just wasn't pretty all the time. Not at all.

But maybe I could have made you wait a bit longer because there was something that was supposed to be on this channel right now. I know that. I was counting out the

week. And I mean, it's a thrilling story, right? It was a shock to me that my mother was alive, but maybe that was just me. Maybe you saw it coming.

(Music fades out and new music fades in)

I--I need to put it out there. I feel stupid for not realizing how bad things were, you know? With Dad. Like, I knew he wasn't a great person, but I still assumed there was a limit to it. I still thought that there was a part of him that was looking out for me and the kids. In an autopilot sort of way. Like the bare minimum. He... He had his problems, okay, but he put a roof over our heads and food on our table. Even sprung for the organic stuff when the science literature said to. It was a brief phase before the literature went back to the 'doesn't make a huge difference' position, but still, it showed that he cared somewhat.

But 'care' is a complicated thing. We don't want to think that it is, though. We like the idea of a linear relationship between the action that is caring and one's good, genuine, altruistic intentions. It's comforting to think that everything is simple and predictable like that. Duplicity and deceit pull at the thread of our reality, spin us, break us down, destroying everything, and it's so much easier to pretend that none of it exists, right? We want care to always be because the other person genuinely wants what's best for us, as we are, as an end in and of ourselves and not because they have some ulterior motives.

But on the other hand, having a good motive doesn't translate into actual care, either. I want to think I had a good motive in leaving, but I really didn't think about the details. And there are consequences to that. It's hard to call that care.

(Music fades out and new music fades in)

I wasn't expecting you to be waiting for me when I got to that house. I knew not to expect it. Too simple. Too romantic for a life as overly complicated as mine could be. I just don't think good things are going to come to me. It's not my lot in life. But at the same time, I wasn't expecting anything else or anyone else. I went out there because I--I didn't have a choice besides fully committing. And I didn't think about safe shelter or food beyond a day or two. Or water. Or company.

But when I got there, I saw I wasn't alone. I knew it wasn't you or anyone I could recognize, but still, weirdly enough, I wasn't afraid. I couldn't afford to be. I had burned that other bridge in my wake quite a while ago. Second I left the house, there was no going back. The window was a one-way climb. Literally. It has some weird anti-theft edging on the outside, and I would have cut my hand up something fierce if I tried to go back in.

I opened the door on this run down shock and was greeted by a dual surprise. For one, the door didn't fall off, which is what I was expecting, but I couldn't think about that for long. That was when I saw the person camped out in the corner.

(Music fades out and new music fades in)

So, I quickly conclude, obviously, I'm in the wrong, right? I just burst into someone's home. What do I care if it was legally occupied or not. They had set up their life, and I was on a stupid errand. But then came the apologies, and they weren't from me. So, you know, I had to set that conversation right.

"My bad," I said because it was, factually speaking, my bad. "Do you live here? Because, like, I just... I don't know entirely what I'm doing."

See, that's when the poorly thought out nature of this entire action hit me. I didn't know what I was going to do. I thought there was immediately going to be another hint, but then again it took me a while to figure out the painting. And the key. All in all, I don't have a good track record at this. But there was no reason this person and I couldn't share this dwelling place while I tried to figure it out. I tried to say that while zippers were furiously going.

"Plenty of room in this here building for the two of us, partner," I said. Which was a joke so badly done that it actually helped the conversation.

I put my hand forth. "My name is Zaneta."

"Lottie," she said after. "She/her"

I hadn't been in the sort of circles where pronouns were part of one's introduction, but I didn't want to be a part of those others circles anymore. So fair enough.

(Music fades out and new music fades in)

I'll take this one. I was starting to like her already. "Same, I replied. "She/her."

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

I stopped there with my mouth slightly open for a second. " A long story, but I've got some jerky in my bag. We could share it while I try to tell you what's going on with me."

Lottie took a bit of offense at that offer because it seemed like I had assumed she had not eaten in a while. Or maybe she was just defensive for other reasons, I don't know.

“It isn’t about you, I hurriedly explained. “This is literally a long story, huge, parts of it are not going to make sense, and I’m essentially bribing you preemptively to believe me.”

My anxious nature apparently spoke to her because we got along well after that. Long after finishing off that pack of jerky between the two of us. We talked for how after that despite how late it was getting. We are about the same age. Lottie had lost track of time out on the road, as she put it, so it took us a second to figure everything out. And you know, we... We had the same... Well, we both knew the same childhood cartoon shows, doll brands, and other weird pop culture trivia. And it was such a relief to have that part of my life, that sort of framework, validated. No matter how trivia it all was. Just--Just to know something was true: something that I remembered was accurate. She also believed me about my memories and Dad and everything.

You know, to her, I didn’t even have to justify leaving Dad’s house and all the money and status and everything. I’m sure in some circles that;s a controversial decision, but Lottie understands. She knows full well I had to leave, and I had no choice on that front. It’s not a fight with her. It’s a conversation. It’s comfort. It’s support.

When I find you, Lucent, I’ll probably have Lottie with me. She’s welcome to stay with me as long as she wants, and I think she’ll want to for a while. Right now, she doesn’t have any sort of direction. She has less of a one than me. Really, the only thing she wants is to not be alone on the road anymore, and that singular desire got her into a lot of trouble. But it’s her trouble to talk about. Not mine. I can and will only speak for myself. And right now, I will say that she makes me feel sane again, in a way that nobody can take from me, and there’s no greater gift a friend can give you than that.

We stayed in the house for a couple days. For some reason, no one was checking in that place. I asked her if that was unusual, and she shrugged. It was a sort of 'don't look a gift horse in the mouth' sort of moment. I understood, but Lottie wasn't feeling well. I didn't want to even look for the next clue before she was okay because I didn't want to be in a position where I had to think about whether or not to leave her behind. And I couldn't broadcast. There's a short window I can do it, and she was particularly weak during that window. At this point, we've decided we're going to take care of each other. Simple as that.

And there's more to say, I get it. About Mom, but I'm not ready to do it again. Just because you didn't get the perceived benefits of the last time does not change things on my end. It doesn't mean I'm obligated to do anything.

I thought you'd be happier to know that I was safe. Safe-ish. Lottie and I are in another safe house along the way. Safe. House. A house that is safe. Time is tight on our journey, but we're getting there.

(Static starts. Music cuts. Static fades out).

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