

(Static fades in and then out)

There wasn't much to do in that first house. It makes sense. There's no way the plan could have been for me to stay there for so long.

(Music fades in)

That building wasn't a great place to be in. It might have been structurally sound, but there's nothing but debris all over the place. Well, that's what the eye can see. If I'm honest with myself, it was probably worse than that. Worse still when Lottie first found it. She told me she did some cleaning up and gathered up a few odds and ends as the related needs came up. She wasn't sure if she meant to stay for a long time. But once she got sick, it was... it was just easier for her to do so. Her body was weak, and she needed her rest. Might as well get it in a house no one was ever supposed to go into ever. Once again makes sense. I can see that. Even if I was the one who threw a wrench in that plot with my... everything.

But when Lottie is resting, I have to amuse myself. Obviously, there's nothing here for that. But saying that makes me feel guilty for the impulse because bigger concerns, am I right? Lottie would know a lot about them. She wasn't eating regularly before I came along. Or I think she wasn't. Probably mean of me to speculate like that, but I can't help it. It's the maternal impulse drilled into me. Or more of a habit than an impulse. I guess an impulse would somewhat imply I want kids of my own, which is not the case. So... Habit, let's go with that.

And Lottie looks out for me. In her own way that just so happens to be the exact way I need. There's that. There's a call for reciprocity right there. And a reason to use

all the money Dr. Alexson had kept for me in his office. It's more than I was expecting. But then again, I didn't know what to expect.

(Music fades out and new music fades in)

I've tried not to think about him. Admittedly. As rude as that might have been. I've tried not to think about anything really. As ill advised as that might be. Like how... Like how that anti-theft trimming on the window I mentioned wasn't there during my practice run. But that alone shouldn't be so concerning, right? There's a reason it's there, right? I mean, we lived in an affluent area, people get paranoid, and a salesperson knows how to capitalize on that. But it was still odd. Or not odd. It was foreboding. I know when it must have gone up too. It must have been when someone was supposedly checking the trees outside and other garden-esque things outside. It was so innocuous that I didn't question it. I wouldn't have questioned it. I should have. But I was afraid to. I wasn't able to. Reasons and reason and reasons. (Sigh) Whatever.

Being with Lottie means being able to start to unpack all that I'm feeling, which isn't easy to do, but there's a catharsis to it. Telling her about Dr. Alexson has been especially hard, but he was a hard subject to avoid. It's how we can eat well, now, which was a novel concept to her. It broke my heart a bit, but I can feed her now. For now. It's quite a bit of money, but it certainly isn't infinite. This isn't going to be a permanent solution. It just gives us some time. Time to get to where I was going. And therein lies the problem.

(Music fades out and new music fades in)

It took me a while to get to it, but I did search that building. Partially out of boredom. I had nothing else to do for a while when Lottie was resting. My daily

responsibilities are either feed us or search for the next clue: those were my options. And searching was the easier and most frequent activity I took. And there's nothing there. It was a place to rest for a few days. Get over the shock and all that. There was some privacy to be had. From the street, you can't really see into the house, but you can see enough to assume that no one's here. Lottie was here during my practice run, and I had no idea.

But when I would go out to get us food, well, I could do that quickly because it was easy. There was no searching involved. I knew where to go. I knew the various food stops that are in this area. I know where to find coffee and pastries when my stomach can't handle anything more substantial or to find the more substantial stuff that Lottie needs. And I had a weird aversion to a certain corner shop. It didn't make sense. The place looks innocent from the outside, but my body just would not have it. I found out later while eavesdropping on conversations that the place is probably a front for something. Very few people go in, and anyone who genuinely eats there tends to get ill. Now they don't mean to make you sick, but they don't know how to not do that.

But I knew on some level that they didn't know how to not do that. So I... So I had been here before. Not just during a quick practice run. I've actually been there for a decent chunk of time. Long enough to get the lay of the land, to learn this area on a deep level and enough for it to not be forgettable.

That wasn't taken away. And maybe it couldn't have been. There must be different types of memory or knowledge, right? Muscle memory is what I'm thinking about now. The kind of memory that's just autopilot for your body. Dad couldn't have taken that from me. He couldn't have taken that which I didn't fully hold in the first place,

right? It made sense. Whether or not it's true. After a couple days, I realized that this was the one thing about me I could trust. While I waited for some other idea, I would just let myself just walk. My legs counted out the steps, and any turn my feet wanted to take, I indulged. That's when or how I found the building. It hardly took me a couple hours.

(Music fades out and new music fades in)

The entire neighborhood's inconsistent, I would say. That's the best way of describing it. Unlike gentrification, there's plenty of money that comes in but plenty that flows out in certain directions. And now, some buildings are falling apart, but some are pristine. And it looks like the local city council--while largely indifferent in many other ways--has tried to keep the street paved properly. They're working against time on that, though, and time is not kind. Time hasn't been kind to anything here. There's a few trees the street over from the house that are also decaying, but there's official tape around one of them. So I guess they're going to try to do something about it. It's not an unsafe neighborhood, but it can't really get offended that you thought as much.

It was by an untaped tree that I found myself stopping. There wasn't anything all that special about it except for some markings that would suggest someone once upon a time, chained up their bike a bit too aggressively or left it for too long. You could make out a couple links in the bark. Clean, deep impressions of a certain shape.

That tree stood on a property with a smaller than average multi-family building also on the lot. The building had maybe four or five units. It was three floors and did not stand that wide. So maybe one or two units per floor. But even that math isn't great, so

what am I talking about? I'm talking about one of the units on the top floor. I'm talking about knowing that's where I needed to go.

(Music fades out and new music fades in)

And once again, this supposed determination made me do something relatively dumb. I went onto the property. And once again, it looked like no one was around, so... so what was the point of trespassing or thinking about trespassing. There was definitely a point, and I should have realized that, but I was slow to learn, and having Lottie around somewhat worked out for me.

I picked up one of the rocks that lined the outside of the building. That feature was not a wise aesthetic decision because those rocks were perfect for throwing. They carried a great weight to them while still fitting perfectly in a hand. I swear, if I had half a mind to break one of those windows, I could do it. Might have been unarmed when I arrived on the property but suddenly I wasn't. But I wasn't there to commit an act of vandalism in addition to my trespassing. It might have looked like it since I had to walk so many steps onto the grass to get to the rock that was close to the halfway point, but like I said, no one was around to see me do it. And sure enough, I lifted the rock, dug a bit--maybe half an inch--and found a plastic baggy with a few keys.

(Music fades out and new music fades in)

And that was enough chaos for me for one day, so I raced back to the house with my bag in hand. I didn't think about the moral ramifications of taking someone's key because it wasn't someone's key. It was mine. I knew it. I just knew it was mine. I was claiming that it was mine. But I look back on that back, and it doesn't make sense. I know that was the right thing to do, but it still doesn't make sense.

Lucent, I... I have been laboring under the conclusion that you set this path up for me, but if so, how could I have known to grab the key? It took me a couple hours to think that maybe that wasn't the path. Maybe this is just about me getting Lottie to a different environment. Maybe that's why I felt so sure, I-- I needed to get her to some place that wasn't so detrimental to her health. I studied that building for a bit, and from what I could see of it from the outside, someone had been looking out for it. Someone kept the grass trimmed. Some of the windows are washed. Others not. But that's more of a tenant thing with a building so short and all the window so to the ground.

Honestly, it was worth a shot. And I knew the key was mine, or I could convince myself that. I could tell myself that and end the conversation because Lottie needed me. She was particularly bad that day. And it was... It was the day after I told her about Dr. Alexson, and so I was in a very particular frame of mine, which was the frame of mind that... That wants Dr. Alexson to be the one secretly alive and not my mom. I mean, he's more useful, right? Or I would think. Because Mom was a musician. If I remember correctly, she was a musician. She gave it up when I was born, so maybe on some deep down level, I also expect her to hate me. The situation has to be more complicated than that. I'm just saying if I do one day find her, and the first thing she says to me is some deviation of 'F--- you,' I will not be surprised in the least bit. Maybe I ruined her life by being born, and maybe I ruined the kids' lives by trying to be reborn. I will not think about them. I refuse to do it. But even still, there's a lot of things I could say about my ability to destroy: it is prolific. Dr. Alexson was the only person who never made me feel useless or worse than that. So there's that consideration on top of the practical knowledge he brings.

(Music fades out and new music fades in)

Because maybe I shouldn't say this, but for my own sake, I will. Lottie doesn't know why she's sick, and that's the sort of question a doctor could answer after some testing. But can she even go to a doctor now that I'm attached to her? Is Dad a big enough influence in the medical field in general to be able to find me if a companion of mine gets sick? Is every doctor just one lure away from being his spy? I don't know. Obviously, I can't know that. But grabbing on someone's coattails is a way to the top, though, and Dad is way too lazy to ever shake anyone off. So, I could see it happening. But even if not, Lottie's a soul on the road. People on the road aren't cared about. So assuming she could walk in, what if they won't help her? Or what if they do something worse?

The latter bit is something she has thought about quite a bit, so we were both hoping time would be able to heal her, at least part of the way. No need to fear the touch of time more than you normally do. However, she's still not all the way better. A bit better but not what she should be. And she's a bit quick to add, she may never be well. But I know our constant moving isn't helping her. We still do it. We don't have a choice. I don't have a choice. Even when it comes to her, I'm... I'm more of a detriment than anything else.

I try not to think about that either. This shelf of things I avoid is full, but I can always cram more onto it.

The moment Lottie was strong enough, I asked her to take this leap of faith with me. And she did. It was after two days that we went back to the building. It was the first time I had gone back. I had been waiting to be able to bring her with me. Maybe she

was safer in that first house, but at the time, I thought maybe there was something in the walls that was making her sick. Maybe there was asbestos. Not that I know what asbestos poisoning would look like. It just... It was just easier to jump to that conclusion, and she was willing to go along with it.

Maybe she's enabling me by believing in all this, by trusting that the gut feeling that I have about the key being mine is right, and then by going along with me to the place. She didn't hesitate when she was packing up her life into a couple bags in a matter of moments. I shouldn't think too much about that detail. That's my life too now, and I tend to not cope with things well. So... so we just needed to keep moving, right? Just keep moving.

It took me a second or two or several to figure out which key was which. And that made me nervous. How could it now? We are in all likelihood committing some sort of crime, right? We had no good reason to be there. But maybe I did it. And I knew exactly where to go. I took to that hallway like I had walked there my whole life.

Lottie asked me if I had been there before, but I couldn't answer her. At some point, even Occam's razor starts to betray you. And what do you do then? What do you do when even the most logical explanation does not make sense anymore?

You keep walking, that's what. You let your legs count the steps and trust your feet on the turns. It's how we ended up on the third floor, at the only door of the third floor. It's why--against overwhelming reason and logic--we went inside.

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

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