

(Static fades in, peaks, and then fades out but lingers)

Hello? Hello?

(Microphone taps. Static stops.)

I forgot how hard this was. Then again, I've never tried it on the road before. Or not quite the road.

(Music fades in)

I'm hiding out right now. It's too late to move about. Especially alone. And I am alone, now. Lottie didn't want me to leave her, but what choice did I have? She's still not getting worse, as she lovingly pointed out, but she's already so sick. She can hardly stand, never mind walk, so I have to be her legs right now. I have to run and go get her help.

But I'm not used to this. Come to think of it, I do think I've ever travelled alone. Ever. There were family trips, apparently trips with my mom, and now trips with Lottie, and to a great extent that completely sums up the part of my life that I know for sure happened. If I remember correctly, university happened close to home. And there's nothing wrong with that if you're anyone but me. Except I am me. And I can't believe I wouldn't have taken that escape.

But if I keep blaming myself I'll lose what little I have left of my mind. And that's a real possibility out here, on the figurative road. In a literal sense, I'm back in one of the safehouses Lottie and I had already gone through. I have to retrace my steps to get Lottie help. I don't know what else to do. There's only one doctor left that I feel anything even vaguely like trust for, but I might be barking up the wrong tree by going to them. Their specialty is wrong, but maybe they know someone else I can trust, someone

who's expertise might be more useful, and their word will be that person's bond. But I don't know. I can't trust what side they're on.

Maybe they do or don't understand how bad Dad is in so far as he lines up with badness as a general concept, but I tried to make them understand that I wasn't like that. I was doing my absolute best to prove that despite how the general situation around us was pretty terrible to them, I wasn't like that. I did my best. And--frick--my best doesn't tend to be good enough. I need this to be the exception. I can only hope it's the exception. Only hope until I get there.

Time lost its meaning fairly early on in our travels. Partially because Lottie was already sick enough to need large amounts of rest and partially because I was trying to make sense of the world that I seemingly left on that desk. I couldn't help but dive into it. It was like gazing into an alternate dimension. One where I was truly and utterly myself. Unhindered and free.

That isn't a simile in a technical sense, is it? I mean structurally, it fits the bill. But you wouldn't say a towel that was dipped into an ocean is 'wet like a soaked dish cloth.' Because then you would essentially be saying the same thing twice, which is annoying. I do it a lot, but it is still annoying. Maybe dimension is too strong of a word, and if I drop that, then I'll just have a descriptor of the moment, but the word 'alternate' does need some sort of noun to ground itself too. 'Dimension' came naturally because those words get paired so often, but it's a bit too strong right now. So maybe not an alternate dimension but an alternate life or me.

'Life' sounds better. To say 'alternate me' is pulling back into the existential stuff that I am desperate to avoid. I just can't right now. Or really ever but right now especially. Not when I'm physically alone.

Oh but hey, I'm not entirely physically alone. The car followed me. Occupants unknown, but it has some way of moving. Someone's directing it. And I knew to expect that. Or I should have. It's been with us this whole time, and I'm the one with a sketchy backstory. Lottie's been fairly honest with me, and she's clean. She's been picked on and singled out for no good reason, but as for the record of her own sins, that slate is pristine. Obviously. She could never hurt a fly.

And some people would look at the predicament we have found ourselves in with her health and think, "It's always the good ones." Or worse yet, as the old saying goes, "only the good die young," and that's just... Well, we don't mean it to be accurate when we say it, right?

(Music fades out and new music fades in)

We just want to voice our frustrations out into the world, and because that sentence is prescreened, generally accepted, and widely used, you know what I mean if I were to invoke it. "The good die young" means that the jerkwads who deserve a comeuppance are not getting it in a timely manner.

It isn't even just Dad. It's a lot of people. It's a lot of people I interacted with regularly at that job. Not so much the patients because--I get it--not too much they can do on that front. Even when it came to their families, I understand what's going on with them. I get why they were rude to me. I cared about the kids, so I had some sort of frame of reference for fear, love, and potential loss. It was the vendors that sucked the

most. Always pushy and just hyper focused on their bottom line, as if I couldn't see the calculators going off in their heads. Maybe I'm overreacting, but I don't like it when people think I'm stupid. Which was somewhat latent in those interactions. Same thing with the donors. They had the same opinion of me because I wasn't a doctor. I wasn't set to follow in my father's footsteps, so to them, I was largely useless. I was a glorified gate, in fact. I had this tendency of getting in their way.

One of the things I was most interested in when I was looking at all of (quote) 'my' stuff was... Well, my intelligence. Petty as it is. I wanted to know if I was smart enough to have become a doctor someday? Is there that extra tragedy in all of this? That any of the patients I could have helped are also going to be without that caregiver and medical advocate? But even packaged that way, it's a stupid thought, I know. But maybe it had something to do with Lottie. Because how convenient would it be if I could just suddenly pull a doctor out of my brain and fix her right up? I'm sure we'd all love a medical expert lurking in our subconscious, and for me, there was half a chance at that. Quarter of a chance. Maybe an eighth. Or it wasn't zero. But nothing came up.

The notes and books were all in philosophy. So they weren't objectively useless, but quoting Socrates at Lottie's lungs wasn't going to fix a darn thing, so forgive me for being snippy. But I was into it. Into philosophy not a poorly thought out use for Socratic philosophy. I could tell as much from my notes that I did genuinely enjoy this, that I was fascinated with everything that was there. All those books and notes were a glimpse into that world, but I had a deeper history than what I was seeing in front of me.

(Music fades out and new music fades in)

But what I could see painted a pretty thorough picture all the same. There were lines in those books that mirrored thoughts I had or beliefs I held, things that I thought just came to me. Like the neurons in my brain just so happened to fire in a way that made those things, and one little detail changed could have created an entirely new thought. Potential irony of that supposed 'little detail' comment aside, it turns out that those thoughts weren't my own. They were phantoms of my old life and all the books I carried through it.

That should be a cool thought, but it can't be. Not now. Because... Well, I doubt that version of me would have pulled Lottie in this mess or abandoned the kids in the traumatic that way I did. Or... Frick, the patients might not be okay. A lot of things might have fallen apart because I abruptly decided to remove myself from the equation. Maybe I had no obligation to be there, but I fell into it no differently than I fell into this life. I had to make the most of it in some regards, and now I'm in this life: a life where I was the one to find Lottie and not someone like a social worker.

Sh-- Why didn't I just try to call one of those? Fri-- Infinitely better than my nonsense right now. But I can't go back. I--I can't now. There was some destructive stuff happening in the house that I left Lottie in, and now we're all implicated. That's my mistake too. I didn't realize it at first. It was just the best of a bad situation. It was a safe place for us to go in the moment after... months on the road, total? I think that's how long it's been. That house, for all of its illegal activity, was the first somewhat not bad option that came up. And we had miles to go to get the place we were actually headed to. I had to make a judgment call. Lottie was in no place to do it.

(Pause)

Sometimes I find myself thinking that if I tell you where we are, the cavalry is going to come, you know? Like that's all you're waiting for: an address. Or a vague approximation of where we currently are. Because, sure, I took over a public transmission, but it didn't look like anyone was listening to it. And the radio police never came for me.

(Music fades out and new music fades in)

And that car out front already knows to follow me, so what does any of this matter? Actually what does any of this matter?

I didn't take those books with me. There was no room in our little travel bags. And Lottie shouldn't carry anything. I hold her to that and hold myself up as the designated pack mule. It isn't all bad. It means not having to consider whether or not to take something like those books with us. I couldn't carry them, so it didn't matter. Maybe there was a part of alternative me that was in those books. Maybe I had an obligation to her. I certainly had a right to them, but I didn't want them. I didn't want those pieces of her, I mean. To be blunt, I don't think I particularly like the person that she was. From her notes, she seems self-righteous? Elitist. Like, she had all the answers because she was interested in philosophy.

And I've known people like that. I've hated them. I don't know how I could have become one, but that's where we were or could have been. Maybe I could have grown up and out of the jerkwad pit, but who knows? Nobody ever wins the what-if game.

The only book that mattered to me was the blatantly overdue library book. It had a sticky note on it that read, 'Take me home,' and that was the responsible thing to do,

after all. It had been, what, years since it was checked out. Who knows what the timeline was. But there was something... off about the direction.

(Music fades out and new music fades in)

The fact that it wasn't 'bring to library' or the simple 'return.' 'Take me home' seemed so much more personal than that. And a bit pointed. So I took it. The library wasn't that far away, after all. It was a day trip, so I wouldn't even have to leave Lottie.

Sure, I was partially worried about the fines. After all, they do add up quickly. But at some point, it would had to go to collections, right? Some creditor would've stopped by. I never saw one. And that's the sort of problem Dad could have thrown money at, so if it came up, he probably would have done so. Besides, at the time, I wasn't as broke as I could have been. I knew Lottie was going to need money for medicine, but at that point, I thought I had enough for both. Or I hoped so.

But it turned out to be irrelevant. In so many ways.

The obvious thing to do in that situation would have been to drop the book off in the return bin outside by the door and be done with it. That's what I thought to do because it didn't seem like I had any other options, you know? But when I got there, the bin outside was busted, and a nice little note was taped to the front of it apologizing for the inconvenience. It was a nice apology, but it was what it was. Which was an excuse to go inside. And I needed to go inside, it turns out. I wish the "Take Me Home" comment could have clarified that bit, but it all worked out in the end.

One of the librarians at the desk looked up when she sensed the nervous energy of an unfamiliar soul walk into her building. It was meant to be a casual glance at first,

but it turned into anything but. Her eyes locked onto me. And the color drained from her face.

“Z?” she whispered in disbelief.

And yeah, my name starts with that letter. It’s one of the few that does, so I somewhat liked my odds, but of course, it was more complicated than that. The librarian hopped over the desk and reached out to hug me. Which created a wide range of problems because I didn’t know who she was. But for the moment, I accepted the embrace all the same. It was a way to stall for time.

I don’t know why I thought her name was eventually going to come to me, but of course it didn’t. And it wasn’t the sort of thing I could hide. She hurried me into one of the small reading rooms and locked the door behind us. Once alone, my lack of warmth and familiarity became abundantly clear.

“Z?” she asked again. “Don’t you recognize me?”

She wasn’t nice enough to lead with her name, so I was somewhat stuck. I couldn’t fake it. I really didn’t have much to gain by faking it. Sure, my pride would be initially spared, but it was only a matter of time before I would get caught, and then it would be even more embarrassing. Then again, I couldn’t have been honest with everything, right? It all seemed more than a little farfetched.

So I tried to keep it simple. “I lost my memory.”

Her hand flew to her mouth, and I panicked.

“There was an accident,” I replied. “I hit my head pretty bad.”

(Music fades out and new music fades in)



Which would suggest that things should have been worse. I mean, traumatic, memory-losing injuries don't come to the party alone. But I was trusting her not to know that. Librarians might know a lot but hopefully not that.

Because I didn't know who she was. I didn't know if I could trust her. I just knew I had to try something, right?

Just like tonight. I have to try something. I need to get some rest.

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

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