

(Three short static bursts)

I don't do well when I'm alone in my own head, and that's where I am right now. Alone, in an unfamiliar space, and in my own head.

(Music fades in)

But I did hear from Lottie, and she's actually doing better, which is such a relief.

(Sigh) But I can never seem to let myself be happy for long. Now I can't stop thinking that--that maybe I shouldn't have taken that phone call. (With a sigh) Oh, what is this? What is my problem? That I can be so paranoid as to want to be unreachable and yet so desperate to be reachable. And I know what you're thinking. Or what I hope you're thinking. It's different to want just one person to be able to talk to you than it is to want the world to be able to do it on a whim, but you don't understand. You don't know my dad. He's a "foot in the door" type guy, which is to say that he can always jam his foot into any door that catches his eye. The only real defense to that is to surround yourself with walls. Not doors, and I clearly haven't done that.

But Lottie's doing better. I should focus on that. She's been doing better since I left. And that's a good sign, right? It means I have some time. I needed more time. I needed more time to make up for the unfortunate fact that I got delayed. Rightfully delayed. Well, I needed to redirect. That part was 'rightful.' Burning down the library I had visited and apparently loved wasn't 'rightful' in the slightest.

Wise or not, because there was no point in doing it and a very good reason in Lottie to not do it at all, I was going to go visit. It was some... It was some small taste of familiarity, a theoretical familiarity, that I was desperate to have back. Sure, the first time

I went there nothing came back, and even talking to Reine did practically nothing. But I'm still stupidly hopeful deep down.

That's what her name turned out to be: Reine. I don't think I mentioned that. I probably should have, but it's been... It's been hard. Everything's been hard. And I'm so tired.

(Music fades out and new music fades in)

Reine had to completely reintroduce herself to me. She told me how I just showed up in the library one day, almost like a vision out of a movie, she would have called me. My long hair was blowing behind me, and I had a sun kissed face in the dead of winter. She told me how I broke the ice by complimenting her tongue piercing and lamented that the vein placement on my tongue didn't allow me to have one. Her story both sounded right and didn't. It sounded like something I would want to be but that I could never be. Maybe I could pretend to be, but it would be a facade that could easily be washed away.

Reine had the difficult task of telling me a story about me, and to both of our dismay, nothing she said took root or pulled out some secret artifact of memory buried deep enough that I couldn't get it on my own. Am I to then assume that nothing is there for me to find? Maybe. I don't want to think about that. There's a problem, but it could always turn into a thousand, right? That's a dangerous road to go down. There's a problem, but it could always turn into a thousand problems, right?

Instead, I've been thinking about this one patient back at Dad's office. (With a sigh) I probably shouldn't name him here. Patient confidentiality extends to the grave. Or it should if it doesn't. And to point out I was just the office coordinator and not some

sort of practitioner feels like a hair split. He was a good guy in his time, you know? He deserved everything life could give him, like dignity and respect in death, but instead, he had one of the worst cases of dementia I had ever seen. And considering my line of work, I've seen some terrible ones.

Basically, while they can't completely cure you or stop the progression outright, there are medications that can effectively buy you time or stop the worst of it. It's a terrible strategy-game, to be honest. Long term cures were always and still are in development, but there are separate research groups out there who are looking at more immediate but less effective options. And those were the people who were making certain judgment calls on what functions needed to be spared and prioritized and what could be left on the backburner for when they had that other stuff figured out. And they were never going to get that other stuff figured out, or I'm not inclined to think that they would.

I had so many opinions on their decisions and why they probably made them. But then this patient came in. And the point. Right. This patient--despite all the signs and symptoms that come with this condition in the beginning--never sought medical intervention and sold the image of perfect health incredibly well to his children. He was able to do so, in part, because they were so far away. And phone calls were kept brief because, seemingly, the children had their own lives to handle. And they were happy to hear their dad give them that blessing. They were happy that their dad was giving them so much freedom when so many other parents seemed overbearing.

The problem is that wasn't the truth. He wasn't feeling well, but he didn't think it was a severe problem, so he never told them.

It wasn't until a child happened to swing by during a layover that anyone could see how bad this condition had gotten. In fact, No one knew he had it in the first place.

Early intervention with the medication I was so inclined to be suspicious of could have bought him about ten years of relative normalcy. And then five years of a little less than that. And so on and so forth. On the other hand, Dad's late stage intervention gave him four years of... of I don't even know. But I wouldn't want that for myself.

Cold as it is to say, everything about him was incredibly disturbing to witness. I hated to see him. I hated it when he came by. I would throw up in the bathroom after encountering him. And that isn't professional at all. That makes me, on some level, a not-great person, but it was my human reaction to what I was going to call a nightmare.

(Music fades out and new music fades in)

And I also got this divisive, cold, and insensitive thought in my head about him, blaming him for this. Like, how could you not have known something was wrong in the beginning when everyone could have still helped him? How could it have gotten to this point? How was he that stupid?

But he wasn't stupid. I was being incredibly defensive and destructive. You can't expect people to have all the answers. You can't expect people who aren't in that profession to be able to read situations like that.

I've been thinking about that a lot because Reine clearly didn't know how hard I was lying. And I didn't know how to back down. And neither of us knew what that moment would mean. Neither of us knew that I shouldn't have stayed to talk to her. We didn't know there would be consequences for this. I didn't know there would be consequences for ignoring the signs and indulging in a fantasy.

Also, it was better than thinking about the alternative. So there's that.

It turns out that Reine and I had met almost 10 years before. I was living in that small apartment Lottie and I were crammed in, though she put 'lived' in quotes, and I thought she was referring to it that way because of how dismal, dusty, and sparse that place was. But that isn't what she meant at all.

"There's a lot about your life you never told me," she said.

And sure, you'd expect that. Friends can't just tell friends everything. For one, there are just time limits to conversations, implicit or otherwise. On the other hand, friendship is an act of carefully considered disclosure. Personally, I tend to be more private. I can't imagine a version of me that isn't. But to further prove my point, a lot of people with terrible families tend to be more private as a survival mechanism. We learned at a young age that things we say can be used against us. We learned at a young age that things about us can be used against us. And now we planned accordingly. It is what it is.

Reine didn't know how I was able to afford that place. But I bought it outright and under the table. The building isn't zoned as a multi-family structure despite it obviously being that in terms when you look at the floor layout, so the various residents have to keep themselves scarce and cannot leave a paper trail. And that promised to be a disaster, but I--apparently--was willing to deal with that later if it ever came up. It was more important to me that my name not be attached to any address.

Besides, I apparently rationalized to her when she was concerned, I wasn't there all the time anyway.

Of course I asked her why this was.

But she didn't know. She didn't know where I was all the time or what I did to get the money that let me make such a bizarre purchase. It all just happened to work out for me. She was almost jealous of that, in fact. But she never said it. Because it was clearly a double-edged sword. I was fine, but I was temporarily fine. I was fine right then while still looking over my shoulder for something I never mentioned to her.

There were no pieces for her to put together. We never talked about anything like that. Instead, we talked about literature and movies or her problems. Never mine. And for a while, she was okay with that. She thought that conversation was going to come someday. And then it didn't. And then I stopped coming by at all. No clear explanation given. I was just gone. No goodbyes. No anything. Well, Reine was left with a lingering suspicion that something was wrong or had gone wrong, but it wasn't anything she could prove.

Enigmas can disappear at any time, it turns out, and no one bothers to seek them out.

(Music fades out and new music fades in)

When I left that day, there was no promise we would speak to each other again. I couldn't give her one, and true I couldn't explain why. But when I walked out, the car was there. I didn't think anything of it. Clearly, I should have. I really should have. Because I'd given them a reason to think about the library, so... spent more time there than what someone in my position would be inclined to do unless there was something significant there, something worth being distracted for. And sure, there was the obvious reason, but I had no library card and no way of getting one without giving them my actual name, which we all knew I shouldn't do. Also, I wasn't going to stay there long

enough to make use of it. So of course, it had to be a significant place. There was no other reason for it.

When I got there, all I found was an ash residue left on the foundation that survived the blaze. Enough time had gone by for most of the debris to be cleared away, likely out of safety, but the small fragments that remained created an eerie atmosphere. Feeling tears welling up in my eyes, tears I didn't fully understand, I looked around. The car wasn't there. So apparently, it was going to give me some level of privacy. Or maybe I'm looking into it too much. But it made sense that I was owed some moment of grief and heartache. After all, something had clearly been taken from me.

I asked around, trying to figure out what happened to that building, specifically what caused the fire. But I didn't get a good answer. Or I didn't think I had a good answer even if that answer was consistent. Apparently, it was an electrical fire and faulty containment system coming together. All that paper just went up in a moment without those guards. And sure, okay, I get it. It didn't seem like arson. There was no ignitor fluid or accelerant or anything like that. But there were multiple parts to that fire system. Or there had to be. I confess I can't know for sure, but it's a building full of kindling; you'd have to go above and beyond to prevent a disaster, and everything failed at once? To me that's suspicious.

(Music fades out and new music fades in)

But honestly, in the moment, I couldn't think too much about that. I tried to figure out what happened to Reine, but no one knew who I was talking about. Even when I kept it vague and tried to ask about any employee, no one knew what I was talking about. Allegedly, there were no casualties in that building, but no one seemed to know

for sure. And worse yet, no one seemed inclined to look into it. And I get it, but I also don't.

It was enough for me to not go back into the apartment, though. I was left scrambling for some sort of alternative, some... something like a safe house in an area that wasn't entirely familiar to me, but I did it. Of course I did it. Of course I knew where to go.

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

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