

(Static fades in then out)

If you know an area pretty well, it isn't hard to shake a car.

(Music fades in)

Alleyways are a great first step in that, sure. But you would need to know that not all alleys are created equal. A quick enough car or driver can easily find you on the other side of the most basic type. But sometimes buildings don't fit together properly and that creates an abundance of alleyways for someone to wander about and escape through. You can think of it as a maze with multiple exits. It's only useful if you know the track. You really do have to know what you're doing. You have to have the sort of confidence that can only come from trust, specifically trust in yourself and your memories. Therein lies the problem. I don't have my memories. I have impulse and impulse alone. But to make it worse, I'm not the trusting type.

And that's just in general mind you. It's something written, not into my mind, but into my very DNA. It's at the core of who I am. I'm overly skeptical, defensive, and inclined to keep my cards close to my chest. There's some sort of innate muscle memory there that won't let me trust my own muscle memory. Or anyone, really. When you think of it in terms of other people, the framework makes a bit more sense. I always chalked this up to my dad being such a horrible figure in my life. I always thought it was an emotional scar from my childhood. It could very well still be, but I'll never know for sure. At the most fundamental level, though, Dad did not hold his end of the parent-child bargain. He was supposed to love and care about me, and he seems so vastly unable to do even that much. Of course I was going to be hurt living in a household like that. There are consequences for these things. And of course I was going to remember those

lessons on a subconscious and even cellular level. These messages were things I would carry forever.

Don't trust. Don't expect things to work out. Don't expect to receive what you're owed. People can betray. Promises can be reneged. Loss is inevitable.

Don't ask me why Lottie seems to be the exception. I mean, I can confidently say she's harmless. At bare minimum, she's far too weak to ever go against me.

And that's something Dad would say. I hate that.

(Music fades out and new music fades in)

I won't tell you where I went, but instead of going to that apartment, I found some small-ish place to hide. Or my corner of it was small. I was hiding out in what could be considered a developer's nightmare: a halted but very large project. There's several of them around that neighborhood, in fact. You see, this isn't just a place of uneven wealth. It's a place of ambition and reality fall short in meeting each other. All around, there are large buildings in the midst of a grand transformation from practical to high-end, and during that transformation, the money ran out, and with so much of the building still in that pre-investment state, selling units was hard. Sure, some people were willing to buy at what could be considered a discount, but it wasn't a discount freely given. It was market price, and the market has decided against these developers finishing their project. So now most of their money is tied up, and their frustration keeps them from checking each unit for secrets and secret inhabitants. But assuming they did find me, what were they going to do? Eviction processes take time and money they don't have. When it comes, they will, but that will be a while. And I'll long gone by then.

I hid out in that building for two days before I dared to go outside to do anything. I needed to make sure this break was clean. I needed to give myself the best chance of not being found. Presumably, the car would get desperate and resort to going back to the apartment or the rundown building where I started my journey. Then again, I couldn't guarantee it. That's what I was hoping. I didn't explicitly remember that place, which to me was a good sign. And I also made sure it was hard to see whatever side door I ducked into from the street. Just for good measure.

And look, this detour is not ideal, but I was going to have to shake that car eventually. Maybe I should have been trying it from the get-go. Maybe that should have been a priority for me. But they already know about Lottie and they must remember where she is. If my ultimate destination is set, what does the rest of it matter? Or that's what I was thinking before the library burned down, and my distrustful mind went to arson or if not direct arson then whatever the indirect version of it is. It's raised the stakes, but I'm sure how high.

(Music fades out and new music fades in)

And I'm dancing away from a point, but I know what you're thinking it. Lottie needs my help, and I should have run for it. Maybe... Maybe my failings as a friend are what make it so easy to trust her. If all relationships are made up of failure and disappointment, then my being the one to provide it both hits the quota that proves me right and suggests that Lottie won't do it. That's food for thought if there ever was any.

But I was desperate to find out if Reine was hurt in that fire. Granted, I had no reason to think she was. Or no objectively-grounded reason. Everyone I talked to and I did talk to many people told me that there were no casualties, and I could have just

accepted that. But I didn't. At surface level, I was chasing certainty, but I'm sure it goes beyond that. I'm sure there are a thousand different tendencies and neuroses lurking inside of me that are coming together to make me so determined to find out things that don't objectively matter. But I don't have time to think about that. Or that's what I tell myself.

Of course, this quest for truth, to be generous to myself, did not come without a sea of practical problems. For obvious reasons, I could not go back to the library. What good is shaking the car if I just meet it in the past anyway? And I'm sure this mysterious 'they' saw me wandering about and asking questions. That actually might be where they go next and not the apartment or the building or anything. If they know that I need to know, then that's where they're going to go. But also, Reine has no reason to be back there. Behind all of that, to cut the story short, is that I needed to find some other way to get to Reine. But of course I wouldn't consciously know where to begin. Consciously being a pretty important word in that.

This next part is stupid for a variety of reasons. For one, I probably should not say it here. I should not draw attention to the places I have been because it means being tracked. It means my route will be easier to find. But on the other hand, how fricking convenient, right? I went out to the back alley of this new building of mine, this place where I was not welcome but I made myself at home--I went out to the back alley, by the dumpsters, so obviously I didn't do it for anything vaguely like fresh air. I just wanted to be outside, and dumpsters make for a convenient hiding place if someone were to come by. If you're desperate you can get in one, but they're big enough that you can just hide behind.

Unlikely as it was, there was a chance some was going to come outside.

Dumpsters serve a practical purpose, and this one resource had multiple groups pulling from it, as it were. These dumpsters were shared--by the looks of it--with the building next door. I say that because the door of that next door building opened up and someone appeared with a garbage bag in hand. And it was Reine.

(Music fades out and new music fades in)

I couldn't believe it either. In fact, I only came to believe it just because of how poorly that interaction went. She wasn't happy to see me in the least bit. And it wasn't about a second disappearance, which there was not one. I didn't promise to stay when I last saw her, and we both knew I couldn't be expected to stay. Nor were things going to fall back into place, and our friendship magically restored. Brain damage can change you. That's pretty common knowledge. Also, it had been a while. Friendships are difficult to maintain sometimes, especially when they include someone like me. And that's the connection that I think Reine made.

Because mysterious people have to have pretty pressing reasons for staying that way. It's a hard thing to do: leaving no paper trail or anything of the sort and keeping a variety of stories straight in your mind. Add the pressure of being bizarrely close to my hometown and the people I was running and... Well, I don't really know what was going on with me. I really don't know, but the person I was allegedly running from was only a bus ride or two away. Certainly, I could have done better, so I was making some odd choices.

Neither Reine nor I really knew what was going on in my head all those years ago, but in that moment, it didn't matter. She threw her bag in the bin, and only then did

she see me. She saw me. The color drained from her face, and she froze for half a moment. But after that half moment, she came alive again, resurrected by the panic in her blood. Now that she saw me, now that she knew I was there, she immediately began her retreat. Her steps were frantic, too. She was running for what she thought was her life.

That's hindsight talking, though. I was pretty absorbed in my own head and by my own concerns. So despite the blatant red flags and moral reasoning, I went after her. It was a race, almost. She wanted to get away from me, and I didn't want her to. Even though seeing her alone proved that she didn't die in that fire and that she wasn't seriously injured either, once I had that taste of that satisfaction, I immediately demanded more. I shouldn't have. She had every right to reject me. I just didn't accept that.

By a technicality, I won the race. She was in the doorway, but I had the door. And I was bigger than she was.

Once I was in the doorway of her building, she was stuck. I could follow her wherever she went, and assuming she wasn't great friends with her neighbors, she wouldn't have many places to hide. Clearly I was going to follow her wherever she went. I had the will to do, and I had given myself the opportunity.

(Music fades out and new music fades in)

To shorten the story again because Reine hates me now and I want to be halfway respectful as a means of apologizing for my breaking and entering esque moment, someone came into the library after I left. Now, Reine didn't know all the patrons of that library, but she knew what a patron looks like or what a patron wasn't. A

patron would never be that short tempered or have gotten in her face or disregard rules about volume and so many other things. But above all, the ultimate giveaway was that this woman didn't care about the books, only me. All her questions were about me and what Reine might have told me.

Then the library burnt down, and Reine connected the same dots I did. So no, I'm not exactly losing my mind. There's something to be said about this collection of unexpected circumstances and mysterious people carrying boatloads of secrets. This storm is potentially destructive, but what is certain is that I'm at the center of it.

Reine wouldn't give me a description of the person. She both didn't want to and said there was something fake about the woman's face, so what good was it going to do me anyway. I think I believe her. Even though I am assuming I understand what she meant by fake. Simply because I don't have much of a choice.

I did tell her that I was relieved that she was okay, that I was happy that she was alive, but none of that was well-received. And that's when self-awareness kicked in, so I left her building. And the building next door entirely.

(Music fades out and new music fades in)

Look, this whole time I've known someone was following me, right? So why was I suddenly so scared? Why was this suddenly so real? Maybe because there was confirmed existence of a face? A face that tried to hide itself and was willing to directly intervene in some way. Like I said, the burning of the library raised the stakes quite a bit. Whoever is following me isn't just ready to intervene but to outright destroy things that potentially mean something to me, that could be part of the process of getting my memory back, of getting myself back, which... Which they don't know is something I've

decided to not do. Or I'm not going to prioritize. I mean... Maybe I'm lucky that I don't have to grieve the loss of myself in any tangible way. Not everyone can say that. The what-if game is so much easier to play. So maybe I'll just stick with that.

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

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