

(Static fades in and out)

Just so you know. (Music fades in) If you told your manager to talk to me at any other point during the event, he didn't. As for me, I'm still unsure if I'm... happy about that or not. I did have more questions, but he does make me uncomfortable just by the way he carries himself. The broad shoulders set back, the stern eyes set in this menacing glare.

All the same, I took his advice, and I did not stare at the picture any longer no matter how badly I wanted to. I turned away and joined another crowd, the one that was gathering around the piece with a red base that revealed ornate flowers, different flowers, in fact, depending on the angle at which you stood.

It was the most... Obvious choice given my current state. In its crowd, it was easy to be inconspicuous. It was easy to hide. People were moving about, ducking and weaving around everyone else, creating a blur of movement, and they were whispering in amazement which hid my ragged breathing. Eyes were wide, as if staring off into space. Being mesmerized is surprisingly an all purpose state of being. And so no one could read me. No one could see that I was different from the rest of them. And no one could suspect anything. I thought it was rather brilliant. Regardless, it seemed to be enough for your manager, whose name I... genuinely can't remember, (inhale) not any more.

(Music fades out and new music fades in)

I guess (exhale) maybe I never actually knew it. I've always been so bad with names that maybe whatever happened to me did not take it away. Maybe it was

organically lost. No matter what, it was too late to ask him. Assuming I got the opportunity. Which I did not.

Soon enough, it was time for the honor and accolades part of the evening in a different section of the converted warehouse, complete with a forced speech from me. And he was there... He was there, lingering along the back wall, staring at me. AND I didn't understand why. The manager of the featured artist would obviously have his own seat, and maybe he wouldn't be placed up front, but he'd have a chair somewhere in the crowd. Now sure, the places of honor are typically reserved for those who wrote the biggest checks. It was really about wallet size as demonstrated by spending in a particular outlet.

But he provided a different sort of utility. He provided your work and access to you, so he should have had a chair, towards the front of the room but off to the side. Maybe where he would not immediately be in my line of sight. And maybe he'd have his own table, or he would be seated with people who had once been important but were now dying stars, fading off into oblivions.

I don't quite know. That's the sort of utility that's more subjective. It would have been up to Ms. So and So, and my word, she is not the sort of person I would ever spend any period of time psycho-analyzing. For my own sake.

I don't know where he would have been, but he would have had a chair. So standing there, staring me down was his choice. He wanted to do that. Maybe you told him to, maybe you didn't, but that only shifts the question of why.

(Music fades out and new music fades in)

I found it to be greatly unnerving, but at least giving a speech like that is fairly easy for me. I've just done it so many times. I hate doing it, but I've definitely cut enough corners to make it bearable.

There's a standard outline that I always employ, not that I actually write the speech, but I've improvised it so many times that it's like I've got a written speech memorized. You open up with a generous outpouring of gratitude for everyone's generosity and support, then hit them with an emotional appeal about those who are struggling with diseases like this. But you put a hopeful spin on it because all of those people in that room; they're fixing this. They're helping you fix it by giving you their money, and maybe you describe the tears of the family as their loved one's departure from them happens in this drawn out and physically painful fashion. Then you outline Dad's dedication and his research trajectory, etc etc.

But noticeably, at least to you as to try to talk under a manager's stare, you leave out specifics on what he's doing or how. You think to yourself later that research has never been as collaborative as it should be. There's just a finite number of resources or money to go around, so in the spirit of that ensuing competition, you have to keep your cards close to your chest.

But then you think back to the manager as he stands in the back of the room. His eyes probing yours, as if looking for something. And I think it was just that. I think he was looking for something, wasn't he? He was asking me what exactly my dad was working on and what his approach was. But not for his sake. You see, it's not the first time I've gotten that question. It was just the first time that I really... really came to terms

with the fact that I did not know about any of it. I don't know what exactly my father does, and I had never thought to ask before that gala, before your manager, and his somewhat brutal method of asking.

(Knocking. Music cut. Static fading in,)

Sorry. (Music fades in) Child emergency (sigh). Not really an emergency.

Dylan wet the bed. And I don't think Dad should know, so I had to take care of it right away. I mean, he's not going to care regardless. He's never cared, and he's not going to help me with anything. Especially not the laundry. But it's not that. Dylan is afraid of him finding out. It doesn't matter why. Dylan is afraid, so I promised him that I would not tell Dad about this. Ever. And I won't. But that just means cleaning up after him in the middle of the night and calling it normal.

This is the sort of thing that just happens, right? It honestly and truly just happens to some kids. And it happens to them at different ages. And his mom is gone, so his development cycle is always going to be a little off. There is this sense in which we're just making do. Just trying to get him to adulthood in one piece.

Okay, there is a chance that this could be a serious issue, right? But there's also a chance that I could be struck by a falling pumpkin when I walk into the office tomorrow. (Brief stammering) I'm not even kidding. That sort of thing happened once in our neighborhood about five years back during the harvest season, so the precedent creates the possibility, but I'd never make any potentially life altering decisions based on it.

So I stopped the broadcast, and I stripped the bedding off of his mattress and threw everything into a plastic bag in the laundry room. Dad never goes in there, but I still hid it underneath some of my clothes. That's all I can do right now. I can't run the machine this late without raising suspicion. So tomorrow, I'll deal with it. (sigh) I don't know when, but I'll deal with it tomorrow.

Thankfully, though, Dylan has a mattress protector, so once I do the laundry, I don't need to worry anymore.

Well, I won't need to worry about the bed thing. There's (exhale)... There's something else... Um... He said something to me earlier this week, that I just can't shake off. And I know you can't answer me, but I want to tell you about it.

So I was making toast, right? Super straightforward task. But I did not think we had a toaster, so it creates a mild complication in that I have to pan-toast it. That---That seems weird. You take a pan. You take some butter. You butter the pan. Put the bread down for a couple minutes on each side. Then you're done. It's a simple task that's only a little harder when you're making toast for so many people. But a lot of things are harder with a big family. So you just have to make the most of it.

Roslyn is normally the first one up. But that day Dylan got up before she did. (inhale and exhale) His sleep schedule is just... All over the place. I think he's have a growth spurt or something. That's probably what it is. And the growing pains are just making certain things hard for him. Like sleeping.

He was watching me while I made the toast. The eggs were done, and Dad was gone. He had taken his portion and left with his coffee. The toast did not interest him. So whatever I guess. Or maybe he had a meeting. I don't know.

Dylan looked around. He asked about Dad, but he seemed to relax when I told him Dad had left for work already.

(softer) Those... Those poor kids. It's like... They're completely different people when their dad is around, and when he's gone, things are better. Dylan is more curious and inquisitive, and when he's here, Dylan just freezes. And I've just made peace with it because Dad's hardly ever here anyway. It's just me and them.

Dylan came to the stove. Not so close that I would have to worry about an oil splash burning him but close enough that he could still see what I was doing. And he asked me, "Why do you do it like that?"

"What do you mean?" I asked him.

"In the pan?"

And I knew he had a valid point. Even if we did not have a toaster, we could afford a toaster. And it's a small enough expense that Dad wouldn't even notice it. I can buy kitchen appliances. As the person who ran the home, that is well within my powers. I replaced the blender twice. But the toaster? I just didn't take care of that. I just didn't do that. I didn't buy one.

Really, I did prefer to make toast this way. As odd as it sounds because, yes, it is time consuming, but it was how I liked doing it. Nostalgia is just... Nostalgia is just quite the drug.

And I tried to explain that to him with cleaner language. "It's how Mom used to do it," I said.

And then it occurred to me that he might not remember her. It's been too long, and he was too young. But he looked at me, like... (sigh) It was like I had two or three heads or something because he says quite confidently. "No, she didn't. She used a toaster like everyone else."

No, I wanted to argue. She didn't. Mom pan-fried toast. That's how I learned to do it, but I couldn't (exhale) I couldn't find a clear memory in my head to share with him. And it wasn't just a matter of timing because he was so young and Mom's been gone for so long that there was a small window of time for him to have formed a memory of her that I could reference. (Breath) I couldn't find anything. In my own head. (Music fades out and new music fades in)

And I know some people's memories aren't visual. But mine are. I can close my eyes and see my image in that canvas. And I can close my eyes and see my mother's face. I... can... Can I? (Large Sigh). I can't.... I can't... I can't see my mother. With or without a toaster. I can't see her.

But Dylan walked over to one of the cabinets that... Rationally I always knew was there, but I had never really thought about it. Or actually seen it for myself. It wasn't really on the map of the kitchen that I kept in my mind, even if it was there with me and I shared space with it and I knew about it. I just couldn't fully acknowledge it.

Until Dylan walked over and opened it right up. Sure enough, there was a toaster right there, gathering dust.

(Pause)

It's hard for me to think about that. I know there are gaps in my memory or I know that now, but there's still the present to get through and Dad's suspicion to avoid. For that reason, I just have to overlook certain things. But that doesn't change that things aren't lining up. And I feel... (sigh) broken that something like a cabinet could completely escape me like that.

Long after the gala, when the party was over and my purse was full of checks, your manager was standing right next to me as I waited for the car, and I did not notice him right away. I knew there was a man there. I could feel someone beside me, and I could even see his profile out of the corner of my eye, but it wasn't until he cleared his throat that I fully recognized him.

(Music fades out and new music fades in)

And it was a sharp fall back into reality. I jumped, noticeably, but he did not say anything. He just positioned his body in such a way that I could see this...ribbon coming out from his jacket collar. I could see it. I could see this dark red ribbon against the light gray of his jacket where it did not belong. And there was something in me that was screaming to grab it. Grab it. (more forceful) Grab it. (most forcefully) Grab it. (calmer) Grab it.

But I couldn't. I just stood there, staring at it. Until my car came and drove me away.

I feel incredibly stupid, but now I'm just telling myself that there was no way I could have taken it. I couldn't have dealt with that right then., Roslyn was waiting for me

to get home. She was sleeping out in the front room with my necklace in her hand. But she wasn't clutching it, like I told her to if she was scared. It was just easier for her to hold it that way what with the chain being so long compared to her.

I carried her to bed and tucked her in before returning to my own room. I didn't even turn the light on as I stripped off my dress and wiped off my makeup. Not the sort of things that cannot be done in the dark, but human eyes work better in the light.

My mind on the other hand, found the darkness comforting. (sigh) Okay I know it would have been so easy to overlook the picture. To overlook that your manager was familiar to me. And as for my name, everyone in that circle knows who I am.

That moment did not have to be life-changing. It could have just been a collection of small things that were easily to overlook individually and then never put together. As for my face? Well, I have a really plain looking face, so that also means next to nothing.

Except no. It's not that plain. And there's one detail that you included that I can't overlook.

The scar I have, along my hairline. (breath) That's hard to see, and I normally put concealer on it. Did I ever tell you how I got it? Did I tell you that story?

(Music fades out and new music fades in)

I was a child playing in my grandparent's garden, chasing butterflies specifically, and I tripped and fell face-first into some stone decoration. The gash was so deep that it was never going to fully heal, and it's such a bizarre shape and placement that questions are bound to come up. But it's easy to cover up with hair and makeup, and given how much I want to avoid the subject, that's what I've always done.

But there are exceptions to every rule. You must have been an exception. And you found a way to tell me that you were the exception. And to be an exception, you have to be real. You have to mean something to me, even if I can't remember.

When I was laying in bed, I kept reaching towards the scar on my forehead. I kept brushing my fingers over it, like I was expecting it to be gone. But of course it could never leave me. The hurts we carry can be the most enduring company.

(Pause. Exhale)

I know this might seem elitist or petty or whatever, but I never thought this would be my life. Me being a glorified office assistant. Glorified because of my last name. Glorified because of the man who sired and then largely ignored me. And I don't think office assistants are to be mocked or ridiculed or condemned. Not all such positions are the same. But this one sucks, so I get to be upset about it. I work for my dad who is an absentee but temperamental boss with patients who are slowly dying mentally and coworkers with a turnover rate so high that I can't be bothered to get to know them.

This wasn't supposed to be my life. At a bare minimum, when I was a child, I did not want to work in medicine. A patient once came to our home ranting and raving. And it wasn't because of his disease or not directly. It hadn't really set in yet. But the fear of his diagnosis and the terrible prognosis drove him towards a different sort of end. And that might not be an accurate portrayal of what it would mean to have a medical career, but I never got over that incident. So I decided to do something else. But I don't remember what.

I just don't think it was this. I just can't imagine, though, that being in a medical office in a position that gets heaped with so much abuse and responsibility is what I ever had in mind. But I hadn't cared about that. Because it's not an uncommon thing to drop childhood fancies from your memory to make room for more practical things. And I had to drop a lot of other childhood things when Mom was gone.

Like a normal sleep schedule. Or actually eating enough. There's just no time for that with running the home, taking care of the kids, and keeping Dad's office running pretty much single-handedly. And now my head is in a fog, an angry and frustrated fog that just won't go away and it won't end And.... (sigh) And maybe there's something else. Maybe I... But laying in bed thinking about this wasn't helping anything on any level. But I wanted to lie with that observation for a while. Before it could be taken away from me.

(Music fades out and new music fades in)

I had no way of knowing it at the time, but it was the calm before the storm. The next morning, Dad began his intense vigil over me. And I knew right then that I was onto something. His frustration was all the confirmation I could ask for. Because that's how a daughter's spite works. If he's angry, I'm on the right track. I'm doing something. Because his anger is what I value most. He never cared about me. Not what I did or said or wanted. So the fact that I suddenly was this person of interest told me that something had changed.

Or look at it this way, Dad's research isn't on fully healthy minds, brains that function without issue or problem. There's an entire branch of research for that sort of

thing and plenty of positions for researchers. But it did not interest him, so he made a different choice: a choice to study destructive minds that deviated from norms and expectations. That's what interested him, so that's what I must have been.

And admittedly right then, I thought about gloating. I thought about making things as difficult for him as possible. It would be funny, I thought, to get a rise from him.

(chuckling) And what's he going to do? I run his life. He needs me.

I didn't have much of a chance to. Thankfully.

Later that morning, I was standing at the copy machine. And this is going to be a hard thing to explain, but we were out of the blank patient sign-in forms, and I can't be bothered to search through the electronic filing system to find where any of the receptionists put the original file. Great example of why high turnovers suck, by the way. Things like this get completely lost, and you can't muster the will to find it when you know it's going to get misfiled by the next person anyway. So you end up making copies of the blank form, like you're technologically incompetent.

And I swear every person at that office has a different insult to follow up that description, but I'm used to the judgment by now. I mean I get judged for so many things around there. It's just par for the course.

But then... But then Dr.... Oh what should I call him. Alexson, let's say. Dr. Alexson is Dad's mentor and former partner. He's retired now, but he still hangs around the office, doing... whatever. (sigh) I always thought he liked having a place to go during the day. But he always seemed to be watching me. Especially that day.

He came up behind me and watched me make the copies, and I was mentally preparing my usual explanation for what I was doing: this weird task that made no sense.

But then he said. Or asked, "Did you go to the art show?"

I stopped what I was doing and turned to him.

"Yeah, how did you know?"

(Music fades out and new music fades in)

Dumb question because obviously Dad mentioned it. I mean, by some informal norms, Dad was still accountable to the man who had helped him so much, which would mean giving him the assurance that the research would keep going on, and funding was a part of that.

And maybe he knew the answer was obvious. Or maybe he didn't think that answer was relevant right then, and it could come out later. I don't know, but he looked at me and simply said. "Pull the thread."

I knew immediately what he was talking about, even if his terminology was a bit off. The ribbon in your manager's suit jacket. Dr. Alexson wanted me to pull it, and I wanted to ask more. Like how was I supposed to do that long after the fact? Like that ship had sailed, and it left the port to never come back when I got into the car.

I was about to say that, but Dr. Alexson gave me this look that spoke volumes of a different kind. There was no answer to the how only the harsh rebuke against asking questions at all.

This wasn't the time, he seemed to say. Don't push your luck, he seemed to say.
Be serious, keep your head down, and trust no one.

I didn't know what to say, so I just nodded. And he accepted that.

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

This has been a production of Miscellany Media Studios with music licensed from the Sounds like an Earful music supply. It was written, performed, edited, and produced by MJ Bailey. If you like the show, please consider leaving a review and-or telling many friends about it. Thanks.