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The problem with the whole stages of grief thing, in my uninformed opinion, is that it's incomplete.

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Where's the regret that inevitably floods you now that you don't have a chance to fix all your mistakes with someone or do all those things for them that you were putting off? There's a disturbing amount of clarity in that first moment you have without them as everything rushes back to fill the void they left behind. All the things you meant to say. All the things you disregarded, specifically the advice. No matter what's going on in your life now compared to back then, each word of wisdom now rings especially true. Each and every bit adorns itself in potentially undue significance. It's something you should have done, a door you should have gone through... But then, well, that metaphor raises a lot of questions. Because doors sometimes lead to final destinations. And sometimes, they just open up to a stop along a larger journey. Maybe this was a journey, you start to think to yourself. Maybe this place where I am now is not the place I should be but the result of an opportunity I did not take. Maybe it was all supposed to be better than this. Hopefully. Hope-against-hope-fully. Regardless of the question of quality, things could have been different, and I want them to be different.

But then again, not every shred of wisdom can do something like that. Sometimes, it's less than that, and sometimes, it's a lot more. Lately, I've been thinking about one thing in particular because it just keeps coming up.

Once upon a time, Dr. Alexson told me not to be too hard on myself because not everything is life or death, and I need to not see it that way. I tend to. I know I do that. I

know it has a consequence or two. But that's about as far as I can take it. It's not my fault. It's easy to misjudge the stakes, especially when you work in the medical field. It's an inclination that turns into a habit that turns out to be impossible to break. All the while, it's sucking you in and away from reality and into a series of nightmares until you're sleepwalking. I was sleepwalking. And I think I still am.

But I can't say if that's why I made the choice that I did. It didn't feel conscious. More like, I was in a daze or haze of hazy daze. And that led me to act in a less than ideal way. Mistakes were made. But they weren't consciously made. I am far from conscious. How do I wake up?

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I left that apartment while everything was still quiet, but I wasn't sure what to do from that point on. This was my neighborhood, once upon a time, and once upon a time, I had a right to exist there without question, but I might have forsaken it. I wasn't sure. It depended on why everyone thought I had permanently left, or if they knew it was permanent. I gave an explanation for a few short days of absence, but anything more than that would have gotten back to Dad because small talk is no one's specialty really, and talking about someone's kids can feel like a safe bet. However, you never know if one of them, the one that you secretly think failed to launch, is talking about finally launching as a way to hide some grand scheme, some grand escape attempt from him specifically. You have no way of knowing. I get it. I'm not thrilled, but I get it. But I also get that a slip up like that would have cost me that chance. So forgive the deceit. Not that I care if you do.

Buying myself those few days meant losing control of the narrative, and at the time, that was a worthwhile exchange. It shouldn't have mattered, but it suddenly did.

Or it didn't have to. Look, I know where Dr. Hart lives. Their place is actually a few neighborhoods over from my old one and one where no one would know my name. I shouldn't know that detail. That's bad HR etiquette to the extreme. Or not extreme. Well, I was plotting a kidnap or aggressive persuasion for a getaway, if you will. So let's go with 'extreme,' after all. Why not?

But memorizing Dr. Hart's address had never been intentional. It was just a random detail that got stuck on its way in and out of my head. And I also knew, more reasonably, they didn't keep the same absurd hours that my dad did, so at that point morning, I could have just gone there and done my business. Be on my way to whatever, but I didn't. I half-heartedly wanted to check on the kids. Stupid as it was. Specifically I needed to check on Roslyn.

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Siblings are allowed to have favorites, right? It's not the same set of rules for them as it is their parents. Or it shouldn't be. It should be a different relationship. Except it wasn't for us. I took on a role, and that came with expectations. Right or not, they were the ones who paid the fees when I dropped that ball. And that isn't fair. None of that is fair. Dad's the one who should be figuratively paying. After all, we all are his kids, but instead, he is literally paying someone to do the things I used to do. Or I'm pretty sure that's what's happening.

I wondered if it is the same person. The one I hired. That would be a little comforting, so probably not. I couldn't blame that chick for leaving if she did. It wasn't

the best work environment, and I'm pretty sure we were underpaying her, but emotional manipulation can always get someone to stick around even when it isn't in their best interests. Dad's great at that sort of thing, and it's a prime situation for it. So many kids. No Mom. Practically no Dad. And an older sister who ran off without a goodbye. It is sad to be those kids. Inherently so. You as the nanny leaving or abandoning them would just make everything worse. And it's not like you have to be there forever. Just a few more years. Roslyn is old enough to walk herself to school, just not to handle the gaggle of brothers. Up ahead are a sea of milestones that gradually make children less and less dependent on anyone. At some point, you can leave with minimal issues. They won't need you, and given teenage angst, they may not want you. They wouldn't need you or what you can do for them. There's a whole lot you couldn't do. You can't protect them from a dad who--while a jerk--is mostly absent.

That's a nice fairytale, right? But the hard part is Dad refusing to do things that aren't research. And sure, I can explain that away as a normal part of the scientist-life. A certain kind of scientist. And his work is high stakes. But at the end of the day, all that stuff will still need to get done. He'll just have to force someone to do it.

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I still struggle to make sense of what might have happened to me. The gaps in everything. Flashes of the ghosts of any number of memories certainly aren't helping things. But they aren't alone in my peripheral vision. There's a lot of worry. Largely for Roslyn. Let's say it that way because we need to focus on something or someone right now. That's what Dad would do.

And with me, Roslyn's technically next in line to be Dad's servant. For all the cooking and cleaning and office maintenance stuff. She's the next failed child of the genius, receiving all the scorn and ridicule that comes with it. It only bothered me sometimes, but I always had thicker skin than she did. So for the most part, I was okay. Until I wasn't. Then I really, really wasn't.

Denial is great. Denial is inevitable if you think things cannot go another way. But now that I know things could be different--excusing the matter of how to get there--I can say wholeheartedly that I was deeply unhappy in that life. It was a unique kind of soul crushing that can only come from a fate you didn't choose yourself, that comes from being soaked in such intense misery for any period of time.

Sure, some people could handle it. I was halfway there myself, but Roslyn wasn't.

(Music fades out and new music fades in)

When I left my hideout, I didn't know where I was going. I knew where I should go, but that was a distant thought. Once again, my body was leading me. But this time, it was being driven by a very different sort of memory. A more recent one.

Before I knew it, I found myself at the school I dropped Roslyn off at a thousand times before. By then most of the children were there. Class was starting soon, and many had gone inside, including her.

Even at the time, I knew I shouldn't have gone over there. This is not just hindsight talking. I should have just walked by if I couldn't resist the urge, which apparently I couldn't. And I shouldn't have lingered at that gate, eyes searching for her. That was going to open me up to some sort of trouble. Pretty obvious, right? I couldn't

be seen, and there I was waiting to be seen, and someone inside a building is always going to have an easier time spotting someone on the outside than vice versa. The outsider is distracted by the many small pieces out front. In my case, it was the children who were out there playing and the grass that seemed to claim the breeze as if it were a lot taller than it actually was. Or the fact that the front of the school had been painted since the last time I was here, which really solidified the passage of time and pulled at my sense of nostalgia.

It was a good paint job. I couldn't help but admire it, tracing over potential brush strokes in my mind when I suddenly caught a glimpse of Roslyn's eyes staring out from the window. Out at me. She saw I was there. Not there for her. Just physically there.

I wish I could tell you what she was thinking as she stood there clearly seeing me, clutching the necklace I had given her. And I should have been able to tell. Her eyes are so expressive. But I... I was not a helpless boat at the mercy of the waves, which is how I want to describe myself there, for a second. Even if something happened I had a choice on how to respond. There was a fork in the figurative road there, however small. And I choose where to take a step. I chose to take a step away from her, while she was watching.

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At that moment, for the first time in a while, I received a message. I won't clarify how, exactly. Even if I have nothing left to lose but my freedom, that still feels worth preserving, worth making myself hard to trace because all technology has its limitations. But I received word from the safe house that Lottie was showing small signs of improvement. So I ran to the nearest payphone. I ran away from Roslyn again. Not that

I know what her reaction was, even if I can speculate. I haven't tried to, though. I try not to think about it.

You know, I... I could have asked her what she was thinking in that moment. Not right then but at some point. Um... In a part of this story I haven't gotten to yet. And that I'm dreading the act of telling you about it. It would have hardly taken a minute to pose that question, and it probably would have likely been cathartic for her to answer. Just as a small gift, a small act of mercy, but I didn't do that. But I didn't care then or later. Or I didn't care as much as I should have. Or I didn't care about her as much as I should have. I only cared about my own feelings. Which were already coming apart right then. I had a vague understanding of what I was doing. The consequences of all my choices...

We aren't there yet, though. I have some time before I present myself to you for judgement.

(Music fades out and new music fades in)

And right now, we're talking about Lottie who I had not heard anything about for quite some time because apparently, no news was... no news. No one there seems to understand the suffocating power of silence. They did say that they would have told me if she died. As was our deal. And if they broke their end, well, mutually assured destruction and all that. She's the only piece of leverage they have over me. They thought she was the only thing I had to live for, which says a lot. None of it lies, I would venture. Telling me meant gauging my reaction, meant knowing if I was going to turn them in for the things going on in that place, and meant getting a headstart if they needed to run. I still thought their silence was stupid and callous. But you know, who asked me. Right?

To calm me down, they gave Lottie the phone, and... And she sounded better than I had heard her sound in a while. Was it enough? No. The dying don't always fall uneventfully, rhythmically, or routinely into their graves. There are highs and lows before the fall. Hope wasn't healing. A small glimmer of health wasn't going to multiply and engulf her body. I still needed Dr. Hart, but now getting them would probably mean something. Or it meant more. It didn't just feel like a Hail Mary anymore. But by then, or by the time in the day that came after I did some cursory evasion maneuvers just in case, I wasn't going to be able to catch Dr. Hart at their home. I would have to go to the parking garage the practice utilizes for that.

Except I didn't. I didn't need to rush. That was the one thing I could have gifted myself from that phone call. But I didn't. I don't give myself anything. It's not how I'm wired, right now.

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