

(Static fades in and then cuts)

Contrary to all of my current actions, there was a time when I was the ideal pseudo-parent or parent number three... Well, technically the second or however you want to say it. Whether it was a choice or not, I was dedicated to those kids. And work. And Dad's supposed mission. I was dedicated to everything and everyone that wasn't me.

(Music fades in)

As a result of that, I knew where they were going to be that time of day, the time of day that it was after I hung up the phone but before any other clear marker or action I was going to take. I knew where they likely were at all hours of the day. It reminds me of muscle memory I've been dealing with but for muscles outside of my body. Muscles that aren't mine.

I was fairly knee deep in their lives as is somewhat inevitable with the various social constructs surrounding child-rearing, but it's more relevant some times than it is for others. Like... There were so many Parent Teacher Association meetings that were tedious and meant absolutely nothing in the long run, but then there were the ones that we had about the clear line of sight the shopping center behind the school had with the playground that was exclusively used by the younger kids, specifically the kids who may not think to tell the teachers when something odd was about. Particularly if it was just someone watching them because odd-ness and not belonging is something learned, not innate.

I had this concern too, rational or not. I was concerned that some predator was going to go to that very busy shopping center--one of the most popular spots in the city,

let me tell you--and sit in that one spot amidst a crowd of witnesses, staring at a bunch of children absentmindedly. Absentmindedly because their mind would be somewhere else relative to their head. And yeah, it's a place no one can know, so someone's going to jump to a conclusion.

Like I said, it might not have been rational, but it's the sort of fear that's easy to get swept up in. So the PTA were pushing for a wall or some sort of visual barrier between that spot and the kids. Moving the playground wasn't really a possibility, so we made the demands that we thought we could. And they were never met. And nothing bad ever happened. So eventually some other panic came up, and we all forgot about the playground. Consciously forgot.

That makes it sound like it was complicated, but it wasn't, probably, for anyone but me.

And you can see where this is going, right? You know where I went. You also might know where I should have gone. After the call about Lottie, I could have gone to where I thought Dr. Hart was. Or to a place where I could more safely wait for them. Ethics aside, breaking into their home was technically an option. Not a good one, but it was within the realm of possibility. And we're talking about saving Lottie's life, potentially, so this was morally in a gray area as a best case scenario sort of thing.

(Sigh) Look, I know I'm beyond redemption or I never needed it in the first place. It doesn't make too much of a difference either way, does it?

So yeah, I was sitting in that spot, staring out into the playground, waiting for my brothers to appear without knowing if they would or not. With my luck, they wouldn't. They'd stay inside for their morning play time or their schedule had been changed to

keep them inside longer. I had a feeling it was the latter. It was yet another fight the parents were having with the school. Except that one had a lot of infighting within the parents too. We broke down because, well, both sides were making what sounded like compelling arguments. On one hand, more learning, and on the other hand, common sense. Give kids a fricking break.

My tone aside, I can't remember which side I was on. I know what side I want to be on, but you know, that doesn't mean anything anymore.

(Music fades out and new music fades in)

The kids never came out, and while I waited, it was like I left my body. I was having an out of body experience, I mean, even if I don't know what the verbiage should be for that. You get it. Suddenly, I was watching myself as I sat there, unsettlingly still with my eyes desperately searching for any sign of the boys amidst an empty field and some admittedly cheap play equipment.

And that was me, right? That was me watching when I maybe shouldn't have been. I'm sure it was creepy and unsettling, but then again, I'm a woman, so it must have been completely excusable. People probably assumed I was a first time mother or something like that. First time mom trying to cut the cord but failing miserably at it due to my own fears. I'd get over it. Eventually. But I had to do it in my own time, right?

That is a stupidly common story, and sure, assumptions are terrible, but I can't think about that right now. I'm thinking about a different part of it. Because if I ever had kids, that would be me, right? I'd be the nervous first time parent. I'd be afraid of Dad somehow coming in and ruining their lives like he did mine. I'd be all about breaking the cycle, you know? Because being a parent can make you somewhat idealistic.

And if I wasn't so busy at the practice or if I had put everything together without your help, Lucent, I'd probably have done that a time or two with the siblings that became my children. Dad did not care about them as his kids or as people independent of his will, and now that I've got a glimpse of the lengths he's capable of going, I'm rightfully afraid for them. Honestly, I couldn't care less if they get along with other kids on the playground, which might have been what I'd used as an excuse, but there's more to life than that.

Either way, the motions are the same. From the outside looking in, it's all the same. It's still me, living a different life even if it's not the one I would have picked for myself.

And there's something weird about out of body experiences. For one, they don't physically hurt, like you would think they would. Or like I thought they would. I mean, think about it: part of you, your soul or consciousness or something, is being ripped out from the place where it should be, so shouldn't something be stretching out or is something cut in some way? I guess not. But it also raised an existential question. A bad one that mixed with the terrible situation I found myself in, to almost poison me. It was this dilemma that shouldn't have been a dilemma but was. And um... Well, I was sitting there, asking myself, do I physically save Lottie's life or figuratively save Roslyn's? Which matters more?

(Music fades out and new music fades in)

So suddenly, I find myself back at the beginning. I left to reclaim myself, right? I went back out to save myself. But I doubt Dad would have physically killed me. He couldn't have been bothered to do that. Then again, he was already starting to replace

me. Who knows what his actual point was with that? What the end game might have been. Then again, I kind of forced his hand. I was already starting to rebel. That might have been what initiated this transition. He was tired of trying to discipline me, so... upgrade. But if I had accepted my role, this alternative version of my life, it still would have been my life. I still would have found some joy, with the kids especially. And they were growing up. Dad had no intention of having more. I-- (Sigh)

There was value there. It wasn't nothing. So did I overreact? Did I get so caught up in a mystery that--no offense--I've now completely forgotten about? I threw it aside for someone I've... For someone I've come to love as much as I'm able to. I needed someone. I needed someone, and Lottie fits in that whole as well as anyone could. Clearly, I need people in my life to have any sense of happiness. It would have been easier to stay. Live this life. Live a life that would have been mine by a technicality.

I just don't think technicalities are really going to cut it right now. Or ever. I-- I don't. But maybe that's me trying to justify my choices in hindsight. Assuming such a thing is possible.

The boys never came out to play. None of their grades, I should clarify. For once, there's nothing nefarious here. And Roslyn's classroom or grade-designated area, whatever you'd call it, was on the other side of the building.

That was it. I sat out there, fulfilling a fear of mine about some creeper gawking at kids, for nothing. When the uselessness of it all hit me, I wiped my eyes with the heels of my hands, but there was nothing to take away. There were supposed to be tears there, right? Shouldn't I have been crying? Wouldn't that have made sense? But

no, I wasn't. I wasn't crying and whatever emotions I had were those that lingered from that first goodbye I never gave those kids.

(Music fades out and new music fades in)

With that nothingness done, I popped into one of the cafes and grabbed a sandwich, specifically I popped into a cafe with overworked staff because that would minimize the chances of them recognizing me. I hate taking advantage of exploitation, but I kept telling myself that this was life or death. It could always get worse for them, I thought. But I left a twenty in the tip jar anyway. And you know, um... They had Lottie's favorite pastry there. It's this weird French thing. I genuinely can't pronounce it for the life of me. In the moment, pointing works as a form of ordering, but I can't really do that here. So there was no need to mention it, really, but um... it was a nice little pick up when I really needed it, and I need to remember it for the same effect so... yeah, um... Just thought I'd put that in there for my own sake.

Because I was going to give it to Lottie, you know, when I saw her again. Ideally that night when I brought the doctor. It would be my apology for taking too long or just a little treat to bring a smile to her face. There were so many things it could be. It came in one of those plastic tins that's easy to smash if you aren't careful. But I could be careful, I thought. It was the least of my concerns right then, but I could do it.

(Extended - Music fades out and new music fades in)

I kept a low profile until the day fully and officially passed over from lunch to late afternoon. And given all the interpretations out there for a lunch hour, that's a surprisingly hard transition to nail. But at bare minimum, I knew how the office handled

it. I knew the shifts and rhythms of the staff and practitioners, at least. Which were the only groups of people allowed to use the parking garage I was breaking into.

Or not really breaking into. Security sucks, and Dad never got around to calling in the request to make it not suck. And apparently I wasn't important enough to do that myself, so... Gift horse and all that. Sometimes you just get lucky and the greatest source of your frustration for a respectable chunk of time actually turns out to be a gift in a moment you'd never thought you'd have. And sometimes your luck continues and the doctor you need never changed their car or cleaned it out. With the weather outside being what it is, you could just break into their car, lie in the backseat and cover yourself with one of the many blankets there, hiding the curves of your body amongst the clutter. Then you just wait. Because surely they are coming out alone and vulnerable. After all, they don't socialize with anyone in the office. They don't socialize much at all as a doctor starting out in their busy career. You've got a great chance at getting the upper hand. Right?

That's all hypothetical, of course. It has to be.

Of course, there's another meaning to late afternoon. At least for certain families with certain children in certain schools. Okay, I don't need to be subtle about this part. It's the time of day when some kids get off of school and do whatever it is they're going to do with the rest of their day. I didn't think about that. And in my defense, I didn't have much of an obvious need to. I had done my part for the kids that day. I had gone back to retake up my vigil and all the failures therein. With that done, I had every intention of making another, more permanent break. There was no going back now. There was no reason to.

But sometimes you don't have to go back to see the consequences of your actions. More often than not, they come and find you where you are. Sometimes, you're standing beside a car you obviously don't own, trying to jimmy the lock open because it's actually a lot harder than it looks when the consequences of your actions come to hit you in the face. Figuratively hit you. In a literal sense they come close but not close enough.

I heard someone enter the garage. I heard the heavy click of the door and the rush of fresh air coming in. It was a heavy door, too, which delayed whoever it was and gave me not much of a head start but enough time for me to duck behind the car and not be seen.

(Music fades out and new music fades in)

Again. To not be seen again. Because we'd already done this once before.

There was Roslyn, sweet Roslyn, walking towards Dad's practice, specifically the staff entrance that could only be found in that parking garage.

My heart sank at this small shred of evidence that my worst fear had come true. Roslyn was the new me. Roslyn had taken over for me. Or that was the most likely explanation, the one I was drawn to. Yes, there were others. Yes, there are child labor laws. But Dad does what he wants and won't do what he doesn't. Roslyn's young, but there's still some work at the practice that she could do, discreetly. Or not so discreetly. No one is going to challenge the miracle worker, not when it could very well be their minds or lives in his hands one day. He has the ultimate power. No civic authority, no policing authority, no one could ever argue against him. No one could act against that, that ultimate fear: something worse than life or death.

Except for me. Except I did once. I could have done it again. I could have rushed up and grabbed her and just ran or steal a different car. I could have made it work. I had choices. I had actions I could take that were entirely mine. I could have rescued her. I could have have saved her. But I didn't. I didn't do anything. I crouched down behind the car and held my breath as my sister walked like a prisoner to her execution. And that metaphor isn't entirely a metaphor.

God help me. Whatever Deity might be listening, help me. Except you can't. It's too late for so many things. Because in hindsight, breaking into that car was the wrong thing to do.

I should have saved Roslyn. And at least then, I would have someone here with me. But what kind of justification is that, even? It's just a selfish one. How fitting.
(Static starts. Music cuts. Static fades out).

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