

(Static fades in and then cuts. Moment of silence)

Have you ever been so stressed and anxious and scared that you think the only way this turmoil could ever end (inhale) is in the (exhale) disaster you are painfully anticipating. (Music fades in)

And so this stress builds up in your mind. The horrors and the terrors. All of it. It just grows and grows. And now it's bigger than you. And what are you going to do? You can't do anything. That's the problem. So you just sit there and panic. Panic. Panic. Panic. That's all. And that's just an escalation of the issue. It got worse. Everything gets worse. Over and over again. And that's your life now. Just this panic, over and over again, and it'll end someday you know, but it'll be over in the worst way. And you don't want that. But there's nothing you can do about that, and the spiral continues.

And then... Then it stops.

(Music fades out and new music fades in).

Suddenly you wake up one morning, and everything is not so bad. Or it doesn't feel like it is. Or you don't feel like it is. The panic that once consumed your every thought is gone. And you can just breathe. But maybe you don't have any additional reason to think that everything will work out. Or that the other side of this will somehow be in your favor. But you feel like everything will be okay, somehow. Logical calculations of days gone by be damned. You're going to be okay. You just believe it.

I hit that point today. I think I'd been wavering around it for a while. But today, I just hit it dead-on. My body slammed against it and stuck.

Maybe it was the dip in temperature outside that just distracted me. It's like winter's come again, and I've got a small pack of kids to dress appropriately, which is such a hassle.

Have you ever dressed a kid for winter, she asked rhetorically. It just drains your soul.

At least things have been somewhat calm since my last broadcast. The bed sheets are all clean. And Dad... Dad is... how he always is. But one of his case studies got swept up by a major journal, and he's pretty happy about that. Or as happy as someone like him could ever be. But I will say that it's not a new occurrence for him at all. This isn't that much of an accomplishment. Hence the more muffled state of contentment around the office.

But that particular case study was... a bit unusual. It wasn't a medical breakthrough exactly, but the featured patient's memory loss wasn't a typical case of memory loss, and there are some ramifications. Well, it was, and it wasn't.

(Music fades out and new music fades in)

Patient Z, as he's known in the text, forgot large portions of his professional life, but in the course of that forgetting, he remembered his childhood, particularly swatches from the younger side of that era of his life, the times we normally forget. Like our first or second year of schooling.

And I know what you're thinking. Depending on Patient Z's age, that could be half a century ago, and we can't verify any of it. Except we could.

You see, in what has to be a once in a lifetime occurrence, Patient Z just happened to have buried a small box underneath part of his childhood home, a farm about two hours outside of the city. And Dad sent one of his research assistants out there to see if said box could be found. Patient Z still owned the farm after all, and he had not done anything with it in the past decades.

And sure enough, there it was, right where Patient Z said it would be. And he was able to describe the contents of the box almost perfectly. What mistakes he did make were simply the product of time. Oxidation isn't something that could be predicted by anyone, particularly not someone in his state.

Dr. Alexson in particular was just fascinated by this. Because it seems to raise some sort of question about the nature of forgetting. Are there some memories that aren't truly gone beyond recollection? But might just be buried beneath everything else. And what does that uncovering entail?

(Music fades out and new music fades in)

Consequently, he's been hanging around the office more often since that article was accepted. Well, specifically around Dad's office, asking him all sorts of questions to that end, trying to get to answers that of course Dad did not have at that stage. In fact, he wasn't even going to pursue that line of research. Publishing that case study was just a way to pad out his CV, and that of the RA who got sent out on that relatively dumb errand. And it was also going to help solicit more donations. Maybe from people who would not think to earmark them in any way. That was always his goal: to get money without conditions.

But Dad can't say that to Dr. Alexson. He has to behave around his mentor. And maybe that's why I'm suddenly so calm.

Dr. Alexson always made me feel safe. Ever since I was a little girl. You know, my dad's worked for him as long as I've been alive. So when I say always, I mean always. And as my dad's mentor and boss, Dr. Alexson would come around a lot. Dad would show off the kids and the wife when the wife was alive as well as his beautiful home. It's always good when the boss thinks your life is in perfect order. It makes it easier for him to promote you later.

And Dad took that to heart despite already being the golden child or the prodigy who maybe on some standards already had it made. So he invited Dr. Alexson to our home quite often, and on those visits, I was actually happy. Dr. Alexson used to bring me some candies, and he'd give them to me right in front of my parents. And he praised me for being smart and pretty or whatever I wanted to hear.

The only kind words I got during my entire childhood came from him. Even my own mother wasn't... great at loving me. She was just distant in a different way than Dad was.

But Dr. Alexson was warm and caring. And he would always joke with me.

I always wanted him to be my dad, you know? I think a lot of people with dysfunctional families find other outlets for their love and devotion. Dr. Alexson always had mine. I worked hard in school to give him my report cards and graded exams. I learned to cook so I could bring him meals when he was working late. I learned to sew because he was too thrifty to throw away a shirt with a tiny run in it. But it was more

than that, I used to fantasize about Dr. Alexson being my actual dad, and I even made various elaborate backstories trying to explain how it was possible. That was just how I coped. It was what I needed.

(sigh) And sure, I've... I've grown out of those childish fancies. But I still feel safe when he's around. And maybe that's why I'm not absorbed in a panic about... about the picture.

And that was probably a super rude way to say it, but I didn't know what to do. I did not pull the ribbon when I had the chance. So I assumed it was over. It was over, and I had messed up, but story of my life. Except Dr. Alexson would not seem to let it go. When he goes to bother Dad, he has to pass me at the front desk, and he just gives me this look, like... (sigh) It's hard to explain.

When I was a child, Dr. Alexson gave me gifts that my parents weren't so thrilled about. And I know how that could sound, but hear me out. My parents did not want me to be a child, just a small adult. So toys and other childish things were frowned upon, but so was disrespecting Dr. Alexson in any way. Like by refusing a gift from him.

One day, one Sunday in fact, Dr. Alexson came over for a family dinner and scooped me off the floor to sit on his knee. And he gave me that same look that I've been seeing a lot of as of late..

My birthday was about two weeks away. And Dr. Alexson had gotten me this beautiful doll that I had been secretly coveting for months. He knew I wanted her. All the girls in the nation wanted her. She was a beautiful doll, for one, but she was part of a line of dolls that was really popular at the time.

She was an artist, dressed in a smock with fake stains and smudges but still beautiful and smart if the lore behind her was to be believed.

(Music fades out and new music fades in)

I loved that doll as long as she could handle my love. But toys cannot last forever. Not physically anyway. But my love and all the fond memories of her remain. Particularly the memories that involve Dr. Alexson, and the look he gave me before her arrival. A look that came then and now. I just had to wait, I knew. I just had to trust him.

So I did. Until this morning.

(Knocking. Music cuts. Static transition.)

Sorry. I... (sigh) Night terrors.

(Music fades in)

Some kids get them. It's like a nightmare, but the kid can't fully wake up because they aren't actually having a dream. It's like the neurons of their brain are just rapidly firing, and that's what it does to the physical body. It stiffens them, and they start screaming. But nothing's wrong. Nothing is wrong. Not that Roslyn necessarily believes it.

It scares her, and honestly, it scares me too. But it's happened enough times that I've made an uneasy peace with it.

Dr. Alexson once told me that they happened to me too. When my parents and I were visiting his summer cabin, when I was about seven, I was struck by a particularly bad batch of them. And my parents were mortified that it happened, but Dr. Alexson didn't care. He just wanted to comfort me. Or tried to. But rationally, you can't comfort a

child in that state. I did not know he was there. And I wasn't actually afraid. It was just my body doing something that no one fully understood.

All the same, Dr. Alexson's heart broke to see me like that. But there was nothing he could do. And I understand that quite well, in a few different ways.

Anyway, this morning, Dr. Alexson did what has essentially become normal to him. It's practically a routine at this point, though who knows how long it can last. He walked over to Dad's office when he noticed a gap in the schedule, because as a doctor--retired or not--he can see the patient schedule, and started asking him the same set of questions, things that Dad could not answer, and really did not care about in any way. And Dad would dodge and weave as diplomatically as he could until this window of supposed free time finally closed.

(Music fades out and new music fades in)

All the while, the door was open, and their conversation spilled out into the rest of the office. The office was always draped in this uncomfortable silence born out of the nature of our work. Dr. Alexson, for reasons I still do not fully understand, can keep it away just by his presence. He's never given that sadness any power over him, and so, as I imagine, he can effortlessly fight this weakened form back.

And in awe of his power, we all end up listening for his voice. And it both literally and figuratively fills the space.

And then, this morning, after the conversation played out, Dr. Alexson ran out of questions, and Dad started to run out the office door, but Dr. Alexson broke from his usual pattern.

(Music fades out)

He grunted and groaned, but refused to outwardly admit that he couldn't lift himself from the chair. (New music fades in) Not that he needed to admit that. He's an old man, now. He's an old man who has already had a lot of other trials and struggles already. This wasn't anything new.

I was the first to run to him, before Dad could call me in. It was the filial instinct kicking in, you could say. And yeah, Dad really did have to call me. Dr. Alexson would never let anyone else help him with such a basic task or with anything really. He's a sweet old man, but he's proud. But when it's me, he doesn't care about that. He doesn't argue. he falls against my body and lets me pull him to his feet.

"You'll have to help me to my office," he said.

His sadness was carefully masked by his pride, but I could still hear it. I tried to assure him that I was happy to help him with emphasis on him. That I didn't mind it at all when the new receptionist was annoying me, saying that last bit loudly enough to clearly be heard by the front desk area. Because it wasn't exactly a secret, and I don't have hiring authority over her or anyone when I maybe should anyway.

It's not harmless, I admit, but it's practically so.

As you can tell, it was great to have some sort of break from everything, a break with the person who made me feel safe, and it was going to be a fairly long break. In his old age, Dr. Alexson moved very slowly, and his office was on the other end of the floor, off to the side and out of the way. Or private, by some other words. Less chaotic. He



needs his rest as was told to him by other doctors not in the practice, and he has taken that to heart.

Maybe it should be harder than it is to see him like that. To see him be so tired and weak. But I can get by. I can handle it.

When we entered the office, Dr. Alexson gestured for me to close the door before I helped him into his chair. And I thought nothing of it. I thought it was his pride again, his not wanting to show off how old and frail he has become. Even if it is common knowledge, it did not have to be the sort of thing anyone thought about frequently. There's different kinds of secrets after all.

But when he sat down, grunting and groaning the whole time, he beckoned me to stay a moment longer with a wave of his hand. And I obliged, of course.

I knelt before him as he pulled open the drawer. And in it, lay another fancy piece of paper or cardstock or whatever the correct terminology is. I've seen pages like that a thousand times over. And you guessed it, it was an invitation to some other grand gala. This one in Dr. Alexson's honor, celebrating his life and fully packed career.

He handed it to me, which was odd, I admit. (exhale in frustration) It's not weird that he's being honored. That's par for the course, but I never knew about those galas until after when he came with a handful of checks or donation slips for me to give our accountant whose name he struggles to learn. That's just how it worked with him. He never put the responsibility of attending on anyone else, even before he retired. And maybe it was only because he didn't have a wife or children, and now that I've grown more and more into that role, this just made sense, but I don't know.

I held it in my hands and waited for him to speak, to explain.

But then he simply said, "You need to go."

I look at the invitation more closely. The gala itself was in two days. It's more notice than what my dad gives me, but still, this was a bit puzzling. This wasn't something Dr. Alexson had ever done before.

I was about to ask, but once I opened my mouth, he spoke. "Pull the thread," he repeated. And it suddenly made so much more sense.

I lowered my eyes and sure enough, there was your name. You would be providing the art. Of course, you would be providing the art. Lucent is the most desired artist right now. So mysterious. So talented. And so... rare, they used to say. Once upon a time you never displayed your work, but here you are. Doing it again, so close to your last appearance. This wasn't like you. No, there was something special going on.

For good measure, Dr. Alexson put his finger against his lips. Keep the secret, he seemed to add. And on that, he didn't need to tell me twice.

(Music fades out and new music fades in)

There's a message waiting for me, isn't there? At this gala, this week. I looked at the invitation again. It was an updated one. It was reprinted last week, and while a change in the entertainment seems like a poor reason to go to all the trouble of reissuing invitations, you're worth that trouble. You are the defining factor, right? I don't know who the artist was before, but they could not have compared to you. And you know that. You know your power. You have to. (sigh) It's not a secret.

You must have offered your work to them. You must have offered to participate and that drew their interest. And of course, they had to act on it. They had to act on you. I know all the variables but not the why. Why you're doing this? Why all of this trouble? It-- (two breathes)

It's me, isn't it? This is about me. It will be my turn soon, won't it? To act on you. Because your manager will be there. And I'll need to pull the thread. Or ribbon or whatever it is.

What does Dr. Alexson have to do with this? What is going on? Lucent or whatever the frick I used to call you? Why can't you give me a message like a normal person, okay? I'm here. I'm at the practice. You're the one whose mysterious why are you doing this to me? Why?

(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.