

(Static fades in and cuts.)

(whispering with static rising and falling beneath Zaneta's voice) I don't know if you can hear me. But I had to move my setup to what's technically known as the maid's quarters. It's like a small room in the corner of the building, out of sight and out of mind. There's a window. So I think I can still get a signal, but maybe not consistently.

Dad's home for once, and that's the problem. (sigh) But that feels impossible. Dad's never home. He normally comes back late, gets a few hours of sleep, but all the while, he never makes it obvious that he's here. But he came home today. Loudly. He stomped around the house like that was his habit, not his right. And it was like he was trying to wear down the hard wood floors in the hallway outside of the kids' rooms as he walked back and forth. Back and forth. Back and forth. Doing rounds almost.

I used to just broadcast from my bedroom. The door locks, and the kids know to knock. Not because of this... whole thing. That's just good manners, and I want them to have good manners. But Dad does whatever he wants for whatever purpose he may have. The rules don't apply.

I know the behavior but not the reason. He's not going to knock because there's never been a good reason to knock. It's a gesture based in courtesy, respect, and care: things he doesn't have in spades. Especially not for me.

But he does want to know. He wants to know what I'm up to. He demands it.

He's up to something. I know it. He has something in mind or some sort of plan because that's how his brain works. But he won't tell me what's going on. That used to

be just annoying, but if he's really working up to something, like I know he is... I just I need you to know that I (Zaneta cuts)

(Static rises and falls. Equipment jostles.)

(Normal volume but a bit breathless) That should be better. All of this should be better.

(Music fades in)

Lucent, what am I getting myself into? This scavenger hunt of yours is... (sigh) Well, okay I get it now, it's the best you can do, but you know I have to come home to him, right? I have to come home to him, and to this, and to everything. Why can't we just run away together? Why? I mean, I... I think I love you. Loved you. And you must love me back. I mean... (awkward chuckle) Why else would you do this? Why?

I mean, I guess it could just be about pity. Pity is making you do this, making you help me (Forced exhale) From what little I've been able to put together, There's plenty of reasons to pity me, alright. I mean, how could you feel anything else but pity for me.

No, it doesn't matter. It can't matter right now because that's going to be the last thing you tell me. The why of it all. That's the last part of this. I know. I just have to get there right now.

(Music fades out and new music fades in)

The first step.... (quick sigh). I went to the gala for Dr. Alexson like I was supposed to. And that was, what was it, almost two weeks ago now. Look, I don't have a lot of time for this. I have to make do with the scraps I have leftover because of Dad and the practice and the kids. And now, Dr. Alexson... He... He fell in the practice the

other day in his office where no one could see. He was down for a while before anyone found him, and even though he's otherwise strong for his age, for his old age, being stuck on the ground like that, unable to get yourself up, is going to take its toll on him.

I don't know the specifics of what's going on with him, though. Dad's been the one checking in on him, calling the medical facility that Dr. Alexson was checked into, and there's no one else I can ask, so I have to trust what Dad's telling me, which obviously I don't want to do right now, but I don't have a choice (quick inhale). And I'm just so trapped right now. There's no way around it.

But Dr. Alexson... Okay. I went to that gala for him, right? I never went to his events. I was never even told about them. They just happened, and maybe I had a part in processing the donations, after the fact, but that was it. So there was this sense in which, well, I felt lost and confused. I couldn't resort to autopilot. I was just trying to adapt another routine for this situation.

That included, obviously, the pizza money for Roslyn and the kids. And also telling her about it, and she gave me the same concerned and sorrowful look that she did before. She asked me for the same promise, and I gave her the same assurances, and I told her the same thing about the necklace. (sigh) And the entire situation felt or still felt wrong. It feels wrong even in hindsight. I mean, obviously I don't want my little sister to be anxious, but the way it comes up, the way she asks me, the way she doesn't trust me. There's something I'm missing here.

I know everything about Roslyn and her life, so what could I be missing? Well, I mean... That's all assuming I was right, which I'm not. I'm missing other things, but

even the scraps I have now don't really explain this. But maybe I'm just not looking at it hard enough or in the right way. Maybe the answers that I have now will be the only one I get. Maybe I'll never know what's bothering her, what's Roslyn and the kids, but you know they... They haven't had it as easy as some kids have.

Unless... Are you going to tell me? When I find you, are you going to tell me why she's like this? (sigh) I don't know why I think you know. Why it seems connected to you in some way. That part doesn't make sense, but none of this has made sense. It's... It's how my brain is inclined to think right now.

I can't think about that right now, right? There's the path right ahead of me, and the rocks in the distance just can't be my focus right now.

(Music fades out and new music fades in)

So I put on a navy blue dress. Roslyn likes it, and it's one I frequently wear to these types of events, and maybe kind of, sort, that's a fashion faux faux, but now, ask me if I care, if I can mentally muster up that sort of thing right now. And I'm sure you can guess what my answer is.

But to the point. When I got to the art studio, it was in another one of those converted warehouses in the lazily gentrified neighborhood downtown. Or maybe it was even the same one. I don't know; they all look the same to me, and by certain standards, they really are the same thing. They have the same history and stand to represent the same events, so why bother differentiating?

Also, I wasn't paying attention to that or pretty much anything. I was too busy looking around, looking for your manager. And that's what I had to prioritize. I'd have to

piece together and learn everything about that exhibit on my own. That's why I needed to prioritize. I couldn't expect anyone to come and pretend to care about filling me in when really, in those other circumstances, they just wanted their photographer to grab a candid shot of us together so that they could show off to their friends or prove that it all happened.

But I wasn't the guest of honor by proxy anymore. People would smile at me, yes, but being the protege's daughter was akin to being nothing. A picture with me would serve no purpose. Well, almost no purpose. I guess some people would think my larger frame makes theirs look better in pictures, but my disinterest helps me wear it better. So they can't even do that.

(Music fades out and new music fades in)

I knew I was going to be completely on my own when I got there, but that didn't bother me. Normally it would; I'm the sort of person who does better with a clear mission or a sense of purpose. But then again, Dr. Alexson already told me what to do right? He told me to pull the ribbon that was in your manager's coat collar. That's what he said, and Dr. Alexson had never led me astray. So that's what I was going to do. That was my mission. That was my sense of purpose. That's why I was there.

So there was a lot that would likely go into that, but it could all be distilled down into two basic tasks: I had to find your manager and trust Dr. Alexson, and those two things that would normally come easily to me. I mean, I guess the added caveat was to do it silently. Discreetly.

I glanced around. Your manager cuts such a distinct presence that I was sure I would be able to find him immediately. And all versions of my so-called plan revolved around that fact. Which was not wise on my part. I probably should have been more flexible, but can you blame me for putting my trust in such a basic fact? He has these piercing eyes that cut through the thickest crowd. He's a looming presence naturally in a crowd of people who fell into wealth or let themselves be softened by it once it was gained. He was very different. He stood out like a sore thumb.

And yet, I could not find him anywhere.

Maybe he was waiting, I thought. Maybe he was waiting for me to see the message in the display, in another largely ignored piece meant to only speak to me, and for now, I just had to wait. That was my hastily devised Plan B. But I had nothing else. So I lifted my eyes and looked for a message somewhere. But these pieces... Well, they weren't that special. They were basic paintings, some would call them. Though no one would ever want to use that word when you were involved. And you were clearly involved.

Your artistry shined through. The way you crafted and gathered the lines of your subjects. The way you capture the soul--this twisting, turning, and ever evolving entity--in the eyes otherwise flat and stagnant, no matter how distant they must be from the viewer for the sake of the larger picture.

All of those things you were famous for were in those pictures. So undoubtedly, it was you who made those pieces. But if still, somehow, I had doubt, the whispers of the crowd would have put them all to rest. Everyone else was sure it was you. And yes, the

snobby amateur art critic types tend to be the most ill-informed, but it's easy to follow confident people, even if it is into the fire.

That's why I did not initially question when someone grabbed my arm and pulled me towards the balcony. Though that was the wrong way of handling it.

(Music fades out) I should have panicked, yes. I know. I should have pulled back or yelled to draw others' eyes in. I should have done something, anything.

(Music fades in)

But that wasn't my reaction. In the moment, I didn't think I needed to be given how it was.

The grip was not demanding in a power-driven sort of way, if I'm making sense. It had a strength behind it that seemed to be drawn from an urgent necessity not a desire or an assumption. And in it, there was concern, but it was only the faintest hesitation: a demurring that co-mingles with a plea that cannot be heard as it cannot be uttered. There's this potential back and forth, a full conversation, condescended into a moment, its allure strengthened by the subconscious callback to the familiar being invoked.

I can't rationally tell you how I knew that was Dr. Alexson directing me, calling me, demanding me to come with him. I can't tell you how I knew it was him pulling me to the balcony before I saw his face. It wasn't something my mind recognized. Rather, it was the body that filling in the gaps. It caught a whiff of the current and fell against it effortlessly.

My mouth chimed in before the face of my pursuer was revealed to me. "Dr. Alexson," I whispered as he pulled me aside and into the night air.

And sure enough, it was his face I was staring back into.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“You left,” he said. “What happened?”

I don’t know how to tell you about this. I don’t know how to distill a conversation like that into mere words when the back and forth went so far beyond that. When spoken word danced with history and connection and... And the sight of his eyes. The plea therein. The love. This was my father. Or the closest thing I had ever known to one. He carried the sort of love for me I had otherwise been denied but that every child needs. He corrected the greatest wrong in my life. A fundamental one. He cared about me. He wished me well. He taught me many things. He comforted me. Dr. Alexson was always my everything.

So when he said something that could have seemed outright absurd, I fell into it. There was no need for a coherent argument. He was the argument. The evidence. The everything. Logic be damned. But then again, the logic felt sound. Your picture? Of me. You had seen me, so there was some sort of gap in my life, time not fully accounted for. This was a good of an explanation as any I could have come up with.

(Music fades out and new music fades in)

So when he told me that at one point, I had gone away for a while, a great while. It did not matter that I could not remember it. It didn’t matter that I thought I could account for every moment of my life, which I couldn’t really do. I was just trusting in the mundaneness of it all. It’s like how... How hard it can be to remember if you locked your door or not when you left for work. You know you’re going to question yourself later

because that's what everyone does every day, but all the same, you can never seem to commit that act to memory. And it's because you do it all the time.

Even with the patients. Even with the tragedy of their struggles and pains, there's always been a rhythm to it all. There were patterns and norms. And in them, I lost myself.

Instinctively, though, my head shook a bit.

"Think," he told me, in a low voice. "Those memories have to be in you somewhere. Did you ever want this life?"

No, I didn't. And I did not need to answer him. He knew my heart. I had entrusted it into his hands. He knew I always wanted to leave here. And in the periphery of my mind, I could see... a faint memory of maps and guide books. I closed my eyes and tried to focus on this seemingly random image that had just popped into my head. But it didn't feel random. It felt like a memory. And in that memory, in a darkened room... No, not a room. We were outside. Dr. Alexson and I. Just like tonight, but with less light.

Above shined a full moon. It wasn't like that back then.

It took me a bit to piece everything together, but this is what I know: At one point, I left, and he helped. First he gave me the hope and then the tools. And finally, I think... Later after the event, I remembered him giving me another envelope of money, but it wasn't like in the office when he handed me all the donation checks. This bundle was thicker. And it was cash. And his hands brushed against mine as he handed them off. It was a small touch meant as a genuine and heartfelt last goodbye.

But it wasn't that because... Yes, I left this place. At one point, I left. But then...

(inhale)

"When did I come back?" I asked.

His face was stern, and he was silent. He did not know. He would come and go from the office, travelling for lectures and teaching gigs, and all that. But one day, when he came back, I was there. I was there, acting like I had always been there, complaining about the printer like I had spent years fighting with it. I knew about office parties that I had not been to, and... And the staff had completely changed over too.

(Music fades out and new music fades in)

No one but he or Dad could have corrected me. And Dr. Alexson did not know if he should or how. One wrong move on his part could have blown us all away.

And then he said... He said when he came back, Dad had a small smirk on his face when he was watching me from a corner of the office where I could not see him. Where he thought no one could see him. Smirking wasn't like Dad. That would have involved some more emotion than what he could typically muster.

I accepted every word Dr. Alexson said. Though to be fair to me, it wasn't as shocking as I thought it would have been. The picture, my face in it... That was shocking. Horrifying some would say. Because it broke through the illusion that everything was fine. And everything that came afterwards... Well, that's all me living in a new age, scrambling to figure out what that means. And really, Dr. Alexson was only telling me to do something I was already inclined to do, something I had to do, which was walk through it. Walk through this... This gap. This opening.

There were so many more questions, so many more things I wanted to know or hear him say, but before I could ask, we were interrupted by a loud and awkward laugh from inside. It was an entirely unrelated event, but we were already on edge. Time was working against us. We couldn't disappear for long like this. We had to go back inside. Whatever questions remained could be addressed some other time.

Or so we thought... That was the last time I saw Dr. Alexson. He fell and stayed fallen a few days later. I haven't been able to visit him or see him at all since then. I haven't been allowed to. He's taken no visitors. But I think... I think I know why.

I caught Dad's eye as we walked back inside. He was facing towards the door with a dark twinkle in the corner of his eye as he engaged in some other conversation. And I think... I think I know what he was thinking, what he did. After all, there were questions that I didn't need Dr. Alexson to answer. Dad worked with memories but not in the psychology way. No, Dad worked with the hardware.

And who stood to benefit from my sudden and forced return? Dad did. And--
(Knocking sound. Music cuts. Static. Silence)

(More emotional) Sorry. It's the kids again. And it's always the kids. Everything I do is for them. I haven't really slept or eaten in who knows how long. And you know what? Maybe it wasn't Dad that benefited from me coming back. Maybe it was just them. Always them. And--(sigh)

I love my siblings. (inhale) I really do. I love them with all my heart and soul, and... (breaking/crying) And this is where most people would vow to die for someone they care about, which is what I'm doing by many standards. So you would think it's an

easy promise to make. It's an easy thing to say when you're doing it. But... But here I am. I'm dying for these kids. I'm killing myself slowly for these kids. And there's so many of them. And they lost their mom, and their dad's.... horrible. And they need someone. They need a stable adult. Like I needed a stable adult. And I leaned on Dr. Alexson, but never like they do. And they and Dad and everything. And I hate that... I hate that I can't... And

(crying still) I should be happy, right? I should be happy. I shouldn't be this upset. But Dad's a jerk. But Dad's a jerk, sure, but I have those kids. I have these babies. Not everyone has something as beautiful as them in their life, but is this a life? I don't know. I just don't know.

(Deep breaths and time to regain composure)

Dr. Alexson disappeared into the crowd, into a crowd that was somewhat eager to swallow him up, but Dad on the other hand... He always seemed to linger in my peripheral vision, just in the corner of my eye and just enough so I knew he was there. I knew he was there, alright, and I knew it didn't have to be that way.

This was his first public appearance in years. (sigh) Or maybe years. (audible wince). He... He does not go out much. Even to the galas in Dr. Alexson's honor. Dad thinks attending them is pointless as a general concept. If the donors are going to pay with or without him, then they can do it without him.

You can probably see the logic. Dad's choices are deliberate. His reasoning is always consistent and sound. Maybe he is not right, but without emotions or sentimentality or anything along those lines, he will never divert from his rhythms, his

paths and patterns. And right then, all of that led to watching me. It was the why that left me uneasy.

I don't remember Dad caring en-- Okay that's... (sigh) That's not the best word choice. Dad never exerted the effort required to be abusive. (inhale) Maybe that's a bit better. Like raising your hand to hit your kid involves the energy to raise and swing your hand with some effort. The mental energy to aim, also. The ability to have anger and to let that consume you. Dad never had any of that. And that's not my faulty memory talking. Other people have noticed how... unnaturally stoic he is.

Dad's always been somewhat scrawny. He was the nerd who grew up to be a nerd and never had a reason to not be a nerd. And cliches can be mean, and they can suck, but you know what I mean by this. Dad doesn't have anything physical to exert against someone. (Music fades out and new music fades in) But the wheels in his brain are turning, and they will run you over if you don't get out of the way. But you can't get out of the way. They move much more quickly than you do.

I've danced around it, but other people in my life haven't. Mom is gone for a reason, right? Not grand, divine plan reason. But something happened, and that led her to being gone. I don't remember what that thing is. I don't really remember my mother besides the sound of her crying if I think hard enough.

No one really knew my mom. But they do all know that Dad does not exactly act like a widower. Even a widower of any cried. He never cried. He did not miss her. And some men like that would just get another wife but not a romantic wife more like a placeholder wife. Someone to fill the domestic work quota. And considering how

wealthy he was, a trophy wife with a nanny on the payroll just makes sense. Or even just the nanny and the maids. Someone to do what his wife used to do.

But Dad did not get another wife, though. Dad didn't get another wife or a nanny or an army of maids. Dad had me, and everything about my presence was questionable.

Some of those rumors were particularly vicious. But necessarily vicious with malice. But vicious unintentionally. People had these fears or concerns that there was a monster in their midst or that I, who could be an easy standin for their daughters or sisters, was in danger. But it was never like that. And I don't know if that's for better or worse.

But it's just... It's a blank space. Dad did not care about anything or anyone. And that's what makes him dangerous. After all, it's always more convenient to destroy someone than it is to preserve them. Destruction is just... Look, okay, I was the kind of kid who crushed sand castles, okay? But to an extent. I mean, I never wanted to hurt someone else's feelings by crushing the creation they had worked so hard to make. So I would make half-hearted ones just to crush them beneath my heel, and I got a rush from doing so.

(Music fades out and new music fades in)

There was this thrill that came from destroying little things. Things that didn't matter. I would never crush something that did. Even if it mattered to another person. But Dad doesn't think that way, and he never has. His research matters. Nothing else

does, to him. It's this conquest, to conquer what has taken so much away from everyone else. What other people are calling indomitable.

But what if that target changes? What if this conquest becomes... about me. Or what if it already was.

I'm sorry that I did not pay attention to your display, but to be fair, apparently you did not have as much of a hand in picking out those pieces. Or so I think, I mean, I expected the host to be more excited and bragging about it endlessly if you did so. So if there was a theme, I did not catch it. I heard the paintings were beautiful objectively, but in the scheme of my life, they didn't matter. So I slowly weaved through the crowds, reconnecting with people who I had met before, smiling and chatting. I offered compliments and good cheer, particularly to those who had donated before because then it's donor maintenance. It's cultivating a relationship that's really a lucrative financial faucet. Nothing suspicious about that. A little sleazy but not suspicious.

Until I saw him. Your manager. He was seated at a table with another couple, discussing prices and rates. (sigh) Rates for you, I guess. (while chuckling) He lacks any sort of finesse about it. He doesn't dance or play games like everyone else does, like I do. And when I heard that, I suddenly liked him a lot more. Sure, he was a bit gruff and rough around the edges, and he scared me a bit, but I could appreciate those who were free.

And sure enough, I saw the ribbon peaking out just a bit from behind his collar. Not as far as before, but it did not need to grab my attention this time. In fact, it had to

do quite the opposite; it had to go unseen and stay mysterious, while it waited only for me.

I seized my opportunity. "Sir," I said to him while I came up behind him. "Your tag is out."

Your manager jumped a bit when I said that. I scared him, and I can imagine why. Maybe he assumed the plan had gone awry, and I was only shoving my prize further in his coat. Or maybe he was afraid I was drawing unnecessary eyes to an exchange that could have been private and needed to be private. I don't know what he thought, but regardless it wasn't his style to do it this way. And he never did like to be touched did he? He doesn't seem like the type. But all the same, I dipped my fingers beneath the collar of his jacket and did my best to avoid direct contact while I fished out my prize.

With a flick of my wrist, it was in my hand. And I began to walk away, calmly and to someone else, as I shifted my prize into my purse. I didn't even look at it until I got home. But then--

(Angry knocking. Static starts. 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.