

Day 5 of 18

Admittedly, I was trying to avoid my uncle as much as possible. And that is not an entirely new impulse, so, ya know. But it's not like I can run from him or anything like that. Not like this. I'm kind of stuck here. And injured. Yeah, that's a not unfamiliar kettle of worms. And neither is the desire to avoid that conversation for as long as I could. I've talked about both things before. But the desire to do something and the ability to do that thing were definitely incompatible is what I'm trying to say.

We have talked. And frankly, I thought he was going to scold me for my sullen attitude. I mean, that's what my mom did. And I tried to say it was just the jetlag, but we both knew it was not the jetlag. For all the ways my body fails me, it is stupidly good at working through that one issue.

Shortly after the party, Mom took me into what is temporarily my room to berate me for not being just unabashedly happy to be there. And like, while she has a point, I didn't think it was so obvious, okay? I would not have made it. I would have made it as not-obvious as possible because this is a me-issue, and I fully see that. I know this is my problem, and I want to be respectful. You know, I think the real problem is that she's my mom, so obviously she's going to see right through me, right? Like, her standards for how well I'm hiding how upset I am and everyone else's standards are going to be massively different. She just can't seem to see that.

And of course, I was defensive, and that made everything worse. Because I always make everything worse, right? That's like my thing. Or to hear her talk about it, that's my thing because apparently everything I do is wrong and I don't think anything

through. Or that's what she keeps telling me. And I'm not supposed to point this out because that's just a textbook example of me not thinking things through.

I know she's stressed and tired, but she's been stressed and tired since I came home from the hospital so whatever, I guess. It just is what it is.

And Dad just keeps his distance. He's never going to take a side in this. He never has. When I was younger he used to sneak me a candy or two to make me feel better after the fact, but now that the doctors have planted the idea in his head that I am at super high risk for a very bad case of diabetes, yeah, now he doesn't even want to do that. Because what if that's the piece of candy that pushes me over the edge, right?

*(Sigh)* I should make the most of my time with Lola. She actually has diabetes, you know? So she understands that it's a little more complicated than that. So there's a solution for when I am here, I guess. Nothing's really going to change when I go home.

*(Pause)*

Anyway after Mom was done and she left, I just stayed in my room and laid on the bed for a while. I couldn't really get up either physically and emotionally. You know that mood. At bare minimum, it's a scene in like every teen movie ever. And true to every teen movie ever, shortly after Mom left, there was a knock on the door.

And no, of course it was not my dad. He's never been all great at the sentimental, "almost cliched time with his daughter" thing, but it did get noticeably worse after the accident. Yes, you never want to see your kid suffer or you never don't want to imagine that something this unfair could ever happen to them. I get it, but this is where we are. It already happened. So maybe don't make it worse by acting weird or keeping

some sort of very obvious distance. By being visibly uncomfortable with a reality that--yes--sucks. But it sucks for me, your daughter, above all others, so once again, maybe don't make it worse for me. Maybe don't make this all about you.

I'm sorry. That's, That's not what this recording was supposed to be about. It's about my uncle, right? So he knocks on the door, and when I say okay, he comes into the room to see if I'm okay. And I guess that gives Mom's argument some credence. But Uncle didn't come to ask if I was okay like he noticed I had been sad okay. He asked if I had given any thought to his suggestion that I come up with some adventure I want to go on while I'm here. It's already the fifth day after all. Actually that last bit is me editorializing. But I get it. The trip, at this point, is about a fourth of the way over, and there's always so much we want to do. Or... that's how it used to be. Maybe no one's fully realized all the changes that may need to come together now. When I'm here.

I didn't say anything to that. Then Uncle asked me if I liked the bookshelf and the books on it. And all of that. Which I do. Don't get me wrong. Or I do in every way that I want to talk to him about. But because of the whole school switch, I'm somewhat limited in what I can say to him. Or at all. I...

Maybe I'm wrong about this, but I always got the impression that the greatest joy my parents could ever experience was in my achievements, specifically my achievements being better than those of my peers. It was a sign that they had done a good job. It was, like, a reward for all their hard work. And then... life happened. And it's not their fault, objectively, but no one can seem to believe the simple fact that I struggle to walk because of some internal damage. So, you know, there's a lot of things people

aren't going to believe about all this. And all of that is going to negatively affect my mom and dad, so that's upsetting too. I just don't think about it.

Instead, I think about other things. And I find reasons to be angry because angry is less physically painful than grief, blah, blah, blah, it's nothing my therapist hasn't heard a thousand times before.

What I mean is, I don't think I can tell Uncle how the books really don't mean a lot to me now. Or they aren't the same resource they could have been. And I can't tell him the research trip I wanted to plan pre-accident, when I was a starry-eyed and fully able-body freshman in a university where far-flung pots of grant money were just, like, everywhere because that's just a thing old universities have is now definitely not going to happen.

I know, rationally, I'm not letting him down, but it feels like it. It feels like I ruined everything. Like maybe I did not work hard enough in physical therapy. Maybe if I just got up from the hospital bed sooner. Maybe if I reacted quicker or differently when the actual accident happened. Okay, I don't even remember the accident, though, so I'm just assuming I did something wrong. Because everything seems more fair if it's what happened. Like, if I genuinely screwed up, then okay this is my fault. But I didn't genuinely screw up. Or maybe I didn't. The police officers who responded to the scene of the accident did not think so, but like in a battle between a car and a person, one side is more appealing than the other.

All the while, when Uncle was sitting on my bed, though, I was quiet. There wasn't anything I could say to him, so I did not say anything. He then stood up and

walked over to the bookshelf. He studied it for a moment, and I was worried he was going to be able to tell that I had not really spent that much time with any of the books. Only to realize, that wasn't his point.

He pulled out a children's picture book that I hadn't seen before. You know how it is, I guess. The spines of children's books are narrow enough that if it's on the edge of a shelf of differently sized books it kind of just blends in.

"What is it?" I asked.

You know I thought about doing voices, but--like--not a skill I was blessed with.

Uncle said it was a book about the various mountain ranges in the Philippines. It's the sort book you gave to kids to help them learn about their country and geography as sort of a two for one that is inevitable when your nation is a series of islands. There's a lot of tectonic plate stuff happening, I guess.

But that wasn't the point. It was a super old book, I realized. It was fairly beat up, but not along the edges like if a child with dirty and greasy hands spent way too much time flipping through the pages. It actually looked crushed a little bit. Like it was under a heavy box that didn't cover the full length of the cover. There was a clear indentation is what I mean.

Uncle said maybe we could go someplace in the book. And I halfheartedly gestured to my bad leg, even though Uncle might not have known that this leg in particular was my bad leg, but he said he would carry me up the mountain if I wanted to. My cousins would help, he added. We could bring one of my aunt's dining room chairs. Or, and this was a pretty strong selling point, he would just make one for me.

And frankly I liked the idea of him making me a chair or a grand throne of some kind. So for literally no other reason I agreed.

After that, he left. After he left, I halfheartedly opened the book. I say it that way because once Uncle left the room the appeal of a potential throne quickly wore off. It's like once you wake up from a dream where you are swimming in a hot fudge sundae and helping yourself to the contents of this pool, you realize how woefully impractical and sticky and maybe hot but also super cold, that would really be.

But when I pulled the front cover away, I saw a message. To translate it, it simply read, "Baby Felisa, Grandpa loves you so much."

And yeah, now I'm going to cry. So... End tape.

(Pause. Music fades in)

The Mountain's Heart is a production of Hugot Podcasting. And this end song comes from the Sounds like an Earful music supply. See you in two weeks.