

Chapter Eight: Going Back

He took the long way. There was a shorter road and he did not take it. He went around the back of the ward, past the football ground where a group of young men were still playing in the last available light, the ball a moving shape in the dimming air. He went past the primary school with its swept yard and its painted wall mural — a tree with children's handprints for leaves, the kind of thing that schoolchildren paint and then grow too old for and return to find it still there, unchanged, their handprints preserved on the wall long after the hands themselves have grown.

He walked and he thought about the phone call.

He had not allowed himself to think about it fully since it happened. There had been too much else: the walk to Mama Ofile's, the food, the wallet, the argument, the walk back, the gate. The phone call had been sitting at the back of everything like an object in a dark room that you can sense without being able to see clearly.

He brought it forward now and looked at it.

His future self had called. That self had known about the cologne, the wallet, Tumo. That self had delivered three clear instructions: go easy on the cologne, do not ask about Tumo, take the wallet. Three instructions. Simple, specific, actionable.

He had ignored all three.

Not through defiance. He was honest enough with himself to know that. It was not that he had heard the advice and decided against it. It was something simpler and stranger, something he had been turning over since he left the house that afternoon with his jacket on and his wallet in his jeans.

He had left the wallet on purpose.

He had not admitted this to himself cleanly while it was happening. He had dressed it as negligence, as carelessness, as the ordinary forgetting of a nervous man preparing for a date. But walking now, with the fat cake inside him and the evening cooling and nothing left to hide behind, he could see it for what it was. He had stood in front of his work jeans with the wallet inside and he had walked out without it because some part of him had decided, before the date even began, to make the date a test.

The logic of it, as he examined it now, was the logic of a person who has been badly used before and has not finished processing it. If she would cover fifty pula — not because

she was expected to, but because a man she liked had made a mistake and needed covering — then she was the kind of person who covered people. And if she would not, then he had learned something useful before it was too late to learn it. This was the calculation. He had made it somewhere below the level of conscious thought, and then sent himself out the door without the wallet to see what would happen.

It had not worked the way he had imagined. He had imagined a simpler version: the wallet is missing, she sees his face, she pays without fuss because she is that kind of person, and something is confirmed. He had not imagined Kefilwe. He had not imagined Mama Ofile standing in the doorway with the specific authority of a woman who has run a tuck shop for thirty years and has seen every version of human foolishness that exists. He had not imagined having to stand between two people fighting over a burger plate in front of the entire ward.

And now Thato had said it was not going to work. She had said it at the gate with the same clear voice she used for everything, without cruelty, without drama. Just: this is not going to work, we should stop. And he had said okay, because what else was there to say. Because the test had not returned the result he wanted, and the date had not gone the way anything should go, and the whole afternoon had been a demonstration of exactly the kind of person he became when he was afraid.

He thought about what it would take for a warning from your future self to actually work. The warning itself was not enough — he had proved that. The information did not change the behaviour. The information lived in one part of you and the behaviour lived in another, and they were not always in communication.

He thought about the other thing he had said to his future self.

Where were you when I was failing exams. Where were you when I actually needed someone.

He had meant it at the time. It had felt true. But walking now, with the sugar from the fat cake in him and the evening air starting to cool, he was less sure.

The exams had been difficult. The years before and after them had been difficult in the way that anyone's early life is difficult — not dramatically, not catastrophically, but continuously. Things that were not quite right, choices that were not quite the right choices, years that produced useful scar tissue but were not particularly enjoyable to live through.

But future him had not called about any of that. Future him had called about this: a first date with a woman named Thato at Mama Ofile's tuck shop on a Thursday afternoon. He

had called about this specifically. Which meant that in whatever future his future self was calling from, this afternoon still mattered. You do not call across time, or across whatever gap separates now from then, about things you have stopped thinking about.

So this afternoon had not been forgotten. It had not dissolved into the ordinary sediment of days lived and mostly unremarked upon. It was still present. Still something that a future version of him felt the need to intervene in, even knowing — perhaps knowing from experience — that the intervention would not work.

That felt like information.

He passed the football ground again from the other side — the young men were finishing now, calling to each other in the dark, collecting the ball, heading toward the various homes that held them. The sky over Otse was the colour it turns when the last of the light has almost gone and the darkness is arriving gently, not all at once, giving you time to adjust.

He thought about the gate.

She had said it was not going to work. Not a door left open — a door closed, gently, by someone who had thought about it and decided. He had said okay. He had meant it and had not meant it at the same time, which was perhaps the most honest thing about the whole afternoon.

He turned onto his road. The lights were on in his house — he must have left them on when he went out, which was the kind of thing he did when he was distracted. He walked up to the door, got his key, went in.

He went to the jeans.

The wallet was there, exactly where future him had known it would be, exactly where he had been told to check before leaving, exactly where it had been the entire time.

He picked it up. He held it. He set it back down on the dresser.

He sat on the edge of the bed. The bedroom was the same bedroom it always was — the mirror, the chair with the work jeans still on it, the cologne bottle with its unreliable nozzle, the small packet of mints beside it. Everything exactly as he had left it. Everything having waited for him, patient and unchanged, while the afternoon happened.

His phone rang.

He looked at the screen. No name. The same number as before — or not a number exactly, something that looked like a number the way a dream looks like a memory: familiar in shape, wrong in detail.

He answered.

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