

Remnants, Episode 36: Half-Empty Perfume Bottle

Content Warnings:

- Discussion of death
- Amnesia
- Mentions of severe sickness
- Discussions of complex grieving processes
- References to casual racism, specifically anti-black racism
- Mentions of ableism typical of the 1930s-40s, with regard to autism
- Discussions of war, specifically references to WW1 in both France and Uganda, and descriptions of life in occupied France during WW2
- Descriptions of explosions, smoke and gunfire
- Depictions of characters in pain and emotional distress
- Deliberate psychological harm

Transcript

[APPRENTICE GASPS AWAKE]

APRENTICE

What?

Where am I...?

Uh.

[HE GETS UP]

Hello?

[HE WALKS A FEW STEPS]

SIR

Can I help you?

[THE APPRENTICE STARTLES]

APPRENTICE

Christ, you scared the life out of me.

SIR

Perhaps. Can I help you?

APPRENTICE

I don't know. I woke up here and I... I don't remember.

SIR

What don't you remember?

APPRENTICE

I don't know.

SIR

Do you know me?

APPRENTICE

Um. I—I don't know.

SIR

No matter. What do you need?

APPRENTICE

Sorry. What is this place?

SIR

I'm not certain. But we are in it.

APPRENTICE

You mean, you don't know why you're here either?

SIR

No.

APPRENTICE

Oh.

SIR

Perhaps it is alarming. Perhaps a comfort.

APPRENTICE

Right. If I don't know and you don't know then...?

SIR

If neither of us know, then we are not alone.

APPRENTICE

You don't know why you're here and nor do I. But Maybe we can work it out.

SIR

How?

APPRENTICE

By looking at this stuff. Maybe whoever put us both here put all this stuff here, too. Maybe it can tell us something.

SIR

So you think we were placed here for the same purpose?

APPRENTICE

I don't know. But nor do you. Unless.

SIR

What?

APPRENTICE

Ha. Maybe you brought me here and you're pretending you don't know that so you can win my trust. I'll figure it out.

SIR

There is no proof either way.

APPRENTICE

I suppose not.

SIR

Look at all of these remnants, all of these things. Shelves.

APPRENTICE

It's like a... a bric-a-brac shop.

SIR

Oh?

APPRENTICE

Yeah. A lot of this stuff is junk.

SIR

I see.

APPRENTICE

There's no prices on anything.

SIR

No. There isn't. Why is that important?

APPRENTICE

Well, that's weird, isn't it? If it's a shop, why aren't there any prices? Maybe it's a clue?

SIR

I am not sure. It is unfamiliar territory for me.

APPRENTICE

This shop?

SIR

No. Knowing.

APPRENTICE

Well. Alright. Let's see. I woke up over there. Where did you wake up?

SIR

I didn't.

APPRENTICE

You didn't what?

SIR

Wake.

APPRENTICE

So how did you get here?

SIR

I don't know. This place wasn't, then it was.

APPRENTICE

How do you mean?

SIR

It was not. And then it became.

APPRENTICE

You must've been asleep and woken up here, same as me.

SIR

No.

APPRENTICE

It doesn't make any sense otherwise. Things don't just become out of nothing, that's now how it works.

SIR

How what works?

APPRENTICE

The world.

SIR

The world?

APPRENTICE

Yeah.

SIR

What were you doing before you woke up here?

[THE APPRENTICE SIGHS]

APPRENTICE

Sleeping, I suppose.

SIR

And before that?

APPRENTICE

I don't... I don't remember. That's... I should remember. Maybe whatever they used to make me sleep... it made me forget.

SIR

I see.

APPRENTICE

And you. Before you came here, what were you doing?

SIR

Talking with you.

APPRENTICE

What? But you said you didn't know why you were here.

SIR

You're confused.

APPRENTICE

Of course I'm confused! Why aren't you?!

SIR

I am.

APPRENTICE

But you remember before.

SIR

Yes, I do.

APPRENTICE

Who are you?

SIR

Ah. That is a complicated question. Who are you?

APPRENTICE

I... fuck. I don't know. I don't remember that either.

SIR

That's good.

APPRENTICE

Why is it good?!

SIR

In honesty, I'm not sure that it is. But it means I was successful.

APPRENTICE

I-in what?

SIR

Making you forget.

APPRENTICE

You... what did you give me?

SIR

I didn't give you anything.

APPRENTICE

Well you must've! You— you. I can't remember anything, nn, I— I can't. Damn it!

SIR

Are you alright?

APPRENTICE

No, hnn, no I'm not, I'm not alright and you— I need to go,

[HE RUNS, HIS STEPS ODDLY UNEVEN]

APPRENTICE

Where's the— how do I get out?!

SIR

You can't.

APPRENTICE

Where did you come from?! You didn't follow me, you—

SIR

I didn't.

APPRENTICE

I need to get out, I—

SIR

There is no leaving. No in or out.

APPRENTICE

What is this place?!

SIR

The First and Last, I think. You thought we'd left it, when things fell apart. But you were wrong. It's all the same place.

APPRENTICE

What are you talking about?!

SIR

I'm not sure. Everything, perhaps. Everyone. I don't know. But I am. And you are. And we are here. That's all there is to know.

APPRENTICE

But. But I don't understand.

SIR

No. I am not sure that you are meant to.

APPRENTICE

What's that supposed to mean?

SIR

I have no idea.

APPRENTICE

Why are you doing this to me?!

SIR

I'm not sure that I am. You see, everything was gone. And now it's back. Is it back because I made you forget? It's hard for me to be sure.

APPRENTICE

You're not making any sense.

SIR

That's not a thing I do.

APPRENTICE

Well, try!

SIR

I am.

APPRENTICE

So tell me what's happening.

SIR

You made me forget because I made you forget. Now I've made you forget again.

APPRENTICE

What?

SIR

I have told you what I know. Hmm. Perhaps that's what's different.

APPRENTICE

What?!

SIR

That I know. I am not a thing that knows.

APPRENTICE

You're wasting my time. I need to find a way out of here.

SIR

Some things never change.

APPRENTICE

I don't care. Leave me alone.

[HE RUNS AGAIN]

SIR

You cannot outrun me.

APPRENTICE

What are you?!

SIR

A fascinating question. One I have given a lot of thought, recently.

APPRENTICE

You don't know what you are?

SIR

No, but I know you are the Apprentice. And I am Sir. And this implies to me that I am the one with the power.

APPRENTICE

What power?

SIR

That remains to be seen.

APPRENTICE

You're scaring me.

SIR

Perhaps I should. Do you know what these things are?

APPRENTICE

What things?

SIR

The objects on these shelves. They are remnants. Every one of them represents a life that was lived, and lost.

APPRENTICE

Like a memento?

SIR

No. Like a remnant. Choose one.

APPRENTICE

Which one?

SIR

They will all do the same thing, for you.

APPRENTICE

Ah, this little bottle, thing?

SIR

Very well.

APPRENTICE

Alright.

SIR

Pick it up.

APPRENTICE

Uh. It's pretty small. There's some liquid in it. It's sort of thick, like it might be oil. There's a dropper inside and, ah.

[WHOOSH]

Lucie wakes to a strange, low sound. At first, she thinks it's coming from outside. She peers out of her bedroom window. There's nothing out there but trees and the moon.

The sound comes again, from downstairs. Lucie slides her feet into her slippers and creeps out into the hall. Mama is muttering, her voice quick and indecipherable.

There is a horrible moment where Lucie's stomach is in knots. Mama has been sick. So sick that she's having to go to the hospital three times a week. Her hair has been coming out in tufts. Lucie finds them everywhere, like tiny black clouds.

This time, when the sound comes, Lucie knows what it is. Her brother. José.

In the little living room of their cottage, José is curled in a ball on the floor. Mama is sitting next to him, cross legged, not touching.

'What's happening?' Lucie asks.

'I scared him,' says Mama. There are tears on her cheeks. 'I felt sick from my medicine. I came down to boil some water for tea. He heard me, must've have thought it was morning. When he came in, I startled, dropped the whole thing on the floor.'

'Is he hurt?'

'No,' says Mama. Tears drip from her chin.

'Papa is not home?'

'He's working in the city. Some job with Pierre.'

Lucie nods. She crouches next to her brother. He's rocking back and forth, hands braced against the sides of his head. 'José,' says Lucie.

José's eyes press more tightly closed. He lets out a long, low hum. Lucie can see all the muscles in his arms, so tense that he's almost shaking.

'I'm sorry it was scary,' says Lucie. 'Mama didn't mean to scare you, did you, Mama?'

'No,' says Mama.

José opens his eyes. He shakes his head at Lucie.

'You weren't scared?'

José shakes his head again, more firmly this time.

'You were, but that's not why you were upset?'

José nods, a little sound of affirmation whooshing out of his nose.

'Is it Mama?'

José nods. 'Not better,' he says.

Lucie sighs. So many people seem to think that José doesn't understand that Mama is sick. As if it were not obvious that she is as thin as a rake, that her scalp shines through her thinning hair, catching the light like new pennies. He's not stupid. He just doesn't speak very much.

'I'm sorry I'm not getting better,' says Mama.

José shuts his eyes again, shaking his head hard. 'No.'

'If I could get better I would. For you. For Lucie. I'm sorry, José.'

'Stop,' says José. 'Stop stop stop.'

Ma gasps a quiet little sob.

Lucie settles against the wall. Mama gets up from her spot a few feet away to move closer. They all sit together, quiet, not touching. Mama takes a deep breath and closes her eyes. Lucie copies her. After a while, all three of them are breathing in time.

[WHOOSH]

José has not spoken for days. He was silent through the funeral. Lucie worried he might be too upset to stay, but he wasn't. If anything, he seems angry. This, Lucie can understand. She's angry too. She knows it's not fair. Mama didn't die on purpose. But Lucie can't help being angry all the same.

She talks to José about it, though she's not sure how much he's listening. He seems distant. She worries she's not doing enough to help him, to be there for him in his grief. But her own is threatening to swallow her whole.

When her father returns home briefly from his work in the city, she finds she's angry at him, too. He has to go to work, cannot be there to help them. But it's all so much for Lucie to handle, especially on top of her cleaning jobs around the town. They need the extra money. First, they needed it to pay for Mama's medicine, but now Lucie needs it so she can believe one day she can leave. Maybe she'll buy an apartment in the city for her and José. And maybe in the city she and José won't be the only black people, and maybe she could find better work, if people weren't so surprised by her all the time, even though they'd known her all her life.

She has José so she's not alone, but sometimes she feels it. She wishes she could handle things the way he does, falling quiet, shutting out the world until it becomes more bearable again. People think José is simple but this seems to Lucie like a skill, one she wishes she could learn.

She steps into her parents bedroom. The first time she has been in there since Mama passed. It's absurd. She'd not slept in that bed for months before she finally died. But she's not been able to face it. Not until now.

The air hangs still and quiet. Sunlight pours in through the small, square window by the bed, long shafts of light across the unmade sheets, bundled around where her father slept on his brief return.

Lucie shakes out the blankets, fluffs the pillows, makes the bed, and sits down at the end of it.

There, in the mirror sat on top of the chest of drawers, her own face stares back at her. She picks out her mother in features. Wide brown eyes, lips that always look as though she is about to smile, even when she's sad. Like now.

There, next to the mirror, her mother's jewellery, and a small, half-full bottle of perfume oil. Lucie reaches, picks it up. The scent is rich and thick, one Lucie knows from burying her face in her mother's shoulder. A scent that's followed Lucie her whole life.

Lucie seals the bottle and takes it to her bedroom. She folds it into a pair of old socks and shoves them to the back of her drawer.

[WHOOSH]

Papa sits up at the window.

‘Why would they come here?’ Lucie asks.

Papa shakes his head. ‘You’re thinking of it too logically. You don’t know what it was like, in the last war. It’s not the way you’re imagining.’

‘I’ve been listening to the reports on the radio and—

‘Quiet!’

‘Papa. There are no Nazi’s at the door, dad. What does it matter that I’ve been listening to the pirate channels feeding information about the—’

‘Shh! You never know who might be listening.’

‘Oh, come on. It just doesn’t make any sense that they’d come here. We’ve only got a bakery and a post-office. The de Vallée house has been all boarded up for weeks, now; they shipped all the valuables away months ago. There’s nothing here.’

‘There’s the train station,’ says José, from the corner of the room.

‘That’s right, son,’ says Papa. He’s still staring out of the window. ‘The train line that runs through here is a direct line to Paris. Only a few miles away, tracks merge from several important regions. If they can secure our town - our station - they can make sure supplies can enter Paris at a constant rate.’

‘There are easier routes from Paris into Germany, Papa. They’ve got a whole airforce!’

‘They won’t risk flying, and with the amount of goods they need to keep their forces fed, it’s just not practical. No. They need the trains.’

'Not just food,' said José.

'What do you mean?' asks Lucie.

'Information.'

Papa nods.

'Oh you're both being ridiculous!' Says Lucie. 'Most people in this town have never left it. They think Papa is strange for going to find work in the city, and they think José and I are strange because our mother was Ugandan. This town is so small and pointless that just being from another continent is enough to make you strange! The Germans probably don't even know we exist.'

Papa shakes his head. 'To a soldier, a small town looks like a vantage point not a sanctuary.'

'Well it's never been a sanctuary for us, anyway,' says Lucie.

'That's because you've never left,' says Papa.

Lucie sighs. 'It all just feels a bit absurd.'

'Such is the nature of war,' says Papa.

[WHOOSH]

Papa's been shot. Lucie didn't see it, but everyone in town is whispering about it. If it weren't for the blood on the cobblestones, it would be like he just disappeared.

Soldiers in hats with skulls perched on the brim watch from alleys and doorways as Lucie tries to go about her usual business. They smoke, flinging cigarette butts into the street. They don't care about the mess they're making because this isn't their home. They chatter in German, watch Lucie like a hawk.

Lucie has been trying to keep José inside, but he keeps wandering off. He likes the railway too much to leave it alone. She tells him he needs to stay away; the Nazi soldiers patrol the tracks near the town every morning, every evening. If they catch him out there, a big burly black boy who acts in ways most people consider strange, they'll shoot him, she's sure.

Lucy feels trapped, stuck, compressed into a little box. Like she's hardly had a moment to think about her own feelings about anyone or anything. She barely has enough time in the day to worry about other people, let alone to worry about herself.

At night, in the dark, she curls up under her blankets and listens to her radio, tuned into the pirate channels. Hearing news about the war, about people fighting back. Lucie wants to fight back too, but how can she justify putting herself at such risk when she's all José has?

And it's not just the Germans who patrol the tracks. She knows the old station master, Alain, and his son have been going out there, too. She's seen them late at night, watching from the little window in her parents' room, where she and José now sleep.

Alain knows José. Lucie hopes this is enough to keep him safe, but she's not sure, especially because Claude is out there too.

Lucie can never be certain if she likes Claude or not. They've fooled around together for years, down the back of their house near the train station, and out in the woods. When she was younger, Lucie liked him a lot, but it hurt her that he wouldn't be seen out with her in public. She'd wondered why, when she was young. Now she's older, she understands it. When he kisses her and calls her beautiful, he compares her skin to hazelnut cream, her hair to wild hedges. He likes her because she exotic and strange. Because she is other.

This same reason, the very thing he likes about her, is why he won't go steady with her. She's not a whole person to him. She's something else.

And that means Claude thinks José is something else, too. Probably something lesser. Like everyone else in town he probably assumes José is a simpleton.

She thinks about their mother, about her stories of Uganda in the last war, burning homes, frightened children. How she was spirited away in the night. How sometimes survival is resistance in itself.

But Lucie's mother was just a little girl when she was saved. Lucie might be young but she's a woman. She wants to find a way to help. She can be the person who reached out of the dark and pulled her mother to safety. The person she is sure her mother would have been, if only she'd been older.

She makes up her mind. Next time she sees Alain and Claude in the dark, she'll follow them into the woods. She'll just have to make sure that José doesn't follow her.

[WHOOSH]

Lucie lies in her parents bed, listening for the sound of the blast she knows will come.

It's been weeks since José got involved and started helping Alain and Claude and the others come up with their madcap plan to blow up a train.

It's not fair to call it mad. In principle it makes sense. But it scares her.

She's proud of José for helping, proud of herself for trusting that he could. Proud of him for walking off into the woods. Proud of herself that she let him go. But she's still afraid.

José didn't seem to be. It was a surprise to learn how much he wanted to fight, just as much as Lucie did. She should have been paying more attention. Shouldn't have taken his silence for a lack of understanding. Her mother never would have done that.

She had to trust that he knew what he was doing, just the same as her. She had to trust that he was going to be alright.

The blast is so huge it shakes dust free of cracks in the ceiling. She feels foolish for thinking she might have missed it.

She gets up from the bed, goes to the window. In the thin light of early morning, she sees the German soldiers running from their posts, tossing half-smoked cigarettes as they go.

Then there is quiet.

Across the street, Lucie sees Fleur, Claude's mother, peering from the upstairs window of the Girard's house. She's pale and drawn. Her expression is wide-eyed but oddly flat. Lucie feels like she's looking into a mirror.

There is a plan; there is something that comes next.

They're going to the de Vallée house. The Germans avoid the place; they think it's haunted. She and Claude have been going up there a few times a weeks, maintaining a story, a myth. Now it will be the place that they run to. All thanks to Alain and Claude and Lucie's effort.

But until she gets the signal Lucie can do nothing but wait.

She fusses about the house, hides her radio under the floorboards. She tries to eat one of the oat biscuits which is all they have left in the kitchen, but her mouth is so dry it's like eating soft gravel. She spits her mouthful into a handkerchief. She waits.

The light is stronger when the kitchen door bursts open. Lucie flinches, cowering in her mother's old chair. She thinks about her hair being combed on the floor at her own feet. How strange to die here, in this same room where she and her brother were born, right there on the stone floor.

Claude grabs Lucie's shoulder. 'We need to go,' he says.

Lucie is still expecting bullets in her gut when he pulls her to her feet.

'Get your things,' he tells her. He grabs the paper bundle of oat biscuits, shoves it into his bag. 'Hurry up.'

Lucie hurtles up the stairs. She grabs her bags, stuffed with fistfuls of clothes from her drawers. She'd not paid attention when she packed; she doesn't suppose fashion will be much of a concern if they're on the run.

She runs down to meet Claude. He hadn't noticed how badly he was shaking until he takes her hand.

They run from the house through the back door, down the little alley that runs behind the yards of all the houses on Lucie's street. Her mother used to tip the dirty bathwater out here.

Lucie's heart is racing. Her muscles burn from running but she barely feels it. Her breath is hot in her chest. In the woods, the air is thick with the acrid smell of smoke. Everything is shrouded in a thick fog of it that makes her choke.

It's three miles to the de Vallée house. It takes forever to get there and no time at all. They enter through an unlocked shutter, stand panting in a large room full of furniture covered in white cloths. Ghosts.

Alain and a few others are already there, sitting on the floor.

'Where is José?' Lucie asks, scanning the soot-streaked faces of the men who are watching her. They do not speak, but Lucie knows. José is dead.

[WHOOSH]

Lucie wakes with a start. For a moment, she was fleeing the de Vallée house again. Hearing Claude's voice on the wind, telling her to keep going. Smelling the gunpowder from the guns. Hearing tree trunks splinter in the dark.

She's not in the woods. She's safe in her bed, miles away from the de Vallée house. She's—

SIR

Stop.

[APPRENTICE MAKES AN ODD, PAINED SOUND]

APPRENTICE

She was— in Paris and—

SIR

I told you to stop.

[TEARING SOUND]

[WHOOSH]

[THE APPRENTICE PANTS]

SIR

That's enough for now.

APPRENTICE

What was that— why did you— ugh. I feel sick, I feel—

SIR

That was a remnant. You read the part I meant you to read.

APPRENTICE

What?

SIR

You read what I wanted you to see. Now I will ask you a question. Does she matter?

APPRENTICE

To— what are you talking about?!

SIR

Lucie. Does she matter?

APPRENTICE

To who?!

SIR

You.

APPRENTICE

How can I— what does she have to do with me?!

SIR

That was not the question.

APPRENTICE

I don't understand.

SIR

Nor do I. That is why I'm asking you this. Does she matter?

APPRENTICE

Yes! Yes she matters. She was a person, she matters!

SIR

Does every person matter? Even if you do not see how your life affects theirs?

APPRENTICE

Yes! Yes they do! Yes. What a stupid fucking question.

SIR

Hmm.

APPRENTICE

I— what are you doing to me?

SIR

I don't know. That is the problem.

APPRENTICE

Oh really?! That's the problem?! Not you— not you just— what the hell is wrong with you?

SIR

I don't know that, either. This too is a part of the problem.

APPRENTICE

You're not making any sense.

SIR

Often you accuse me of this. Perhaps the sense I am making is beyond you.

APPRENTICE

You can't just— you can't make me do that! I felt her, I felt her fear her— her love for her brother and— you tore me out and you just—

SIR

It hurt you? To stop?

APPRENTICE

Yes, it hurt.

SIR

Ah. I had hoped that by pulling you out sooner, I would spare you the pain.

APPRENTICE

What is— what happened to her?

SIR

She died. Everyone does. That's how they come to be here. Or perhaps not.

APPRENTICE

Perhaps not?

SIR

They're connected, you see. All the remnants that are here. All of them are connected. Sometimes the threads are more obvious than others. But always they ripple outwards, and one of the rings on the surface of the pond intersects with the shockwave of you.

APPRENTICE

Me?

SIR

Yes. And it makes me wonder if I have been asking the wrong question. Since I stirred in this world of dust, you were the only thing in here with me, and I had wondered how it was that I came to be here. What I had done to be put in such a place with you? But that may have been the wrong line of enquiry. I think perhaps the question I ought to have been asking is what you were doing here in the first place. Why they're all connected to you.

APPRENTICE

But I don't— I don't know who I am.

SIR

I understand that. And I wonder if perhaps that is what I have been missing.

APPRENTICE

Who I am?

SIR

Indeed. I need some time to think. So. Perhaps you ought to sleep.

[END]