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Conner Schrader

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The purpose of traveling to Cleveland this past week originally had nothing to do urban exploration. I traveled to Cleveland to celebrate my new nephew's grand entrance into the world. His name is Kadence Savannah and he stepped onto the playing field at 4:18 pm on Thursday, 16th, 2017 weighing 7.9 ounces. My mom and I still have my fully comprehended the fact that my twin brother is now a father. It sure does put things into perspective.

With the baby delivered, the trip was finally coming to a close and it was time to head back to Cincinnati and to normal life. Early Friday morning, I miss a class at the end of school to be there for my brother. I'm sure in the school's eyes I could've cut down on the days I missed but having a family member with a baby on the way is a very effective "get out of jail" free card. Yes, I took advantage of it.

I also took advantage of the fact that I was in possession of a perfectly running vehicle, miles and miles of unsealed roads and an entire day to get back to Cincinnati. Why rush? As an urban explorer, I knew exactly how I was going spend my day.

I'm not going to pretend that I just happened to stumble upon the Molly Stark Hospital as I was driving aimlessly through the back roads of northeast Ohio. There may or may not have been prior research completed while I was at the hospital waiting for the baby to arrive. I did extensive research on the buildings in the Cleveland area but most were too far out of reach and didn't fit into the itinerary of my trip. The Molly Stark Hospital however, was just an hour south on Route 44. According to Google Maps it was practically a straight shot from where I was located. Not to mention, I was going to be heading south anyway to get back to Cincinnati. I decided that night in the waiting room that it was my duty as an urban explorer to jump on this opportunity.

Friday morning arrives. I wake up in a soft, comfortable bed inside the Hampton Inn. My mouth is dry and I have a slight headache. That's what you get for ordering a drink or two at dinner last night. It is nothing that a complimentary breakfast won't solve. I take a shower and I settable with a bowl of cereal and black coffee. Very simple and nutritious.

Before the urban exploration journey could begin, I had to visit my brother and my nephew one more time at the hospital to say goodbye. Also, I had to retrieve my car that was parked that was parked there overnight. My mom and I hang out at the hospital for an hour or so before we make our departure. I stall with my brother in the parking lot and allow my mom to leave first so she doesn't notice that I am leaving in a different direction than her. She thinks we're both heading to Cincinnati. I'm taking a slight detour.

At this point in the story it must be brought to the attention of the reader, what all exactly is at stake here. I am an experienced urban explorer and I have about a ninety to ninety five percent success rate with infiltrating buildings. That percentage includes everything from how many times I have gotten caught to how many times I haven't been able to find a way into the building. In my experience of urban exploring, I have only been caught by the police on one occasion. This happened in Athens, Ohio at the infamous mental asylum known as "The Ridges". Luckily, since it was my first offense, I was let off the hook with a fine and a suspended punishment on the grounds that I maintained good behavior for two years. In other words, probation. Except, not the kind where you have to meet with an officer and pee in a cup. Right about now, there should be an alarm going off in your head and you begin to ask:

Why you risking getting caught AGAIN?

Well, there's a lot of different ways I could answer that. On one hand, I decided to take the risk considering my high success rate with urban exploration. When you look at the numbers, I have gotten away with trespassing way more times than I have gotten caught. The problem with having a good urban exploration success rate is that it can also make you a little too optimistic and naive. And cocky. This will get you into trouble.

On the other hand, I am taking the risk in the sense that I am a thrill seeker who craves adventure. This is the main reason why I am so deep into this hobby. It provides a thrilling stimulant that I like to mix in with my normal, everyday life. I try my best to keep it balanced and stable. With the direction this story has headed, clearly you can begin see that it is hard to maintain that balance at times.

I was twenty minutes away from the Molly Stark Hospital when I began to feel the pre-exploration jitters. Driving past field after field, I felt my heart rate elevate. The anxiety is creeping in but this was the enjoyable kind. This was the kind of anxiety that mimics the effects of a strong cup of coffee. I began to wonder how I am going to get in. Will it be easy or tricky? Will there be people around? I also considered the implications of getting caught again and how stupid I would feel. There would be no one to blame but myself. This still was not enough to make me turn around and head home.

I arrive at what appears to be the last stop light in the navigation route. I am sitting at the intersection of Route 44 and Columbus Road. Not even half a mile down, right off Columbus Road is Molly Stark Park. The home of the abandoned hospital. I drive slowly down Columbus Road and through the trees I can see the shattered windows of the building and the red, peeling shingles on the roof. I can feel the building looking back at me.

I turn right into the narrow drive where the sign for Molly Stark Park sits. I notice an empty lot in front of the hospital and I pull in and park. I look at the building through the windshield of my car and I take note of the barbed wire fence that seems to stretch around the entire perimeter of the hospital. Challenge number one. I exit my vehicle and off in the distance, standing outside the fence, I see a figure dressed in black and an acquaintance dressed in bright pink. The darker dressed individual is holding out a tripod, taking photographs of the Molly Stark Hospital. Observing this, I knew the next move would be to find out their exact level of interest these two individuals had towards the building. Could these two be fellow urban explorers like myself?

"How's it going?" I ask, walking up to the couple.

"It's going good!" They said. "It would be better if we could get in though!"

I laughed. "Yeah, just recently found out about this place and knew I had to check it out since I was nearby. Where are you guys from?"

"Were from Geneva!" The darkly dressed photographer said.

"Oh nice, I know where that is," I replied. "My brother lives in Ashtabula."

"Yeah, that's not too far outside of Geneva," she said.

The small talk discussion ceases and together, we slowly make a lap around the perimeter of the building, looking for any signs of entry points. Walking around the fence with the couple, I begin to notice that the fence looks fairly new. As we continue around the building I also notice that every attempt that has been made to cut into the fence has been patched up with more shiny and intimidating wiring. This is a bad sign. This shows that someone is paying active attention to the building.

We arrive at a spot in the fence behind the hospital. The hole we find, like all the other ones, has been tied together with thick wire rope. If it hadn't been for the wire patching job, this would've been a significantly large entry way through the fence. The couple and I analyze the patch job but we arrive at different results in our head.

The couple continues walking, discouraged to find yet another hole that has been repaired. In my head, I notice that yes, the hole has been patched but not as secure as the other ones. This particular patch job simply reduced a bigger hole to a smaller hole that still looks possible to squeeze through.

Next, I come to the conclusion that it would be in my best interest to separate from the couple. I enjoyed the opportunity to connect with other fellow explorers but now they were just getting that would hinder my mission to get inside. Given the size of both individuals and how much stuff they were carrying (tripods, backpacks and beer gear), I didn't like imagining the awkward scenario of me being able to squeeze through the fence while they fail.

To my advantage, the couple takes interest in a building off in the distance that appears to also be abandoned and they make their way over to investigate, leaving me behind with Molly Stark.

Once the couple is far away and out of sight, I continue my lap around the hospital. I am confident that I found my way through the fence but that still didn't solve the issue involving how I would get inside the actual building. From the observations I was making, the Molly Stark building appeared to be very secure. There were lots of padlocks on the doors and nailed down plywood over the first story windows. If you can tell that there has been a significant amount of effort put into securing the building, that's when you know you are probably going to have to squeeze through a tight spot. The real challenge is finding one and doing it quickly. For this situation, there would be an added level of suspense since I was doing all of this in broad daylight. And after I squeeze through the hole in the fence, whether or not I find a way inside, I will be trapped in trespassing territory without any sort of quick getaway if there's trouble. This is the risk we take as urban explorers. Never assume we don't know what we're doing.

I have finally made my way full circle around the building and I am now once again standing where I was when I met the other urban exploration couple. I turn my attention now to the front entrance of the hospital. Scanning from left to right, I look hard for any signs of a possible entry point. The front doors will be a no go and still, all I'm seeing is more plywood than dark holes indicating a possible entry point. What catches my eye is this balcony on the first level. It is slightly elevated but looks climbable from my viewpoint. On the balcony, I can see a small glass window. The kind that you can easily slide up to open. It is a long shot but I believe this is my potential entry point.

With my heart beginning to pound in my ears, I make my way to the back of the hospital to the poorly patched hole in the fence. I am wearing a dark Columbia winter jacket, jeans and a flannel shirt underneath. I approach the hole and remove my jacket and slip it through the hole to reduce the width of my body. Now it is time to begin the maneuvering through the hole. I grab the chain link fence with both of my hands and climb my way up the fence so my upper torso is slightly above the hole. Using my arms to keep me secretly supported, I begin to slide my legs through the narrow hole and gradually lower myself down to the grass on the other side of the fence. My feet touchdown with the ground and now I am slightly bent over as if I was participating in a limbo contest. Next I shimmy my upper body through the random tangle of wire until I am completely through the hole on the other side of the fence. Step one is complete. I quickly pick up my jacket and waste no time power walking back to the potential entry point.

In the front of the hospital, I approach the first level balcony and grab hold of the metal railing and walk my way up to the concrete wall to give myself the momentum to jump and grab the top part of the railing. I level pushing after a simple and swift hopping maneuver, or "ghetto hop" I am firmly grounded on the first level balcony. Just a couple feet away from me is the potential access point and now, being able to study it from a closer range, I see that my potential entry point will be a success. The window is already cracked open and with no amount of difficulty, I walk over and slide it completely open. The open window only offers a small entry way into the building but it is entirely doable. I peek my head through the window and see that I will be entering the Molly Stark Hospital through one of their basements. Below the window is a dusty and vile looking toilet. In my urban exploration experience, the toilets are always disgusting and covered in mysterious muck but I've never had to actually touch one. Looking at the size of the window, it appears that I will have to use the toilet as support to first step my way inside. There is nothing outside of the window to grab onto to help me enter in feet so I have to go head first instead.

In my experience of being an urban explorer, you would think that by now I would carry around the necessary supplies to help me stay somewhat sanitary while exploring but I never do. I usually rely on the collar of my shirt as a makeshift breath mask.

A nice pair of gloves would've also been a huge help, given the gross appearance of the toilet but I can improvise. Before entering through the window, I hide my hands in the sleeve of my flannel shirt, bundling up the excess cloth into my clenched fist, thus creating a poorly designed flannel glove to protect my skin from whatever sort of bacteria that could exist on an abandoned toilet in a deserted hospital.

I slowly slipper my way in through the window, reluctantly grabbing the seat of the toilet as I twist and turn to get my legs into the window. This maneuver is a little more tricky than squeezing through the hole in the fence but I manage to get inside without falling over on the ground or cutting myself on anything. On most occasions when I go exploring, I always keep leave the building with some sort of cut or scrape. It's a miracle that I haven't picked up a case of tetanus from all the rust I have come in contact in. My jaw still remains to be unlocked.

I stand up straight in the hospital bathroom and my first course of action before continuing the exploration is making sure my nose and mouth remain covered to the best of my ability. I have no mask so I have to rely on the collar of my shirt. Because I'm wearing a flannel, I decide to button the shirt over my nose. It is a tight fit but the button keeps it in place. I'm not too sure how much this helps when you are in the possible presence of black mold and asbestos but it still gives me a little peace of mind. Now that I have provided myself with some illusion of safety and precaution, I make my way towards the exit of the bathroom to see what Molly Stark has to offer to the curious explorer.

Coming out of the bathroom, I find myself standing in the first floor hallway. I look to my right and to my left and see that the hallways seem to stretch farther than my eyes can see. Already, I can pick up the reminiscence of the hospital that once was. Looking both ways down the hallway, I see doorways leading to the rooms that once housed the sick and suffering. The paint on the walls are almost completely chipped off and the ground is littered with chunks of fallen ceiling and indistinguishable greenish, brown muck. The ground looked like the building vomited all over itself. I decide to turn right down the hallway to begin my journey. As I stroll through the first hallway, I peer into a couple of the rooms I pass, looking for something noteworthy. I reach the end of the hallway and after observing a couple rooms, I have yet to find anything completely out of the ordinary. A lot of the rooms I looked at were trashed and made it hard to tell what could've been inside there years ago.

When you participate in urban exploration long enough, you begin to notice that there are certain stages of abandonment that a building will go through after it is deserted. In the first couple stages, the building looks nearly the same as it did when people operated it. In buildings like this, you will find numerous artifacts that were left behind and it is easy to tell what the building was used for in the past. With time, nature, vandals and looters begin to affect the building's appearance and if you wait long enough, eventually the building will become unrecognizable on the inside. For the Molly Stark Hospital, it appears that she was approaching the latter stages of abandonment.

As an explorer, if I find myself to be dissatisfied with the contents inside of the building there are two places where I then direct my journey: the roof and the basement. No matter where an abandoned building is located, you can never complain about the view offered from a rooftop. Molly Stark is located in a very rural area of Ohio which meant the view from the rooftop would surely be picturesque.

Sure enough as I weaved my way through the lonely hallways of Molly Stark, I found my way onto the roof. Looking back on my experience at Molly Stark, the roof was my favorite. Not only was the view of the stretching pastures visually appealing but so was the architecture of the building. I found this and courted on the roof which I would later learn was used as a secret place for tuberculosis patients to receive their proper dose of sunlight for the day. I don't feel some sort of weird energy on that roof. I've never been one to believe in the paranormal but I do believe energies and emotions can linger over time in a certain area. I'd compare it to what I imagine it feels like to walk through Auschwitz but on a smaller scale. It's the knowledge that something terrible once happened here. You can almost hear the whispering of untold stories.

After I finished immersing myself in the basements the roof had to offer, I decided that my final move inside Molly Stark was to explore her basement. Make no mistake, I completely understand why many choose to avoid the basements in an abandoned building. It is always the darkest room in the building and it seems like if you're always told that's where the monsters hide. Despite how creepy it is to descend down into that dark stairwell, the basements are usually where the urban exploration gems are.

As I mentioned earlier, despite my years of urban exploration experience, I have never been the one to bring the necessary equipment. I've been known to explore abandoned buildings in bright green Mountain Dew t-shirts, athletic shorts and skateboard shoes. If I think about it, I'll wear a mask but most of my explorations are planned on impulse which is why I just rely on the collar of my shirt.

My carelessness for preparation presented itself as a real conflict down in the basement of the Molly Stark Hospital. My lack of equipment didn't put me in any safety predicament, it just resulted in a missed opportunity. It doesn't happen all the time, but if you explore enough basements, eventually you will come across an underground tunnel. The thing that was so alluring about this particular tunnel in Molly Stark's basement is that, given my position in the building, it was clear that this tunnel led away from the building. Meaning that if I were to walk down the tunnel, I wouldn't be considered inside the Molly Stark Hospital anymore. I would simply be underground moving towards the unknown. Perhaps the tunnel leads to another building? Maybe it leads to some sort of sewer system with even more tunnels to explore. Sadly, the tunnel was also a bit flooded and if I would've worn the proper boots instead of my Vans Chukka Loops, I would've been able to satisfy the mystery of the Molly Stark's secret. It's a shame I could've totally waded in the ankle deep, murky tunnel water in my skate shoes but I already touched a fucking toilet in this place and the idea of driving home with soaked jeans and shoes did not sound appealing to me. Just know I contemplated this way more than I'm making it sound in this story. To this day I still regret not going through with it. I think exploring the tunnel would've been worth the damp socks in the long run.

Climbing back up the stairs, heading towards the bathroom where I came in, I reflected on what all I had seen and do to the Molly Stark Hospital. As an urban explorer, I give the building a B- overall in terms of appearance. Until I found the tunnel, I was thinking like a C- but that discovery gave the building some bonus points. In conclusion, I figured that I missed the exploration prime years for exploring. Back in a time where the building was "A" studded or gatted with artifacts. Make no mistake though, the grades I give buildings do not reflect my opinion on the building itself. Every explorer is an A+ in my book because in this case, "A" stands for adventure, and when participating in urban exploring, the sense of adventure always prevails.

Regretfully touching the toilet one final time, I crawled my way back out through the window where I first entered. The sun was shining higher in the sky and it was becoming warmer. Although I still had the hole in the fence to shimmy through, I began to feel more relaxed knowing I would soon be back in the safety of my own car and on my way home towards Cincinnati. I hoped to learn from the one-story balcony and started my way back to the exit point. I walked mindfully around the building watching every step of mine pass through time and connect with the ground, softly crunching the grass beneath my feet. I was tuned in to this meditative frequency until I vacated my way around the corner of the building. I look up from the ground and that moment, the timeline of the ever expanding Universe takes place. On the other side of the fence, in the vacant parking lot to the Molly Stark hospital, my eyes lock in on an idling, black and gold SUV with the bold letters **STARK COUNTY POLICE** printed on the side.

Everyone has different gameplans for when the cops show up and I was no exception, only making their situation worse. When exploring, my gameplan is full cooperation with the authorities. I understand hiding and being elusive if the cop hasn't seen you yet but in this case, I was standing in broad daylight on the trespassing side of the barbed wire fence. There is nowhere to run except back into the building which is also a terrible idea. In that moment, I have already surrendered and I continue walking, trying to accept the fact that my fate has been sealed. I'm going to jail today.

I am still walking, approaching the final corner of the building where the hole in the fence sits just around the bend. I've now walked so far that the cop car is behind me and the officer is still sitting in his vehicle. It dawned on me this guy hasn't even seen me yet nor is he here because of me! I realize I am now a victim to bad timing and coincidence. It was one of those moments I wish I could rewind. If I was more of a martial thinker in times of trouble, I probably could've made three quick steps and I would've been out of sight around the corner of the building. However, seeing that I was already a victim to the untimely circumstance, I was too nervous that the moment I would decide to run would be the exact moment the cop looks up and sees me. Instead, I just refuse to let myself become arrogant through my tales of "good luck".

Finally, the cop sees me and gets out of his vehicle. I look back at him, pretending as if I just now noticed him. I stop walking and as he approaches the fence. He has a slight grin on his face.

"How's it going?" I ask, rhetorically. There is also a slight grin on my face.

"Uh, what are you doing over there?" The officer asks.

My strategy for navigating through situations like this one is to always appear dumber and more ignorant than I really am. Cooperate with the authorities, but present yourself in a way that makes them wonder if you're just a slightly misguided airhead. I'd like to believe that acting this way in the face of trouble makes myself appear more innocent and harmless, which I already am. I believe, I refuse to let myself become arrogant through my tales of "good luck".

"That was in Athens, Ohio," I reply. "There's an abandoned mental asylum called 'The Ridges' that's really close to OU's campus. My friend and I both got caught there."

"Is that place haunted too?" he asks in a mocking tone. The second police officer now joins us.

"Yeah, it actually is!" I say laughing.

"I think we're all good here, he's being cooperative," the police officer says, turning to his partner.

"Geez, you made it sound so serious over the radio, that's why I came over here!" The second officer says. "I thought you needed back up."

The first officer laughing, turning towards me again. "You do know there's black mold in that building right? That's why it's why it's closed up."

"Oh yeah I figured," I say, chuckling lightly, but ignorantly. "The whole place looked really disgusting on the inside."

As I say this, his facial expression changes and he shoots me a confused look. "Oh! I didn't know you actually got inside," he says.

My heart sinks again; this time harder than when I saw the second police car arrive at the scene. Damn, I fucked it up. I thought I was doing so well too. The urge to facepalm myself was very strong. I started thinking about jail again. Maybe it won't be so bad as long as I can find a book to read.

"Well Conner, we're going to let you go today," he says. "Honestly, you're really lucky I caught you outside the building rather than inside, otherwise I would be taking you to jail today." All I can do is just stare back at him, hoping he has more to say because I'm speechless at that moment.

"Stay away from this place and don't come back," he states firmly.

I sit beyond shocked but I am still able to muster up a genuine thank you to the officers that handled this whole fiasco in a way I didn't think was possible. I shake both of their hands and I quickly walk away, back to my car. For some reason I had this idea that if I didn't get back to my car quick enough, they'd change their mind. We have all heard of the walk of shame. Well, this was the walk of shame. If my life was a comedy show, I'd like to imagine this whole episode ending the same way Bugs Bunny would end with a "THAT'S ALL FOLKS" title screen.

I get back into my car and I make no hesitations getting the hell out of Molly Stark Park. I don't even think about guessing in the directions back to Cincinnati. I just want to get a safe distance away from the scene of the crime. There is still lingering fear that the cops are going to change their mind. I guess my brain was taking a while to fully comprehend what just happened.

Once Molly Stark Park is out of sight in all of my car's mirrors, at the next red light, I plug Cincinnati into my GPS. After a quick u-turn in a Dollar General parking lot, I am finally homeward bound.

The route the GPS provided for me took me through scenic backroads that allowed me to reflect on the day's adventure. The question is, did I learn anything from this experience since I got away with it? Some might argue no because I'm still an active urban explorer. There is part of me that worries the happy ending of this story will possibly influence my naivety towards future explorations which will only lead to more trouble.

What defines me even more is that this isn't my first time. I have experienced "luck" that I really don't deserve. I refuse to let myself become arrogant through my tales of "good luck". Sure, by definition I have gotten "lucky" countless times in my life but I do not believe in an external force known as Luck that works in our favor. If Luck is real, that means it will run out eventually and I'll get mine soon. Also, to believe in luck is to imply that the Universe might be rooting for you and it's not. It sounds harsh but don't lack it personally; it's just Nature. It's a beautiful mess. Do not be scared. I'm a victim just like you! Let us love and be friends in this finite existence that we have been given. Let's embrace the chaos and explore!