The Light Across the Street

A lamp comes on in the window across the street at three every morning, and one night she holds up a sign that changes everything.

The building across from mine is close enough that I know what their super's radio sounds like. Mostly Yankees games, some salsa on Sundays, a talk show host who yells about parking. Close enough that when I moved in, the broker looked out my window, looked back at me, and said "you'll want curtains," like it was a warning.

I never got curtains.

I meant to. I had a tab open for six months with a set of linen ones in a color called oat. Then I just got used to it. You stop seeing the building across the street the same way you stop hearing the BQE. It becomes a wall with windows in it, and the windows are mostly dark or mostly blue with TV light, and none of them are about you.

Then one of them was.

Fourth floor, third window from the left. The light came on at 3:04 the first night I noticed it. Then 3:01. Then 3:06. Never before three. Never later than ten past. A desk lamp, warm, the old yellow kind with the bendy neck, and someone sitting under it with her back half turned to the street.

I couldn't see her face. Just her shoulder, a dark sweater falling off it, and her hand moving. Writing, or drawing. Something with a lot of small movements, then a pause, then more small movements.

I should say I'm not a creep. I know that's what a creep would say. But I wasn't looking for anything. I was a graphic designer in Crown Heights with a fourteen-year-old orange cat named Gus and a sleep schedule my mother called "a cry for help." I worked from home,

which meant I worked from my desk, which meant I worked from the window, because that's where the desk fit.

I'd be there doing client revisions nobody was paying me enough for, Gus asleep on my feet like a warm sandbag, and I'd look up and there it was. That little yellow square. Like the city had left one light on for me.

I started waiting for it. That's the honest version.

I'd tell myself I was up anyway. I was. But I started making sure I was at the desk by three. I started making a second cup of coffee around 2:45 so I'd have something to hold. I noticed I was doing it about a week after I started doing it, which is how most things go with me.

My friend Marcus, who I told about it over beers at a place on Franklin with a broken jukebox, said, "So you've basically got a girlfriend who doesn't know you exist."

"She's not my girlfriend."

"You know what time she wakes up."

"Everybody on my block knows what time the garbage truck comes. That's not a relationship."

"Do you wait for the garbage truck, Dylan?"

I didn't answer that, and he bought the next round because he said I'd earned it by being pathetic.

· · ·

About two weeks in I did something stupid. I turned my desk around.

It took an hour. I had to unplug everything, and Gus walked through the cables like a supervisor, and I kept telling myself it was about ergonomics. Facing the wall was giving me a headache. Facing the window was better for my eyes. All true. None of it was why.

The next night, 3:02, her light came on, and for the first time she didn't sit down right away. She stood there. I could see her outline against the lamp, completely still, looking straight across at me.

I didn't move. I don't think I breathed. Gus lifted his head off my foot like he'd felt it.

Then she sat down and turned her chair. Not all the way. Just enough that we were facing each other across forty feet of Brooklyn and two panes of dirty glass.

From that angle I could see a little more. Dark hair pulled up in the kind of knot you do without a mirror. A mug on the desk. The edge of a sketchbook, the big kind with a black cover. She didn't wave. I didn't wave. It felt like waving would ruin it, like talking during the part of a song you both know is coming.

Neither of us did anything else that night. It felt like a lot anyway.

When I went to bed at five, the sky was that thin grey it gets over the Brooklyn Museum, and I lay there with my heart going like I'd run up the stairs. I hadn't done anything. I'd sat in a chair. I'd been looked at. I'm thirty-one years old and I lay awake over it like I was fifteen.

· · ·

The paper thing was her idea.

A week later she held up a sheet against the glass. Thick black marker, big letters, clearly written more than once until she got it right. I could tell because the paper was a little crooked, like she'd torn it out fast before she could change her mind.

CAN'T SLEEP EITHER?

I'm a designer. I have more markers than any grown man should. I have markers I've never opened because I liked the box. I pulled the biggest sketchpad off the shelf, knocked over a jar of pens doing it, and wrote back.

NEVER

She laughed. I couldn't hear it but I saw it, her head going back, her hand over her mouth like she was embarrassed about laughing alone in her apartment at 3am. Which, fair.

That's how it went after that. Every night. Short stuff, because you can only fit so much on a page and still read it from across a street. I learned fast that four words was comfortable and six was pushing it. She learned to write in all caps. I learned to stop using my good marker because it bled through and ruined three pages at a time.

WHAT ARE YOU WORKING ON

A LOGO FOR A GUY WHO SELLS BOATS. I HATE IT

SHOW ME

I held my laptop up to the window. It was a sailboat inside a circle inside another circle, with his name in a font I would never have

chosen if he hadn't asked for it by name in three separate emails. She squinted at it for a while. Then she gave me a thumbs down, very slowly, like an emperor.

She was right. I redid it the next day and the boat guy loved it, and I didn't tell him a stranger had art directed it at 3am.

She never told me what she was drawing. I asked a few times.

WHAT ARE YOU DRAWING?

LATER

She'd just write later and go back to it. Head down, hand moving. Sometimes she'd look up at me, then down, then up again, and I figured she was one of those people who needed to look at something else while she thought.

We never wrote our names. I don't know whose rule that was. It just felt like saying them would make it something else, and neither of us wanted it to be something else yet. In my head I didn't call her anything. She was the light. Sometimes she was the 3:04, like a train.

. . .

There's a lot you can say with a piece of paper, it turns out, if you only get a few words.

YOUR CAT IS JUDGING ME

That was the first time she wrote first in a while. Gus had climbed onto the radiator and was sitting in the window like a loaf of bread with opinions, staring across the street.

HE JUDGES EVERYONE

WHAT'S HIS NAME

GUS. HE'S 14. HATES JAZZ

She wrote something, crossed it out, wrote again.

SAME

I laughed out loud at that, alone, and Gus turned and looked at me like I was the problem.

Some nights it was just weather.

COLD

RADIATOR'S BANGING LIKE IT OWES MONEY

MINE SOUNDS LIKE A MAN FALLING DOWN STAIRS

Some nights it was the street. The guy on the second floor of her building who practiced trumpet at midnight, the same eight bars of "My Funny Valentine" over and over, always breaking on the same note. The couple on my side who fought in Spanish on their fire escape and then made up loudly enough that both of us closed our windows at the same time, and she held up a sign that just said WOW and I had to put my head on the desk.

One night in October the power went out on my side of the block. Whole row of buildings, dark. Hers stayed on. I found the one candle I owned, a gift from my sister that was supposed to smell like a forest and smelled like a car air freshener, and lit it, and sat back down at

the desk because what else was I going to do.

She looked at me for a long time. Then she wrote.

YOU LOOK LIKE A VICTORIAN GHOST

I'M HAUNTING YOU

BAD AT IT

GIVE ME TIME

She smiled at that, a small one, the kind you do mostly to yourself. She looked at the sign in my hands for a second longer than she needed to, then picked up her pencil again, and I watched her draw by the light of her lamp while I sat in the dark, and it was one of the best nights I'd had in a year.

That's the part I couldn't explain to Marcus. Nothing happened. Somebody across the street wrote four words and I felt seen in a way that I hadn't felt on any of the dates my sister kept setting up. Those dates were all talking. Two hours of talking at a wine bar in Fort Greene, both of us performing our jobs and our hobbies and our travel stories, and at the end I'd know where she went to college and nothing else.

The window was the opposite. I didn't know anything about her. I didn't know her name or her job or her face up close. But I knew she laughed with her whole head. I knew she tore the paper out fast when she was nervous and slow when she wasn't. I knew she drank something hot at 3am and held the mug with both hands. I knew she looked up at me when she was thinking.

Somewhere in there I figured out I was falling for a lamp.

. . .

There was one more exchange before I ruined it. I keep coming back to it.

It was the first really cold night, early November, and I'd been sick for two days with the kind of cold that makes you feel personally betrayed. I wasn't working. I was just sitting at the desk in a hoodie with a box of tissues, because it was three, and I didn't want her to see a dark window and think I'd stopped.

She noticed right away.

YOU OK?

DYING

DRINK TEA

DON'T HAVE ANY

She stood up and left the frame. I sat there blowing my nose and feeling stupid. Then she came back and held a box of chamomile up to the glass, and shrugged, like, I'd throw it if I could.

It was nothing. It was a box of tea at a window. I thought about it all the next day.

Which is maybe why I did what I did.

. . .

The night I messed it up was a Thursday. Raining. The kind of rain that makes the whole street sound like static, and the streetlight between our buildings turned every drop into a little falling spark.

I'd been thinking about it all day, so I just did it. I wrote it slow so my hand wouldn't shake. I wrote it twice, actually, because the first time my letters slanted downhill like I'd lost my nerve halfway through the sentence.

COFFEE? LIKE A NORMAL PERSON? IN DAYLIGHT?

She looked at it for a long time. Long enough that the rain got louder. Long enough that I lowered the pad an inch, then another inch, then put it down on the desk and felt like an idiot.

She didn't move. She just sat there with her pencil in her hand, not drawing. Then she looked down at the sketchbook, and then at the street, and then she wrote something, and held it up, and didn't look at me while she did it.

DON'T COME OVER.

And she turned off the light.

It was 3:19. I know because I sat there staring at the clock on my laptop like it owed me an explanation.

The next night her light didn't come on.

Or the next one.

Or the one after that.

I kept my light on anyway. Three nights of sitting there with Gus snoring and the boat guy's business cards open in another window and a dark square across the street where my favorite part of the day used to be.

I went over it a hundred ways. Maybe she had a boyfriend. Maybe she had a husband, and the window was the one innocent thing she let herself have, and I'd made it guilty. Maybe she was seventy. Maybe she was sixteen, which made me feel sick until I remembered the mug, and the way she sat, and the tiredness in her shoulders that didn't belong to anyone young. Maybe I'd just scared her. A man across the street she'd never met, asking to meet. Put that way it sounded bad, and I couldn't stop putting it that way.

Marcus said, "Maybe she's just busy."

"At three in the morning?"

"You're busy at three in the morning."

"I'm not busy. I'm sitting there."

"Then she's sitting somewhere else. Give it a week."

I didn't give it a week.

On the fourth day I broke.

I went over in the afternoon, which felt like cheating, like seeing a movie set with the lights on. Her building looked so normal in daylight. A guy was hosing down the sidewalk in front of it. Somebody's laundry was hanging off a fire escape on the second floor, and a kid's scooter was chained to the railing out front. Her building's buzzer panel had no names, just numbers and tape and one

button hanging by a wire. 4C. I counted the windows twice from the sidewalk to be sure. Fourth floor, third from the left. 4C.

I didn't press it. She said don't come over and I'd already pushed it once. So I did the most 1950s thing I've ever done in my life. I stood in the tiny vestibule, with its smell of radiator dust and somebody's cooking, and I wrote a note on a page from my sketchbook against the wall, and slid it into the gap of the mailbox marked 4C.

> *You don't have to talk to me. Just turn the light on so I know you're okay.*

I didn't sign it. She'd know.

The guy with the hose watched me come out. I said "hey" in a voice that made it clear I had never done anything suspicious in my life, which is how you know I had.

. . .

3:00. Nothing.

3:05. Nothing.

3:11. I was reaching for my own lamp to give up when it came on.

She was already standing there. Like she'd been waiting in the dark for a while, deciding. She held up a page.

YOU CAME OVER.

I wrote back the only true thing I had.

I KNOW. I'M SORRY. I GOT SCARED SOMETHING HAPPENED

She read it. Put her hand flat on the glass for a second. Then she wrote something long, longer than the rules allowed, the letters getting smaller as she ran out of room.

NOTHING HAPPENED. I GOT SCARED TOO. DIFFERENT KIND.

I didn't know what that meant. I didn't ask. I'd already asked for enough.

And then she sat down and went back to drawing, and so did I, and neither of us wrote anything else that night. But she left the light on until the sky started going grey, and so did I.

It went like that for a few nights. No signs. Just the lights. It was like when you've had a fight with someone and you're both in the same kitchen being careful with the dishes. I didn't hold anything up. She didn't either. But she looked up more than she used to, and once, when Gus jumped on the desk and knocked my coffee into my lap, I saw her laugh so hard she had to put her pencil down, and that felt like a sign even without the paper.

. . .

Two days after that there was a flat package leaning against my door when I came back from the corner store. Brown paper. No stamp. No name. Just my apartment number in thick black marker I would've recognized from across a street.

I stood in the hallway with a carton of eggs and a bag of cat litter and just looked at it. My neighbor Mrs. Okafor opened her door, looked at me, looked at the package, said "Somebody likes you," and closed her door again.

Inside were drawings. Maybe forty of them. Pencil, some ink, one in watercolor that had warped the paper.

All of them were of a window. My window.

Me at my desk with my hand in my hair. Me holding my laptop up to the glass, the boat logo a tiny scribble on the screen. Gus's ears poking over the windowsill, two little triangles, so exactly him that I laughed out loud in my kitchen. Me with the candle, the whole page dark except for that one small flame and my face above it, and she'd made me look less like a Victorian ghost and more like somebody waiting for something. Me in my hoodie with the tissue box. Me asleep on my arms, which I didn't even know had happened. Weeks of nights. Every one of them dated in the corner, small, in the same handwriting.

They were good. I mean really good. I've worked with illustrators for eight years and I know the difference between someone who can draw and someone who sees. She saw. The way the light from my lamp hit the side of my face. The tired slump I didn't know I had. The way I looked across the street when I thought nobody was looking back.

That's what she'd been drawing. The whole time. Every time she wrote later.

I sat on the kitchen floor with them spread out around me. Gus walked over them like he was inspecting a crime scene and lay down on the one of himself. I didn't move him.

The last page wasn't a drawing. It was the same thick marker, but smaller this time. Not written to be read from across a street. Written to be read up close.

> *Okay. Come over. 4C. 3am. Don't knock. It's open.*

. . .

It's 2:51 right now.

I've changed my shirt twice. The cat is looking at me like he knows exactly what's going on and doesn't approve.

Her light's not on yet.

I think that's the point.

I'm going.

. . .

The stairs in her building were steeper than mine, and somebody on the third floor was frying plantains at three in the morning, which I respected. The hallway light on four buzzed and flickered like a bad omen in a movie. 4C was at the end, a door painted the same brown as every other door, with a little brass C that had come loose and hung at a tilt.

I stood there for a while. Long enough for the light to flicker four more times. Don't knock, she'd said. It's open. I had my hand up in a

fist anyway, out of habit, and I put it down.

I turned the knob.

It was dark inside. Not totally. There was streetlight coming through the window, the window, and it laid an orange stripe across the floor. I could see the shape of the desk and the lamp on it, unlit, and the back of a chair. And past that, through the glass and across the street, I could see my own window, my own lamp, which I'd left on. My desk. My empty chair. Gus, sitting up on the radiator, staring right at me.

So that's what it looked like from here.

"Hi," someone said.

She was standing by the kitchen counter, off to the side, in the dark. I could see her outline and that was all.

"Hi," I said. "I didn't knock."

"I noticed."

"You said not to."

"I know what I said." I heard her breathe out. It sounded like a laugh that hadn't decided yet. "Can you close the door? The hallway light makes me feel like I'm in a horror movie."

"I was just thinking that."

I closed it. Now it was just the stripe of streetlight and us.

"I'm going to turn on the lamp," she said. "Is that okay?"

"It's your lamp."

"I know. I'm just saying it out loud so I do it."

She came across the room. She walked past me close enough that I felt the air move, and she smelled like coffee and pencil shavings and something warm, like soap from a bar. She reached for the lamp. Her hand stopped on it for a second.

Then she turned it on.

. . .

I'd had six weeks to imagine her face and I'd gotten it wrong in every possible way.

She was around my age, maybe a little younger. Dark hair falling out of the knot, the way it always was. Freckles, a lot of them, more than I'd have guessed, like someone had flicked a paintbrush at her. A small scar through one eyebrow. Brown eyes that were looking at me with a kind of terrified focus, the way you look at a step you can't see in the dark. Thick socks. The dark sweater, sliding off her shoulder, and under it a grey T-shirt with a hole in the collar.

She was nothing like I'd imagined. She was better, because she was real, and because she was standing there being nervous at me.

"Hi," she said again.

"We did that part."

"I know. I'm resetting." She pushed her hair back with her wrist. There was graphite on the side of her hand, a long silver smudge. "I'm Nora."

"Dylan."

"Dylan," she said, like she was testing it. "I had a list of names for you."

"What was on it?"

"I'm not telling you that."

"Was it bad?"

"One of them was Boat Guy."

"That's the client. That's not me."

"I know that now." She almost smiled. "For a while I thought you sold boats."

Neither of us moved. The lamp made a circle on the desk and we were both standing at the edge of it, like it was a pool and we were deciding about the water. I could see her sketchbook, closed. Her mug. A pile of pencils sharpened down to stubs. And a little stack of torn pages, the signs, all of them, flattened and kept.

She saw me looking.

"I keep them," she said. "Is that weird?"

"I keep mine too."

"Really?"

"They're in a folder on my desk. It says 'Taxes' on it so nobody asks."

She laughed then, the real one, the whole head. I'd seen it so many times through two windows and it turned out it had a sound, kind of a low surprised sound, like she always forgot that things could be funny.

It did something to the room. Something unclenched.

"Do you want something?" she said. "I have tea. Obviously. And coffee. And a really sad amount of wine."

"How sad?"

"Like a third of a bottle. I opened it at nine to calm down and then I didn't drink it because I didn't want to be the girl who was drunk when you showed up."

"Coffee's good."

"Coffee. Okay. Coffee is a thing I can do."

Her kitchen was a strip of counter and a two-burner stove and a fridge covered in takeout menus held up by magnets from a dentist in Bay Ridge. She made coffee in a little stovetop pot, and while it hissed she kept her back to me, and I stood in her living room trying not to look at everything at once.

It was a small place. Smaller than mine. A couch with a blanket thrown over it. Books stacked on the floor because there was no shelf. On the wall above the couch there was one framed picture, a pen drawing of a woman sitting on a porch in a lawn chair, laughing at something out of frame. It was the only drawing on the walls. Everything else was bare.

"That's my mom," Nora said, without turning around. She'd seen me in the reflection of the microwave. "I drew that in high school. It's the only one I ever framed."

"It's really good."

"It's okay. The hands are wrong." She poured the coffee into two mugs that didn't match. One said WORLD'S OKAYEST AUNT. "She

liked it, though."

Liked. I heard it. I didn't say anything, and she handed me the aunt mug, and we sat down on either end of the couch with a whole cushion between us like a chaperone.

"So," I said.

"So."

"You're Nora."

"I'm Nora."

"What do you do, Nora?"

She made a face like I'd asked her to show me her browser history. "That's such a daylight question."

"It's three in the morning. I'm allowed one."

"I do medical billing," she said. "For a group of orthopedic surgeons on the Upper East Side. I code people's knees."

"You code knees."

"Knees, hips, a lot of shoulders. There's a code for everything. There's a code for being hit by a turtle."

"There is not."

"There is. W59.21. I'm not kidding. I think about it a lot." She pulled her feet up under her. "I went to art school. Pratt. For illustration. I was going to do children's books, I had an agent for like five minutes. And then my mom got sick, and I moved back home to Albany to take care of her, and you can't really freelance when you're driving

somebody to chemo three times a week. So I got the billing job because it was remote and had insurance. And then she died last year, and I moved back here, and I kept the job because I didn't know what else to do with my hands."

She said it all fast and flat, like she'd practiced it to get it over with. I didn't say I'm sorry right away, because I could tell she was braced for it.

"How long was she sick?"

"Three years." She looked into her mug. "She had a lot of meds at night. I'd set alarms. Two, three, four. I'd get up and do the pills and check on her and then I couldn't fall back asleep, so I'd just sit in the kitchen. And after she died I kept waking up at three. Like my body didn't get the memo. It's been a year and I still wake up at three. Every night. Like somebody's calling my name."

"So you draw."

"So I draw. I hadn't drawn anything in three years. Not since she got sick. I'd sit down and nothing would happen, I'd just stare at the paper. And then I moved in here, and I was sitting at the desk at three in the morning feeling like the only person awake in New York, and I looked across the street and there was this guy." She glanced at me, then away. "Hunched over a laptop. With an orange cat on his feet. And he looked like he felt the same way I did. So I drew him. It was the first thing I'd drawn in three years that didn't make me want to throw up."

I didn't know what to say to that. I held the mug with both hands, the way she did.

"I'm sorry about your mom," I said finally.

"Thank you." She meant it. She seemed relieved I'd waited.

"Is that why you said don't come over?"

She was quiet for a while. Down on the street a car went by playing something with a lot of bass, and the windows hummed with it.

"Kind of," she said. "Partly. I'd been doing this thing where I was okay at three in the morning. Like that was the only hour I was okay. The window was the one part of my life that wasn't about knees or hospitals or her stuff in boxes in my closet that I can't open. And you wrote coffee, in daylight, and I thought, in daylight I'm just a person who codes knees and cries in the CVS on Flatbush because they moved the aisle where her shampoo was. In daylight I'm a mess. At night I was this girl in a window you liked. I didn't want you to meet the daylight one and be disappointed."

"I wouldn't have been."

"You don't know that."

"I know you laugh with your whole head," I said. "I know you tear the paper out fast when you're nervous. I know you held up a box of tea to a stranger with a cold. I didn't need daylight for any of that."

She looked at me for a long time. The same look as the night of the coffee sign, the long one. Only now I could see what was in it, and it wasn't a no.

"And the other part," I said. "You wrote different kind of scared."

"The other part." She put her mug down on the floor. "The other part is my last relationship ended because I didn't let him in. Like at all.

My mom was dying and I wouldn't talk about it, I just went to work and came home and did the pills. And he said living with me was like living next to a locked room. Which, he wasn't wrong. He was kind of a jerk, but he wasn't wrong." She rubbed the graphite on her hand with her thumb, making it worse. "And then you came over. You came over even though I said not to, and you didn't even knock, you just left a note. And I stood in the hallway holding it and I realized I'd been doing the same thing to you. Locked room. Light on, door closed. And you were just standing outside it being nice."

"So you sent me forty drawings of myself."

"I sent you forty-three drawings of yourself," she said. "I kept two."

"Which two?"

"Not telling you that either."

. . .

We talked for a long time. Longer than I've talked to anyone in years without checking my phone. The coffee went cold and she made more. I told her about growing up in Rochester, about my sister who set me up on dates with women who did Pilates professionally, about the time I designed a logo for a dentist that accidentally looked like a tooth with a face screaming. She told me about Pratt, about her roommate who kept a snake, about the trumpet guy on the second floor whose name was Lou and who was eighty-two and learning "My Funny Valentine" for his wife's birthday, which had been in March.

"He's six months late," I said.

"He's committed."

At some point the cushion between us wasn't between us anymore. I don't remember who moved. I think we both did, a little at a time, like the way the light moves across a floor. She'd pulled the blanket over her knees and my arm was along the back of the couch and her shoulder was almost under it.

She was looking at my hands.

"What?"

"I've drawn your hands so many times," she said. "From forty feet away. I always got them wrong. I made the fingers too long."

"Are they too long?"

"No. I made them too long." She reached over and turned my hand palm up on my knee and just looked at it, like it was a reference photo. Her fingertips were cool and dry and they had graphite on them, and she traced the lines across my palm, slowly, the heel of my thumb, the inside of my wrist, where she stopped because I'm sure she could feel my pulse going.

"Nora."

"I'm studying."

"You're killing me."

"I know," she said quietly, and she didn't stop.

I'm not a smooth person. I've never been a smooth person. Every first kiss I've ever had has involved some kind of collision, teeth or noses or once a doorframe. But I didn't think about any of that. I turned my hand over under hers and laced our fingers, and she looked up at me, close now, close enough to see the freckles were on her eyelids too,

and she said "hi" one more time, barely, like a question.

I kissed her.

It was soft at first. Careful. A testing-the-water kiss, like we were both still on opposite sides of the street. She tasted like coffee. She made a small sound against my mouth, surprised, and I felt her hand come up and close in the front of my shirt, the second shirt, the one I'd picked, and pull.

Then it wasn't careful.

Six weeks. Six weeks of watching her across the street, of four words at a time, of three nights of a dark window, and all of it came at once. She climbed into my lap like she'd been planning it, the blanket sliding off, her knees on either side of me, and her hands went into my hair. I had my hands on her waist, under the sweater, on the warm skin of her back where the T-shirt had ridden up, and she shivered and pressed closer and kissed me harder, and somewhere in there the mug I'd put on the floor got knocked over and neither of us cared.

"Your coffee," I said into her neck.

"Leave it."

She smelled like soap there too. I kissed the place under her jaw and then lower, the slope of her shoulder where the sweater was always falling, the shoulder I'd looked at across the street for weeks, and she let her head fall back and breathed out my name, and it was the first time I'd heard her say it like that. It did not sound like a test.

She pulled back just far enough to look at me. Her lips were pink and her hair was coming all the way down and her eyes were dark and a

little wild.

"Is this okay?" she said.

"Are you asking me?"

"I'm asking you."

"It's more than okay." I pushed her hair off her face. My hand was shaking a little and I didn't hide it. "Is it okay for you? We can stop. We can just sit here. I'd sit here all night."

"I know you would," she said. "That's sort of the problem. You'd sit across the street forever. Somebody has to come over."

She stood up, and held out her hand, and I took it.

. . .

Her bedroom was even smaller than the living room. A mattress on a low frame, a lamp with a scarf thrown over it that turned the light red-gold, a window that faced the back of the building where the fire escapes zigzagged down to a yard full of somebody's tomato cages, dead for the season. She didn't turn on the lamp. She didn't need to. The streetlight came around the corner of the building and made everything soft and orange, like the inside of a peach.

She turned around in the doorway and kissed me again, slower now, walking backward, pulling me with her by the front of my shirt until the backs of her knees hit the bed.

"You changed your shirt," she said against my mouth.

"How do you know that?"

"I watched you. Twice. You put on the blue one and then you took it off and put on this one." I felt her smile. "I liked the blue one."

"You were watching me get dressed?"

"Your light was on. You have no curtains, Dylan."

"I've been meaning to get some."

"Don't," she said, and started undoing my buttons, one at a time, with the same small careful movements I'd watched her draw with for weeks. Her fingers were steady. Mine weren't. When she got to the last one she put both hands flat on my chest and just held them there, and I knew she could feel my heart, and I didn't care.

I found the hem of her sweater and waited, and she lifted her arms.

There's a lot I could tell you about the rest of that night and most of it is mine. I'll say she was beautiful and that she knew exactly what she wanted and wasn't shy about asking for it. I'll say that the freckles went everywhere, that I tried to count them and she laughed and told me I was terrible at math, and I said I was a designer and I wasn't supposed to be good at math, and then she pulled me down and neither of us said anything for a long time.

I'll say there was a moment, in the middle of it, when she put her hand on my face and looked at me, in the orange light, with nothing between us at all, no glass, no street, no paper, and her eyes were wet, and she said "you're really here," and I said "I'm really here," and she held on to me like I was the only solid thing in Brooklyn.

That part I'll tell you. The rest stays in 4C.

. . .

I woke up because the light changed.

It was the grey hour, the one I usually went to bed in. Her bedroom window had gone pale and somewhere outside a garbage truck was groaning down the block, and I thought about Marcus and almost laughed. Nora was asleep with her back against my chest and her hair in my face, breathing slow, one hand curled under her chin like a kid.

I lay there and didn't move. I didn't want to wake her up. I didn't want to wake myself up.

After a while she said, without opening her eyes, "It's past three."

"It's like six-thirty."

"I didn't wake up at three." She opened her eyes then and turned her head a little to look at me. "I always wake up at three."

"Maybe you were busy."

"Maybe." She was quiet. Then she said, "That's the first time in a year."

I kissed the back of her shoulder. She found my hand under the blanket and held it against her stomach and we lay there and listened to the city wake up, the truck, the trumpet starting up two floors down, Lou breaking on the same note, and she laughed into the pillow.

"He's never going to get it," she said.

"He'll get it."

"How do you know?"

"He keeps coming back to the window," I said. "That's most of it."

. . .

That was in November.

It's January now. I have not gotten curtains. Nora has opinions about this, mainly that if I get curtains she'll draw them closed in every picture so I look ridiculous. She's drawing a lot. She's drawing during the day, too, on her lunch break, in the back of a coffee shop on Nostrand that lets her sit for two hours on one cortado. She sent sketches to her old agent in December, ten pages of a picture book about an old man learning to play trumpet for his wife. The agent wrote back in four hours. Nora read the email out loud to me twice, standing in my kitchen in my blue shirt, and then she sat down on the floor and cried, the good kind, and Gus climbed into her lap, which he has never done for anyone, including me.

She still wakes up at three sometimes. Not every night. When she does, it's different now. Sometimes she's in my bed and I feel her sit up, and I sit up too, and we make tea and sit at my desk in the dark and look across the street at her empty window. Sometimes she's at her place, and her light comes on at 3:04, and mine is already on, and she holds up a sign.

YOU UP?

ALWAYS

And then sometimes she just gets her coat and comes over. Four minutes, door to door. I timed it.

Lou played the whole song in December. All of it. Start to finish, no break on the high note. The whole block heard it through the windows, and the couple on my side came out on their fire escape and clapped, and Nora and I were both at our windows, her at hers and me at mine, because we'd had a fight about the dishes and were sleeping apart that night out of principle. We looked at each other across the street while he played, and by the end of it neither of us could remember what the fight was about.

She held up a sign. It said COME OVER. I already had my shoes on.

. . .

This morning it snowed. Real snow, the first of the year, the kind that makes Brooklyn quiet in a way it never is. I woke up alone because she'd gone home late to finish a page, and I made coffee and sat at the desk with Gus, and the light coming through the window was white and flat and clean, and it was ten in the morning. Broad daylight. The whole street bright.

Her lamp wasn't on. She didn't need it.

She was standing at her window in her coat and the hat with the pom-pom I bought her at a stand in Prospect Park. She was holding up a page. Thick black marker, big letters, written more than once until she got it right. I could tell because the paper was crooked, like she'd torn it out fast.

COFFEE? LIKE A NORMAL PERSON? IN DAYLIGHT?

I laughed so loud Gus jumped off the desk.

I grabbed the sketchpad and the good marker, the one that bleeds through, and I didn't care. I wrote back the only true thing I had.

YES. MEET YOU IN THE MIDDLE.

She read it and smiled, and turned off nothing, because nothing was on, and disappeared from the window.

I put on my coat. I went down the stairs two at a time. I pushed open the door into the cold and the snow was still coming down, slow and fat, and the street was empty and white and new, and her door was opening across from mine.

We met in the middle.

— Shay

Thanks for reading. There are more of these on my site, one every couple of weeks.