Last Call at Dorrie's

Every Thursday at 11:40 he takes the same stool and orders the same drink, and the night Nina locks the door with him still inside, she finds out the stool was never really his.

Jake came in every Thursday at 11:40, sat on the third stool from the end, and ordered a rye on the rocks. Nina had it poured before he got his coat off. She'd been doing it for four months. Neither of them had ever mentioned that.

He was the kind of quiet that made people lean in. Dark sweater, sleeves pushed up, forearms that looked like they'd carried things heavier than a laptop. He tipped too much and never looked at his phone. Nina had decided a long time ago that that was the most attractive thing a man could do in a bar.

Dorrie's sat on Manhattan Avenue in Greenpoint, wedged between a Polish bakery and a laundromat that never seemed to close. It had a tin ceiling the color of weak tea, a pool table with a slope you had to learn, and a CD jukebox that Frank, the owner, refused to replace with one of those touchscreen things. "People should have to commit to a song," he said, every time somebody complained. "You push the buttons, you live with it."

The bar was named after his mother. There was a photo of her above the register, squinting at the camera in 1974 with a cigarette and a beehive, and Nina had worked under that photo for three years. She liked knowing where everything was in the dark.

And she liked Thursdays, which was something she'd stopped admitting even to herself.

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The first time Jake came in was the second Thursday of July. It was a hot, sticky night, the kind where the AC unit over the door dripped on everybody's shoulder on the way in, and he'd stood just inside for a second like he was deciding whether he was actually going to do this.

Then he walked down the length of the bar, past three empty stools at the near end and a whole open stretch in the middle, and sat on the third one from the far wall. Like it was assigned.

"What can I get you?"

"Rye," he said. "On the rocks. Whatever you've got."

She gave him Old Overholt because that's what was in the well, and he looked at the glass for a long time before he drank any of it. He didn't look sad, exactly. He looked like someone sitting in a waiting room.

He stayed for one drink. He left a twenty on a nine-dollar tab. She remembered thinking he was either new to the neighborhood or trying to make a point, and she didn't think about him again until the next Thursday, when the door opened at 11:40 and he walked in and did the exact same thing.

Same stool. Same drink. Same twenty.

The third week, she saw him through the front window, crossing against the light with his hands in his pockets, and she had the rye on the bar by the time he sat down.

He looked at it. Then he looked at her.

She waited for him to make a thing of it. Guys always made a thing of it. They'd say you remembered in a voice like they'd won something, and then they'd spend the rest of the night trying to collect.

He just said, "Thank you," and drank it.

That was how it started. Nobody announced it. It just kept being true.

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By August, she'd started noticing things about him, the way you notice things about a person you see once a week and never actually talk to.

He always took the same side of the stool, left foot on the rail. He read paperbacks sometimes, the old kind with cracked spines and somebody else's name written inside the cover, and he read them slowly, like he was in no hurry to get anywhere. Once it was Elmore Leonard. Once it was a field guide to birds, which made her laugh out loud at the register, and he'd looked up, and she'd had to pretend she was laughing at something on the ticket printer.

He said "please." He said "no rush." When old Walt at the other end got loud about the Mets, Jake listened and nodded and didn't argue, even the night Walt said something so wrong about the 1986 playoffs that Nina almost threw a lime at him.

He had a scar across the knuckle of his right hand, pale and old. He had a watch with a cracked face that he never seemed to fix. He wore a wedding ring exactly never, which she'd checked the first night and pretended she hadn't.

And he played the jukebox. Not every week. Just sometimes, near the end of his drink, he'd get up and feed a dollar into the slot and push the buttons without looking at the list, like he'd memorized where it was. B14. Otis Redding, "These Arms of Mine."

He never stayed long enough to hear the whole thing. He'd play it and come back to the stool and finish his drink while Otis was still asking somebody to let him be her man, and then he'd be gone before the last chorus, the door swinging shut on the song.

It drove her a little crazy. She didn't tell anyone that either.

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"So he's a ghost," her sister said.

Kelsey was sitting on the counter in their kitchen in the apartment on Freeman Street, eating cereal out of a mixing bowl at two in the afternoon because she'd worked a double at the dental office and claimed she'd forgotten what meals were. She was two years younger than Nina and had never once in her life been subtle.

"He's not a ghost. He's a guy."

"He comes in at the exact same minute every week, sits in the exact same spot, drinks one drink, plays one sad song, and leaves before it's over. Nina. That's a ghost. That's literally what ghosts do."

"He tips twenty bucks."

"A rich ghost." Kelsey pointed her spoon at her. "Have you talked to him?"

"I talk to him."

"Have you said a sentence to him that wasn't about ice?"

Nina didn't answer, which was an answer.

The radiator under the window made a sound like someone dropping a wrench down a staircase. They both looked at it. It was October and Gary, their landlord, had been almost done fixing the heat for three weeks. Gary texted exclusively in thumbs-up emojis and once came to fix a leak wearing a Bluetooth headset and never stopped talking to someone named Big Mike.

"Did he answer you about the lease?" Kelsey asked.

"He said he's 'reviewing the market.'"

"That means he's raising it."

"That means he's raising it," Nina agreed.

She went into her room and opened the banking app on her phone, which was what she did when she was anxious, the way other people bit their nails. Thirty-eight thousand, four hundred and twelve dollars. Three years of tips and doubles and not going to Kelsey's friend's bachelorette in Nashville and eating rice and eggs more nights than she'd ever admit.

It wasn't for an apartment. That was the stupid part. If it were for an apartment she could have stopped worrying a long time ago.

Frank was seventy-one. His knees were shot and his brother had a house in Rehoboth Beach with a spare bedroom and a view of a parking lot that Frank talked about like it was the Amalfi Coast. He'd said more than once, late at night with the chairs up, that he'd only sell Dorrie's to somebody who wouldn't fill it with Edison bulbs and

fifteen-dollar mezcal drinks with burnt rosemary in them.

"You'd keep it," he'd said to her once, not looking at her, wiping down the taps. "You get it."

She hadn't said anything back. She'd just started saving harder.

Thirty-eight thousand dollars was a lot of money to her and almost nothing to a bank. She'd read enough about small business loans at four in the morning to know that.

She closed the app and lay back and looked at the water stain on the ceiling that looked a little like Ohio, and she thought about a quiet guy with a cracked watch who left before the end of his song, and she told herself she was thinking about the lease.

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The receipts thing happened in September.

He'd paid by card that night because he'd run out of cash, and she'd printed the slip and set it in front of him with a pen, and he'd signed it and slid it back. She'd glanced at the name out of habit. JAKE CALLAHAN. She'd liked it. It sounded like a guy who'd help you move a couch.

She didn't know she wrote her name on the receipts. Frank had taught her to sign every slip when she started, so if there was a problem with a tab he'd know who'd rung it. Her name in the corner, fast and slanted.

She definitely didn't know she put a line under the N.

He knew. She found that out later.

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Tonight it was raining hard enough that the last couple left at one and nobody else came in. The jukebox went quiet. The ice machine hummed. Jake was still on his stool, turning his glass in slow circles on the wood.

It was the second Thursday of November, which made it four months almost to the night. She knew that because she'd counted on the walk in, under an umbrella that turned inside out on Nassau and gave up completely by Driggs. She'd shown up soaked to the knees and Frank had looked at her and said, "It's gonna be dead, you know. You could go home at midnight." And then he'd gone home himself, because his knees hurt worse in the rain, and left her the keys.

She'd stayed. She'd told herself it was the money.

Jake had come in at 11:40 with water running off the brim of a Mets cap she'd never seen him wear, and he'd taken it off and shaken it out by the door and laughed at himself a little, and that was the first time she'd ever heard him laugh. It was a good laugh. It came out of him like he'd been surprised by it.

He hadn't left after one drink. He'd ordered a second. He'd never ordered a second.

Now it was 1:20 and the rain was coming sideways against the window and the street outside was empty except for a delivery guy on an e-bike going by in a poncho like a sail.

"You closing?" he said.

"I'm supposed to."

She came around the bar, walked past him to the door and turned the lock. The click sounded louder than it should have. When she turned back he was watching her, not even pretending he wasn't.

"That's either very nice of you," he said, "or I should be worried."

"You've been sitting on that stool for four months, Jake. I figured you could handle one drink after hours."

"You know my name."

"It's on your card. Every week." She went back behind the bar and poured two. "You know mine?"

"Nina." He said it slowly, like he'd been saving it. "You write it on the receipts. Little line under the N."

She didn't know she did that. She felt her face go warm and hated it a little.

"I do not."

"You do." He reached into his back pocket and took out his wallet and, from behind his license, a folded slip of paper soft from being carried. He flattened it on the bar between them. It was a Dorrie's receipt. Rye, $9.00. Tip, $11.00. And in the corner, in her own fast handwriting, her name.

> *Nina*

With a line under the N, like she was proud of it.

"You kept a receipt," she said.

"I kept a receipt."

"That's insane."

"Yeah," he said. "I'm aware."

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They drank the first one talking about nothing. His job, which was boring, he said, and he wasn't lying. He was an accountant for a hospital system in Manhattan, payroll and vendor contracts and something called reconciliation that he described for about forty seconds before he stopped himself and said, "You see what I mean."

"No, keep going. I was almost asleep. It was nice."

"I'm very good at it," he said, with dignity. "Nobody has ever been excited about it, including me."

Her landlord, who was a disaster. She told him about Gary and the thumbs-up emojis and the radiator and Big Mike, and he laughed the second time that night, harder, with his head tipped back, and she felt it somewhere under her ribs.

"Is Big Mike real?" he asked.

"Kelsey thinks Big Mike is a group chat. Like a bunch of guys who all go by Big Mike."

"Who's Kelsey?"

"My sister. We live together. She's younger and she thinks you're a ghost."

He took that in. "That's fair, honestly."

The song he'd played on the jukebox three Thursdays in a row, which she'd noticed and he hadn't known she'd noticed.

"B14," she said. "Otis Redding. You never stay for the end."

He went quiet for a second, turning the glass again. "I was hoping you'd ask me about it," he said.

"Why didn't you just say something?"

"Because you're working. And you're good at it. And every guy in here talks to you like you owe him something." He shrugged. "I didn't want to be every guy."

She thought about Danny from the hardware store, who called her sweetheart with a wink that made her want to file a police report. About how tired her face got by midnight from smiling at people who thought the smile was for them.

She thought about four months of a guy who said "thank you" and "no rush" and never once asked her what time she got off.

"You're not every guy," she said.

"You don't know that yet."

"I know you read a bird book at my bar."

He winced. "You saw that."

"Everybody saw that, Jake. You underlined stuff."

"There's a kind of hawk that lives on the Williamsburg Bridge," he said, a little defensive. "It's a whole thing."

She came around to his side of the bar for the second drink. Sat on the stool next to him, close enough that their knees touched, and she didn't move hers, and neither did he.

It was strange being on this side. The bar looked different from here. Longer, warmer. The bottles glowed in the mirror and the neon Rheingold sign in the window threw a pink stripe across the wood and across the backs of his hands. "You're different over here," he said, like he'd read her mind.

"Different how?"

"I don't know yet." He looked at her like he was trying to work it out. "You're closer."

The jukebox still had credit on it. She leaned past him to reach the buttons, her arm across his chest, and felt him go completely still. She took her time choosing. She knew exactly which song she was going to pick. She picked it anyway, slowly.

B. One. Four.

His song.

The machine thought about it for a second, the way it always did, clicking and whirring like an old man getting out of a chair. Then the horns came in, soft and slow, and Otis started singing about these arms of his, and the whole empty bar filled up with it.

"Dance with me," she said.

"There's no one here."

"That's the point."

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He was a terrible dancer. He didn't care, and she didn't care, and after the first thirty seconds it wasn't really dancing anyway. It was his hand on the small of her back, spread wide, warm through her shirt. It was her fingers finding the back of his neck. It was the rain on the window and the neon beer sign buzzing pink over both of them.

He smelled like rain and soap and a little like rye, and his heartbeat under her cheek was quicker than the song.

"You're stepping on me," she said.

"I'm aware of that."

"You're doing it a lot."

"I'm trying something new," he said. "It's called leading."

"It's called my foot."

He laughed into her hair, and she felt the rumble of it all the way down her spine, and she stopped caring about her foot.

"Four months," she said into his shoulder.

"I know."

"You could have asked me out in week one."

"Would you have said yes?"

She pulled back to look at him. Up close his eyes were darker than she'd thought, and he was looking at her mouth, and he wasn't hiding that either.

"No," she said. "Week one I didn't know how you'd look at me when the door was locked."

He laughed, low, and she felt it more than heard it. Then he backed her up, one slow step at a time, until the edge of the bar was against her spine and there was nowhere else to go, and she didn't want there to be.

For a second he just stood there with his hands on the bar on either side of her, not touching her, close enough that she could feel how warm he was. Giving her the whole second. Letting her decide.

She decided. She took a fistful of his sweater.

He kissed her like he'd thought about it every Thursday for four months. Slow at first, like a question. Then not slow at all.

His hand came up to her jaw, his thumb at the corner of her mouth, and her back pressed into the wood, and somewhere behind her a glass tipped over on the bar mat and she didn't care. She'd wondered, more than once, what kind of kisser a quiet man would be. She'd guessed careful. She'd guessed wrong.

The song ended. Neither of them noticed.

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She drove him home at three in Frank's old Buick, the wipers squeaking the whole way down McGuinness. Jake gave her directions to a brownstone in Clinton Hill, which surprised her, because she'd assumed he lived around the corner from the bar. Everybody at Dorrie's lived around the corner from the bar.

She wanted to ask why a guy from Clinton Hill came all the way to Greenpoint every Thursday. She didn't. It felt like the kind of question that would change the shape of the night, and she liked the shape of the night.

At the curb he didn't get out right away.

"Same time Thursday?" he said.

"No," Nina said. "Saturday. I'm off."

He smiled at her the whole way up his steps.

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"He kept a receipt," Kelsey said on Friday afternoon, for the fourth time.

"Stop."

"In his wallet. Behind his license. Like a soldier with a photo of his girl."

"I'm going to put you in the radiator."

"Nobody can go in the radiator. Gary's still reviewing the radiator." Kelsey was lying upside down on the couch with her feet on the wall, which was how she thought best. "What are you wearing?"

"I don't know."

"You've known since Thursday at three a.m. Don't lie to me."

Nina had known since Thursday at three a.m. The green top with the square neck and her good jeans and the boots that made her taller than she was. She'd laid it out on the chair before she went to sleep.

He texted her Saturday morning at 9:12.

> *Is it too early to text. I've been up since 6. I'm not going to tell you what I've been doing since 6.*
>
> *What have you been doing since 6*
>
> *Cleaning my apartment like my mother is coming. She's not. She's in Florida. Pick you up at 3?*
>
> *3. Wear real shoes. You're going to walk.*
>
> *I've been told I'm a terrible walker too*
>
> *Who told you that*
>
> *Nobody yet. I'm getting ahead of it.*

She read it three times standing in the kitchen in her socks and laughed loud enough that Kelsey yelled "GHOST?" from the shower.

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He showed up at 2:55 in a navy coat and real shoes and looked so normal at the bottom of her stoop that for a second she almost didn't recognize him. She'd only ever seen him under the neon, on a stool, in the half dark. Here he was in afternoon light with a coffee in each hand and the wind messing up his hair.

"I didn't know how you take it," he said, holding them out. "So one's black and one's got everything in it."

"Which one's yours?"

"Whichever one you don't want."

She took the one with everything in it. He looked relieved.

They walked south. It was cold and bright, and the trees along McCarren Park were half gold and half bare. He asked her questions and then actually waited for the answers, which she kept forgetting was a thing people could do.

She told him she'd grown up in Bay Ridge with a mother who did hair out of their kitchen and a father who'd left when she was nine. She told him she'd done two years at Brooklyn College studying business and quit when the money ran out and started tending bar, and that she'd thought it would be temporary, and that it hadn't been, and that she'd stopped being sorry about that.

"You like it," he said.

"I love it." She hadn't said it out loud like that before. "Is that sad? I'm thirty-one and I love tending bar."

"Why would that be sad?"

"I don't know. People act like it's what you do while you're waiting to become something."

"You're already something," he said, simply, and went back to his coffee like he hadn't just said that.

She didn't tell him about the thirty-eight thousand dollars. Not yet. It felt too much like showing somebody your diary.

They got to the Williamsburg Bridge a little after four and walked up the long ramp on the pedestrian side with the J train rattling past behind the fence. Halfway across, he stopped and took a small pair of binoculars out of his coat pocket.

"You're kidding," she said.

"I said it was a whole thing."

"You brought binoculars on a date."

"I brought binoculars on a date," he agreed, and handed them to her, and stood behind her and pointed up past her shoulder at the north tower, his chin almost on her hair. "There. Up on the cross beam. See it?"

It took her a minute. Then she saw it. A red-tailed hawk on a girder two hundred feet over the East River, feathers ruffling, completely unbothered by the whole loud city underneath it.

"Oh," she said.

"Yeah."

"It's just sitting there."

"It's been there for years," he said. "Every winter. People walk past it every day and never look up."

She lowered the binoculars and looked at him instead. He was still watching the hawk with an expression she'd never seen on a man, a sort of plain uncomplicated happiness, like a kid at a window. And she thought, without meaning to, that four months was a long time to sit on a stool and wait for somebody to look up.

"Okay," she said. "That was pretty good."

"Pretty good?"

"Don't push it. My feet are cold."

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They ate at a pierogi place on Nassau that had been there since before either of them was born, with paper placemats and a waitress named Barbara who called them both "honey" and brought extra sour cream without being asked. He ordered the potato and cheese and she ordered the sauerkraut and mushroom and they split them both without discussing it, the way people do when they've already decided some things.

"How did you end up at Dorrie's?" she asked. "You live in Clinton Hill. There are bars in Clinton Hill. I've been to them. They have the burnt rosemary."

He put his fork down. He did it carefully, like he was buying himself a second.

"My dad lived over here," he said. "On Java Street. For forty years."

Lived. She heard it. She didn't know what to do with it yet, so she just held it.

"I'm over here a lot on Thursdays," he said. "Taking care of some stuff at his place. Dorrie's is on the way back to the train."

It was true, she could tell. It also wasn't all of it. There was something behind his face that he wasn't ready to set on the table, and she knew what that looked like, because she'd been looking at people across a bar for ten years and she knew the difference between a man who was lying and a man who wasn't finished.

"Okay," she said.

He looked at her like he'd been braced for more questions. "Okay?"

"You'll tell me when you tell me." She stole the last pierogi off his plate. "Or you won't, and I'll make Kelsey find out. She's very good. She found my ex's second Instagram in nine minutes."

"Second Instagram?"

"It was for his feet."

Jake laughed so hard Barbara came over to see if he was choking.

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He walked her back to Freeman Street at ten. The block was quiet. Somebody on the third floor of the building across the street was practicing the trumpet, badly, the same four bars over and over.

At the bottom of her stoop she turned around to say goodnight and he was right there, closer than she'd expected, and neither of them said goodnight.

This kiss was different. Slower, out in the open, under the streetlight with the cold coming down. He held her face in both hands like it was something he'd been trusted with. She slid her hands inside his coat and felt how warm he was through his shirt, felt his breath catch when her fingers found his ribs, and she pressed closer and he made a low sound in his throat that went straight through her.

She pulled back just far enough to talk.

"Kelsey's at her boyfriend's tonight," she said.

She watched it land on him. Watched him close his eyes for a second like it physically cost him something.

"Nina."

"That's my name. You wrote it on a receipt."

"You wrote it on a receipt." He rested his forehead against hers. "I want to. I want to so much I'm a little worried about it."

"So come up."

"I want to do this right," he said. "There's some stuff I need to tell you first. I don't want to be the guy who doesn't tell you stuff."

She could have argued. Her whole body wanted to argue. She stood there with her hands still inside his coat and her heart going like the trumpet across the street, and she thought about the word lived, and the way he'd put his fork down.

"Tell me now," she said.

"Not on a stoop." He kissed her once more, short and sure. "Thursday. At Dorrie's. After close. I'll tell you everything. Is that okay?"

"That's five days."

"I've done four months," he said. "I can do five days."

"I didn't say I could."

He grinned, walked backward down the sidewalk three steps, and almost went into a recycling bin. She was still laughing when she let herself in.

Upstairs, alone in the apartment, she stood in the dark kitchen with her coat on and her mouth still warm and the radiator clanking, and she said, out loud, to nobody, "Oh, I'm in trouble."

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He texted every day that week. Small things. A photo of a pigeon on a hospital loading dock with the caption "colleague." A complaint about a vendor contract so boring she read it out loud to Kelsey as a bedtime story. On Tuesday night, at 1:47 a.m., when he knew she'd just be locking up:

> *Get home safe. Text me when you're in.*

She texted him when she was in. She lay in bed afterward grinning at the ceiling stain shaped like Ohio, and Kelsey knocked on the wall and said, "I can hear you smiling," which wasn't possible, and was.

On Wednesday she went over to Java Street.

She didn't mean to. That was what she told herself later. She'd been dropping off a duvet at the big laundromat on Franklin because theirs couldn't handle it, and Java was two blocks over, and she'd been thinking about the word lived for four days, and her feet just went.

It was a narrow street of vinyl-sided row houses running down toward the river, with the Manhattan skyline sitting at the end of it like a backdrop somebody forgot to take down. She didn't know which house was his father's. She didn't have to. Halfway down the block there was a small moving truck double-parked with its hazards on, and a pile of flattened boxes on the sidewalk, and Jake.

He was on the stoop. He was holding a woman.

She was about his age, dark-haired, in a big puffy coat, and she had her face buried in his shoulder and both arms wrapped around him, and he had one hand on the back of her head the way you only hold somebody you've held a long time. Her shoulders were shaking. He was saying something into her hair.

Nina stopped on the opposite sidewalk behind a parked van. She felt it happen in her chest, a cold drop, like missing a step in the dark.

She didn't stay to see more. She walked back toward Franklin fast, her face hot in the cold air, telling herself every reasonable thing there was to tell.

He'd said there was stuff he needed to tell her first. He'd stood on her stoop with her hands inside his coat and said I don't want to be the guy who doesn't tell you stuff.

She'd been in bars long enough to know exactly what kind of stuff men needed to tell you first.

He texted that night. ~Long day. Can't wait for tomorrow.

She looked at it for a long time. She wrote three different answers and deleted all of them. Finally she sent back a thumbs-up, and then lay there hating herself, because she'd turned into Gary.

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Thursday was cold and clear and busy early. She was short with a guy in a vest who wanted an espresso martini. She broke a pint glass. At eleven Frank came in out of nowhere to drop off the change bag and sat down at the near end with a club soda and watched her slam a drawer.

"You're in a mood," he said.

"I'm not in a mood."

"You're in a mood like my mother was in a mood." He nodded up at the photo over the register. "That's not a compliment, kid."

At 11:40 she looked at the door.

She'd decided she would pour his drink and be professional and hear whatever he needed to tell her, and then go home and cry in the shower like an adult. She had the bottle in her hand.

The door didn't open.

At 11:50 she put the bottle back. At midnight she wiped down the third stool from the end, which was clean. At 12:20 she checked her phone in the back by the mop sink and there was nothing, not since the afternoon, when he'd sent ~See you tonight. Got something for you.

"Ray's boy not in?" Frank said, when she came back out.

She stopped. "Whose boy?"

Frank looked at her like she'd asked him what year it was. "Jake. Ray Callahan's kid." He tipped his club soda toward the end of the bar. "That's Ray's stool. You didn't know that?"

She didn't know that. She stood there holding a rag.

"Ray carried mail on this route for thirty-one years," Frank said. "Got off his shift at the Greenpoint station, went home, showered, came in here. Thursdays were his night. Eleven-forty, like a train. Rye on the rocks. Played the same damn Otis song every week and never stayed for the end of it." He shook his head slowly. "He said the end was too sad. He'd rather leave while the guy was still asking."

And she remembered him. All at once, like a light coming on in a room she'd forgotten she had.

Her first year at Dorrie's, before she had Thursdays, she'd picked up a few for Frank when his knees were bad. And there'd been an old man in a navy USPS jacket on that stool, white-haired and big-handed, who'd called her "the new kid" and left his tip in a neat little stack of quarters and dimes. She'd served him maybe five times. She'd never known his name.

"He got sick a couple years back," Frank said. "Stopped coming in. Passed in June." He was quiet for a second. "Jake started showing up in July. Never said a word to me about it. I figured he'd tell you if he wanted you to know."

"Frank."

"What?"

"You could have told me."

"Wasn't mine to tell." He finished his club soda and stood up, slow, knees cracking. "Closing on the house was today, I think. His sister flew in from Denver. Megan. Nice girl. Cried at the funeral harder than anybody."

His sister.

Nina sat down on the stool behind the register, which she never did.

"You're in a different mood now," Frank observed.

"Go home, Frank."

He went home.

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She locked the door at 1:15. It wasn't raining. There was nobody to dance with. She put the chairs up and counted the drawer twice because she lost count the first time, and she stood behind the bar with the lights half down and the neon sign buzzing and looked at the third stool from the end, and she thought about an old man who left before the end of his song because the end was too sad.

Then somebody knocked on the glass.

He was outside with his hands cupped around his eyes, peering in. He looked wrecked. His coat was on crooked and he was holding a shoebox under one arm like it was something alive.

She opened the door. The cold came in with him.

"I'm so sorry," he said, before she could say anything. "I'm so sorry. The closing ran three hours over because the buyer's lawyer couldn't find a pen, I swear to God, and then Megan's flight was out of JFK at eleven and the Van Wyck was a parking lot, and my phone died, and I just kept thinking, she's going to think I didn't come. She's going to look at the door at 11:40 and I won't be there."

"I did," Nina said. "Look at the door."

His face did something painful.

"I saw you," she said. "Wednesday. On Java Street. With Megan." She made herself say the rest of it. "I didn't know she was Megan. I thought you were somebody's husband. I sent you a thumbs-up."

He stared at her. "That's what the thumbs-up was?"

"I was very upset."

"I thought it meant you were busy!" He ran a hand over his face. "Nina. I would never. I don't even know how people do that. I can barely keep up with one person. I'm an accountant."

She laughed, and it came out wet, and she was embarrassed by it, and then she wasn't.

"Frank told me," she said. "About your dad. About Ray."

He went very still. Then he nodded slowly and set the shoebox down on the bar, on the wood in front of the third stool, and sat down on it. He didn't take his coat off. She went behind the bar and poured him a rye on the rocks and set it in front of him, and then she poured one for herself and came back around and sat down next to him, knee to knee.

"I wanted to tell you myself," he said. "That was the stuff. That's all it was. I didn't want you to find out and think I'd been coming here for four months to sit in my dead dad's chair and be sad at you."

"Were you?"

"At first," he admitted. "The first few weeks, yeah. I didn't know what else to do with Thursdays. He used to call me every Thursday from his kitchen, at like 11:30, right before he came in. For years. Just to say hi. I'd be half asleep and he'd say, 'Going to Dorrie's, kid, just checking in,' and I'd say, 'Okay, Dad,' and that was the whole call." He turned the glass. "After he died, Thursday nights got really loud. So I came here. I sat where he sat. I ordered what he ordered. I played his song and left before the end, like he did."

"And then?"

He looked at her.

"And then there was a bartender who poured my drink before I sat down," he said. "Who didn't make a thing of it. Who laughed at me for reading a bird book. And at some point, I don't even know when, maybe September, I stopped coming because of him." He said it plainly, the way he said everything. "I started coming because of you. And I couldn't figure out how to say that without it sounding like I was using you to get over my dad. So I didn't say anything. For like two months."

"That's a long time to not say anything."

"I'm aware," he said. "It's a family trait. You'll see."

He pushed the shoebox toward her.

"Megan found this in his closet Wednesday," he said. "That's why she was crying. That's what you saw."

She took the lid off.

Receipts. Hundreds of them. Maybe thousands. Dorrie's receipts going back decades, some of them so old they were the yellow carbon kind, some printed on the thermal paper that was already fading to nothing. Rye, $3.50. Rye, $5.00. Rye, $7.00. Rubber-banded by year. Thirty-one years of Thursdays.

And near the top, in the last band, from a few years ago, there were five of them in a familiar hand.

> *Nina*

A little line under the N.

She put her hand over her mouth.

"He kept them," Jake said quietly. "All of them. I don't know why. I think he just liked having proof he'd been somewhere." He touched the corner of one of hers, very gently. "I kept the one you gave me before I ever found these. So I guess it's genetic."

Nina didn't trust her voice. She took his face in her hands and kissed him instead, slow, with the box of receipts between them and his father's song not playing and the neon buzzing pink over the bottles. He kissed her back like a man setting something heavy down.

When she pulled away, she kept her forehead against his.

"Kelsey's at her boyfriend's," she said.

He laughed, a little broken. "You said that last time."

"She's at her boyfriend's again. They're very serious. It's disgusting." She stood up and held out her hand. "Did you tell me everything?"

"I told you everything."

"Then come home with me, Jake."

. . .

They walked. Six blocks in the hard cold, holding hands like teenagers, the shoebox under his arm because he wouldn't leave it at the bar. The streets were empty and the bodega on the corner of Freeman had its gate half down with the light still on inside, a cat asleep on the newspapers.

On the second-floor landing she dropped her keys. He picked them up. She dropped them again, because he'd put his mouth against the

side of her neck while she was trying to find the right one, and she said, "You're not helping," and he said, "I'm aware," and she finally got the door open by feel.

The apartment was boiling. Gary had fixed the radiator. Of course he had. Tonight, of all nights, it was blasting like the inside of a pizza oven, and the windows were fogged and the whole place smelled like hot dust.

"Is it always like this?" he asked.

"It's never like this. It's been broken for a month."

"Should we open a window?"

"Jake," she said. "Take your coat off."

He set the shoebox down on the kitchen counter, carefully, like it was sleeping. Then he took his coat off, and she took it out of his hands and dropped it on the floor, and he looked at the coat and then at her and something in his face changed. All the careful went out of it.

He kissed her against the refrigerator. A magnet shaped like a slice of pizza fell off and hit the floor and neither of them looked. His hands were in her hair, then at her waist, then sliding up under the hem of her sweater, warm against her skin, slow, asking. She answered by pulling the sweater over her head herself.

He made a sound she was going to think about for a long time.

"You're sure," he said against her mouth.

"If you ask me that one more time I'm going to put you in the radiator."

"Nobody can go in the radiator," he said, and she laughed into his kiss, and he walked her backward down the short hallway toward her room the same way he'd walked her back against the bar, one slow step at a time, except this time he wasn't giving her a second to decide. She'd already decided. She'd decided in July, probably, watching him look at a glass of rye like a man in a waiting room, and she just hadn't told anyone.

His sweater ended up somewhere in the hall. Her boots ended up somewhere else. In the dark of her room, with the streetlight coming through the blinds in pale stripes across the bed, she put her hands flat on his chest and felt his heart going as hard as hers, and he said her name like he'd been saving it, the way he had that first night at the bar. Only now it wasn't careful at all.

She pulled him down with her.

The radiator clanked. The trumpet player across the street, somehow, at two in the morning, started up the same four bars. Neither of them noticed that either.

· · ·

She woke up at ten to the smell of coffee and the sound of somebody trying very hard to be quiet in her kitchen and failing.

He was standing at the counter in his jeans and her extra-large Dorrie's softball shirt from 2019, which said DORRIE'S DRUNKS across the back, reading the instructions on the side of her French press like it was a vendor contract. The shoebox was still on the counter. He'd put the pizza magnet back on the fridge.

"I didn't know how you take it," he said, without turning around.

"You know how I take it."

"With everything in it." He turned around and handed her a mug. "I was being polite."

She leaned against the doorframe and drank it and looked at him for a long time in the gray November light. He looked back. He didn't hide that either.

"I want to tell you something," she said. "Since we're telling people stuff."

So she told him about the thirty-eight thousand dollars.

· · ·

It was the first Thursday of February when the paperwork came through.

Jake had read Frank's books in a single weekend in December, at the back table with a pencil behind his ear, and come out of it looking happier than he had since the hawk. He'd found a small-business lender in Sunset Park and a loan program for first-time owners she'd never heard of, and he'd talked Frank into carrying part of the price himself over five years, which Frank had agreed to on the condition that nobody ever install Edison bulbs.

"Over my dead body," Nina had said.

"Over mine," Frank had said. "Which is the point. Put it in writing."

They'd put it in writing.

So the bar was still Dorrie's. It would always be Dorrie's. The tin ceiling was still the color of weak tea and the pool table still sloped and the jukebox still made you commit. But there were two photos over the register now. Dorrie in 1974, squinting through her cigarette smoke. And next to her, in a frame Jake had picked out at a thrift store on Bedford, Ray Callahan in his navy postal jacket, holding up a rye on the rocks to whoever was taking the picture, grinning like he'd just heard a good one.

Old Walt was at the far end explaining spring training to a pair of Australians who hadn't asked. Kelsey was in the corner booth with her boyfriend, pretending she wasn't watching the door.

Nina was watching the door too. She didn't pretend.

At 11:40 she saw him through the front window, crossing against the light with his hands in his pockets, and she had the rye on the bar by the time he got his coat off.

He looked at it. Then he looked at her.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi."

He sat down on the third stool from the end. He didn't drink right away. He reached across the bar and took her hand, and turned it over, and pressed a folded piece of paper into it. It was soft, like it had been carried.

She opened it. It was the receipt from the night of the rain. Rye, $9.00. Tip, $11.00. Her own name in the corner, with its little line. And underneath it, on the back, in Jake's careful accountant's

handwriting, something new.

> *Same time Thursday? Every Thursday. -J*

She looked up. He was watching her. He wasn't pretending he wasn't.

"You're going to need a bigger shoebox," she said.

"I'm aware."

Later, when the drink was half gone, he got up and fed a dollar into the jukebox and pushed B14 without looking. Otis started in, soft and slow, asking somebody to let him be her man. Kelsey groaned audibly from the booth. Walt told the Australians to shut up, this was a good one.

Jake came back to his stool and sat down, and Nina leaned on the bar across from him with her chin in her hand, and the song played on.

He stayed for the end.

— Shay

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