Wrong Number

One tired thumb sends Lauren's midnight complaint about her sink to an architect in Brooklyn instead of her landlord, and eight weeks of late-night texts later, they finally agree to meet under the clock at Grand Central.

At 11:52 on a Tuesday night in late September, Lauren Pierce stood barefoot in her kitchen on Jane Street and watched the sink fill up with gray water that had nowhere to go.

It wasn't her water. It came up from the apartment of the man in 3B who cooked fish every night at ten, and it rose slowly around the coffee mug she'd left in there that morning, like it had all the time in the world.

She had been on her feet since 4:30 a.m. She had laminated forty-eight croissants, burned a sheet of financiers, cried for exactly one minute in the walk-in, and piped the word "Congratulations" onto a cake for a man named Todd who had called three times to make sure it would say "Congratulations" and not "Congrats." She smelled like butter and bleach. There was almond flour in her ear.

She picked up her phone and found Doug.

Doug was her landlord. Doug owned four buildings in the West Village that he'd inherited from his father, and he managed them from what she was fairly sure was a Honda Odyssey in Bayonne. Doug had promised a plumber "first thing Tuesday." Doug had promised that last Tuesday.

> *Lauren: Hi Doug, it's Lauren in 4B again. Friendly reminder that the sink is doing the thing. The fish water thing. You said Tuesday. It is still Tuesday, technically, for eight more minutes, so I guess you're not late yet. Please send someone. I'm begging in a dignified way.*

She hit send and went to stand in the shower until the hot water ran out, which in this building took about four minutes. When she came out, the phone was lit up on the counter.

> *Unknown: you have the wrong number. also your landlord sounds terrible*

She checked Doug's contact. Doug ended in 4471. She had typed 4474, because her thumb was tired and the 1 sat right on top of the 4, and some stranger had just read her dignified begging.

> *Lauren: Oh my god. I'm so sorry. Please ignore that.*

> *Lauren: Doug ends in a 1. You end in a 4. My thumb gave up.*

> *Unknown: too late. I'm invested now. what's the fish water thing*

> *Lauren: You don't want to know about the fish water thing.*

> *Unknown: I'm an adult. I can handle the fish water thing*

She sat down on the edge of the bed. It was midnight. She had to be up in four and a half hours. She should have put the phone down.

> *Lauren: The guy downstairs cooks salmon every night and when he runs his sink, my sink fills up with his water. Fish water. It comes up from the drain. It's gray and it smells like a dock.*

> *Unknown: ok that's actually horrifying*

> *Unknown: as a professional I can tell you that's a venting problem. your stacks are probably tied together wrong. somebody did a renovation in like 1987 and took a shortcut*

> *Lauren: As a professional what? Plumber?*

> *Unknown: architect. which is like a plumber who's afraid of getting wet*

She laughed out loud, alone in her apartment, in her towel, which annoyed her.

> *Lauren: Well thank you for the free consultation. I'll tell Doug it's the stacks.*

> *Unknown: tell Doug it was a 1987 shortcut. landlords hate when you know the year*

> *Lauren: Goodnight, wrong number.*

> *Unknown: goodnight, fish water*

. . .

Ryan Cole lived on the top floor of a brownstone on Carroll Street in Brooklyn, in an apartment with slanted ceilings he'd hit his head on maybe four hundred times. He was thirty-two. He had his grandfather's drafting table, which he never used for drafting, and right now his laptop sat on top of it because he was still at work. Technically. The firm was in Dumbo, in an old cardboard factory where the heat came on in May and went off in December. He was designing a public library in Ohio that his boss, Kevin, wanted to submit to a competition in five weeks. He'd built the reading room around a big skylight, and right now the skylight was the only part he liked.

He didn't usually answer wrong numbers. For a year he'd gotten texts asking somebody named Tony if he still had the truck, and he'd never answered one. He didn't know why he'd answered this one, except that it had said "begging in a dignified way," and he'd thought, that is a funny person.

He closed the laptop. He went to bed. He didn't think about it again until Thursday, when his phone buzzed at 12:14 a.m.

> *Lauren: Update for no reason. Doug sent a plumber. The plumber said "huh" and left.*

Ryan sat up in bed.

> *Ryan: did the plumber say anything else*

> *Lauren: He said "that's a weird one." Then he ate one of my scones without asking and left.*

> *Ryan: wait why do you have scones*

> *Lauren: I'm a pastry chef. I always have scones. I'm like a raccoon but for baked goods.*

> *Ryan: I'm not going to lie that's the best job I've ever heard of*

> *Lauren: It's 4:30 a.m. every day. It's burns on your forearms. It's a man named Todd calling three times about the spelling of Congratulations.*

> *Ryan: still sounds better than my job*

> *Lauren: What's your job? Besides being afraid of getting wet.*

> *Ryan: right now I'm designing a library in Ohio. I've been staring at the same skylight for four days*

> *Lauren: That actually sounds kind of nice.*

> *Ryan: it's very nice. it's the nicest skylight in Ohio. nobody in Ohio is going to care*

> *Lauren: People in Ohio deserve nice skylights.*

> *Ryan: that's what I keep telling my boss*

There was a pause. He watched the three dots appear and disappear twice.

> *Lauren: Okay. I'm going to say something and you can say no.*

> *Ryan: ok*

> *Lauren: This is weird but it's also the most normal conversation I've had all week. Can we keep doing it? Like not in a creepy way. You can just tell me about your skylight sometimes and I'll tell you about Todd.*

He read it twice. Then he got up and got a glass of water and came back and read it again, which he would never have admitted to anyone.

> *Ryan: yes. but I have rules*

> *Lauren: Of course you do. You're an architect.*

> *Ryan: no photos. no last names. no googling. I don't want to find out you're on a billboard for a law firm*

> *Lauren: You think I'm on a billboard?*

> *Ryan: I don't know anything about you except you have fish water and scones. you could be anybody*

> *Lauren: Fine. No photos. But I want one rule too.*

> *Ryan: go ahead*

> *Lauren: Tell me one thing you made today. Every time. Even if it's small.*

> *Ryan: deal. today I made a staircase that nobody's ever going to walk up*

> *Lauren: Today I made a cake that says Congratulations. In full.*

> *Ryan: Todd must be thrilled*

> *Lauren: Todd is overjoyed. Goodnight, wrong number.*

> *Ryan: goodnight, fish water*

He saved the contact before he put the phone down. He thought about it for a second and then typed "Fish Water," because he didn't know her name yet, and because it made him smile, and because nobody was ever going to see it.

. . .

The bakery was called Margot, on the corner of Perry and West 4th behind a green awning lettered in gold. Brenda, the owner, had learned her kouign-amann in Brittany from a woman who threw a rolling pin at her.

Lauren had been the pastry chef for two years. Before that she'd been in culinary school in Hyde Park, dating a guy named Jason who wanted to open a taco truck in Los Angeles. Jason had opened the taco truck. He'd gone without her. She'd heard it was doing very well.

"You're smiling at your phone," Megan said.

It was 5:15 in the morning. Megan, her second, a tall girl from Long Island with a nose ring and forearms like a rower, was scaling out butter and looking at Lauren like she'd caught her stealing.

"I'm not smiling."

"You're smiling at your phone at five in the morning. Nobody smiles at five in the morning. Who is it?"

"Nobody."

"Is it Jason?"

"God, no."

Lauren put the phone in her apron pocket and picked up her bench scraper. "It's a wrong number."

Megan stopped scaling. "Explain that."

So she explained it, while she sheeted the dough, and Megan listened with the face of someone watching a car accident.

"So you don't know what he looks like."

"No."

"You don't know his name."

"I know his name now. It's Ryan."

"Lauren. He could be sixty. He could be in prison. People text from prison."

"He's not in prison. He's designing a library in Ohio."

"That's exactly what a guy in prison would say."

Lauren laughed and cut the dough into long triangles. She didn't tell Megan the rest of it. That she'd started waiting for 11:30. That she'd started saving things up during the day to tell him, the way you save a good seat for somebody. That the night before, she'd written three paragraphs about the exact sound a perfect croissant makes when you tear it, and he'd written back "that's the most romantic thing anyone's ever said to me and it's about bread," and she'd fallen asleep with the phone on her chest.

. . .

By the middle of October they had a schedule, though neither of them had ever said so.

She texted around 11:30, after her shower. He texted back from in front of the library.

> *Lauren: Thing I made today. A pear tart with a brown butter frangipane. Brenda said "fine." Brenda has said "fine" to me maybe four times in two years. I'm framing it.*

> *Ryan: what's frangipane*

> *Lauren: It's almond cream. It goes under the fruit. It's the part that makes people close their eyes when they eat it.*

> *Ryan: I want to close my eyes when I eat something*
>
> *Lauren: When was the last time you ate something?*
>
> *Ryan: define eat*
>
> *Lauren: Ryan.*
>
> *Ryan: I had a bodega egg and cheese at 2*
>
> *Lauren: That's not a meal. That's a cry for help.*
>
> *Ryan: thing I made today. a stair rail. it's oak. it curves. I'm prouder of it than I should be*
>
> *Lauren: Describe the curve.*
>
> *Ryan: you really want me to describe the curve of a stair rail*
>
> *Lauren: You let me describe a croissant for three paragraphs. Describe the curve.*

There was a long pause. Somewhere on the street a man was singing "Sweet Caroline" in a way that suggested he'd had a very good night.

> *Ryan: ok. it starts out straight at the bottom like it isn't going to do anything interesting. then right around the landing it starts to turn and it doesn't make a big deal about it. it just goes. and when you put your hand on it you don't notice it's turning until you're already halfway around. that's the whole thing. it's supposed to feel like the building is taking care of you without telling you*

She read it three times. Then she put the phone down on the blanket and looked at the ceiling.

> *Lauren: Okay that was good.*
>
> *Ryan: I know. I've been working on it since 7*
>
> *Lauren: The rail or the text?*
>
> *Ryan: both honestly*

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Dylan had been Ryan's roommate at Cornell and his best friend ever since, and he had the instincts of a bloodhound and the subtlety of a parade.

They were at a bar on Smith Street on a Sunday afternoon, watching the Jets lose in a way that felt personal.

"You just laughed at your phone," Dylan said. "A little nose laugh. I've known you for fourteen years. You barely laugh at me."

"You're not that funny."

"Who is it?"

"It's a wrong number," Ryan said.

Dylan put his wings down. Dylan never put his wings down. Ryan walked him through it, and when he got to the no-photos rule, Dylan said, "She's catfishing you."

"She's not catfishing me. She hasn't asked me for anything."

"That's how they get you. They don't ask for anything. Then one day it's 'oh Ryan, my grandma's stuck in Portugal and she needs four thousand dollars in Target gift cards.'"

"She's a pastry chef in the West Village."

"Says who?"

"Says her. Last night she told me about a thing called a kouign-amann for twenty minutes. It's like a croissant that got caramelized. When it bakes, the outside turns to glass. You can't fake that."

Dylan looked at him for a long time.

"Buddy," he said gently. "You're in love with a bread lady you've never seen."

"I'm not in love with anybody."

Ryan's phone buzzed and he reached for it before he could stop himself, and Dylan shook his head slowly, like a doctor delivering bad news.

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The thing nobody tells you about working nights and mornings is how lonely the in-between hours are.

She got up at 4:30 and walked down Jane Street in the dark with her knife roll over her shoulder. He worked until two and took the F at Carroll Street with a coffee and a headache. They lived three miles and a river apart, and the only hour they shared was the one where everyone else was asleep.

It turned out to be a good hour.

> *Ryan: question. what's your worst kitchen injury*

> *Lauren: Oh, that's easy. I put my hand flat on a sheet tray that had just come out of a 400-degree oven. I knew it was hot. I watched myself do it. My brain just went "what if."*

> *Ryan: that's the most relatable thing I've ever heard*

> *Lauren: What's your worst architect injury?*

> *Ryan: I cut my thumb on a foam core model in grad school and bled on a professor's shoes. he made me buy him new shoes. they were Ferragamo*

> *Lauren: How much were the shoes?*

> *Ryan: $640. I ate rice for a month*

> *Lauren: You've been eating badly for a long time, haven't you.*

> *Ryan: I'm in a long term relationship with bodega egg and cheese. it's very committed*

> *Lauren: You should break up with it. It's not good for you.*

> *Ryan: it's always there for me though. it's there at 2am. nobody else is there at 2am*

> *Lauren: I'm there at 2am.*

The dots appeared. Disappeared. Appeared.

> *Ryan: yeah. you are*

She could hear her own heart, which was stupid. It was four words from a guy whose face she'd never seen.

> *Lauren: Thing I made today. I'm forgetting to say it.*
>
> *Ryan: tell me*
>
> *Lauren: A chocolate tart. Seventy percent. With a little sea salt on the top. I made one extra and I don't know why. It's in my fridge right now and I keep looking at it.*
>
> *Ryan: who's it for*
>
> *Lauren: I don't know yet.*

She put the phone down before she could say anything else. She didn't sleep for a long time.

. . .

In the first week of November, two things happened that neither of them told the other about right away.

The first was that a critic from the Times came into Margot on a Wednesday morning, or Brenda thought he did, which in practice was the same thing. He ordered one of everything and wrote nothing down. After he left, Brenda came back into the kitchen and said, "Nobody take a day off until Christmas," and shut herself in the office.

Lauren worked fourteen hours that day and fourteen the next. Her knuckles cracked, and she put Aquaphor on them at night and wore cotton gloves to bed like a Victorian widow.

The second thing was that Kevin called Ryan into his office, which was a glass box in the corner of the cardboard factory, and closed the door, and said, "How do you feel about Chicago?"

"In general?"

"We're opening an office. We need someone to lead the transit hall on Wacker. Eighteen months, maybe two years. It's a big job, Ryan. It's your job, if you want it."

Ryan looked at the river through the glass behind Kevin's head. A Circle Line boat was going by, empty, with one man in a red jacket at the rail.

"Can I think about it?"

"Think about it," Kevin said. "Don't think about it for too long."

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> *Lauren: You're quiet tonight.*
>
> *Ryan: long day. I'm sorry*
>
> *Lauren: Don't be sorry. Mine was long too. My hands look like I've been punching a wall.*
>
> *Ryan: have you been punching a wall*
>
> *Lauren: Only emotionally. Brenda thinks the Times was here. Nobody's allowed to have a life until Christmas.*
>
> *Ryan: that's a lot of pressure*
>
> *Lauren: It's fine. I like pressure. I'm a croissant.*
>
> *Ryan: thing I made today. nothing. I made nothing. I sat in a meeting and stared at a boat*

> *Lauren: That counts. Staring at a boat counts.*

> *Ryan: does it?*

> *Lauren: Tonight it counts. I'm the judge.*

There was a long gap. She thought he might have fallen asleep. She was almost asleep herself, the phone tilting in her hand, when it buzzed again.

> *Ryan: can I ask you something and you can say no*

> *Lauren: That's my line.*

> *Ryan: I'm borrowing it*

> *Lauren: Okay. Ask.*

> *Ryan: do you want to meet*

She sat straight up in bed. The blanket fell off. The cotton gloves were still on her hands and she had to pull one off with her teeth to type.

> *Lauren: Like in person?*

> *Ryan: that's usually how it's done*

> *Lauren: What happened to your rules?*

> *Ryan: I made the rules. I can unmake the rules. that's how architecture works*

> *Lauren: That's not how architecture works at all.*

> *Ryan: it's how it works for me*

She looked at the yellow square the streetlight made on the ceiling. She thought about Jason saying "I just think we want different things" like he'd read it off a card. She thought about how it had been almost seven weeks of this, and how it was the best part of every day, and how if he turned out to be a sixty-year-old in prison she would at least have a funny story.

> *Lauren: Okay.*

> *Ryan: okay?*

> *Lauren: Okay yes. But still no photos. I don't want to see you first. I want to see you for real.*

> *Ryan: ok. how will I know it's you*

> *Lauren: I'll wear a yellow scarf. I'll be carrying a pastry box. I won't tell you what's in it.*

> *Ryan: that's the most you thing you've ever said*

> *Lauren: Where?*

> *Ryan: Grand Central. under the clock. Friday at 7*

> *Lauren: That's such a cliche.*

> *Ryan: it's a cliche because it works. it's the most beautiful room in the city. I want to meet you in the most beautiful room in the city*

She didn't answer for a full minute, because she was busy pressing the phone to her forehead with her eyes closed.

> *Lauren: Okay. Under the clock. Friday at 7. What will you be wearing?*

> *Ryan: a navy coat. and I'll be the guy who looks like he's about to throw up*

> *Lauren: I'll be the girl holding a pastry box like it's a bomb.*

> *Ryan: perfect. we'll find each other*

. . .

Friday was the longest day of Lauren's life.

She got to Margot at 5:00 and the walk-in compressor was making a noise like a dying goose. A repairman named Phil came at nine, stood in front of it, and said, "Huh," which Lauren was starting to believe was the only word men who fixed things knew. The butter went soft. At two o'clock a wedding cake tier slumped like a tired man leaning on a wall, and she rebuilt it from scratch with her jaw clenched. At 5:40 she was still in her whites with buttercream in her hair.

"Go," Megan said. "Go, go, go. I've got it."

"I can't leave you with this."

"You've been talking about this guy for seven weeks. If you stand him up because of a cake, I'm going to quit and open a taco truck."

That was low, and Lauren laughed so hard she had to sit down on a milk crate.

She went home and showered in four minutes and tried on three things and put on the first one again. The yellow scarf was her

grandmother's, old silk, the color of an egg yolk. The pastry box held two kouign-amann she'd made at five that morning, the outsides dark and crackling like stained glass.

She took the 1 train to Times Square and the shuttle across to Grand Central, holding the box in front of her with both hands the whole way, like it might go off.

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Ryan's train stopped dead under the river at 6:31.

He was on the 4 from Borough Hall, wearing the navy coat and a shirt he'd changed three times. The conductor came on in the voice of a man who had said it a thousand times. "Ladies and gentlemen, we are being held momentarily by the train dispatcher."

Nobody even looked up. Ryan looked at his phone. No signal, under the East River, no way to tell her. He held the pole and watched the minutes change and felt like he was going to be sick for real.

6:40. 6:48. 6:55.

At 7:02 the train lurched and started moving again, and the conductor said, "Thank you for your patience," and a woman behind Ryan said, "What patience," and the whole car laughed. He didn't. He was already at the door.

. . .

Lauren got there at 6:52, which was early, which was her whole personality.

The main concourse was full of people going home and people going out, everyone moving in straight lines across the marble like ants who knew where the sugar was. The ceiling was turquoise and gold, the stars painted on backward. The clock sat on top of the information booth, brass and glowing, its four faces made of opal.

She didn't go stand under it. She lost her nerve halfway across the floor and climbed the big marble stairs to the east balcony instead, and stayed there by the Apple Store, looking down. She told herself it was strategy. She'd see him first. She'd have one second to get ready.

She watched the clock for fifteen minutes. Tourists took a selfie under it. Nobody in a navy coat.

At 7:09, a guy walked up and stood right under the clock. Tall, navy peacoat, dark hair. He had a long black drawing tube over his shoulder, the kind architects carried. He looked around. He looked nervous.

Her heart did something complicated. She took one step toward the stairs.

And then a woman in a red coat came half-running across the concourse with her arms out, and the guy with the drawing tube turned and saw her and his whole face opened up, and he caught her and lifted her off the ground and kissed her like he'd been waiting his whole life to do it, right under the clock, while the tube swung around on his back and nearly hit an old man.

Lauren stood very still.

Okay, she thought. Okay. That's fine.

Some part of her had been waiting for it the whole time. Things that were too good were usually happening to somebody else. She watched them walk away together down the ramp toward 42nd Street, his arm around the woman's shoulders, and she held the pastry box against her chest and felt very stupid for having made it.

She turned around and started walking toward the back of the balcony and the long hallway out to Lexington.

She got all the way to the doors before her phone buzzed in her coat pocket.

> *Ryan: I'm here. I'm so sorry. the 4 died under the river for half an hour. I'm under the clock. I'm the only guy here without a drawing tube, which is weird, because there was a guy with a drawing tube here a second ago and he made out with somebody so hard a tourist clapped*

She read it twice in the doorway. Then she turned around and walked back to the railing and looked down.

There was a man under the clock. He was alone. He had on a navy coat that wasn't a peacoat, longer, wool, the collar turned up on one side and not the other like he'd put it on in a hurry. He wasn't holding anything. He was turning slowly in a circle, looking at every face that went past him, and even from up on the balcony she could see that he looked exactly like a man who was about to throw up.

> *Lauren: Look up.*

She watched him read it. She watched him look up, at the ceiling first, at the painted stars, like an idiot, which made her laugh. Then he looked at the balconies. Then he found her.

It was a long way down. She saw him stand very still with the crowd moving around him like water around a rock, and lift one hand, and she lifted hers back, and she was walking toward the stairs before she'd decided to.

. . .

He was better looking than she'd been ready for. That was the first problem.

Seven weeks of texts and you build a person out of whatever you've got. She'd given him glasses for some reason, and a rumpled sweetness, like a guy in a commercial for flannel sheets.

He didn't have glasses. He had dark hair that needed cutting and a day of stubble and eyes she couldn't figure out under the opal light, gray or green, and he was looking at her like she was the skylight.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi."

"You're Lauren."

"You're Ryan."

"I'm Ryan." He laughed, a short breath through his nose, and ran a hand through his hair. "Sorry. I had a whole line. I practiced it on the train for half an hour. I had a lot of time."

"What was the line?"

"I don't remember. It's gone. You walked down the stairs and it left my body."

She held out the pastry box. Her hands were shaking a little, and she hoped he didn't notice, and she could tell he noticed.

"I made you something."

He took it from her like it was made of glass. He didn't open it. He just held it and looked at her over the top of it.

"Is this the thing?"

"It's the thing."

"The kouign-amann."

"You said it right."

"I practiced that too," he said. "Before the train."

Somebody's rolling suitcase ran over her foot and she didn't feel it. He smelled like cold air and wool and cedar, and she was close enough to know that and didn't remember stepping in.

"I saw the drawing tube guy," she said. "I thought he was you."

His face changed. "Oh no."

"I was leaving. I was at the door."

"Oh, no. Lauren." He said her name like he'd been saving it. "I would never kiss somebody that hard in front of a tourist."

"Never?"

He looked at her mouth, just for a second, and then back at her eyes, and the air between them did something that she felt in the backs of her knees.

"Not on the first night," he said.

. . .

He took her to the whispering gallery first, because he couldn't help himself.

It was downstairs outside the Oyster Bar, a low vault where four arches met, covered in pale Guastavino tile that curved over their heads like the inside of a shell. Ryan put her in one corner, facing the wall, and walked diagonally to the opposite corner and turned his face to the tile.

"Can you hear me?"

His voice came out of the wall right next to her ear, low and close, like he was standing behind her. She jumped. She actually jumped.

"How is that possible?"

"The curve carries it," he said into the tile. "1913. Nobody even knows if they did it on purpose."

"You're such a nerd."

"I know," the wall said. "I've been wanting to tell you that in person for weeks."

She put her forehead against the cool tile and closed her eyes.

"This is like texting," she said quietly. "You're far away and you're right here."

There was a pause. Then his voice came again, softer.

"I like it better when I can see you."

She turned around. He'd turned around too, and they stood in opposite corners grinning like teenagers until she couldn't stand it and crossed the floor.

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They walked.

It was cold and clear, the kind of November night when the city looks washed. They went down Park Avenue past the Pershing Square viaduct, and he pointed at buildings and told her which ones were ugly and why. He told her the Chrysler Building's spire had been built in secret inside the fire shaft and lifted through the roof in ninety minutes so the guy building 40 Wall Street wouldn't know he'd lost.

"That's petty," she said.

"The best buildings in this city are petty," he said. "Half of Manhattan is men trying to be taller than other men."

"Sounds like a lot of men I know."

He laughed. He had a good laugh. It came out all at once, surprised, like he didn't use it much.

They ate at a Korean barbecue place on 32nd Street, and the waitress kept taking the tongs away from him because he was doing it wrong. By the third time he was doing it wrong on purpose, and she smacked his hand with them, and Lauren laughed so hard soju almost came out her nose.

He ate the kouign-amann for dessert, out of the box with his fingers. She watched the outside crack like ice on a puddle. She watched him close his eyes.

He didn't say anything for a long time.

"Well?" she said.

"Give me a second."

"Ryan."

"I'm having a moment," he said, with his eyes still closed. "I'm having a private moment with your pastry and I need you to respect that."

She put her chin in her hand and watched him have his moment, and something in her chest that had been clenched for about two years let go, like a fist opening.

• • •

They took the 1 train downtown because she said she wanted to show him something.

It was after eleven. Two girls in sequined tops were splitting a bag of Takis. When the train swayed around the curve at 14th Street, her knee pressed into his, and she left it there.

"Where are we going?" he said.

"My bakery."

"It's closed."

"I have keys."

He turned and looked at her. The fluorescent light was ugly on everybody except him.

"You're taking me to your bakery at midnight."

"I'm taking you to my bakery at midnight," she said. "It's the most beautiful room in the city."

. . .

Margot was dark except for the little light over the ovens that never went off. She let them in through the side door on Perry Street, and the bell over it jingled, and she felt him come in behind her and stop.

It smelled like butter and burnt sugar and yeast. It smelled like her. The marble counter ran the length of the kitchen, cold and white under the low light. The walk-in was still making its dying goose noise, softer now, like it had given up arguing.

"This is where you are," he said quietly. "When you text me about Todd."

"This is where I am."

He walked the length of the counter slowly, running two fingers along the edge of the marble. He looked at everything, the rolling pins, the scale, the sheet trays stacked in their rack.

She took off her coat and turned around and he was right there.

"Lauren," he said.

"Yeah."

"I've wanted to do this since the stair rail."

"The stair rail?"

"You told me to describe the curve," he said. "Nobody ever asks me to describe the curve."

And then he kissed her.

He kissed her slowly, at first, like he was asking a question, one hand coming up to the side of her face and the other at the small of her back. Her back met the edge of the marble and the cold went through her sweater and she didn't care. She grabbed the front of his coat with both hands and pulled him in and the question was answered. He made a low sound into her mouth that she felt all the way down. His thumb moved along her jaw. Her fingers found the back of his neck, the soft short hair there, and she held on.

When they came up for air, his forehead was against hers and they were both breathing like they'd taken the stairs.

"Okay," she said.

"Okay," he said.

"I live four blocks from here."

His eyes opened. Up close they were gray, with a ring of green around the middle. She'd figure that out properly later, in better light.

"Is that an invitation?"

"It's a fact about geography," she said. "You're the architect. Do something with it."

. . .

Afterward she would remember it in pieces, the way you remember the best kind of dream.

The walk up Jane Street, his hand in her back pocket. The way he kissed her against the front door while she tried to find her keys, so

that she dropped them twice. The way he stood in the middle of her tiny apartment and looked at the sink and said, "So that's the famous sink," and she said, "Don't you dare," and pulled him by his collar into the bedroom.

The streetlight made its yellow square on the ceiling. He took her grandmother's scarf off slowly, unwinding it one turn at a time, and laid it over the back of the chair like it mattered, because he'd understood without her saying it that it did. His hands were warm and careful and not careful at all. Her sweater went somewhere. His shirt had too many buttons and she said so, and he laughed against her neck, and she felt the laugh in her collarbone.

He kissed the scar on her hand. He kissed her wrist, the inside of her elbow, her shoulder, like he was learning a building, like he wanted to know how all of it was put together. She pulled him down to her and the radiator clanked and neither of them heard it.

At some point he said her name, quietly, into her hair, like a question he already knew the answer to.

At some point she stopped thinking about anything at all.

• • •

Her alarm went off at 4:30, because her alarm didn't care about anything.

She reached over him to kill it and he caught her arm and pulled her back down without opening his eyes.

"No," he said into the pillow.

"I have to go to work."

"It's the middle of the night."

"It's morning. This is what morning is for me."

"That's insane. That's a crime. Call Brenda. Tell her you're sick."

"Brenda would come here and kill me in my bed. She'd kill you too. She'd make it look like an accident."

He opened one eye. His hair was wrecked against her pillowcase. He looked about nineteen.

"Can I see you tonight?" he said.

"I get off at four."

"I'll be at Margot at four."

"You can't come to Margot. Megan will interrogate you. She thinks you're in prison."

"I'll bring references," he said, and pulled her down and kissed her, and she was eleven minutes late to work for the first time in two years, and when Megan saw her face she put down her bench scraper and said, "Oh my god," so loud that Brenda came out of the office.

. . .

The weekend was a blur of good things.

Megan interrogated him for twenty minutes on Saturday and came back into the kitchen and said, "Okay, he's fine, he's really cute, I hate it." On Sunday he showed her the slanted ceilings and the skylight model for the library in Ohio, small and white and perfect on a shelf by the window like a cake.

They had brunch with Dylan on Smith Street. Dylan stood up when they walked in and shook her hand with both of his like a politician.

"Bread lady," he said. "I've heard so much about you."

"Ryan calls me bread lady?"

"Ryan doesn't call you anything. I call you bread lady. Ryan just stares at his phone and does a little nose laugh."

"Dylan," Ryan said.

"It's sweet," Dylan said. "It's disgusting. Sit, sit."

It was a good brunch, for an hour. Then Ryan got up to go to the bathroom, and Dylan leaned across the table and said, in a voice that he probably thought was low, "So are you guys going to do long distance, or what?"

Lauren had a forkful of eggs halfway to her mouth.

"What?"

"With Chicago." Dylan's face changed, slowly, the way a man's face changes when he realizes he's stepped off a curb that isn't there. "He didn't tell you about Chicago."

"No," she said. "He didn't tell me about Chicago."

. . .

He knew something was wrong the second he sat back down. Lauren was smiling the polite smile she used for Todd. She kept it up all the way to the top of the subway stairs at Carroll Street, where she turned around and said, "When were you going to tell me?"

He didn't pretend.

"I don't know," he said.

"Is it real?"

"It's an offer. It's eighteen months. Maybe two years. Kevin asked me two weeks ago."

"Two weeks ago." She was doing the math. He watched her do it. "So before you asked me to meet you. You asked me to meet you under a clock knowing you might be leaving."

"I hadn't decided anything."

"That's worse, Ryan. That's actually worse." She pulled her scarf tighter. The yellow one. "I had a guy who went to Los Angeles. He didn't tell me either. He told me the week before. He said 'I didn't want to ruin what we had,' like what we had was a cake he didn't want to cut."

"I'm not him."

"I know you're not him. That's what's scary." A train was coming in below with a roar. "I can't be the last to know. I've done it. I'm not doing it again."

"Lauren."

"I have to go," she said. "I have to be up at four-thirty."

She went down the stairs. He didn't follow her, because he could tell she would hate him for it.

. . .

She didn't answer that night. She didn't answer Monday.

She made a birthday cake shaped like a golden retriever, and Brenda said "fine" about it, and it didn't feel like anything. At night she looked at the lock screen and saw Wrong Number, and the first few words of each message, and turned it over on the blanket.

> *Ryan: I'm sorry. I should have told you the first night*

> *Ryan: I should have told you before the first night*

> *Ryan: I'm not going to keep texting. I just want you to know I'm not going anywhere tonight. I'm here if you want to yell at me*

> *Ryan: thing I made today. nothing again. I stared at a boat for six hours*

She muted him on Tuesday morning and felt terrible about it, and didn't unmute him either.

"You're being an idiot," Megan said, torching a meringue. "He didn't lie to you. He didn't tell you something for two weeks while he figured it out. Do you want him to go to Chicago?"

"No."

"Did you tell him that?"

Lauren didn't say anything.

"Right," Megan said. "So you're both just sitting in your apartments staring at the ceiling. That's two idiots."

. . .

On Wednesday night at 11:52, almost exactly eight weeks after the first one, Lauren's phone lit up on the counter with a text that wasn't from Ryan.

It was from Doug.

Doug, who had never in two years texted her anything but a thumbs-up and, once, at Christmas, a picture of a ham.

> *Doug: Lauren this is Doug. I got a text from a guy named Ryan. He says he is the wrong number. He says you will know what that means.*

> *Doug: He says you muted him which is fair. He says he knows my number because it is his number but with a 1 at the end instead of a 4.*

> *Doug: He says to tell you he called his boss today and told him no on Chicago. He says he decided Sunday at the top of the subway stairs but he wanted to do it before he told you so you would know it was real and not something he was saying.*

> *Doug: He also says I need to fix your venting stack because somebody took a shortcut in 1987. Which is true. My father did that. I never told anybody.*

> *Doug: I am not a messenger service Lauren.*

> *Doug: He also says one more thing and then I am done.*

> *Doug: He says thing he made today. A decision.*

Lauren was sitting on the kitchen floor. She didn't remember sitting down. She was laughing and her face was wet and downstairs the man in 3B was cooking salmon.

She unmuted Ryan. There were eleven messages. She didn't read them. She just typed.

> *Lauren: You texted my landlord.*

The dots came up instantly. Like he'd been sitting there holding the phone too.

> *Ryan: you muted me. I had to go around*

> *Lauren: You texted DOUG.*

> *Ryan: I had his number. I've always had his number. it's my number. I'm one digit away from Doug at all times. it's the closest I've ever felt to a landlord*

> *Lauren: He says you knew about the 1987 shortcut and now he trusts you more than me.*

> *Ryan: that's architecture*

> *Lauren: That's not architecture.*

> *Ryan: Lauren I don't want to go to Chicago. I want to stay here and eat your frangipane and close my eyes. I'm sorry I didn't say it sooner. I'm saying it now. I'm going to keep saying it, probably, until you get sick of it*

She looked at that one for a long time.

> *Lauren: Where are you?*

> *Ryan: honestly?*

> *Lauren: Honestly.*

> *Ryan: I'm sitting on your front steps. I've been here since 11. it's very cold. a man walked by with a tuba*

She got up so fast she hit her head on the cabinet. She went down four flights in her socks and opened the front door, and he was sitting on the stoop in his navy coat, holding a white paper bag from the bodega on Hudson Street.

He looked up at her.

"I brought you an egg and cheese," he said. "It's the only thing I know how to make."

"You didn't make that."

"I picked it out. I watched them make it. That's the architect part."

She sat down on the cold step next to him. He put the bag in her lap and his coat around her shoulders, and for a while neither of them said anything. A cab went by slowly with its light off.

"I'm sorry I went silent," she said finally.

"I'm sorry I went silent first."

"I don't want you to go to Chicago."

"I know," he said. "Doug told me."

She pulled back and stared at him. "Doug told you?"

"Doug's been texting me all night." He held up his phone. "He's very invested. He wants to know if we're okay. He says if I hurt you he knows people in Bayonne."

She started laughing and couldn't stop. He started laughing too, the surprised way, all at once, and she put her forehead on his shoulder and shook.

. . .

Doug came the next Tuesday with a plumber named Steve and a new section of pipe, and stood in the kitchen of 4B in a Jets jacket, looking from Lauren to Ryan like a man who'd been told the plot of a movie and didn't believe it.

"So you're the wrong number," he said.

"I'm the wrong number," Ryan said.

Doug looked at him for a long time. He was a short man with enormous eyebrows and a mustache that looked like it had been there since 1987 too.

"You were right about the stack," he said finally. "Nobody's been right about the stack in thirty years."

"I'm good with stacks."

Then he looked at the pastry box on the counter.

"Take one," Lauren said.

He took two. He ate the first in three bites while Steve banged on the pipes, and then he closed his eyes, a short man in a Jets jacket having a private moment with a kouign-amann, and when he opened them he nodded at Ryan once, like a deal had been made.

"Fish water's over," Doug said, and went to go yell at Steve.

. . .

That night at 11:30, Lauren lay in bed with her phone on her chest. Ryan was asleep next to her, one arm across her stomach. The sink was quiet.

She opened her contacts. She'd never changed his name. It still said what she'd typed on the first night, after he'd told her about the stacks, when she didn't know anything about him at all.

Wrong Number.

She thought about changing it. She thought about it for maybe five seconds. Then she scrolled up through the thread, past the frangipane and the Ferragamos and the stair rail, all the way to 11:52 on a Tuesday in September, to a text she'd sent to the wrong person because her thumb was tired and the 1 and the 4 were right on top of each other.

She typed one more.

> *Lauren: Thing I made today. A mistake. Best one I ever made.*

Next to her, on the nightstand, his phone lit up. He didn't wake. She watched the light on his face for a second, the gray and the green, and then she put her phone down and closed her eyes.

In the morning he'd read it and do the nose laugh, and she would already be gone, walking down Jane Street in the dark with her knife roll over her shoulder, toward the ovens, smiling at nothing.

– Shay

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