Seat 14A

A six a.m. flight, a silent page-number race with the woman in the window seat, and a folded last page he isn't allowed to read yet.

She was already in the window seat when I got to my row, coat still on, a paperback open on her knee. I noticed the cover before I noticed her. Same book as the one in my bag. Same edition, even, the one with the blue spine that cracks if you look at it wrong.

The book was The Weather at Corley Bay, by a Norwegian-American writer named Margit Lund, and I'd been carrying it around for a week like a good luck charm I didn't believe in. My mom had pushed it on me. She'd read it in the hospital in Atlanta, waiting to get her hip replaced, and she said it was the only thing that made the waiting room smell less like a waiting room.

"It's about a woman and a ferry," she told me, from the bed, high on something with a lot of syllables. "And weather. You'll hate it. Then you won't."

I'd spent eight days at her house in Marietta, sleeping in my old room under a poster of a band I can't defend anymore, learning how to work a raised toilet seat and how to argue with a pharmacist. My brother Kevin had the first week. I had the second. On the last night she made me promise to finish the book, and I promised, the way you promise your mother things when she's on painkillers and holding your wrist.

Then I got up at four in the morning to make a six o'clock flight back to LaGuardia, because the six o'clock was ninety dollars cheaper, and I'm thirty-two and still think that's a good reason to do anything.

So. Row 14. Me in 14B, middle seat, the worst seat in America. Her in 14A, by the window, coat on, reading.

I didn't say anything. You don't say anything at six in the morning on a full flight to New York. You nod and you fight for the armrest and you pretend you're not a person.

She had dark hair pulled back in a clip that was losing the fight, and reading glasses pushed up on her head that she clearly forgot were there, because every few minutes she'd squint at her page and then not use them. Her coat was mustard yellow. Her coffee was from the Starbucks by gate B9, the one with the line that loops back on itself twice. She'd written something on the sleeve in pen that I couldn't read.

The guy in 14C was asleep before the doors closed. He had the aisle and the armrest and a neck pillow shaped like a shark. He'd won. I accepted it.

We took off into a sky that was still deciding what color to be. Atlanta went small and orange under us, all those highways lit up like someone had spilled a necklace. She didn't look out the window once. She turned a page.

Somewhere over Georgia I took mine out.

She clocked it right away. I saw her eyes go from her page to my page and back. She didn't say anything either. She just turned her book a little, so I could see her page number. 211.

I was on 140.

She raised one eyebrow, like, keep up.

I want to be clear that I'm not a competitive person. I lost a game of Monopoly to my nephew last Thanksgiving on purpose and then lost

the rematch for real. I let people merge. I'm the guy at a bar trivia night who knows the answer and says, I think it might be, and then lets someone louder say it.

But there was something about that eyebrow.

So we read. Side by side, not talking, the engine doing that low hum that makes everything feel underwater. Every so often she'd tilt her book toward me and I'd tilt mine toward her. 230. 168. 247. 191. I was reading faster than I've ever read anything in my life. I don't remember a single word.

The flight attendant came by with the cart. The woman in 14A ordered tomato juice, which I've never seen a real person do, and I ordered a coffee I didn't need. When the attendant asked if I wanted cream I said yes, and when she asked how many I said page 183, and then I said, sorry, two, and the woman in the window seat made a sound into her tomato juice that might have been a laugh or might have been her choking.

She didn't look at me. She turned a page with a little extra flick, though. I'm almost sure.

By North Carolina I had worked out a system. I'd read the first line of each paragraph and the last line, and if anyone in the paragraph died or kissed or fell off a boat I'd go back and read the middle. It got me to 201. She was at 262. The gap wasn't closing. The gap was a canyon. She read like she was being paid by the word.

I started noticing things about her that I had no right to notice. She mouthed certain words. She pressed her thumb into the corner of the page right before she turned it, like she was taking its pulse. She had a

small scar on the knuckle of her left hand, white and old, the kind you get from a can opener or a sibling. When something in the book was sad she touched her bottom lip.

She touched it a lot around page 270. I wanted to ask what happened. I didn't. You don't ask for spoilers from a woman who's beating you by seventy pages. It's an admission.

Over Virginia she laughed at something on her page, quietly, through her nose. It was a real laugh, the kind that sneaks out of you when you're alone and forget you aren't. Her shoulders shook a little. She covered her mouth with the back of her hand, the one with the scar.

I wanted to know what was so funny so badly that I skipped forty pages to find it.

I didn't find it.

I found a funeral, a storm, and a long description of fog that I'm sure was beautiful if you were in the mood for fog. Nothing funny. Nobody slipped on a fish. I went back to where I'd been, ashamed, and she glanced over at my page number and then at me, and I could tell she knew. She knew exactly what I'd done. She shook her head very slightly, the way you'd shake your head at a dog who's eaten a sock.

The pilot came on and said we were starting our descent into the New York area and that the weather was forty-one degrees and clear. The guy in the shark pillow woke up and asked if we were in Atlanta.

"Other way," I said.

"Huh," he said, and went back to sleep.

When the plane started coming down she closed the book. She'd finished it. She sat there for a second with her hand flat on the cover, the way you do when something ends and you're not ready. She looked out the window for the first time the whole flight. The city was down there, Queens first, then the bridges, then the whole gray and gold length of Manhattan with the sun coming up behind it. She looked at it like it owed her money.

Then she took a pen out of her coat, wrote something on the last page, folded the corner over, and put the book on my tray table.

"Don't skip ahead," she said.

Her voice was lower than I'd expected. A little hoarse, like she'd been up all night, which I guess she had.

That's all she said, out loud, the whole flight. Then the wheels hit, and everyone stood up at once, and the shark pillow guy stood up into the overhead bin and swore, and by the time I'd untangled myself and grabbed my bag and her book and my book, she was six people ahead of me in the aisle, mustard coat, clip losing the fight.

And then she was gone.

I mean gone. I came up the jet bridge and walked fast through Terminal B, past the shoe shine and the Hudson News and the people holding signs with other people's names, and I didn't see her. Not at baggage claim. Not in the taxi line. Not on the Q70 bus, which I took to Jackson Heights to save another forty dollars, sitting there with two copies of the same book in my lap like an idiot.

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I live in Astoria, on 31st Street, in a one-bedroom directly under the elevated N tracks. Every eight minutes my whole apartment shakes like it's agreeing with something. The first month I lived there I thought I'd lose my mind. Now I can't sleep anywhere quiet. At my mom's house in Marietta I had to put on a video of a train on my phone just to drift off.

I inspect elevators for a living. People think I'm joking when I say that, and then they ask if I've ever been stuck in one, and the answer is yes, eleven times, and twice it was on purpose. I work for a private firm the city contracts with. Mostly I ride old cars in old buildings in Washington Heights and the Bronx and Bay Ridge, and I look at cables and brakes and door locks, and I write reports that nobody reads until something goes wrong.

It's a good job for someone who likes to be alone in small rooms. My ex said that once, not as a compliment. She wasn't wrong. She just wasn't right enough to stay.

I put her book on my nightstand. Her copy, I mean. Mine went on the shelf with the others. Hers had a coffee ring on the back cover, and a receipt stuck in at page 98 from a pharmacy in Decatur, and the spine was cracked in four places, which told me she'd been reading it for a while and didn't care about spines. The corner of the last page was folded down tight. You could see the ink bleeding through a little, a ghost of letters, backward.

I didn't look. She said not to.

I picked up where I was. Page 201. And I started reading it properly this time, every word, the way my mom read it, the way I suspect the woman in 14A read it.

It turned out to be good. That was the annoying part.

The Weather at Corley Bay is about a woman named Signe who goes back to the island in Maine where she grew up, because her father has died and left her his ferry. One boat, one route, island to mainland and back, four times a day. She's supposed to sell it. Everyone on the island assumes she'll sell it. She keeps not selling it. There's a fisherman she used to love and a sister she doesn't talk to and an enormous amount of weather, and somewhere in the middle of all that weather I started caring about whether she'd stay.

I read it on the N train going to work and on the 1 train going farther. I read it in the machine rooms of buildings on Fort Washington Avenue, sitting on overturned buckets, waiting for supers to come with keys. I read it in a laundromat on Ditmars while my sheets went around. I read four pages a night, sometimes five, never more.

Because I was afraid of the end. Hers, I mean.

Whatever she'd written on that last page, it was going to be the last thing I ever got from her. That was the math. Once I read it, the whole thing would be over, a nice story I'd tell at parties. Did I tell you about the woman on the plane? So I read slow, and I let it last, and I didn't tell anybody about her, not my brother, not the guys at work.

I told my mom. She was the one who asked.

"Did you finish it?" she said on the phone, three weeks later. She'd graduated from the walker to a cane and was very proud of herself. She said the cane made her look distinguished. She said it like a threat.

"Almost," I said. "I'm on 290."

"That's not almost. That's a whole other book. What's wrong with you."

So I told her. The window seat, the page numbers, the eyebrow, the laugh over Virginia, the folded page. She listened to the whole thing without interrupting, which she has never done for anything I've said in my life.

"And you haven't read it," she said.

"She said not to skip ahead."

"Ryan. Honey. She meant don't skip ahead in the book. She didn't mean don't ever read what she wrote. She wrote it so you'd read it."

"I'm going to read it. When I get there."

"When you get there could be too late," my mom said. "You don't know what it says."

I said I knew that, which is what you say when someone has a point. Then she told me about her physical therapist, a guy named Gus who she said had forearms like Christmas hams, and we didn't talk about it anymore. But that night I read thirty pages.

The next night I read forty.

Signe doesn't sell the ferry. Then she does. Then the buyer backs out in a storm, and there's a scene on the water in the dark with the fisherman and her sister and a dog that I won't describe because it made me get off the N one stop late at Astoria Boulevard and stand on the platform for a while pretending to look at my phone.

And then, on page 311, I got to the end.

Signe leaves. That's how it ends. She keeps the ferry, hires the fisherman's nephew to run it, and takes the last boat of the season to the mainland with a suitcase. The final scene is her on the deck, watching the island get smaller, and the last line is about the weather, of course it is. Something about how the fog moves out to sea every fall and waits there for June.

I read it twice. Then I closed my eyes and turned to the page with the folded corner, and I unfolded it, and I looked.

Her handwriting was small and slanted and fast, like it was trying to catch a bus.

> *I hated this ending. If you did too, come tell me why. Ferrell Books, Court St., Brooklyn. Sundays. Ask for L.*

And under that, smaller, squeezed in at the bottom of the page.

> *Also you are a terrible cheater. Page 233. The goat.*

I sat up in bed so fast I hit my head on the shelf. The N went by and the whole room shook and I sat there in it with the book open, laughing at nothing, at a goat I had never seen.

Then I flipped back to page 233.

There was a goat. Signe's neighbor has a goat named Pastor that eats the minister's sermon notes off the church steps, and the minister gives the sermon anyway, from memory, and gets it all wrong, and the whole island goes along with it. It was a footnote. A tiny footnote at the bottom of the page, in print so small you'd need the reading glasses she kept forgetting were on her head.

I'd skipped right past it. Of course I had. I was looking for something funny in the big print.

It was a Thursday. Sunday was three days away. I didn't sleep much.

. . .

Getting from Astoria to Carroll Gardens on a Sunday morning is the kind of trip that makes you reconsider your choices. On a weekday you take the N to Queensboro Plaza, the 7 to Court Square, the G down through Greenpoint and Williamsburg and Bed-Stuy, and you get off at Carroll Street and walk. On a Sunday, the MTA has opinions.

That first Sunday the G wasn't running between Court Square and Bedford-Nostrand. There was a shuttle bus. The shuttle bus was full of people holding iced coffees in November and a man with a cockatoo in a carrier who kept telling it to relax. It took me an hour and fifty minutes. I'd left at seven-thirty. I'd shaved twice.

Ferrell Books is on Court Street between Union and President, wedged between a bakery that sells Italian rainbow cookies by the pound and a nail salon called Polished. The awning is green and says FERRELL BOOKS, USED AND RARE, SINCE 1971, and the window has a cat in it that I later learned is not a real cat but a ceramic one, which the owner rotates around the display to confuse people.

I stood across the street for a while. Then I went and stood in front of the bakery for a while. Then a woman came out of the bakery with a box tied in string and gave me a look like I was casing the place, so I went in.

It smelled the way old bookstores smell, like dust and glue and something sweet underneath. The shelves went all the way up to a pressed tin ceiling, with a rolling ladder on a brass rail. There was a radio playing a Yankees postgame show from what had to be a recording, because it was November. There was one person behind the counter, a man in his seventies with white eyebrows that had their own weather system, reading a newspaper with a magnifying glass.

"Help you," he said, not looking up.

"I'm looking for L," I said.

He lowered the magnifying glass. He looked at me for what felt like a full minute. He looked at the book in my hand, the blue spine, the folded corner I'd folded back down because it felt wrong not to.

"Huh," he said. "She does that."

"Does what?"

"Leaves books for people." He went back to the paper. "You're not the first."

That landed somewhere under my ribs and stayed there.

"Is she here?" I said.

"Vermont," he said. "Her friend's getting married. Up in Brattleboro. Barn wedding. She's furious about it, she hates barns."

"Will she be here next Sunday?"

"Might be. Might not." He turned a page. "I'm Walt. I don't give out employee information. I'm not a phone book."

"I'm Ryan," I said. "I'm not trying to be weird."

"Nobody ever is," Walt said.

I bought a used copy of a book about the history of the Brooklyn Bridge, mostly so I'd have a reason to have been there, and I took the shuttle bus home, and the cockatoo was on it again, going the other way.

You're not the first. I thought about that all week. I thought about it riding a 1928 Otis car up and down a building on Riverside Drive that the super called the Old Lady. I thought about it eating a chopped cheese on the hood of my work truck on 181st Street.

Maybe she did this all the time. Maybe she flew all over the country leaving books on tray tables for men in middle seats, and Walt had a drawer full of guys like me, and they all showed up on Sundays asking for L, and she watched them from behind the shelves and laughed through her nose.

The second Sunday, the G was running. The F wasn't. There was a fire department investigation at Bergen Street and my train sat in the tunnel outside Carroll for twenty-two minutes with the lights flickering while a conductor said things over the speaker that might have been English.

I got to Court Street at 11:40. I'd planned for ten.

Walt was behind the counter with the magnifying glass. When I came in, panting, he took it away from his eye and pointed it at the door.

"Just missed her," he said. "Ten minutes. She went to get bread."

"Which way?"

"Toward Carroll Park."

I ran. I'm not a runner. I ran down Court Street past the pork store and the Italian social club with the old men out front in folding chairs, and I turned on Carroll, and the park was full of people, strollers and dogs and a pickup basketball game and a guy selling churros out of a cart. And there, on the far side, by the gate, a woman in a yellow coat with dark hair in a clip, walking away with a baguette under her arm.

I went through the park at a speed that made a dog bark at me and a toddler cry. I caught up to her at the corner of Smith Street. I said, "Excuse me, L," like that was a normal thing to say to a person.

She turned around. She was about sixty. She had a baguette and a lovely face and absolutely no idea who I was.

"I'm so sorry," I said. "I thought you were someone."

"I am someone," she said, kindly, and went on her way.

I walked back to the shop slowly. Walt looked up when I came in.

"Find her?"

"I found a woman with bread."

"Lot of those around here." He put the magnifying glass down. "Coffee?"

I didn't want coffee. I said yes. He poured it from a thermos into a mug that said WORLD'S OKAYEST GRANDPA and handed it to me across the counter.

"She came back," he said. "While you were gone. Went out the back to the alley with the recycling and left. She does Sundays, ten to two.

Today she left at noon. Said she had grading."

"Grading?"

Walt closed his mouth like he'd said too much. "I'm not a phone book."

"You keep saying that."

"Because people keep treating me like one." He drank his coffee. Then he said, "She asked if anybody'd come in. Asking for her. With the blue one."

I put my mug down. "What did you tell her?"

"Told her a guy came last week, looked like he'd been hit by a bus. And that she missed him again today by about four minutes."

"What did she say?"

Walt shrugged one shoulder. "She said, the cheater?"

I laughed so loud the radio skipped.

"Is there a way," I said. "Is there any way I could leave something for her. That's all. Just a book."

Walt considered me with his eyebrows. Then he reached under the counter and pulled out a shoebox. It was full of paperbacks with folded corners. Some had names written on the edges in pencil. A dozen at least.

"House rules," he said. "You put it in here. If she wants it, she takes it. If she doesn't, I sell it for a dollar on the cart outside and you never ask me about it again."

I looked at the box for a long time. You're not the first. I believed it now, and I didn't care. I took her copy of The Weather at Corley Bay out of my jacket and I opened it to the last page, under her note, and I wrote, with the pen Walt lent me, which said Carroll Gardens Savings Bank on the side.

> *I didn't hate it. She comes back every summer, she just doesn't say so. Next Sunday, ten o'clock. I'll be early this time. I'll take the bus if I have to. Ryan, 14B.*

Then I folded the corner back down and put it in the shoebox, and Walt put the lid on, and I went home on the G.

All week I thought about the word cheater. The way he'd said she said it. Like it was a name she'd been using for me in her head.

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The third Sunday I left Astoria at six-fifteen in the morning, which is the same time the plane had taken off, and which I decided to take as a sign. Every train came. Every transfer lined up. I was on Court Street at 8:51, an hour and nine minutes early, with nothing to do but buy rainbow cookies from the bakery and eat them standing on the sidewalk while the nail salon opened its gate.

At 9:40 the gate on Ferrell Books went up with a sound like a drumroll.

She was the one pulling it.

Same clip. No coat this time, a gray sweater with the sleeves pushed up, jeans, sneakers. Reading glasses on top of her head. She got the gate up and turned around and saw me across the street with a

mouthful of cookie, and I watched her face do about five things at once.

Then she crossed her arms and leaned against the door frame and waited.

I crossed the street. I swallowed the cookie. It took longer than I wanted.

"You're early," she said.

"I said I would be."

"You said ten. It's nine-forty." She checked a watch she wasn't wearing. "I had a whole plan. I was going to be behind the counter, reading something serious, and not look up when you came in. Very cool. Very mysterious."

"I can go stand over there again."

"No," she said. "Then I'd have to watch you eat another cookie. That was hard enough the first time."

She held out her hand. The one with the scar on the knuckle.

"Lauren," she said.

"Ryan."

"I know. You wrote it in my book." She was still holding my hand. Neither of us seemed to have noticed. "14B. Very romantic. Like a locker number."

"You signed yours L," I said. "Like a spy."

"I didn't want to be too easy to find."

"You weren't. I've been chased out of Carroll Park by a dog."

"Walt told me." She let go of my hand, finally. "He also told me you chased a woman named Theresa Russo all the way to Smith Street. She's on the parish council. She came in last week and asked if I had a brother."

"What did you tell her?"

"I said no. I said it was a man I met on a plane who can't read."

"I can read."

"You read like you're being chased," Lauren said. "I watched you. You read the first and last line of every paragraph. You skipped forty pages over Virginia to find out why I laughed."

"I didn't find it."

"I know. That's why I wrote about the goat." She pushed the door open with her hip. "Come in. I'll make coffee. Walt doesn't come in until eleven on Sundays, he goes to the eight o'clock mass and then he goes to the pork store and argues with Sal about the Giants."

The shop was dim and warm and smelled like the radiator was cooking the dust. She flipped on the lamps one by one, the green-shaded ones on the reading tables, and the place came up slowly around us like a stage. She went behind the counter and filled an electric kettle from a jug and spooned grounds into a French press.

"So," she said, with her back to me. "You didn't hate it."

"I didn't hate it."

"She leaves." Lauren turned around. "She inherits the ferry, she spends three hundred pages deciding to stay, she fixes things with her sister, she falls back in love with Anders, and then she gets on a boat and leaves. And Margit Lund thinks we're supposed to find that beautiful."

"She keeps the ferry," I said.

"She hires a nineteen-year-old to run it."

"Anders's nephew. He's good at it. They set that up in chapter nine."

Lauren pointed the coffee spoon at me. "You read chapter nine?"

"I read every word of chapter nine. I read every word of everything after page 201. You told me not to skip ahead, so I slowed down. I read four pages a night for three weeks."

That stopped her. I watched it stop her.

"Four pages," she said.

"Sometimes five."

"Why would you do that?"

I could have said something smooth. I'd had three weeks to think of something smooth and I'd thought of several, and in the moment none of them showed up. What showed up was the truth.

"Because I figured whatever you wrote on the last page was the last thing I'd ever get from you," I said. "So I wanted to take my time getting there."

The kettle clicked off. Neither of us moved to get it.

"That's a terrible reason to read a book," Lauren said, after a while. Her voice had gone soft and hoarse again, the way it had on the plane.

"Yeah."

"It's also the best one I've ever heard."

She poured the water. She pushed the plunger down slowly, watching it. She didn't look at me while she did it, and I understood that she needed a second, and I let her have it. I looked at the shelves. I looked at the ceramic cat in the window, which was now facing the street.

"Okay," she said, handing me a mug. This one said PROPERTY OF FERRELL BOOKS, DO NOT REMOVE, in marker. "Your theory. She comes back every summer. Defend it."

So I did. I told her about the last line, the fog that moves out to sea every fall and waits there for June. I told her Signe packs one suitcase, which is not how you pack when you're leaving forever. I told her about chapter four, where Signe's father says nobody lives on an island for good, they just keep landing on it, and how the whole book is set up so that the last scene is the first half of a return. You can't come back to somewhere you never left.

Lauren listened with her chin on her fist, her elbow on the counter, the glasses still on her head.

"That's very generous," she said, when I was done.

"Thank you."

"It's wrong, but it's generous."

"Why is it wrong?"

"Because it lets her off the hook," she said. "Because people say they'll come back every summer and then it's every other summer and then it's a Christmas card." She turned her mug around in her hands. "I'm from a town in Ohio called Wapakoneta. Neil Armstrong's from there. Everybody leaves. Everybody says they'll come back. It's a town full of people waiting for summers."

"Did you come back?"

"Every Christmas," she said. "For a card."

The door opened and a bell jingled and an old man came in to ask if we had any Louis L'Amour, and Lauren took him to the back and spent ten minutes with him going through a shelf of westerns while I stood at the counter drinking her coffee. She was good with him. She knew which ones he'd read. She talked to him like he was the only person who had ever loved a cowboy.

When she came back I said, "Walt said I wasn't the first."

She winced. "Walt has a big mouth for a man who isn't a phone book."

"The shoebox."

"The shoebox is a store thing," she said. "It's been going since before I worked here. People leave books for strangers. With notes. You write on the last page and you put it in the box, and someone takes it, and sometimes they write back. Walt's wife started it in the eighties. Her name was Dolores. Everyone loved her and she was terrifying."

"So you do it a lot."

"In the shop. With the box." She looked up at me. "I'd never done it on a plane."

"Why'd you do it on a plane?"

She opened her mouth. Then she closed it. Then the bell jingled again and two women came in with a stroller and a list, and the moment folded itself up and went somewhere for later.

I stayed until two. I helped her shelve a delivery of cookbooks from an estate sale in Cobble Hill. I learned that she teaches tenth grade English at a public high school in Sunset Park, and that she grades essays in red pen because she says green is for cowards. I learned that she's thirty, and that she lives on President Street in a fourth-floor walkup with a radiator that sounds like a man falling down stairs, and that she works Sundays for Walt because Dolores used to give her free books when she was broke and new in the city and she promised Dolores she'd keep the lamps on.

At two, Walt locked the register and told us both to get out.

On the sidewalk Lauren pulled her coat on, the mustard one, and looked at me with her hands in the pockets.

"Next Sunday," she said. "I'm off. You pick a book. I'll read it. Same pace. We'll see if you can keep up."

"What if I pick something long?"

"Then we'll see each other a lot," she said, and walked off toward the park, and didn't look back, and I stood there on Court Street like a man who had been hit by a very pleasant bus.

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I picked a mystery about a lighthouse in Scotland, two hundred and forty pages, because I'm a coward. She picked the place, the steps of

the Brooklyn Public Library at Grand Army Plaza, under those huge gold doors with the figures carved all over them. We sat on the cold stone with a thermos between us and read side by side, and every so often she tilted her book toward me, and I tilted mine.

44. 41. 67. 63. 90. 90.

She looked at my page. She looked at me.

"You're actually reading," she said.

"I'm actually reading."

"Who killed the keeper?"

"We're on page ninety, Lauren. Nobody knows."

"I know," she said, and went back to her book, and I didn't sleep that night either.

After that it was every Sunday, and then it was Sundays and Wednesdays, and then I stopped counting. We had rules. Same book, same pace. Nobody reads ahead at home. If you have to read ahead at home, you confess. I confessed twice. She confessed once, about a novel set in Lagos with a twist on page 180 that she said she physically could not wait for, and she told me with her hands over her face, in a booth at a diner on Ditmars, and I forgave her over disco fries.

We read on the Staten Island Ferry, back and forth, three round trips, because she said it was the only boat in New York that would let her feel like Signe for free. We read in the café at Housing Works on Crosby Street with our coats on. We went through the dollar carts outside the Strand in the wind and she bought me a water-damaged

book of poems about bridges because she said I'd understand it professionally. I took her up the Old Lady on Riverside Drive, the 1928 Otis, with the super's permission, and we rode it to the top floor and back four times while she read me a chapter out loud, and the brass gate rattled, and she said it was the most romantic machine she'd ever been inside.

We didn't kiss. Nobody decided that. It was more like the book. Neither of us wanted to skip ahead.

But I noticed everything. I noticed that she'd started sitting closer on the library steps, so our shoulders touched through our coats. I noticed that when she turned a page now, her thumb on the corner, she'd sometimes rest the back of her hand against my knee and leave it there. I noticed that I was waking up at five in the morning thinking about the scar on her knuckle, which was from a can opener, which she'd told me on the ferry, which was the least romantic thing in the world and which I could not stop thinking about.

In December it rained for three days straight. On the third day we were supposed to read in Carroll Park, and instead we stood under the awning of Ferrell Books, soaked, sharing one umbrella that had turned itself inside out on Union Street.

"My apartment's two blocks," Lauren said. She was looking at the rain, not at me. "We could finish it there. The radiator's very loud. You'd like it. It's like your train."

Her walkup was four flights of narrow stairs with a rubber runner worn down to the wood in the middle. Her apartment was small and warm and full of books stacked on every flat surface, on the windowsills, on the stove she said she never used, in a tower by the

bed that had a lamp on top of it like a lighthouse. The radiator hissed and banged. She was right. I liked it.

She gave me a towel and a T-shirt that said WAPAKONETA HIGH SCHOOL BAND and went into the bathroom to change. I stood in her living room in her T-shirt, dripping, looking at her shelves, trying to remember how breathing worked.

When she came out she was in a long sweater and her hair was down. I'd never seen her hair down. It was longer than I'd thought, and wet at the ends, and she was pushing it back with both hands.

"We were on 212," she said.

"211," I said.

She stopped. We both heard it. The first number she'd ever shown me, on the plane, over Georgia. She stood there in the middle of the room with her hands still in her hair.

"You remember that," she said.

"I remember all of them."

She crossed the room. It wasn't far. She took the book out of my hands and put it face down on the arm of the couch, which she had told me on the Staten Island Ferry was a crime against spines, and she didn't seem to care. She put her hand flat on my chest, the way she'd put it flat on the cover of the book when it ended.

"Don't skip ahead," I said. I meant it as a joke. It came out like a question.

"Ryan," she said, very quietly. "We're on 211. This is the part."

Then she kissed me.

It was slow at first, careful, like reading something in a language you've only studied. Her mouth was warm and tasted like the coffee from the thermos, and her hands came up into my hair, and somewhere outside a car alarm went off and stopped and neither of us noticed. Then it wasn't slow. I had her against the bookshelf and a stack of paperbacks went over and she laughed into my mouth, that same laugh from Virginia, through her nose, and I felt it all the way down.

I found the hem of her sweater. She found the hem of the band T-shirt and pulled it over my head, and it got stuck on my ear, and she said, "Oh my God," and I said, "Help," and we were both laughing, foreheads together, breathing hard. Her skin was warm from the radiator. Her hands were cold. She put them flat on my back and I made a sound I'm not proud of and she grinned like she'd won.

"Bedroom," she said against my neck. "Mind the books."

I did not mind the books. Two more towers went over in the hallway. The radiator banged like a man falling down stairs, and she pulled me down onto the bed with her, under the lamp on the stack of novels, and reached up and turned it off.

The rain kept on all night. So did we.

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I woke up at six because my body didn't know what to do without the N train. Lauren was asleep on her stomach with one arm hanging off the bed. The rain had stopped. The window was going gray and gold.

I got up to find water, and on the kitchen table, under a stack of student essays bleeding red ink, there was an envelope with a school crest on it. A private school in Decatur, Georgia. It was open. I didn't mean to read it. I read it.

We are delighted to offer you the position of Upper School English Chair, beginning January.

Decatur. The pharmacy receipt in her book, on page 98. The six a.m. flight out of Atlanta. She hadn't been visiting. She'd been interviewing.

When she came out in the long sweater, I was sitting at the table with the letter in front of me. She saw it and stopped in the doorway.

"I was going to tell you," she said.

"When?"

"Today. Soon. I don't know." She sat down across from me. "My sister lives in Decatur. She has twins. They're four and they call me on FaceTime and hold the phone up to the ceiling fan. It's double what I make. I said yes in October. Before you came in the shop."

"In October," I said. "So on the plane."

"I'd just found out. The night before. I was up all night."

I looked at the book on the arm of the couch, face down, still open to 211.

"So that's why," I said. "The note. You were leaving. You wrote to a stranger in a middle seat because you knew it didn't count. A nice thing to do on the way out. Like the box."

"That's not fair."

"She leaves, Lauren. You hated that she leaves."

"I hated it because I was about to do it," she said, and her voice cracked down the middle.

I left. I'm not proud of it. I walked to the F at Carroll Street in yesterday's wet jeans and rode it to the 7 and the 7 to the N, and the N went over the river into Queens with the sun coming up, and I didn't read anything. I didn't have anything to read.

She texted that night. I didn't answer. She texted again on Wednesday, a photo of the lighthouse mystery, open to page 212, with no words. I didn't answer that either. I was busy being right. It's a lot of work.

On Thursday I called my mom.

"So she's moving to Atlanta," my mom said, when I'd finished. "Two hours from you. Where your mother lives. Where you fly every Christmas and pretend you don't have a good time."

"That's not the point."

"What's the point?"

I didn't have one. I had a feeling about a woman on a deck watching an island get smaller.

"Ryan," my mom said. "You read four pages a night for three weeks so you wouldn't get to the end. You don't get to complain when somebody else has trouble with endings. Get on a train."

On Sunday I took the six-fifteen out of Astoria. Every train came. At Ferrell Books, Walt was behind the counter with his magnifying glass. He looked at me with his eyebrows and reached under the counter and pulled out the shoebox, without a word, and slid it across.

On top was a paperback with a blue spine that cracks if you look at it wrong. My copy, the one from my shelf in Astoria. I'd left it at her apartment, I realized, in my coat, the night of the rain. The corner of the last page was folded down.

> *You were right about the one suitcase. I took the job for one year, not forever. I already told them. I'm only packing one. L.*

And under that, smaller.

> *Also I don't know how to do the next part alone. I've never read it before.*

I looked up. Walt was pointing his magnifying glass at the back door.

She was in the alley with the recycling, in the mustard coat, sitting on a milk crate, reading. She didn't look up when I came out. Very cool. Very mysterious. Her ears were bright red from the cold.

"Page?" I said.

She turned the book so I could see. 212.

I sat down on the crate next to her, and I took out the lighthouse mystery from my jacket, and I opened it to 211, and I read one page, every word, while she waited.

"212," I said.

She put her head on my shoulder. "Okay," she said. "Okay."

. . .

She moved in January. I flew down on the six a.m. in February, and in March, and twice in April. I learned the Starbucks line at gate B9 by heart. My mom made her pot roast and told her about Gus and his forearms, and Lauren laughed through her nose, and my mom looked at me across the table like she'd personally arranged the whole thing, which she'd tell you she did.

In June, the school year ended. In June, she came back.

We flew up together, the two of us, the six a.m. out of Atlanta, with one suitcase each and her red pens and a box of books we'd paid extra to check. She had 14A. I had 14B. The guy in 14C had a neck pillow shaped like a frog.

Somewhere over Georgia she took out a paperback. So did I. The same one, two copies, a new novel by Margit Lund that had come out in May, which we'd bought at Ferrell Books and sworn on Dolores's memory not to open until the plane.

She turned her book so I could see her page number. 6.

I was on 4.

She raised one eyebrow.

We read. Side by side, the engine doing that hum that makes everything feel underwater. Over Virginia she laughed at something, quietly, through her nose, and I didn't skip ahead to find it. I waited. I got there on my own, eleven pages later, and it was a footnote, and it was a goat.

When the plane started coming down, the city came up under us, Queens and the bridges and the long gray and gold length of Manhattan. She didn't look at it like it owed her money this time. She looked at it like it was hers.

She took a pen out of her coat. She turned to the last page of my copy, the one we hadn't reached yet, wrote something, and folded the corner over.

"Don't skip ahead," she said.

"I won't," I said.

I still haven't read it. We're on 140. It's on the nightstand in our apartment on President Street, under the lamp, on top of the stack, with the corner folded over, and the radiator banging, and every night I think about just flipping to the end.

I don't. I already know how it goes.

I'm reading slow now. On purpose.

— Shay

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