The Laundromat on Wythe

A line cook, a girl eating cereal out of a mug, and one lemon sock that keeps turning up in the wrong dryer at 2:40 on a Tuesday.

The laundromat on Wythe is open twenty-four hours, which nobody needs, except me, apparently, at 2:40 on a Tuesday.

I should explain. I'm a line cook at a place on Bedford that does a twenty-eight dollar half chicken and a lot of things with fennel. The kitchen closes at eleven on Mondays, and by the time we break down the line and scrub the flattop and argue about whose turn it is to take the grease out, it's past one. Then I walk home with my whole body still running at service speed. You can't go to sleep after that. Your hands keep reaching for tickets that aren't there.

So most nights I sit on my couch with my cat, Lou, and watch videos of people restoring old tools, and I wait for my heart to remember it's allowed to slow down. That Tuesday Lou had thrown up on the couch blanket. That's the whole reason. That's how it started. A cat with a hairball and a blanket that couldn't wait until morning.

I stuffed it into a bag with every towel I owned and some shirts that smelled like the fryer and walked the four blocks down Wythe. It was October and the air had that cold, wet edge that makes the streetlights look fuzzy. A guy on a Citi Bike went by with a pizza box balanced on the handlebars, steering with his elbows. Nobody else was out.

The laundromat is called Wythe Wash & Fold, but the sign has been missing the second W for years, so it says Wythe ash & Fold, which sounds like a candle. Inside it's all white tile and long fluorescent tubes and one of those TVs mounted in the corner playing a home shopping channel with the sound off. There's a change machine that

eats every third dollar. There's a bulletin board with flyers for guitar lessons and a missing parrot named Gus. There are eleven dryers along the back wall, stacked in two rows, with round glass doors like portholes.

There was one other person there. A girl in a huge grey hoodie sitting on the folding table with her legs crossed, eating cereal out of a mug. Dryer eleven was going round in front of her and she was watching it like it was television.

The hoodie was enormous. It came down past her knees when she sat like that, so she looked like a grey tent with a head. She had dark hair pulled up in a knot that was halfway to falling down and a pencil stuck through it. The mug said WORLD'S OKAYEST AUNT. The cereal was Cinnamon Toast Crunch. I could smell it from the door.

She looked up when I came in, gave me a nod that was mostly chin, and went back to her dryer.

I took dryer nine. We didn't talk. The fluorescent light buzzed. Somebody's car alarm went off outside and gave up halfway through, which felt about right for the hour.

I sat in one of the orange plastic chairs bolted to the floor and tried to look at my phone, but my phone was boring and she was not. She ate cereal with total commitment. She didn't scroll or listen to anything. She just chewed and watched her clothes go around, and every so often she'd lean forward a little, like something in there had made a good move.

"Is it a good one?" I said, before I could stop myself.

She didn't look away from the glass. "It's a rerun," she said. "But I like this part."

I looked at dryer eleven. A pair of jeans flopped over a pillowcase. A dark blue thing I couldn't identify rose up and fell down.

"What happens?"

"The jeans think they're in charge," she said. "They're not."

Then she went back to her cereal and I went back to pretending to read my phone, and that was the whole conversation for twenty minutes. I don't know why I remember it so clearly. I think because it was the first time all night my hands stopped moving.

When my load was done I pulled everything out onto the table next to her. Shirts. Towels. The blanket off my couch, which is mostly cat hair at this point. And one sock. Bright yellow, with small cartoon lemons on it.

That is not my sock.

I own socks in two colors, black and a black that has faded. I am a thirty-one-year-old man who buys socks in packs of twelve at the Target on Atlantic Avenue once a year. I have never in my life owned a sock with a fruit on it.

I held it up. She looked at it. She looked at me. She looked at dryer eleven, still spinning.

"That's mine," she said. "It's been missing since August."

"It was in my dryer."

"I know. That's what they do. They travel."

She said it completely seriously. Then she put her hand out, and I gave her the sock, and she put it in the pocket of her hoodie like it was a passport.

"Where's it been?" I said.

"No idea. It doesn't tell me things." She patted the pocket. "It's been gone so long I almost threw out the other one. I held it over the trash and I couldn't do it. So I kept it. And now this one comes back, and guess what, the other one's gone. I looked everywhere. I think they switched."

"That's not how socks work."

"You found a sock you've never owned in a dryer you've never used," she said. "Tell me how socks work."

I didn't have anything for that.

Her dryer buzzed. She hopped down off the table, the hoodie unfolding around her like a sail, and pulled her stuff out in one armful and dumped it next to mine. Then we were folding side by side under the buzzing light, two strangers at a table at quarter past three in the morning, and it should have been weird and it wasn't.

She folds towels in thirds, which is wrong, and I told her, and she told me I fold like someone who's never been loved, which, okay.

"Halves," I said. "Then halves again. It's a towel. It's not a letter."

"Thirds fit on the shelf better."

"Whose shelf?"

"Mine. It's a weird shelf. It's in the bathroom over the toilet and it's exactly one third of a towel deep." She snapped a towel out flat with a crack that echoed off the tile. "You'd have to see it."

"I'm sure it's a great shelf."

"It's a terrible shelf. It's the only shelf I have." She looked at the stack I'd made, which was square and tight, the way the chef makes us fold side towels at work. "Who taught you that?"

"A guy named Rodrigo who yells."

"See," she said. "Never been loved."

I laughed, which surprised me. It came out loud in the empty room, and the man on the home shopping channel kept silently showing us a set of knives.

She packed up fast, the way people do when they've done something a thousand times. Clothes into a blue IKEA bag. Mug into the front pocket of the bag, spoon still in it. She swung the bag over her shoulder and it nearly took her over. Then she stopped at the door, one hand on the push bar, the cold coming in around her.

"Same time next week?" she said. "The other one's still missing."

She was gone before I could answer, a grey shape going up Wythe under the streetlights, the bag bumping against her hip.

I looked down. I was holding a towel I'd folded in thirds without noticing.

· · ·

The next Monday night I got home from work at 1:20 and stood in my kitchen looking at my hamper.

It was not full. I had done laundry six days ago. There were maybe two shirts in there and a pair of jeans that could have gone another week easily. Lou sat on top of the fridge and watched me think about it.

"Don't," I told him.

He blinked slowly, which in cat means you're an idiot and I love you.

I took the two shirts and the jeans, and then I took the sheets off my bed, which did not need to be washed, and the bath mat, which honestly did. At 2:35 I was walking down Wythe with a bag that was mostly air.

She was already there. Same table. Same hoodie, or another one exactly like it. Different mug, this one plain white with a chip on the rim. She was eating Honey Nut Cheerios.

"You came back," she said.

"I had laundry."

She looked at my bag. She looked at me. She was very good at the looking. She did it like she was reading something printed very small.

"Sure," she said.

I took dryer nine again. It felt like mine now. She was in eleven. We sat there for a while and the light buzzed and a bus went by on Metropolitan and made the front window shiver.

"I'm Ben," I said.

"Maddie." She held the mug up a little, like a toast. "I'd offer you some, but it's a mug situation. There's one spoon."

"I'm good."

"Next week bring a mug."

I said I would. I don't know why I said it like a promise, but I did.

"So what's your excuse?" she said. "Nobody's here at this hour on purpose."

I told her about the restaurant. The half chicken, the fennel, Rodrigo who yells. How after service my body doesn't believe it's over, how I come home and it's like my blood is still carrying plates. She listened with the spoon in her mouth.

"So this is your evening," she said.

"This is my evening."

"That's kind of beautiful. Everyone else is asleep and you're having an evening."

"What's yours?"

She thought about it. "I draw," she said. "For work. Kids' books, mostly, and sometimes packaging. You know the bear on the oatmeal box? The one with the scarf?"

"No."

"Nobody does. That's my bear." She seemed pleased about it. "I can only really work at night. During the day the guy upstairs practices the trombone. He's not good. He's been not good for two years. So I sleep from like nine in the morning till four, and then I draw all night,

and around two my brain goes flat, and I come here."

"To do laundry."

"To watch it," she said. "The laundry is kind of a side thing."

When the dryers stopped I pulled my stuff out and went through it piece by piece, shaking each thing out. Sheets. Shirts. Jeans. Bath mat.

"Anything?" she said.

"Nothing."

She nodded like a doctor giving news she'd expected. "That's okay. It's early."

· · ·

By the fourth Tuesday we had a system.

I brought my own mug. It said CITY OF ALBANY WATER DEPARTMENT, because my dad worked there for twenty-six years and still gives me one every Christmas whether I need it or not. Maddie brought the cereal. She rotated. Cheerios, Frosted Flakes, a store brand of Lucky Charms from the C-Town on Grand that she said was better than the real thing because the marshmallows were shaped like nothing in particular.

"This one's a horse," I said, holding one up.

"It's a boot."

"It has a tail."

"Boots can have tails. You don't know about boots."

There was a man who worked overnights there named Hector. He was maybe sixty and he sat behind the little counter by the change machine doing crossword puzzles in pen, and for the first three weeks he didn't say a word to either of us. On the fourth week he looked up as I came in and said, "Your girlfriend's already here," and went back to his puzzle.

"She's not my girlfriend," I said.

"Okay," said Hector.

Maddie, on the table, didn't look up from her mug. But I saw her smile into it.

The sock hunt became official around then. Maddie made a poster. She wrote it in marker on the back of a flyer for the missing parrot and pinned it to the bulletin board, right under Gus.

> *THE SOCK. Yellow. Lemons. Left foot, probably. Last seen August. Answers to nothing. If found, do not wash separately, it gets lonely. REWARD.*

"What's the reward?" I said.

"I haven't decided. Something good. A drawing, maybe."

"Of what?"

"Of the person who found it," she said. "Holding up the sock. Like a fisherman with a big fish."

Every Tuesday, when our loads came out, we checked. We shook out every shirt. We turned pillowcases inside out. Hector let us go through the lost and found, which was a cardboard box from a case of

Goya beans with a lot of single socks in it, none of them lemons, plus one baby shoe, a set of keys on a Mets lanyard, and, for some reason, a harmonica.

"This place is where things go," Maddie said, holding the harmonica up to the light.

"Put it back," said Hector, without looking.

Things came out about her in pieces, a little every week, the way you find stuff in your pockets after a load.

She was from Dayton, Ohio. She had two older brothers who were both named after their grandfathers, and she was named after a character on a soap opera her mother watched while she was pregnant, which her mother still won't admit. She was twenty-nine. She had lived in New York for six years and had never been to the Statue of Liberty and didn't plan to. Her apartment was on South 4th, a fourth-floor walkup with a radiator that banged like someone was trapped inside it.

"I talk to it," she said. "I call it Gary."

"What do you say to Gary?"

"Mostly I tell him to calm down. Sometimes I tell him about my day." She shrugged. "He's a good listener. He's just loud."

She was allergic to cats, which she told me in week five, right after I showed her a picture of Lou asleep in a salad spinner.

"Oh, he's perfect," she said, and then sneezed, just from the picture, which I didn't think was possible.

"That's psychological," I said.

"It's my body's way of telling me I'd love him too much."

She also, I found out, did not have very much laundry.

It took me a while to notice. I'd be pulling out two sheets and a week of work shirts, and she'd be pulling out maybe four things. A hoodie. A pair of leggings. One towel. Once, I swear, it was a single pillowcase going around and around in dryer eleven like a goldfish in a bowl.

"That's all you brought?" I said.

She looked at the pillowcase. She looked at my bag, which that week contained my winter coat, which you are not supposed to put in a dryer, and a throw pillow, which I don't think I had ever washed before.

"We don't have to talk about it," she said.

"Okay."

"We should never talk about it."

"Agreed."

We didn't. We sat there and ate generic Lucky Charms and watched her one pillowcase and my coat go around, and around three o'clock she leaned over and rested her head on my shoulder for about ten seconds, just to see, I think, and then sat back up like nothing had happened.

I didn't move the whole time. Hector turned a page.

. . .

The first time I saw her in daylight I didn't recognize her.

It was a Saturday in November and I was off until four, which almost never happens. I'd gone to the farmers market at McCarren Park to buy apples I didn't need and was standing at a table of squash trying to decide if I was a person who could handle a whole kabocha. The sun was out. It was one of those cold, bright days where everything has an edge on it, and the trees along the park were orange and the dogs were all wearing sweaters.

A woman at the next stall was arguing with a man about honey. She had on a long green coat and a striped scarf, and her hair was down, dark and kind of everywhere. She was holding two jars up like she was weighing them.

"This one tastes like flowers," she said. "This one tastes like a barn. I want the barn."

"Buckwheat," said the man. "Most people don't."

"I'm not most people," she said, and turned, and it was Maddie.

It was so strange. I had only ever seen her under fluorescent tubes, in a grey hoodie, at the hour when everybody looks a little green. In daylight she had freckles. A lot of them, across her nose and onto her cheeks. I hadn't known that. Her eyes were lighter than I'd thought, brown with a gold ring around the middle. The cold had put color in her face.

She saw me and stopped. For a second we just stood there between the squash and the honey like two people who'd run into their dentist at a wedding.

"Ben?" she said.

"Hi."

"You're outside."

"So are you."

"I know. I come out sometimes. Like a groundhog." She looked me up and down, the way she does. "You have a coat. A real coat."

"It's my winter coat. It went in a dryer. You were there."

"It held up," she said, sounding impressed. "Good coat."

We stood there. A kid on a scooter went between us and we both stepped back and then stepped forward again. I realized I didn't know how to talk to her when there was no dryer to look at. At the laundromat there was always something to watch. Here there was just her, in the sun, holding a jar of honey that tasted like a barn.

"I don't usually see you awake at this time," I said.

"I didn't go to bed. I had a deadline. It's a book about a mole who's afraid of the dark." She laughed. "Which, I know. He lives underground. That's the whole problem. He has to get over it."

"Does he?"

"He gets a nightlight. It's kind of a cop-out. The publisher wanted a nightlight." She paid the honey guy, finally, and put the jar in her coat pocket. "Do you want to get coffee? Is that weird? It feels weird. It feels like we're breaking a rule."

"What rule?"

"I don't know. The Tuesday rule. That we only exist at 2:40."

"I think we can exist on a Saturday," I said. "For a little while."

We went to a place on Lorimer with a line out the door and a guy at the register with a mustache that looked like it had its own lease. We got coffee and sat at a little metal table outside even though it was cold, because inside was packed with people on laptops. She held her cup with both hands. She had ink on the side of her right hand, a blue smudge from her pinkie down to her wrist.

"That's the mole," she said, when she saw me looking.

The thing is, it was easy. I'd been worried, standing there with the squash, that we only worked in the laundromat. That she was a 2:40 person and I was a 2:40 person and out in the real world we'd have nothing to say. But we sat at that table for an hour and a half. She told me about her brothers, who both still lived in Ohio and both had boats they talked about like girlfriends. I told her about Albany, about my dad and his mugs. She told me she'd once been chased by a goose in Prospect Park and had climbed a fence to get away from it and torn her best jeans.

"The goose won," she said. "I want to be clear about that."

When I had to go to work she walked with me as far as the corner of Bedford and North 7th, where the L comes up out of the ground and everybody pours out of it at once.

"So," she said.

"So."

"That was nice. Daylight. I didn't hate it."

"Me neither."

She looked at the subway stairs, at all the people coming up them. Then she looked at me.

"You could ask me out," she said. "Like on a real one. If you wanted. I'm just saying the option's there. You don't have to. I'm just putting it on the table." She made a little gesture with both hands, like she was setting something down. "There. It's on the table."

"Do you want to go out Monday?" I said. "It's my night off."

"Yes," she said, very fast. Then, slower, "Yes. Okay. Good. Monday."

She went down the subway stairs and then came back up two of them.

"Wear the coat," she said.

. . .

I spent most of Monday cleaning my apartment, which was stupid, because I didn't know if she'd even see it, and because she was allergic to the main thing in it.

Lou watched me vacuum the couch three times. I lint-rolled the blanket until the lint roller gave up. I bought a little air purifier at the hardware store on Graham and set it up in the corner, and it hummed, and Lou hissed at it, and then he sat in front of it for an hour like it was a fireplace.

I met her at seven outside a Polish place on Manhattan Avenue in Greenpoint that my sous chef swears by. She was in the green coat. She'd drawn a thin dark line along her eyelids, and she had on red lipstick, a deep one, and earrings shaped like little gold moons. I'd only ever seen her in a hoodie and, once, a coat, and I stood there on

the sidewalk and forgot what my hands were for.

"Hi," she said.

"You look nice."

"I look like someone who owns more than one towel," she said. "It's a trick. Don't fall for it."

Inside it was warm and loud and smelled like butter and onions. We got a table by the window and a waitress who called us both honey and brought us pierogi without asking if we wanted them, which we did. Potato and cheese, and sauerkraut and mushroom, and a sweet cheese one with sour cream on the side. Maddie ate with the same total focus she gave cereal. She closed her eyes on the first bite.

"Okay," she said. "Okay. Your sous chef is a genius."

"He's going to be unbearable when I tell him."

"Don't tell him. Let him wonder."

We talked about everything. Her first apartment in New York, a room in Bushwick with no window that she'd shared with a girl who kept a snake in the closet. My first kitchen job, washing dishes at a diner in Troy where the owner made everybody call him Captain. She asked me if I liked cooking, really liked it, and I had to think, because nobody asks.

"I like the part right before," I said. "Ten minutes before service. Everything's set up, all the little containers are full, everybody's quiet. It's like the whole room is holding its breath. Then the first ticket comes in and it all goes."

She was looking at me with her chin in her hand.

"That's how I feel about a blank page," she said. "Right before I ruin it."

After dinner we walked. Down Franklin, past the bars with their windows all steamed up, past the old factory buildings that are condos now, all the way to the water. There's a little park at the end of India Street with a pier, and you can stand out there and see the whole of Manhattan lit up across the river, the Empire State Building doing whatever color it was doing that night. Orange, for some reason.

It was cold. She put her hands in my coat pockets, in with mine, like it was nothing, like we'd done it a hundred times.

"Can I tell you something embarrassing?" she said.

"Yes."

"I had all that laundry done. The pillowcase week. I'd already done everything on Sunday in the machine in my building's basement. I just brought the pillowcase so I'd have a reason."

"I put my winter coat in a dryer," I said. "Hector saw me do it. He knows."

She laughed and leaned into me, her forehead against my chest, and I could feel her laughing through the coat.

"We're so bad at this," she said.

"I think we're kind of good at it."

She looked up at me. The river was black and the city was lit up behind her and the wind had pulled some of her hair loose. I thought about how I'd been looking at her for weeks under the worst light in

Brooklyn, and how I'd still wanted to, every single Tuesday.

"Ben," she said. "Are you going to kiss me, or do I have to put it on the table?"

So I kissed her. It was cold, and her nose was cold against my cheek, and she tasted a little like the sour cream from the pierogi, and none of that mattered at all. She went up on her toes. Her hands came out of my pockets and found the back of my neck, and they were cold too, and I didn't care about that either.

When we stopped she kept her eyes closed a second longer than I did.

"Okay," she said quietly. "That's good. That's very good information."

. . .

We took a cab back, which neither of us could afford. She sat close in the back seat, and the driver had the radio on a station playing old salsa, and every time the cab went over a pothole on McGuinness her knee knocked into mine and she didn't move it away.

"Your place or mine?" she said. "I'm asking because mine has Gary."

"Mine has Lou."

"I know," she said. "I took a Zyrtec at dinner. In the bathroom. I planned ahead."

I looked at her. She looked out the window, very innocently, at Greenpoint going by.

"You took an allergy pill," I said, "in a pierogi restaurant."

"I'm a professional," said Maddie.

My building is on Hope Street, a third-floor walkup over a dry cleaner that's been going out of business for two years. I unlocked the door and Lou was right there, sitting in the middle of the hallway like a doorman. He looked at Maddie. Maddie looked at him.

"Hi, Lou," she whispered. "I've heard so much about you."

He rubbed against her leg once, which he never does to anyone, and then walked off into the kitchen with his tail straight up, like he'd personally arranged the whole evening.

She sneezed. Then she laughed. Then she looked around my apartment, the couch and the blanket and the shelf of cookbooks and the air purifier humming away in the corner.

"You bought an air purifier," she said.

"It was on sale."

"You bought an air purifier for me." She walked over and looked down at it, at its little blue light. Then she turned around and came back across the room and put both hands flat on my chest. "That's the most romantic thing anyone's ever done for me. That's so sad. Don't tell anyone."

I didn't tell anyone. I kissed her instead.

It was different from the pier. Slower, and then not slow at all. Her coat came off and fell on the floor and neither of us picked it up. My hands found her waist under her sweater, and her skin was so warm after all that cold, and she made a small sound against my mouth that I felt all the way down my spine. She walked me backward until my legs hit the arm of the couch and I sat down on it hard, and she

laughed and came down with me, into my lap, her knees on either side of me, her hair falling around both our faces like a curtain.

"Hi," she said, very close.

"Hi."

"I've been thinking about this since the coat."

"The Saturday coat?"

"The dryer coat," she said. "When you put your winter coat in a dryer for me. I watched it go around and I thought, that man is an idiot, and I want to ruin him."

Her mouth was on my neck then, right under my jaw, and I lost the ability to answer. I found the hem of her sweater and she lifted her arms, and it went somewhere, and I'll never know where because I wasn't looking at it. I was looking at her. The lamp in the corner was on and it laid warm light all down one side of her, her shoulder and her collarbone and the freckles, because there were freckles there too, scattered across her shoulders like someone had flicked a paintbrush at her.

"You have freckles everywhere," I said.

"Not everywhere," she said. "You'll have to check."

She pulled my shirt up over my head and it caught on my ears, and we both laughed so hard she nearly slid off the couch. I caught her. She held onto me and kept laughing into my shoulder, and then she wasn't laughing anymore. She was kissing my shoulder, and then my mouth again, and her hands were moving slowly down my chest like she was learning it. Like she was drawing it from memory and wanted

to get every line right.

I stood up with her. She wrapped her legs around me and said, "Oh, okay, we're doing that," and I carried her down the hallway, bumping into the doorframe once, and she said "ow" and "don't stop" in the same breath.

My bedroom was dark except for the streetlight coming through the blinds in stripes. I put her down on the bed, on the sheets I'd washed for no reason, and she lay there looking up at me with her hair all over my pillow and the stripes of light falling across her, and I couldn't think of a single other thing I wanted. A job, a city, a better apartment. None of it. Just this, right here.

"Come here," she said.

I came here.

Her hands went to my belt. My hands went to the button of her jeans. Her breath was fast and warm against my ear, and she said my name once, low, like she was testing how it sounded in the dark.

Outside a car alarm went off, and this one, for once, didn't give up halfway through.

Neither did we.

· · ·

In the morning she was wearing my Albany Water Department T-shirt and sitting on my kitchen counter eating out of my mug.

I don't keep cereal. She'd found an old bag of granola at the back of the cabinet that I didn't remember buying, and she was eating it dry

with her fingers, and Lou was sitting next to her on the counter, which he is not allowed to do, and she was letting him.

"He's not allowed up there," I said.

"He says he is." She sniffled. "He says the rules changed."

She looked so good. Hair everywhere, my shirt hanging off one shoulder, her bare heels knocking against the cabinet door. The light through the kitchen window was grey and soft, and it was the first time I'd seen her in morning light, in my apartment, and I stood in the doorway in my boxers and just looked.

Then her phone buzzed on the counter, and she picked it up, and her face went still.

It only lasted a second. It was the stillness of someone reading a thing they'd waited a long time for, and finding out they weren't sure anymore that they wanted it.

"What?" I said.

"Nothing. It's work." She put the phone face down. Then she picked it up again. "Okay, it's not nothing."

She told me. Back in August she'd applied for a job at an animation studio in Portland, Oregon. A real job, with a salary and dental and a desk by a window and people to eat lunch with. Art director on a kids' show about a family of otters who solve problems. She'd done three interviews over the summer. She'd done a test project, a whole week of nothing but otters. Then she'd heard nothing for so long she'd figured it was a no and stopped thinking about it.

"They want me," she said. "They want me to start in January."

"That's amazing," I said, and I meant it, and at the same time it felt like someone had opened a window in my chest and let all the November in.

"It is amazing," she said. "It's the job. It's the job I've wanted since I was twelve. I used to draw cartoons on the backs of my brothers' homework."

"So you should take it."

"I know."

"Maddie. You should take it."

"I know," she said again, and set the mug down, and looked at me with her mouth pressed into a line. "I sent them my portfolio the same week the sock went missing. Isn't that weird? I remember because I did laundry that night. I was so nervous I couldn't sleep, so I washed everything I owned."

"That's not a sign."

"I didn't say it was a sign."

"You were thinking it."

"I'm always thinking it," she said. "I'm a person who named her radiator."

She left a little after nine. She kissed me at the door, a long one, with her fingers in my hair, and said she'd call. She went down the stairs in last night's jeans and my T-shirt under the green coat, and I heard the street door bang shut, and I stood in the hallway with Lou winding around my ankles like he wanted to know what I'd done wrong.

She didn't call that day. She texted once, around four, while I was on the line breaking down chickens. It said one word.

> *Thinking*

No period. Nothing else.

I didn't know what to write back, so I sent a picture of Lou sitting in front of the air purifier. She sent back a heart. Then nothing, for days.

The next Tuesday I walked to the laundromat at 2:35 with a bag of actual laundry, for once. Dirty work shirts, real towels, the sheets.

Her table was empty.

Hector looked up from his crossword. He looked at the table, and at me, and didn't say anything, which was worse than if he had.

I did my laundry anyway. I sat in the orange chair and watched dryer nine go around. Dryer eleven sat there dark with its door hanging open a little, and I kept looking at it like it might start on its own.

At 3:20 Hector got up from behind the counter. He walked over, slowly, the way he does everything, and stood next to my chair with his hands in his pockets.

"Seven letters," he said. "Gave up on something too soon."

I looked at him.

"I'm messing with you," said Hector. "The clue is lake in Switzerland. It's Lucerne." He went back behind the counter and sat down. Then, without looking up, he said, "She'll come."

She didn't come. I folded my towels in halves and then halves again, and then, for no reason at all, I shook one out and folded it in thirds,

and stood there looking at it like an idiot. I walked home up Wythe in the cold. Somewhere a car alarm went off, the same one from the first night, I was sure of it, and gave up halfway through.

. . .

The Tuesday after that, I almost didn't go.

It had been a bad week. I'd burned a whole sheet tray of romanesco on Thursday and Rodrigo had yelled at me in two languages. Every night I sat on the couch with Lou and watched a man in Finland restore a rusty axe, and I read her text maybe forty times, like it would say something different if I looked long enough. On Saturday I walked through the farmers market and stood by the honey guy for a while, and he asked if I wanted to try the buckwheat, and I said no, I already knew what it tasted like.

But at 2:35 on Tuesday I was walking down Wythe anyway. I didn't even have laundry. I had one dish towel folded up in my coat pocket, because I couldn't make myself walk in there with nothing.

The lights were on in the window like always. Wythe ash & Fold. The home shopping channel was selling a steam mop.

She was on the table.

Same grey hoodie. Same knot of hair with the pencil through it. She had two mugs next to her, WORLD'S OKAYEST AUNT and my Albany one, which she must have walked out of my kitchen with that morning without my noticing, and a box of Cinnamon Toast Crunch. Dryer eleven was going around. Dryer nine was going around too.

"I started yours," she said. "I hope that's okay. I didn't know what you'd bring, so I put a towel in. One of mine. It's in there by itself. It's probably scared."

I stood in the doorway.

"Hi," I said.

"Hi." She pulled her knees up inside the hoodie so she was a grey tent again. "I went to Portland."

"You went to Portland."

"Thursday to Sunday. They flew me out to see the studio. It's in this old warehouse by the river, and there's a dog in the office named Biscuit, and everybody's nice, and the coffee is incredible, and it rained the entire time." She picked at a thread on her sleeve. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you. I didn't know what to say. I didn't know what I was going to do, and I didn't want to tell you one thing and then do something else."

"Okay," I said.

"I should have said that. Instead I said thinking. Who texts thinking."

"It was a bad text."

"It was a terrible text," she agreed. "I'm a visual person."

I came in and sat down in the orange chair across from her. Hector, behind the counter, very carefully did not look up from his crossword. The light buzzed. On the TV a woman mopped a floor that was already clean.

"So what did you decide?" I said.

She took a breath.

"I took the job," she said. Then, before my face could do whatever it was about to do, she held up one hand. "Wait. Let me finish. I'm going to finish. I took the job and I told them I'm not moving. I told them I'd come out one week a month and do the rest from here. From Brooklyn. And they said no. And I said okay, then I can't take it, and I meant it, Ben, I really meant it. I stood up in the meeting room and put my coat on. And the woman in charge, Diane, she has these huge red glasses, she said wait. And they went into another room and talked about it for an hour. And then they came back and said yes."

I just looked at her.

"So I'm staying," she said. "Mostly. One week a month I'll be in Portland drawing otters in the rain. You'll have to feed Gary. That's a joke. You can't feed a radiator."

"You put your coat on," I said.

"I put my coat on." She slid down off the table and stood in front of me, the hoodie swinging around her knees. "And I want you to know it isn't only because of you. I want to say that, because it's true, and because otherwise it's a lot of pressure, and I don't want you to feel like you have to be worth an otter show. I like it here. I like my terrible shelf. I like that the guy at the bodega starts my egg and cheese when he sees me crossing the street. I like this place." She looked around at the white tile, the portholes, Gus the parrot on the bulletin board. "I like my evenings."

"Your evenings."

"Our evenings," she said. "I like Tuesdays. I didn't want to go live somewhere that doesn't have these Tuesdays."

I stood up. She was right there in front of me, and I put my hands on either side of her face and kissed her, under the worst light in Brooklyn, and she grabbed the front of my coat with both fists like she was afraid I'd float off.

Behind the counter, Hector cleared his throat.

"Seven letters," he said. "Finally."

"What's the clue?" said Maddie, against my mouth.

"There's no clue," said Hector. "I'm just saying finally."

Dryer nine buzzed.

We pulled apart. I went over and opened the door and reached in for her lonely towel, which was hot and smelled like the cheap dryer sheets Hector buys in bulk, and I pulled it out, and something came with it, clinging to the terrycloth with static.

Bright yellow. Small cartoon lemons.

I held it up.

Maddie looked at it. She looked at me. She looked at dryer nine, still ticking as it cooled.

"No," she said.

"It was on the towel."

"That's not possible. I put that towel in myself. I checked it. I always check." She came over and took the sock from me very carefully, with

two fingers, the way you'd pick up a baby bird. She turned it over. There was a tiny hole in the heel. "That's it. That's the one. That's the left one."

"Where has it been?"

"I told you," she said, and her voice was doing something wobbly. "They travel. It doesn't tell me things."

She reached into the front pocket of her hoodie and pulled out the other one. She'd been carrying it around, I realized, this whole time, the one that had shown up in my dryer that first night in October. She held them up side by side under the fluorescent light. Two lemon socks. A pair.

"Huh," said Hector, who had come out from behind the counter to look.

"Do you think it went somewhere?" Maddie said. "Like Portland?"

"I think it was stuck in the drum," said Hector.

"I think it went to Portland," said Maddie.

She put both socks in her hoodie pocket and zipped it, and patted it twice. Then she looked up at me, and for a second she looked a little lost.

"So that's it," she said. "We found it. We don't have a reason anymore."

"You still owe me a reward," I said.

She blinked. "The drawing."

"Holding up the sock. Like a fisherman with a big fish."

"Oh," she said, and a slow smile spread across her whole face. "Oh, I'm going to make it so big. I'm going to give you a hat. One of those vests with all the pockets."

"Okay."

"And it's going to take a long time. Weeks. I'm going to need you to sit for it. Every Tuesday."

"Here?"

"Where else?" said Maddie.

We folded her one towel together. She did it in thirds and I let her. Hector went back behind the counter and wrote something in his puzzle in pen, and as we were leaving he said, "Same time next week," before either of us could, and Maddie laughed all the way up Wythe.

. . .

The drawing took eleven Tuesdays. It's on the bulletin board now, right next to the missing parrot. It's me in a fishing vest and a bucket hat, holding up one yellow sock with both hands like a prize marlin, with a look on my face of total triumph. Underneath, in her handwriting, it says FOUND. NO REWARD NECESSARY. HE GOT ONE.

Hector says people ask about it. He tells them it's a long story.

I still do laundry every Tuesday at 2:40. These days I actually need to. There are two of us now, and half the time her stuff is at my place and mine is at hers, and nobody knows whose towels are whose, and Lou sleeps on whatever's warmest. When she's in Portland we do it on FaceTime, her at a laundromat on Hawthorne at 11:40 her time, me

on Wythe, our phones propped against the machines so we can watch each other's dryers go around. She says hers are better. They aren't.

She folds in thirds. I fold in halves. We've stopped arguing about it. Mostly.

The lemon socks live in the drawer by my bed. We keep them balled up together, the way you're supposed to. Every once in a while I open the drawer just to check.

They're both still there. For now. I'm not counting on it. They travel.

— Shay

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