The Neighbor Upstairs

An illustrator, a session musician, and one unfinished song coming through the ceiling of a Park Slope walk-up at exactly midnight, every single night.

The song starts at midnight. Exactly midnight, on the dot, like a cuckoo clock that went to music school.

I live on the fourth floor of a walk-up on Fifth Street in Park Slope, between Sixth and Seventh Avenue, in a building with a green door that sticks in the summer and a mailbox panel where somebody has written PLEASE STOP ORDERING HELLOFRESH IF YOU WON'T TAKE IT INSIDE in Sharpie. There are five floors. I'm on four. The guy on five has a guitar.

I'm a freelance illustrator, which means I work from home, which means I'm home all the time, which means I know this building better than anyone should. I know that the radiators clank twice before they get going, like someone clearing their throat. I know the couple on two fight about the dishwasher every Sunday. I know that Mrs. Russo on the ground floor plays the same Sinatra record on Thursdays and turns it up when she gets to the part she likes. I can live with all of that. That's what you sign up for when you pay this much to live on top of other people.

But the guy on five plays the same song every night at midnight, and he never finishes it.

That's the part that got me. It's eight bars of something soft and a little sad, fingerpicked, and then a chord change that goes somewhere warm, and then it climbs, and you can feel it getting ready to open up into something, and then it stops. Dead stop. Then a pause. Then he starts again from the top.

He does this for about forty minutes. Every night. Some nights he hums along, low, so I can't make out words. Some nights there's a sound like a pencil being thrown across a room. Then it goes quiet and I lie there in the dark waiting for the rest of it, and it never comes.

I was working on a picture book that spring about a raccoon who runs a bakery. It was called Rufus Rises, and the deadline was June first, and I had nineteen spreads left and an art director named Courtney who ended every email with "No pressure!" in a way that was all pressure. My best hours are late. Ten to two. That's when the raccoon looks like a raccoon and not a dog wearing a mask.

And every night at midnight, right when Rufus was finally getting his paws into the dough, the song would start. And I would get to the chord change, and the climb, and I would lean forward with my brush in the air, and then it would stop.

After three weeks of this, I had drawn Rufus's left ear eleven times.

· · ·

The first note was polite. I want that on the record. I wrote it on a nice piece of cardstock, in my good handwriting, and I taped it to his door on a Tuesday morning when I knew he'd be out, because I'd heard him clomp down the stairs at nine with something heavy that bumped every landing.

> *Hi! I'm your neighbor in 4R. I love that you play, and you're really good. Could you maybe keep it a little lower after 11? I work nights and the floors are thin. Thanks so much! Ashley*

I drew a little smiley face. I regret the smiley face. I want that on the record too.

That night at midnight the song started, at exactly the same volume, and stopped at exactly the same place.

The next morning there was a note on my door. It was written on the back of a receipt from the Key Food on Fifth Avenue. Two avocados, a frozen pizza, and a box of Honey Nut Cheerios.

> *Hi Ashley. Sorry about that. I can play quieter. Can't really play earlier, that's when it works. Also I know who you are. You're the blender. D.*

I stood in the hallway holding the receipt for a long time.

"That's when it works," I said out loud to nobody. "When what works?"

Ray, the super, was coming up the stairs with a bag of rock salt even though it was April. Ray carries rock salt year round. I've never asked.

"You talking to me?" he said.

"No. Sorry. Who lives in 5R?"

Ray thought about it. Ray thinks about everything like it's a question on a game show. "Musician," he said finally. "Nice kid. Pays on time. Fixed my nephew's amp."

"Does he ever finish anything?"

Ray looked at me like I'd asked if the building had a basement. "How would I know that?" he said, and kept climbing.

. . .

He did play quieter. For two nights. I could tell because I had to strain to hear it, which was somehow worse. I'd catch myself holding my breath with my brush hovering over Rufus's flour sack, trying to hear whether he'd get past the chord change this time. He didn't.

On the third night it was back to full volume. I wrote the second note on a Post-it, because I'd given up on cardstock.

> *Hi. Me again. Quieter was great! It lasted two days. Is there a setting between "concert" and "ghost"? A.*

The reply came the next morning, on a napkin from the bagel place on Seventh. Not the good bagel place. The other one.

> *There's a setting called "I live alone and it's my apartment." It's a pretty popular setting. Also you hum it. I can hear you through the floor. You hum it wrong. D.*

I read that one standing in my doorway in my sweatpants with a mug of coffee going cold in my hand, and I felt my face get hot all the way up to my hairline.

I did not hum it. I would never hum it.

I went back inside and sat down at my desk and pulled up my spread of Rufus pulling a tray of croissants out of the oven, and twenty minutes later I caught myself humming it. The eight bars, the chord change, the climb. And then I stopped where he stopped, because I didn't know what came next either.

"Oh, come on," I said to Rufus.

Rufus looked back at me with his little raccoon hands full of croissants and no opinion at all.

· · ·

After that it was war. A small, stupid, extremely satisfying war, fought entirely in adhesive.

> *I do not hum it wrong. You PLAY it wrong. It's supposed to go somewhere after the climb and you never let it. A.*

> *Oh great, a critic. Where's it supposed to go? D.*

> *I don't know! That's YOUR job! A.*

> *Correct. Thank you. Very helpful. Glad we did this. D.*

> *Also your boots. Are you walking around up there in ski boots? Is it a medical thing? A.*

> *They're Red Wings. They're broken in. I'll get slippers when you stop running the blender at 7am. D.*

> *That's a smoothie. That's health. A.*

> *It sounds like you're mulching a Honda. D.*

I started looking forward to opening my door in the morning. That's how bad it got. I'd wake up and before I even made coffee I'd go stand in the hallway in my socks and check. Sometimes there was nothing and I'd feel weirdly let down, like when you check the mail and it's only a flyer for a gutter company. Sometimes there was a receipt, or a napkin, or once the back of a guitar string packet, the paper kind, folded into a square.

His handwriting was all caps and leaned forward, like it was in a hurry to get somewhere. He signed everything D. I made a list on my fridge of D names. Daniel. David. Derek. Doug. I crossed off Doug immediately. You can't be that annoying and be a Doug.

My best friend Jenna came over one Saturday to eat Thai food from the place on Seventh and look at my Rufus spreads, and she found the stack of notes on my counter, held together with a binder clip.

"Ash," she said. "What is this."

"Evidence."

She read through them one by one, her pad see ew going cold. Somewhere around "mulching a Honda" she started laughing so hard she had to put her chopsticks down.

"You know what this is," she said.

"Harassment. Noise harassment."

"This is flirting. This is the most flirting I've seen since high school. He drew a little guitar on this one."

"That's not a guitar. That's a middle finger."

She held it up to the light. "It has strings, Ashley."

I took it away from her and put it back in the binder clip. "I've never even seen him," I said. "I don't know what he looks like. He could be fifty. He could have a ponytail."

"You want to know what he looks like."

"I want to know how the song ends," I said, and then wished I hadn't, because she gave me a look over her takeout container that I will be

thinking about for the rest of my life.

. . .

I tried to catch him. I'm not proud of it. I'd hear the boots on the stairs and I'd go to my peephole, but my peephole is the cheap kind that makes everyone look like they're at the bottom of a fishbowl, and he always took the stairs two at a time, so all I ever got was a blur of dark hair and a gig bag and once, memorably, a hand holding a slice of pizza folded in half.

Once I heard him on the landing above me, talking to Ray.

"It's the hot water," he was saying. "It's either lava or the Arctic. There's no middle."

"There's a middle," Ray said. "You gotta find it. It's a feel thing."

"I've been feeling it for a year, Ray."

"Feel harder," said Ray.

His voice was lower than I expected. Warmer. A little rough at the edges, like he talked a lot for a living or didn't talk at all. I stood with my ear against my own front door like a lunatic until they both went downstairs.

That night at midnight, the song. Eight bars, chord change, climb, stop.

I lay on my back on my floor, on the rug I got from a stoop on Third Street, and stared at my ceiling, which was his floor. I could hear him breathe out in the pause. A long breath, like someone setting down something heavy.

I wrote the next note at 12:51 a.m. and taped it up before I could think about it.

> *What happens after the climb? A.*

In the morning there was no reply. Just my note, gone. That was the first time I thought maybe I'd gone too far. Asking about the song felt different from yelling about the boots. It felt like asking someone what they'd been dreaming about.

The next morning there was a note.

> *I don't know yet. That's the whole problem. D.*

That was it. No joke. No guitar drawn in the corner. I folded it in half and put it in my pocket instead of the binder clip, and I carried it around all day without telling anyone, not even Jenna, not even Rufus.

· · ·

The power went out on the hottest night in May, which in Brooklyn means it felt like August had shown up early and refused to leave.

It was 9:40. I was coloring the spread where Rufus's oven catches fire and the whole forest comes to help, and my screen went black, and my fan wound down with a sad little whir, and the whole block went quiet in a way it never is. No AC units humming. No TV through the wall. Just a car going by on Sixth Avenue with its windows down, playing something with a lot of bass, and then that faded too.

I sat there in the dark for a second with my stylus still in my hand.

"Great," I said. "Cool. The forest can wait."

I found my phone and turned on the flashlight and went out into the hall. Everyone else was doing the same thing. Doors opening on every floor, little white circles of light bobbing up and down the stairwell like fireflies. Somebody on two was yelling, "Is it just us? Is it the whole block?" Somebody else was yelling back, "It's the whole Slope, Gary, check Citizen."

Gary and Linda on two are retired. Gary checks Citizen the way other people check the weather. Linda says he's going to give himself a heart attack reading about a guy who stole a scooter on Union Street.

"Con Ed says four hours," Gary announced to the stairwell. "Could be six."

A chorus of groans came from every floor.

Then Mrs. Russo's voice came up from the bottom of the building, loud and clear, the voice of a woman who taught fourth grade at P.S. 39 for thirty-four years. "Everybody go up on the roof. It's an oven in here. Bring whatever's going to spoil."

So we did.

· · ·

Our roof isn't really a roof deck. It's tar paper and a low brick wall and a couple of plastic chairs someone dragged up in 2019, and you're not technically allowed up there, and there's a sign on the door that says so, and everyone ignores it. But you can see the Manhattan skyline from it, if you stand on your toes in the northwest corner, and that night the skyline was lit up like nothing had happened, which felt like a personal insult.

Up close, though, it was all dark. Every brownstone on Fifth Street, every walk-up, every window. You could see stars over Brooklyn, which is a thing that happens about once a decade. A few of them. Five, maybe. People pointed at them like they were celebrities.

And everyone brought everything.

Marcus from 3L, who's a nurse at Methodist and works three twelves a week, brought a cooler full of ice he'd bought at the bodega on Seventh before they sold out. Tyler and Megan, the grad students in 2R, brought a whole Trader Joe's charcuterie situation that was already sweating. Gary brought a battery radio. Linda brought a box of candles from the dollar store, the tall glass kind with saints on them, and lit them all along the brick wall so it looked like a vigil for somebody nobody liked very much. Mrs. Russo got carried up the last flight by Marcus and Ray, sitting on a kitchen chair like a queen, holding a bottle of Chianti in a straw basket on her lap.

"From 1998," she said. "My husband was saving it. He's not going to drink it now."

"Where is he?" Megan asked.

"Green-Wood," said Mrs. Russo, and popped the cork herself.

I brought three bottles of rosé I'd been saving for when I finished the book, because it didn't look like I was going to finish the book, and a sleeve of Ritz crackers, and my sketchbook, out of habit. I take it everywhere. I'd been carrying a small one in my back pocket since art school, the way some people carry ChapStick.

Within twenty minutes there were maybe twenty people on the roof and maybe thirty bottles of wine. Red, white, a box of something

called Franzia that Tyler was very proud of. People who'd been nodding at each other at the mailboxes for years were suddenly passing a corkscrew around and telling each other where they grew up. Ray stood in the doorway with his arms crossed, keeping watch over the whole thing, the way he probably watched the boiler.

I was sitting on the brick wall with a plastic cup of rosé and a cracker, sketching Mrs. Russo with her Chianti, when somebody sat down next to me.

"Is this seat taken," he said. "Or is it reserved for someone with a blender."

. . .

I'm going to describe him once and then I'm never going to talk about it again, because it's embarrassing how much I'd thought about it.

He was not fifty. He did not have a ponytail. He was maybe thirty, with dark hair that needed cutting and a beard that was more of a decision he hadn't made yet, and he had on a gray T-shirt with a hole near the collar and jeans and, yes, the boots. He had the kind of face that looked tired in a way that suited it. Big hands. Calluses on the fingertips of his left hand, hard and yellowish, like little shields. I noticed because he was holding a can of Narragansett and drumming on it.

"You're D," I said.

"You're A."

"You're Dylan." I'd heard Ray call him that on the stairs.

"You're Ashley." He'd seen it on my first note. "With the smiley face."

"I take that back. I take the smiley face back."

"No, I liked it," he said. "It was the last time anybody in this building was nice to me."

"That is not true. Ray loves you. You fixed his nephew's amp."

He looked at me sideways. "Do you know everything about everyone in this building?"

"I work from home," I said. "It's a curse."

He laughed. It came out of him like it surprised him, a short warm sound, and Linda looked over from her candles and smiled at us like we were a couple at a wedding. I took a long sip of rosé and looked at the skyline so I'd have something to do with my face.

"So," he said. "I hum it wrong."

"You started that."

"You do though. You hum the third bar flat. You go down instead of up." He hummed it, low, right there next to me, and I realized he was right, and I was furious about it. "It goes up. It's a question. You keep making it an answer."

"Maybe it should be an answer," I said. "Maybe that's why you can't finish it."

He stopped drumming on his can.

I thought I'd done it again. Gone too far, the way I had with the note. But he just turned the can around in his hands and looked at it like the label had something on it he needed.

"Maybe," he said.

. . .

He told me what he did for a living while Gary tried to get a Mets game on the radio and kept getting a station playing salsa instead. He was a session musician. He played guitar on other people's records, mostly. Some pedal steel. Some bass if they were desperate. He wrote things for people too. Jingles. A song for a car commercial that was on during the Super Bowl two years ago, which I had definitely heard and definitely gotten stuck in my head.

"The one with the dog in the truck?"

"The one with the dog in the truck," he said, like it was a thing he'd been convicted of.

"That song is so catchy. That song is evil."

"Thank you. That's the job. I write the thing that gets stuck in your head so you'll buy a Subaru."

He'd also written half of a song that a country singer took to number six on the charts. Not the singer's half. He wouldn't say who. He said he'd signed something. He said he'd written songs for a girl group, for a guy who got famous on TikTok singing in his car, for a cartoon about a family of otters.

"And you can't finish your own," I said.

"I can finish anything," he said, "as long as it's for somebody else. Give me a brief. Give me a car, a kid's show, a breakup. I'll have you a chorus by lunch." He tipped the can back and drank. "Somebody asks me what I want to say, and I've got nothing. I've got eight bars and a chord change."

"And a climb."

"And a climb," he agreed. "Can't get off the climb."

I'd been sketching while he talked. I do it without thinking, the way other people pick at a label. When I looked down I'd drawn him. Just his hands on the can, and the curve of his jaw, and the edge of the candlelight. He leaned over to look before I could close the book.

"Is that me?"

"It's a can of Narragansett."

"It has my hands."

"Lots of people have hands."

He took the sketchbook gently out of my lap and flipped back. Mrs. Russo with her Chianti. Marcus with his cooler, asleep on his feet. Gary bent over the radio like it was a patient. Tyler and Megan feeding each other salami. Ray in the doorway. Linda lighting the saints. I'd done the whole roof in forty minutes without noticing.

"These are really good," he said quietly. "Ashley. These are really good."

"They're just sketches."

"Do they know you do this?"

"No. It's just a thing I do."

He kept turning pages. He got to the end and then turned back to Mrs. Russo again and looked for a long time. In my drawing she's laughing with her head back and the bottle held up, and you can see the gap in her front teeth, and you can tell she misses somebody.

"You should do the whole building," he said.

"Why?"

"Because nobody ever does," he said. "Everyone lives on top of everyone else and nobody ever looks."

. . .

The wine kept moving. Somebody passed around Mrs. Russo's Chianti and it tasted like a basement in the best way. Somebody got the radio on the Mets game finally and they were losing to the Phillies and everyone booed. Linda's saints burned down. At some point Tyler and Megan started slow dancing to the salsa station, which had come back, and then Gary and Linda joined them, and then Marcus asked Mrs. Russo, and she said she couldn't, and then she did, sitting in her chair with her arms up while he spun her around.

Dylan and I stayed on the wall. Our knees were touching. I don't know when that started. Neither of us moved.

"Can I ask you something," I said.

"You've been asking me things in Post-its since April."

"What's the song about?"

He took so long to answer that I thought he wasn't going to. Below us on Fifth Street someone had set up a lawn chair on their stoop with a camping lantern, and a kid was riding a scooter up and down the block in the dark, screaming with joy every time he hit the curb cut.

"It's about wanting something," Dylan said. "And not knowing what it is. Like when you open the fridge and stand there. You're hungry, you

know you're hungry, but nothing in there is it." He rubbed his thumb across his calluses. "That's the whole song. Me standing in front of the fridge."

"That's sad."

"It's a little sad."

"It's also kind of funny."

"It's also kind of funny," he said, and smiled, and his whole tired face changed. "That's the part I can't get. How it's both."

At 1:20 in the morning the lights came back on all at once. Every window up and down Fifth Street flashed white at the same time, and twenty air conditioners kicked on together with a roar like a stadium, and the whole roof cheered. People started gathering up their bottles. Ray started telling everyone to watch the step. Mrs. Russo demanded to be carried down first.

Dylan stood up and held out his hand to help me off the wall. I took it. His fingers were rough at the tips and warm everywhere else.

"So," he said. "Midnight tomorrow."

"I'll be up."

"I'll play it quieter."

"Don't," I said, and then I walked down two flights of stairs before he could see my face.

· · ·

The notes didn't stop. They changed.

> *Rufus is a raccoon? I thought Rufus was your boyfriend. I've been jealous for a month. D.*

> *Rufus runs a bakery. He's very successful. You couldn't compete. A.*

> *I make bread. D.*

> *You make a frozen pizza. I've seen your receipts. A.*

> *That's a loaf of bread with toppings. D.*

I finished Rufus. I'm saying that like it was easy, and it wasn't, but something happened after the roof. I'd sit down at ten and work until midnight, and then the song would start, and instead of losing my place I'd let it carry me. Eight bars. The change. The climb. I started drawing in time with it. Rufus got his forest to put out the fire in three nights. Courtney emailed me "WOW!!" with two exclamation points and didn't say "No pressure!" at all, which I think was the first time in our relationship.

And I started drawing the building.

I don't know exactly how I asked. I think I just started knocking on doors with my sketchbook and a box of Entenmann's from the bodega, which in my experience will get you in anywhere in Brooklyn. Mrs. Russo let me draw her at her kitchen table with her Sinatra record going and her husband's photo on the windowsill, a big man with a mustache, laughing. She told me about the time he drove a cab into the Gowanus. "Not all the way in," she said. "Just the front."

Gary and Linda posed on their couch holding hands like it was a Sears portrait, and then forgot I was there and started fighting about the

dishwasher, and that's the one I kept. Marcus fell asleep in his scrubs while I was drawing him and I drew that too. Tyler and Megan made me do them reading, very seriously, with glasses on, and then asked if they could buy it for Megan's mom.

I drew Ray in the basement with the boiler. He wouldn't take his hat off. He told me the boiler's name was Doreen.

"Since when?" I said.

"Since always," said Ray. "You gotta name a boiler. Otherwise how's it know you're talking to it."

I drew all of them. Every floor, every apartment, in pencil and then in ink with a little gouache, the way I did Rufus's forest. And every night at midnight Dylan played, and I worked, and the song climbed, and stopped.

I didn't draw him. I kept meaning to. I kept not doing it.

. . .

The first time he played for me on purpose, it was a Wednesday in June, and the fire escape outside my window was blocked by a pot of basil I'd been killing slowly since March.

At 11:58 I heard a window open above me. Then the clang of someone climbing out onto the iron. Then boots on the stairs of the fire escape, coming down. Then Dylan, sitting on the grate outside my bedroom window, with his guitar on his knee and his feet hanging over Fifth Street, knocking on my glass.

I opened it. "That's breaking and entering."

"I didn't break anything. I didn't enter anything." He moved my basil over gently with one hand. "Your basil is dying."

"I know my basil is dying."

"Can I come in?"

"No," I said, and climbed out instead.

The fire escape was still warm from the day. The whole street smelled like someone's grill and the linden trees by the school on Seventh, which are sweet in June in a way that makes you a little crazy. A guy was walking a stroller up the block at midnight, rocking it with one hand and eating a slice with the other. Down at the corner the bodega cat was sitting under the awning like a manager.

Dylan played it for me. The whole thing, what there was of it. Close up it was different. I could see his fingers moving and hear the little squeaks his calluses made on the strings and the way he breathed in before the chord change, like he was about to jump into cold water. And then he sang, low, the words I'd never been able to make out through the floor.

> *I've been standing in the kitchen with the cold door open wide,*
>
> *I know I'm hungry for it, but there's nothing here inside,*
>
> *I could name you every city, I could name you every song,*
>
> *I could name you anything but what I've wanted all along.*

Then the climb. Up and up, and his voice went up with it, and I sat there holding my knees with my whole body leaning toward whatever came next.

And then he stopped.

"That's it," he said. "That's all I've got."

"No," I said. "Come on. Do it again."

"It doesn't change if I do it again."

"Do it again anyway."

He did. And somewhere in the middle of the climb I put my hand on his knee, very lightly, the way you'd steady a ladder, and his voice caught. Just for a second. He kept playing. He stopped in the same place. But the pause afterward was longer than usual, and we were both looking at my hand, and neither of us said anything about it.

"You hum it better now," he said finally.

"I've been practicing."

"Yeah?" He set the guitar down against the railing. "Who with?"

. . .

I'd like to say I was cool about it. I was not cool about it. I'd been not cool about it since the receipt with the avocados.

He kissed me first. I want that on the record. He kissed me on the fire escape with the bodega cat watching, his hand coming up to the side of my face like he wasn't sure he was allowed, and I kissed him back hard enough that the basil fell over and rolled in a slow half circle and neither of us did anything about it. He tasted like the beer he'd been drinking and something sweeter underneath. His beard was softer than it looked. His calluses scraped my jaw a little and I felt it everywhere.

When he pulled back I had my fists in the front of his T-shirt. I didn't remember doing that.

"Hi," he said, a little breathless.

"Hi."

"I've been wanting to do that since the Honda."

"The mulching a Honda note?"

"That's when I knew," he said. "Nobody's ever defended a smoothie that hard."

I laughed into his neck. He smelled like soap and cedar and a little bit like the inside of a guitar case, if you've ever opened one, that dusty sweet smell. His pulse was going fast under my mouth. I could feel it. I could feel him feeling me feel it.

"You want to come in?" I said.

"You said no."

"I'm the neighbor. I'm allowed to change the rules."

He picked up his guitar and the basil, in that order, and climbed in through my window after me, and put the basil on the sill, very carefully, like it might still have a chance.

My apartment was dark except for the lamp over my drafting table, and the drawings of the whole building were pinned up on the wall above it. Mrs. Russo. Gary and Linda. Ray and Doreen. Dylan stopped in front of them with his guitar still in his hand.

"Ashley," he said.

"I know. Later. You can look later."

"You did everybody."

"Not everybody," I said, and took the guitar out of his hand, and set it down on my couch like it was sleeping.

The heat was the kind that sits on your skin. My window unit was rattling and not doing anything. He touched my face again, and then my neck, and then the strap of my tank top, sliding it slowly off my shoulder with one finger, and watched me while he did it, like he was waiting to see if I'd stop him. I didn't stop him. I pulled his T-shirt up over his head and it got caught on his ears and we both laughed, and then we stopped laughing.

He kissed my shoulder where the strap had been. He kissed the place where my neck turns into my collarbone, slow, the way he played the first eight bars, careful and a little sad and building. I had my hands on his back, on the warm smooth muscle there, and I could feel him breathing. My knees were doing something unreliable.

"Bedroom," I said. "It's the door with the dress hanging on it."

"I know where it is," he said against my skin. "Same layout as mine."

"That's creepy."

"You started it. You know everything about everyone."

We made it to the door with the dress on it. We knocked the dress down. Somewhere in there my tank top ended up on the lamp and his boots ended up in the hall, one at a time, thump, thump, like the stairs, and I thought, finally, finally, a night those boots aren't keeping me awake. Then I didn't think anything for a while.

What I'll tell you is that his hands were exactly as careful as they were on the strings and a lot less patient, and that at one point he said my name like a question, going up, the way he said I'd hummed it wrong, and I said yes like an answer. What I'll tell you is that the window unit gave out completely and neither of us noticed. What I'll tell you is that midnight came and went, and for the first time in two months, nobody upstairs played anything.

. . .

I woke up at six with his arm across my stomach and his face in my hair and a stripe of sunlight across the ceiling. Somewhere on Seventh a garbage truck was backing up. For about four minutes, it was the best morning of my life.

Then his phone buzzed on my nightstand, and I looked at it, because it was right there, and I'm a person.

It was a text from somebody named Kyle. It said, Need an answer by Friday man. Six months. Europe then Australia. This is the one.

I lay very still.

Dylan woke up slowly, the way he probably did everything when nobody was paying him by the hour. He smiled at me before his eyes were open all the way. Then he saw my face, and he saw where I was looking, and the smile went somewhere.

"That's Kyle," he said. "He's my manager. Sort of. He's a guy who calls me."

"Six months?"

He sat up and rubbed his face. "There's a tour. Kenzie Hart. Opening for her, playing in her band. The whole thing."

I knew who Kenzie Hart was. Everyone knew who Kenzie Hart was. Her face was on the side of a bus that went down Flatbush every morning.

"That's huge," I said.

"It's huge."

"That's amazing, Dylan. Are you going to do it?"

He didn't answer. He looked at the drawings on my wall through the open door. Then he looked at me. Then he said, "I don't know yet," and I heard it the way you hear your own name across a crowded room, because it was the exact same thing he'd written on the receipt. I don't know yet. That's the whole problem.

"Okay," I said. "Okay. You should think about it."

"Ash."

"I have a call with Courtney at nine," I said, which was a lie, and got up, and made a smoothie so loud it probably woke Mrs. Russo.

. . .

He went home. He texted, and I answered, and the answers were short. He knocked on my door that night and I didn't open it, because I was sitting on the floor of my kitchen eating Ritz crackers out of the sleeve and I did not want to be seen doing that by anyone, ever, but especially not him.

At midnight the song started. Eight bars. The change. The climb.

But it was different. He'd added something. A new line, sung low and rough, the first new words in two months, and I could hear them through the ceiling clear as day for the first time, because I was lying right under the spot where he always sat.

> *And I keep a bag packed by the door, I keep the motor running,*
>
> *I've never stayed in one place long enough to see it coming.*

Then the climb, and the stop.

I lay there on my stoop rug with my heart going like the window unit. He was writing about leaving. That's what I thought. He'd stood in front of the fridge for two months and then he'd spent one night with me and figured out what he wanted, and it was a bag by the door and six months in Europe with Kenzie Hart. I was the thing that finally helped him finish the song. I was the brief. I was the dog in the truck.

I wrote the note at 1:14 a.m. and it took me four tries.

> *Congrats on the new verse. Sounds like you figured out what you want. You should take the tour. A.*

I taped it to his door and went back downstairs and did not sleep.

In the morning there was nothing on my door. There was nothing the next morning either. On Friday his boots went down the stairs at seven a.m., heavy, with a bag that bumped every single landing, and the front door stuck the way it does in summer and then let go with a bang.

Then it was quiet.

. . .

He was gone for nine days.

I know because I counted. I'm not proud of that either. I delivered Rufus Rises and Courtney sent me a GIF of a raccoon doing a backflip. I finished the drawings of the building, all of them except one. I watered the basil, which had, against all odds, put out three new leaves. I didn't hear anything through the ceiling at midnight, and I discovered that silence at midnight was so much worse than the song had ever been. I'd lie there at 12:01 waiting for eight bars that didn't come.

Jenna came over and found me lying on my floor.

"Okay," she said. "Talk."

I told her. All of it. The fire escape, the text, the bag by the door. She sat on my couch eating my Ritz crackers and listening, and when I was done, she said, "What exactly did the verse say?"

I told her that too.

She was quiet for a second. "Ash," she said. "Babe. Read it again. He's always left. Past tense. That's a guy telling you he's never stayed anywhere long enough to see it coming. It. Coming." She pointed a cracker at me. "What do you think it is?"

"Kenzie Hart."

"You," said Jenna. "It's you, you idiot. You're the thing he didn't see coming."

I sat up so fast I saw stars, all five of them.

"He's in Europe," I said.

"Is he?"

"His bag bumped every landing."

"Maybe he had a gig. Session guys have gigs. Did you ask?"

I had not asked. I had made a smoothie at him.

· · ·

Ray was in the basement with Doreen when I found him. I asked him where Dylan was, and he took a really long time to answer, the way he does, while he tapped a gauge with his finger.

"Nashville," he said finally.

"Nashville? Not Europe?"

"Session. Ten days. Some record." He tapped the gauge again. "He asked me to water his plant."

"He has a plant?"

"He's got a basil," said Ray. "It's doing terrible."

I went upstairs and stood outside 5R for a long time. There was nothing on his door. My note was gone. He'd taken it, or the wind had taken it, or Mrs. Russo had taken it, she's been known to.

I went back down to my apartment and found the last blank piece of good cardstock I had, the kind I used for the very first note, and I wrote on it in my best handwriting.

> *I hummed it wrong. I made it an answer when it was a question. I'm sorry. Also I read your phone. I'm sorry about that too. A.*

And I drew a smiley face. I'm not taking it back this time.

. . .

He came home on a Sunday. I heard the door stick and bang. I heard the boots, slow, tired, bumping a bag up every landing. They paused on four. Right outside my door. I stood on the other side of it with my hand on the knob and my heart in my throat.

Then they kept going up.

I sat down on my floor and put my face in my hands.

At 11:58 a window opened above me. Then the clang of iron. Then the boots on the fire escape, coming down, and a knock on my glass.

I opened it. He was sitting on the grate with his guitar on his knee and my card in his other hand, a little bent at the corner.

"You read my phone," he said.

"I read your phone."

"I turned the tour down," he said. "Before the roof. Before any of it. I told Kyle no in April and he's been texting me every Friday since, because that's Kyle. The answer's been no since the first week of the notes." He looked down at the card. "I said I don't know yet because I didn't know how to tell a girl I'd slept with once that I turned down Kenzie Hart over her Post-its. I went to Nashville because I said I would. I went because you told me to go and I'm an idiot who does what notes tell him."

"You did not play quieter."

"I did for two nights," he said. "Can I come in?"

"No," I said, and climbed out.

It was cooler than it had been. The linden smell was gone and something else had replaced it, somebody's laundry and the river smell that comes up from the Gowanus when the wind's right. The bodega cat was under the awning. The stroller guy was walking up the block again with his slice. It felt like the building had been waiting.

"I finished it," Dylan said.

"What?"

"In Nashville. In a hotel by the airport, with a vending machine outside my door that hummed in B flat." He settled the guitar on his knee. "I figured it out. I figured out what happens after the climb."

"What happens?"

"You'll see," he said, and started to play.

Eight bars. The change. The climb, up and up, and I was holding my knees again, and leaning, and his voice went up with it, and this time it didn't stop.

It opened. That's the only word for it. Like a door. The climb broke over the top into something warm and a little silly, a little bounce in it, a melody that sounded like somebody laughing at themselves. And he sang.

> *And it was never in the kitchen, it was never on the shelf,*

> *It was the girl downstairs with the blender, who was smarter than myself,*
>
> *She said the song was asking and I'd been answering it wrong,*
>
> *So I'm standing at your window, and I'm staying, and that's the song.*

Then he did the whole climb again, and it opened again, and I realized I was crying a little and also laughing, because he'd rhymed wrong with song, which is the oldest trick there is, and he knew it, and he was grinning at me over the guitar like he'd gotten away with something.

He played the last chord and let it ring out over Fifth Street.

Somewhere below us, a window went up. Then another. And then from the ground floor, loud and clear, the voice of a woman who taught fourth grade at P.S. 39 for thirty-four years.

"FINALLY," yelled Mrs. Russo.

Gary and Linda were on their fire escape on two. Tyler and Megan were leaning out of 2R. Marcus was in his window on three, in scrubs, holding a Gatorade up like a toast. Ray was standing on the sidewalk by the green door with a bag of rock salt, for some reason, looking up.

And they all started clapping. The whole building. At midnight on a Sunday, on Fifth Street in Park Slope, everybody who'd ever lain awake listening to that song stood at their windows and clapped for the end of it.

Dylan put his face in his hands. I put my arms around him, guitar and all, and kissed the side of his head.

"You rhymed wrong with song," I said.

"It's a classic."

"It's a cop out."

"It's both," he said into my shoulder. "That's the part I finally got. How it's both."

. . .

I did draw him, eventually. It's the last one in the series. It's him on the fire escape with his guitar, at midnight, with the bodega cat under the awning and the basil on the sill and all the windows of the building lit up behind him, and everybody in them clapping. I gave the whole series to the building for the lobby. Ray hung them all along the stairwell in cheap black frames from the Target on Atlantic, one per floor, going up. People stop on the landings to look. Mrs. Russo dusts hers.

The song is on a record now, his own, with his name on the spine. He finished three more after that, and then six, and then a whole album, which he recorded in his apartment with towels stuffed under the door and me downstairs making smoothies on purpose during the quiet parts, to keep him humble. He called the song The Neighbor Upstairs, even though, technically, I'm the neighbor downstairs. He says it's from my point of view. He says I'm the one who had to listen.

We still live in the same building. We still live in two apartments. We've talked about it. We'll get there. For now there's something about it that works for us, the stairs between us, the ceiling and the floor.

And every morning, before I make coffee, I still go out in my socks and check my door.

Most days there's something there. A receipt. A napkin. Once, the back of a guitar string packet, folded into a square.

This morning it was a Post-it, in all caps, leaning forward like it was in a hurry to get somewhere.

> *Your blender woke me up. I love you. Come upstairs, I made bread. D.*

It was a frozen pizza. I went anyway.

— Shay

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