Rooftop Rules

On a Bushwick roof in a ninety-eight-degree heat wave, the nurse subletting the top floor and the neighbor who thinks the roof is his write their rules on a pizza box, and then the whole neighborhood goes dark.

The first time I climbed onto the roof, there was a man asleep in a hammock in a pair of Mets boxer shorts, and there was a tomato plant growing out of a pickle bucket next to his head like a nightlight.

It was 7:52 on a Saturday morning in the middle of June and already ninety-one degrees. The bank clock on Myrtle had said so in red numbers, like a threat. I'd just finished my third twelve-hour night in a row in the ICU at Wyckoff Heights, and all I wanted was ten minutes of air that hadn't been through a hospital vent. Then a cold shower, then my bed, then a bag of frozen peas on my chest until I passed out.

The sublet came with roof access. That was the whole reason I'd taken it. Becca, a friend of my cousin's college roommate, which is how everything in New York happens, had listed it as "top floor 1BR Bushwick, mid-June thru Aug, sunny, quirky, ROOF," and when I'd asked about the roof she'd written back:

> *Oh it's amazing. Nobody uses it. It's basically yours.*

Then she'd gone to Lisbon to "figure some things out," and left me her keys, her plants, a cabinet of glasses she'd stolen from bars, and a ladder in the hallway up to a hatch.

Basically mine.

I stood at the top of the ladder with my head out of the hatch like a groundhog and looked at it. Silver paint on the tar, gone soft in the heat. Café lights zigzagged between a vent pipe and a pole bolted to the parapet. Two folding chairs. A Weber grill, which I was fairly sure

was illegal. Eleven buckets of tomatoes, staked and tied with strips of old flowered cotton. A piece of plywood leaning against the chimney with PRIVATE painted on it in red letters, and a smaller line under it that said (mostly).

And the hammock. And the man.

He was big, the way somebody is who carries things up stairs for a living. Dark hair, a day of stubble, one arm thrown over his eyes, a tan line from a work boot. He was snoring, but politely.

I climbed out and looked at the skyline, because I'd come all this way. Midtown standing in the haze like a row of teeth, the Empire State Building pale and far off, the elevated J curving away toward Broadway. Somebody's laundry on the next roof, dead still, not one breath of wind.

It was beautiful. It was hot as the inside of a mouth. I took a long breath of it anyway.

"You're standing on my basil," the man in the hammock said.

I looked down. I was. There was a little terracotta pot of it by the hatch and my left sneaker was in it.

"Sorry." I stepped off. "I didn't know it was your basil."

"Who else's would it be?" He hadn't moved his arm from his eyes.

"I don't know. The building's? Becca's?"

"Becca's never been up here. Becca's afraid of the ladder." He lifted his arm and squinted at me. Brown eyes, and a crease across his cheek from the hammock rope. "Who are you?"

"Lauren. I'm subletting 3F. For the summer."

"Huh," he said, like I'd told him the weather. Then he put his arm back over his eyes. "Okay. Well, Lauren from 3F. It's kind of early."

"It's eight."

"On a Saturday."

"I just got off work."

"At eight in the morning?"

"I'm a nurse. I work nights."

That got him. He sat up, which is a whole process in a hammock, and for a second I thought I was going to have to do a trauma assessment on a stranger in his underwear on my first day.

"You're a nurse," he said.

"I'm a nurse."

"Where?"

"Wyckoff."

He looked at my scrubs, which had a coffee stain on the knee and something else on the cuff I wasn't going to think about, and some of the sleep went out of his face.

"My grandmother died at Wyckoff," he said. "Fourth floor. The nurses were really good to her."

"I'm sorry."

"It's okay. She was ninety-four. She told a priest to go to hell." He rubbed his face with both hands. "Nate. 3R. Nine years. My AC died

on Tuesday, it's a hundred and four in my apartment, so I'm sleeping up here, and I'm wearing these because Becca said nobody was subletting."

"Becca told me nobody uses the roof."

He laughed, short and surprised. "Of course she did."

"So we've both been lied to by Becca."

"Everybody's been lied to by Becca. She owes me sixty bucks from a Super Bowl party." He looked around at the tomatoes like he was counting them. "Look. It's a shared roof. Technically. But the tomatoes are mine, and the grill is mine, and the hammock is definitely mine, so if you could just..."

"Stay out of your way."

"I was going to say be cool."

"I'm extremely cool," I said, and then, because I'd been up for twenty-three hours and wasn't totally in control of my face, I yawned so hard my jaw cracked.

He looked at me. I looked at him.

"Go to bed, Lauren," he said, and lay back down and put his arm over his eyes.

I went down the ladder. I was so annoyed I forgot the frozen peas.

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The thing nobody tells you about a heat wave in New York is how personal it gets.

By the end of June it was ninety-eight. Con Ed sent texts asking everyone to set their air conditioners to seventy-eight, and everyone in Bushwick ignored them, and the window units on Troutman Street dripped onto the sidewalk all day like the whole block was sweating. Somebody opened the hydrant on the corner of Wyckoff and kids ran through it screaming until the fire department capped it, and then somebody opened it again forty minutes later with a wrench they'd clearly bought for exactly that purpose. The bodega cat on Jefferson, a fat gray tom named Papi, lay flat in front of the beer fridge with the door propped open and refused to move for anyone, including the owner.

Becca's apartment had a window unit in the bedroom and nothing anywhere else. I slept during the day with a wet towel on my neck and woke up at four in the afternoon feeling slow-roasted.

So I went up to the roof. A lot.

So did Nate.

It wasn't a war, exactly. Neither of us was rude. We were both too hot to be rude. It was more like two cats sharing a windowsill.

I'd come up after a shift and he'd be gone to work, and I'd move one of his folding chairs into the one strip of shade behind the chimney. I'd come back up at sunset and the chair would be back by the grill, with a note on the back of a Con Ed envelope.

> *This chair lives by the grill. -N*

I'd write on the other side.

> *This chair would like to live in the shade. It's 98 degrees. -L*

The next day there was a third chair. A nicer one. A low beach chair with a striped canvas back, unfolded and sitting in the shade behind the chimney like it had always been there.

> *Found this on Starr St. Somebody put it out. It's yours. Leave mine alone. -N*

That was the first time I didn't hate him. I left a note on the chair before I went down.

> *Thank you. Why is your handwriting so neat. -L*

> *I'm an electrician. If you label a panel sloppy somebody dies. -N*

So that was what he did. I added it to the list in my head. Nate, 3R. Electrician. Nine years on this roof. Grandmother who told a priest to go to hell. Tomatoes, eleven buckets of them, tied up with what I eventually figured out were his grandmother's old housedresses, torn into strips.

He watered the tomatoes at six in the morning and again at night. He talked to them, which I know because I heard him through the hatch one evening saying, "Come on, buddy, you can do it, it's just a little hot," to what turned out to be a plant.

The stalemate went on for about ten days. Then one Friday night it fell apart, because we both came up at the same time.

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It was nine o'clock and still ninety. I'd been off for two days and I was coming up with a seltzer and a book I wasn't going to read. He was already up there, sitting on the parapet with his back to the skyline

and a pizza box on his knees.

We both stopped. Him with a slice halfway to his mouth, me with my head and shoulders out of the hatch.

"I can go," I said.

"No."

"It's fine, you're eating."

"Lauren. Come up. I'm not gonna make you go back down a ladder because I'm eating a pizza. I'm not a monster."

So I came up and sat in the striped chair. The café lights were on, the bulbs a little uneven, a couple burned out, and down on the street somebody was playing bachata out of a car with all the doors open.

"You want a slice?" he said.

"What is it?"

"Roberta's. The Bee Sting." He held out the box. "It's got honey on it. Don't make a face. It's good."

I made a face. I took a slice. It was good.

"Okay," he said, after a while. "Can we talk about the roof?"

"What about it?"

"I feel like we're not doing it right. You're moving my chairs, I'm moving them back, I'm buying you chairs." He wiped his hands on his jeans. "It's like a divorce where the kids are just carrying notes back and forth."

"Who are the kids?"

"The chairs."

I laughed. I didn't want to.

"So what do you want to do?" I said.

He thought about it. Then he tipped the last two slices into the lid, closed it, and turned the box over, so the clean cardboard of the bottom was facing up.

"Rules," he said. "We write it down. Then nobody has to leave notes on envelopes."

I didn't have any paper. He took a Sharpie out of his back pocket, because of course he had a Sharpie in his back pocket, and uncapped it with his teeth. He wrote across the top in those neat panel-label capitals.

ROOFTOP RULES

"Okay," he said. "Rule one."

"Mornings are mine," I said.

"What counts as morning?"

"Seven to ten. I come up after my shift. I want it quiet. I don't want to come up and find a man in his underwear."

"That was one time."

"It was the first time. It made an impression."

He sighed and wrote it down.

1. MORNINGS (7–10 AM) ARE LAUREN'S. NO UNDERWEAR.

"You didn't have to write the underwear part."

"It's important for the historical record." He tapped the Sharpie on the cardboard. "Rule two. Nights are mine. After nine."

"I'm off three nights a week. I want some nights."

He looked at me like a man negotiating for a used car. "Thursdays."

"Thursdays and Sundays."

"Not Sundays. Sunday me and my buddy Rich listen to the Mets on the radio. It's a tradition."

"Fine. Thursdays and Tuesdays."

He wrote it down. He was smiling, though, just a little, at the corner of his mouth.

2. NIGHTS AFTER 9 ARE NATE'S. EXCEPT TUES + THURS.

"Three," I said. "The hammock is yours."

"Thank you."

"The striped chair is mine."

"I gave you that chair."

"And now it's mine. That's how giving works."

3. HAMMOCK = NATE. STRIPED CHAIR = LAUREN. (I GAVE HER THE CHAIR.)

"Four," he said. "Nobody touches the tomatoes."

"I've never touched your tomatoes."

"I know. I'm just saying it so it's on paper." He wrote it bigger than the others.

4. NOBODY TOUCHES THE TOMATOES.

"Can I ask about the tomatoes?"

He didn't look up. "They were my grandmother's."

"The plants?"

"The seeds. She grew them in her yard on Woodbine Street for fifty years. She brought them from her mother's garden outside Bari in 1961, in an envelope in her bra, because you weren't allowed to bring seeds through customs. Every year she dried the seeds from the best ones on a paper towel on top of the fridge." He capped the Sharpie, uncapped it. "When she died we sold the house. Nobody wanted the tomatoes. So I took the seeds, and I didn't have a yard, so." He waved the Sharpie at the roof. "Eleven buckets."

"That's why you talk to them."

He looked up at me, sharp. "You heard that?"

"The hatch is very thin."

He went a little red. I could see it even in the café lights, which I'll admit I enjoyed.

"Rule five," I said, to be nice. "No music before ten in the morning."

"And no Phish ever."

"I don't listen to Phish."

"Becca listened to Phish. I'm just making sure."

5. NO MUSIC BEFORE 10 AM. NO PHISH EVER.

Five rules on the bottom of a pizza box with a grease stain coming through one corner. A siren went by on Myrtle, and I knew without thinking about it that it was going to Wyckoff, the way you know the sound of your own phone.

"How long are you here?" he said.

"Till August thirty-first. Becca's back September first."

"And then?"

"San Diego. I've got a contract at a hospital in La Jolla starting the fifth."

"Is that where you're from?"

"I'm not from anywhere." It came out flatter than I meant. "I was an Air Force kid. We moved eleven times before I was eighteen. Texas, Germany, North Dakota, Germany again, Florida. And I've been a travel nurse for three years. Thirteen-week contracts. Seattle, Denver, Nashville, Phoenix, Boston. Now here."

"Thirteen weeks," he said.

"Thirteen weeks."

"That sounds exhausting."

"It's great," I said. "You get to see everything. You never get bored. You never stay long enough to get mad at anybody." I took a drink of

my seltzer. "I'm really good at the first thirteen weeks of things."

He didn't say anything for a while. He turned the pizza box around and looked at it.

"You know what I've done for thirty-two years?" he said. "Lived within twelve blocks of where I was born. Grover Cleveland High School. Apprenticeship with Local 3. My mom's on Cypress Avenue, my sister's on Linden Street, and my AC is broken because I'm the last rent-stabilized guy in this building and the landlord's hoping I'll die." He handed me the Sharpie. "You want to add anything?"

I took it. I thought about it. Then I wrote, under rule five, in my handwriting, which is not neat at all, which slants downhill like it's trying to get somewhere:

6. IF ONE OF US IS CRYING UP HERE, THE OTHER ONE GOES BACK DOWN. NOBODY SAYS ANYTHING.

He read it. He read it twice.

"Okay," he said quietly.

He didn't ask. I liked him for that. I liked him for it more than I wanted to.

Then he took the Sharpie back and wrote something on the little tuck-in flap at the end of the box, small, and folded the flap under before I could read it, and propped the whole thing up against the chimney next to the PRIVATE sign.

"What did you write?"

"Rule seven."

"What's rule seven?"

"It's for me," he said. "Not for you. Don't worry about it."

I could have just gone over and unfolded the flap. I didn't. That felt like a rule too.

I worried about it for a week.

. . .

The rules worked. That was the surprising part.

I came up in the mornings and the roof was mine. The silver paint would still be wet in dark rings around the buckets, and it smelled like wet tar and tomato leaves, like somebody's grandmother's yard. I'd drink an iced coffee from the bodega and watch the city wake up. The J rattling over Broadway. The guy on the next roof who did tai chi in a Knicks jersey.

Sometimes there'd be something waiting for me. A cold brew in his cooler with my name on the cup in Sharpie. A tomato, the first ripe one, sitting on the arm of my chair on a paper towel with a note.

> *This is not touching the tomatoes. This is being given a tomato. Different rule. -N*

I ate it standing at the parapet with salt from Becca's kitchen and it was so good I said "oh my God" out loud to nobody, and the tai chi guy looked over.

Tuesdays and Thursdays I came up at night. Sometimes he'd come up anyway, around ten, and stand at the top of the ladder like a vampire waiting to be invited in.

"It's Tuesday," I'd say.

"I know. I brought beer."

"You can come up for the beer."

"That's what I figured."

On Sundays he and Rich sat on the parapet with a transistor radio with a coat-hanger antenna and listened to the Mets lose. Rich had a lot of feelings about the bullpen. Nate mostly said "come on" in a variety of tones.

We traded numbers for what he called roof emergencies.

> *Roof emergency. A pigeon is in your chair and won't leave. -N*

> *Is it a big pigeon -L*

> *It's a medium pigeon with a lot of confidence -N*

> *Leave it. It's earned it -L*

One Saturday he texted to ask if he could come up during my hours, and I asked if he was wearing pants, and he came up in a full outfit, shoes and everything, with two egg sandwiches from the bodega. Bacon egg and cheese on a roll, salt pepper ketchup. He handed me one without asking how I took it, and it was how I took it, because I'd mentioned it once a week before and he'd remembered.

I'd had a bad night, a man with sepsis who'd coded twice and come back twice and was still there when I left, which is the best kind of bad night. I didn't tell Nate about it. I just ate my sandwich. The sun came up and lit the water tower on the old knitting mill on Wyckoff, and he pointed at it with his sandwich.

"My grandfather worked in that building," he said. "When it was still a mill. My grandmother used to walk him to work and then walk home."

"Every day?"

"Every day for thirty years. She said it was the only time she got to talk to him without the kids." He took a bite. "I think about that a lot. Walking somebody to work."

I didn't say anything, because I had egg in my mouth, and because I didn't know what to say.

. . .

The Fourth of July in Bushwick sounds like a war that everybody's winning.

You could see the Macy's show if you looked west past Williamsburg, tiny and silent, like fireworks inside a snow globe. But nobody in Bushwick was watching it. Everybody in Bushwick was setting off their own. By nine it was a constant crackling roar, Roman candles off rooftops, bottle rockets from Maria Hernandez Park, somebody on Knickerbocker setting off something so big it triggered every car alarm on the block, and then the people who owned the cars came outside and cheered.

It was a Saturday. Not my night on the pizza box.

> *Roof emergency. Come up. Fourth of July is a federal exception. I'm putting it in the rules -N*

I came up. He'd strung more lights. There was beer and a bowl of cherries and a plate of his tomatoes with mozzarella and basil, and

there were people on every roof I could see, with speakers and grills and sparklers, and the sky over Brooklyn was full of smoke and colored light.

"You wrote it in the rules?"

"Look."

He'd written it on the box, under six. Not under seven, I noticed. Seven was still folded under, like it was in a time-out.

6½. FOURTH OF JULY IS A FEDERAL EXCEPTION.

"That's not how numbers work," I said.

"It's how union contracts work."

We sat on the parapet with our feet hanging over the airshaft, which I would never let a patient do.

"Eleven moves," he said. "So you've never had a Fourth of July where you knew what was gonna happen."

"No."

"I've had thirty-two," he said. "They're all exactly like this. Every year somebody on Knickerbocker sets off the car alarms. Every year Mrs. Delgado in the yellow building gets on her fire escape and yells at the kids, and then she gives them all popsicles. Every year Rich burns his hand." He pointed. Two roofs over, a man in a Mets jersey was shaking his hand and swearing at a grill. "There he goes."

"Is that comforting?"

"It's the most comforting thing I know," he said.

Somebody set off something huge and gold right over us, close enough that the sparks came drifting down around us like snow, and I flinched, and he put his hand on my back. Just flat. Just there for a second, between my shoulder blades, on the damp cotton of my tank top.

Then he took it away.

I sat there feeling exactly where it had been. I felt it the rest of the night.

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The first week of August I lost a patient I'd been taking care of for nine nights.

She was forty-four. She had two daughters who did their homework in the family lounge, and one of them braided her mom's hair on the fourth night even though her mom was intubated and couldn't feel it. Somewhere in there I'd stopped thinking of her as the bed in 12. You're not supposed to do that. That's the thing about thirteen weeks. You're supposed to be good at not doing that.

I came home at 8:20 in the morning and I didn't go to bed. I went up the ladder in my scrubs.

Nate was there, which he shouldn't have been at 8:20 on a Wednesday, kneeling by the tomatoes in his work pants. He looked up and started to say something about how a transformer blew at the jobsite and they'd all been sent home.

Then he saw my face.

I sat down in the striped chair. I didn't say anything. I put my hands over my eyes and cried, the ugly kind, the kind that comes after you've held it in for twelve hours under fluorescent light, with my shoulders going.

I heard him stand up.

I waited for the hatch. Rule six. I'd written it. I'd meant it. That was the whole point. Nobody had to see it, nobody had to say anything, nobody had to be the person who stayed.

The hatch didn't open.

I heard him walk across the roof. I heard him pick something up, his cooler, and set it down next to my chair. I heard him sit on it.

He didn't say anything. He didn't touch me. He just sat there on the cooler with his elbows on his knees, facing the same direction I was facing, toward Midtown going gold in the haze. Like we were waiting for the same train.

I cried long enough that the J went by four times. He didn't move. When I was done I wiped my face on my sleeve and looked at him. He was still looking at the skyline.

"You broke rule six," I said. My voice sounded like a door that needed oil.

"I know."

"You're supposed to go down."

"I know," he said. "I'm not going down."

He didn't explain. He didn't ask what happened. He just reached into the bucket next to him and picked a tomato, a little yellow one, and held it out to me in the palm of his hand, and I laughed, wet and awful, and took it.

"You're touching the tomatoes," I said.

"It's a federal exception."

After a while he went and got the pizza box from where it leaned against the chimney, and took the Sharpie out of his pocket, and drew a single line through rule six. Neat. Like a panel label.

He didn't write anything in its place. He leaned the box back against the chimney.

Rule seven was still folded under.

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The blackout started at 9:14 p.m. on the eleventh of August, which was a Tuesday, which was my night.

It had been a hundred and one that afternoon. The hottest day in four years, the news said. People were sleeping in the cooling center at the DeKalb library. I'd worked a day shift for once, covering for somebody, and come home at eight like a wrung-out sponge.

I was on the roof in the striped chair with my feet in a dishpan of ice water, which was Nate's idea, when the city went out.

It went in pieces. First the streetlight on the corner. Then the block across Wyckoff, every window at once, like a hand closing. Then the window units on our street all stopped in the same second, and the

silence was so big I heard a dog bark four blocks away. Then the café lights over my head.

And then all of Bushwick was dark. Out to Ridgewood. Out to Cypress Hills. Only Manhattan was still lit, far off, Midtown standing in the haze like a city on another planet. For a second there wasn't a single sound.

Then everybody, on every roof and stoop and fire escape I could see, cheered.

The hatch banged open. Nate came up with a flashlight in his teeth, a camping lantern in one hand and a battery radio in the other.

"It's Tuesday," I said.

He took the flashlight out of his mouth. "Rule two has an emergency clause."

"Since when?"

"Since now. I'm an electrician, Lauren. This is literally my field." He set the lantern on the cooler and switched it on, and it made a little circle of yellow light around us. "Substation, probably. The way it went block by block, it's the whole feeder network. It's gonna be a while." He sat down on the parapet. "Your apartment's gonna be ninety degrees in an hour with no AC. Mine already is. So I figure we're up here."

"Is that a rule?"

"It's a natural law," he said, and opened two beers on the edge of the parapet like a man who'd done it ten thousand times.

The radio was 1010 WINS, a man reading out the dark neighborhoods in a calm, slightly delighted voice. Bushwick. Ridgewood. Parts of Bed-Stuy. Down on the street somebody had pulled a car up with its doors open and was playing salsa off the battery, and people were dancing in the headlights. The bodega on Jefferson had a guy out front selling every ice cream in the store for a dollar before it melted. Somebody's grandmother was on a folding chair with a flashlight under her chin, telling ghost stories in Spanish to a crowd of screaming kids.

And above all of it, for the first time since I'd moved to New York, there were stars.

Not a lot. The air was too thick. But real stars, scattered and faint, right over our heads, and I lay back in the striped chair and looked at them, and Nate leaned back against the chimney and looked at them too.

"I've never seen stars from this roof," he said. "Nine years."

"They're always there."

"I know. I'm just saying I never saw them."

The heat sat on us like a blanket you couldn't kick off. He'd taken his T-shirt off an hour in and draped it over the chimney, and I had very carefully not looked for the entire hour.

"Can I ask you something," I said.

"It's your night."

"What's rule seven?"

He didn't say anything for so long I thought he wasn't going to. A bottle rocket went up near the park, a thin whistle and a pop.

Then he got up. He went to the chimney and got the pizza box and came back and sat on the edge of my chair, which creaked, and unfolded the tuck-in flap, and held the lantern up so I could see it.

7. DON'T FALL FOR THE SUBLETTER.

I read it a few times. My heart was doing something I didn't have a code for.

"It's for me," he said. "I told you. Not for you."

"Why'd you write it?"

"Because I do this." He was looking at the box, not at me. "My last girlfriend moved to LA. The one before that went to grad school in Chicago. All my roommates moved to Jersey City. My best friend from high school is in Denver. Everybody goes somewhere. And I'm the guy who stays, and I'm fine with that. I like being the guy who stays. I like knowing Rich is gonna burn his hand. But I always fall for the one who's leaving. Every time. Like it's a skill." He laughed, not really. "And then you came up the ladder in your scrubs on a Saturday morning and stood on my basil and told me you were gone August thirty-first, and I went downstairs and I thought, nope. Not doing it. So I wrote it down. Like a panel label. So nobody gets hurt."

"Did it work?"

He looked at me then. In the lantern light his eyes were very dark and very steady, and there was sweat at his temple and along his collarbone, and his hand was on the arm of the chair next to my arm,

not touching.

"No," he said. "It did not work at all."

I sat up.

I don't really know who moved first. I like to say it was him so I can tease him about it, and he likes to say it was me for the same reason. What I know is that his hand came up to my face, slowly, giving me every chance in the world, and his thumb went across my cheekbone where it was damp from the heat, and I said "Nate" and he said "yeah" like it was the answer to a question, and then he kissed me.

It wasn't careful. We'd been careful for two months. It was a hundred degrees and somebody down on the street was playing Héctor Lavoe in the headlights, and he kissed me like he'd been thinking about it since the basil, and I kissed him back like I'd been thinking about it since he handed me an egg sandwich without asking how I took it. He tasted like cold beer. His skin was hot and slick under my hands. The striped chair, which was a cheap chair somebody had left out on Starr Street, made a noise like it wanted to file a complaint, and then it folded, very slowly, with both of us on it, and dumped us onto the silver roof.

I was laughing so hard I couldn't breathe. He was laughing into my neck.

"You broke my chair," I said.

"I gave you that chair."

"And now it's broken. That's how giving works."

He lifted his head. I was flat on my back on a warm tar roof with stars over his shoulder. He wasn't laughing anymore.

"We can stop," he said. "I mean it. I'll put my shirt on and we'll lie here and listen to the radio. We'll just do that."

"Is that a rule?"

"It can be."

I put my hand flat on his chest. His heart was going so hard I could feel it in my palm, the way I feel a pulse at work, except at work I'm counting, and here I wasn't counting at all.

"Your apartment's ninety degrees," I said.

"Ninety-four, probably."

"Mine has a window unit."

"There's no power, Lauren."

"I know," I said. "I'm just saying. It's a nicer room."

He looked at me a long time. Then he stood up, and picked up the lantern, and held out his hand.

You can't go down a ladder kissing somebody, it turns out, though we tried, and I lost a flip-flop down the hatch with a smack that echoed through the stairwell, and Mr. Pérez on the second floor yelled up, "Everything okay?" and Nate yelled back, "All good, Mr. P! Power's out!" as if that explained anything.

Becca's apartment was dark and hot. He set the lantern on the kitchen counter next to the stolen bar glasses and turned around, and I was right there, and he put his hands on my waist and lifted me onto the

counter like it was nothing, like I was a bag of potting soil, and kissed me again, slower now, like we had all the time in the world. For once we did. Nobody was going anywhere. The whole city had stopped.

His hands slid up under the hem of my tank top, hot palms on hot skin, and stopped there. Asking. I pulled it over my head myself.

He said my name like he was reading it off a panel label. Very carefully. So nobody would get hurt.

I hooked my fingers in his belt loops and pulled him in, and I said, "Nate. Bedroom. Now," in my charge nurse voice, the one that makes residents stand up straighter.

He stood up straighter.

The bedroom door didn't close all the way. It never had. Becca had warned me. But we pushed it as far as it would go, and the lantern stayed out in the kitchen, and the rest of that night is the one thing from that summer I'm not putting on a pizza box.

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The power came back at 4:41 in the morning.

Every window unit on Troutman Street came on at once with a roar like a jet taking off, and out on the street the whole block cheered again, quieter, a four-in-the-morning cheer.

Nate was asleep on his stomach with one arm across me. Becca's window unit was blowing cold air straight onto both of us, and he made a small happy sound into the pillow like a dog by a fireplace and didn't wake up.

I lay there and looked at the ceiling.

With his arm across me, I felt the thing I always feel. I've felt it in Seattle and Denver and Phoenix. It's like hearing a moving truck back up. Beep, beep, beep. Twenty days. I'd counted without meaning to. San Diego on the fifth. A furnished studio in Pacific Beach with a deposit on it.

I'm good at the first thirteen weeks. I'd told him that on the first night, on the pizza box. I'd said it like a joke. It's not a joke. It's the truest thing I know about myself. I'm good at the first thirteen weeks because I always leave before week fourteen, before anybody has a chance to find out what I'm like when I stay.

So I did what I do.

He woke up at six and kissed my shoulder and said, "I gotta go water the tomatoes, they're gonna be so mad," and I laughed and said go, and he went, and when he came back down the ladder twenty minutes later with two iced coffees, I was in the shower. When I came out he'd left one on the counter with my name on it in Sharpie and a note.

> *Best power outage of my life. Dinner tonight? Real dinner. At a table. -N*

I texted that I'd picked up an extra shift.

I hadn't, yet. I called the staffing office and picked one up.

I picked up four, actually. I came home at eight in the morning and went straight to bed and didn't go up the ladder.

> *Roof emergency. A pigeon is in your chair. Your chair is broken, so the pigeon is in the pile of your chair -N*

> *Ha. Sorry, super busy, short staffed -L*

> *Everything ok? -N*

> *Yeah! Just work -L*

He stopped texting after that. He wasn't stupid. He was the least stupid person I've ever known. He knew what it looked like when somebody started packing.

I heard him on the roof sometimes, watering the tomatoes. Not talking to them anymore. One Sunday I heard Rich say, "So what happened with the nurse?" and I heard Nate say, "She's leaving," in a perfectly normal voice, the voice of a man telling you the weather, and then I heard Rich say, "Ah, Nate. Again?" and I went into the bathroom and ran the shower so I wouldn't have to hear the rest.

. . .

On the twenty-sixth of August, Becca texted.

> *Hiiii!!! Big news, Lisbon was kind of a disaster lol, coming home early!!! Landing JFK Friday!!! Is it ok if you're out by Thurs?? I'll refund you the extra days obvi*

I sat on her kitchen floor and read it four times. Then I got her suitcase out of the closet, because she'd lent it to me with the apartment, and realized I'd have to buy my own, and that was what made me cry. Not Nate. A suitcase.

That's a lie. It was Nate.

I packed in a day. I'm very good at it. I booked a hotel near JFK for the week before San Diego, the kind with a shuttle and a breakfast where you make your own waffles, and told myself it was practical.

On Wednesday night, the last night, around ten, I went up the ladder.

I'd heard him go out at eight. Wednesday was his night. The roof was empty.

The heat wave had broken on the twentieth with a thunderstorm that took down a tree on Irving Avenue, and since then it had been a normal August, which in New York means eighty-four and wet. The café lights were on. Somebody had replaced the burned-out bulbs.

The tomatoes were enormous. I hadn't been up in two weeks and they'd gone wild, heavy and red and splitting on the vine, the stakes leaning. The roof smelled like somebody's grandmother's yard in Ridgewood.

The broken striped chair was gone. In its place was a wooden Adirondack chair, the kind you assemble from a kit with an Allen key, painted a blue that was a little uneven, like somebody had done it by hand in a hurry. There was a cushion on it.

And the pizza box was on the seat.

I picked it up. It was soft at the corners now. The grease stain had spread. Rule six still had its neat single line through it. Six and a half was still there, the federal exception. The tuck-in flap was unfolded, and rule seven had a line through it too now. Not neat. Hard, like the Sharpie had been pressed down too far and bled.

And under that, a new one, in his small panel-label capitals.

8. IF YOU WANT TO STAY, YOU JUST STAY. NOBODY SAYS ANYTHING.

I sat down in the blue chair. It held me fine. I held the box on my knees and let myself think the thing I'd been not thinking for two weeks.

Wyckoff had offered me a staff job on August thirteenth. Two days after the blackout. My nurse manager, Denise, had pulled me into her office at the end of the shift, the one I'd picked up to get away from Nate, and said, "I'm not supposed to poach travelers, but I've got a full-time line on nights and I want you on it. Benefits. Union. Think about it." And I'd said thank you, I'm committed to San Diego, and put the offer letter at the bottom of my bag under my stethoscope where I didn't have to look at it, the way I'd put everything I didn't want to look at my whole life. In a box. Taped up. Labeled. Ready to go.

It was still at the bottom of my bag. I knew exactly where.

I sat there a long time.

Here's what I'd figured out those two weeks, lying awake in Becca's bed. I wasn't good at leaving because I liked new places. I liked the moment right before I left them, when nothing could go wrong anymore because I was already gone. My whole life I'd been leaving a week early so nobody could leave me first. My dad got orders, and we went. Then I got orders, and I went. Except nobody had been giving me orders for three years. I'd been writing my own and calling it freedom.

And Nate had sat down on a cooler next to me while I cried and broken his own rule and not said one word. He'd known exactly what I was. He'd written rule seven because he knew. And he'd stayed anyway.

Somebody has to stay, I thought. Somebody has to sit on the cooler.

I heard the hatch.

I didn't turn around. I heard him come up the ladder, slow, and stop at the top. I heard him see me. He didn't say anything. He didn't come over. He stood there by the hatch the way he had on all those Tuesdays, waiting to be invited in.

I took the Sharpie out of my back pocket, because I'd started carrying one, because of him. I wrote at the bottom of the box, under eight, in my slanted downhill handwriting that had finally gotten where it was going:

9. WYCKOFF OFFERED ME A STAFF JOB. NIGHTS. I'M TAKING IT. I NEED A PLACE. NOT YOURS. CLOSE.

I held it up over my shoulder without turning around, so he could read it in the café lights.

It was quiet for a long time. Then I heard him cross the roof, the way he had the morning I cried, and pick up his cooler, and set it down next to my chair, and sit on it.

He took the box out of my hands. He took the Sharpie. He wrote something. He handed it back.

10. STARR ST. BETWEEN WYCKOFF + IRVING. 2ND FLOOR. MY SISTER'S FRIEND'S BUILDING. SHE'S MOVING TO JERSEY CITY. OBVIOUSLY. I ALREADY ASKED.

I turned and looked at him.

"You already asked?"

"Two weeks ago," he said. "The day after the blackout. When you picked up the extra shifts."

"Why?"

"Because you picked up four extra shifts the morning after I showed you rule seven," he said. "That's not what somebody does when they don't care. That's what somebody does when they're scared they do." He shrugged, like it was nothing, like it was a panel label. "So I figured either you'd leave, and I'd have asked about an apartment for nothing. Or you'd stay, and you'd need somewhere to go. I'm an electrician. You always plan for the load."

I started crying. Not the ugly kind. The other kind.

"Rule six," I said. "You're supposed to go down."

"Rule six got crossed out a long time ago, Lauren," he said, and put his hand on my back, flat, between my shoulder blades, exactly where it had been on the Fourth of July.

And he left it there.

. . .

That was two years ago.

I live on Starr Street now, second floor, in an apartment that's mine and not Becca's, with a lease I signed in my own name for two years and then signed again. It has a window unit in every room, because I learned. It's four minutes from Nate's building if you walk normally, and two if the Mets are about to win something, which has happened, in fairness, twice.

I'm on nights in the ICU at Wyckoff. Denise says I'm the first traveler she ever kept. I tell her I'm not a traveler, I'm a local, and she says it takes five years to be a local, and I tell her I've got a guy who's been local for thirty-four. I'm borrowing his.

Most mornings after a shift I walk to Troutman and let myself in with the key he gave me last Fourth of July, the first Fourth of my whole life when I knew exactly what was going to happen, and climb the ladder, and he's there. Watering the tomatoes. Talking to them. There are nineteen buckets now. I saved the seeds last September on a paper towel on top of his fridge, and he stood in the kitchen doorway and watched me do it and didn't say anything for a long time, and then went into the bathroom for a while, and came out and kissed me on the forehead like it was a federal exception.

Some mornings he walks me home. Some mornings I walk him to work.

The pizza box lives in a Ziploc bag taped inside the chimney where the rain can't get it, next to the PRIVATE sign. There are thirty-one rules on it now, front and back and both flaps. Some are crossed out. One is in Becca's handwriting and says I'M SO SORRY ABOUT THE SIXTY DOLLARS NATE, which she wrote at my housewarming and then still didn't pay him, so that one's crossed out too.

The newest one is from last night. I came up the ladder on a Tuesday, my night by treaty, and he was sitting on the parapet with the box on his knees and the Sharpie in his teeth, and he didn't fold anything under this time. He held it up for me in the café lights, the bulbs uneven, a couple burned out, Manhattan standing in the haze behind him like it was waiting to see what I'd say.

It's at the very bottom. Rule thirty-one. Small, in those neat capitals, so nobody gets hurt.

31. MARRY ME? (THIS ONE YOU HAVE TO SAY OUT LOUD.)

I said it out loud. I said it loud enough that the guy on the next roof stopped doing tai chi and clapped.

Then I took the Sharpie and wrote under it, so it would be on paper, for the historical record.

32. YES. THE ROOF IS OURS.

— Shay

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