The Ice Cream Truck

Every day at 4:15 the lifeguard buys a Choco Taco from her late uncle's ice cream truck, and as far as Katie knows, there are only ninety-six of them left in the world.

The jingle box in Gene's truck played "The Entertainer," and it stuck on the fourth bar.

Every time. Da-da-da-DUM, da-da-da-DUM, da-da-da... and then a little hiccup, a mechanical gulp, like the song had swallowed wrong, before it caught itself and went on. Katie had been hearing it her whole life. She'd heard it from the back of the truck when she was six, sitting on a milk crate with a Bomb Pop running down her chin. She'd heard it in her head at her desk on the thirty-first floor of a building on Park Avenue, at the exact moment a partner asked her a question about deferred revenue. Da-da-da... gulp.

She heard it now, on the Saturday of Memorial Day weekend, parked at the bottom of the boardwalk ramp at West 15th Street, with the Cyclone clattering two blocks behind her and the whole beach spread out in front of her like a towel somebody had shaken out. She'd turned it on to see if it still worked. It did. She sat in the driver's seat with her hands on the big flat steering wheel and cried for exactly as long as the song lasted, which was a minute and twelve seconds, and then she wiped her face on a napkin from the dispenser and opened the window.

SWEET GENE'S, the side of the truck said, in red letters Gene had repainted himself every April for thirty-one years, a little crooked, leaning uphill. Underneath was a cone with a face on it, winking. Under the cone, smaller: SOFT SERVE • NOVELTIES • SINCE 1994 • GOD BLESS.

Gene had died in March. In his sleep, in his apartment on Neptune Avenue, with the TV on and a crossword on his chest. His heart just stopped, the way hearts sometimes do at seventy-three after two bypasses and a lifetime of soft serve. He'd left her the truck. A 1987 Chevy step van with a Taylor soft-serve machine that leaked, a generator you had to kick, a freezer full of novelties, and a will written on a single sheet of yellow legal paper that said, in its entirety:

> *The truck goes to Katie. She'll know what to do with it. —Eugene F. Moran*

She didn't know what to do with it. That was the problem.

. . .

Her mother had said it on the phone in April, from her kitchen in Massapequa, in the voice she used for people who parked in the fire lane.

"You're going to take a leave of absence from a CPA job to sell Choco Tacos on Coney Island."

"They don't make Choco Tacos anymore, Mom. They stopped in 2022."

"You know what I mean, Kathleen."

"It's one summer. The firm's holding my spot till October. I run it through Labor Day and then I sell it. There's a guy in Hoboken who does vintage trucks for weddings. He offered twenty-two thousand."

"So sell it now. Why not?"

Katie had been standing in Gene's apartment when her mother asked. It still smelled like Old Spice and coffee and the Vicks he rubbed on his chest every night whether he had a cold or not. On the refrigerator, under a magnet shaped like the Wonder Wheel, there was a photo of Katie at eight, missing her front teeth, holding a cone bigger than her head, sitting on the counter of the truck. She hadn't known he had that. She hadn't been inside this apartment in five years.

"Because I didn't come see him," she'd said.

Her mother was quiet for a long time.

"Honey," she said finally. "He knew you were busy."

It was the worst thing anybody could have said, and her mother had meant it as the kindest.

. . .

The first customer who mattered was a lifeguard.

It was 4:15 by the dashboard clock, the only thing in the truck that kept good time, and she'd sold exactly nine things all day, about four hundred fewer than Gene would have. The boardwalk was packed. Everybody on it walked straight past Sweet Gene's to the Nathan's on Stillwell, or to the shiny Mister Softee trucks lined up on Surf Avenue with their new paint and their jingle that didn't stick.

He came up from the sand barefoot, in red shorts and a faded red Parks Department windbreaker, with a whistle on a lanyard and a white stripe of zinc down his nose. Tall. Brown hair gone light at the ends. Thirty or so. He stopped at the window and looked at her like

he'd been expecting someone else.

Then he seemed to figure it out. Something in his face went quiet.

"Hey," he said.

"Hi. What can I get you?"

"Choco Taco."

She almost laughed. "They don't make those anymore."

"I know," he said, patiently, like she was a kid who'd swum past the rope. "Gene's got four cases. Back freezer, bottom left, behind the Bomb Pops. He bought out a distributor in Secaucus the week they announced it."

She stared at him. Then she went to the chest freezer in the back and moved about fifty Bomb Pops, and there in the bottom left corner, under frost so thick she had to scrape it off with a spatula, were four cardboard cases. KLONDIKE CHOCO TACO. 24 CT. Somebody had written on the top one in black marker, in handwriting she knew better than her own:

> *DO NOT SELL TO TOURISTS*

She brought one to the window. It was hard as a brick. The wrapper crackled.

"Are these even safe?"

"He ate one every year on his birthday," the lifeguard said. "He was fine."

"He's dead."

"Not from the Choco Tacos." He put a five on the counter. "Keep the change."

She watched him walk back down the ramp and climb into the tall white lifeguard chair at the edge of the water at West 16th, and unwrap it, and eat it in about four bites while looking at the ocean. He didn't look back at the truck once.

She didn't ask his name. She didn't think to. She found a grease pencil in Gene's drawer, and on the inside of the freezer lid she wrote 96, and crossed it out, and wrote 95.

. . .

He came back the next day at 4:15.

And the next.

And on Memorial Day itself, when she had a line of twenty people and the soft-serve machine was leaking onto her sneakers. The lifeguard got in line and waited. When it was his turn he held up one finger, and she went to the back and got it, and he put a five on the counter and said, "Your machine's leaking."

"I'm aware."

"There's a gasket on the bottom. By the drip tray. Gene used to tighten it with a butter knife."

"Why do you know that?"

He was already walking away. "Because he made me do it."

So she found a butter knife and tightened the gasket, and the machine stopped leaking, and she stood there in the truck furious about it for

reasons she couldn't name.

. . .

By the second week of June she'd learned the beach.

She learned that the Russian grandmothers from Brighton came at eleven in sun hats and bought single vanilla cones and told her she was too thin and that Gene was a gentleman. She learned that the kids from the Coney Island Houses came in a pack at two, on bikes, and that the oldest, a skinny kid named Marcus with a Yankees cap on backward, would try to pay for all of them in quarters, and that if he came up short she was supposed to pretend she'd counted wrong. Because that was what Gene did. Because it said so in the notebooks.

There were notebooks. Dozens of them, spiral-bound, from the CVS on Mermaid Avenue, stuffed in the glove box and under the seat. Gene had written down every day. The weather. What sold. Who came by. In the evenings, at his kitchen table with the window open and the Q train rattling by on the elevated tracks, Katie read them.

> *June 14 2009. 88 and sunny. Out of Bomb Pops by 3. Mrs. Ortiz came by, says her boy got into Brooklyn Tech!! Free cones for the whole crew.*

> *Aug 2 2013. Rain all day. 4 customers. One was a seagull.*

> *July 9 2015. New lifeguard kid at 16th St. Ryan. Looks 12, says he's 20. Choco Taco.*

> *June 22 2016. Ryan's dad passed. Heart. Kid sat in the truck an hour and didn't say a word. Gave him a Choco Taco. Didn't charge him. Made him tighten the gasket.*

> *March 3 2019. Katie's birthday. Called. Got the voicemail. She's real busy. Proud of that kid.*

She stopped reading at that one. In 2019 she'd been in her first year at the firm, working ninety-hour weeks, and she remembered seeing a missed call from Uncle Gene on her birthday and thinking, I'll call him back this weekend. She was pretty sure she hadn't.

So his name was Ryan.

She liked that the notebook told her. Like Gene had introduced them.

. . .

"Ryan," she said the next day at 4:15, before he could hold up his finger.

He stopped. He looked genuinely startled, the first time she'd seen him look like anything but patient or sunburned.

"How do you know that?"

"Gene wrote everything down," she said. "July 9th, 2015. You looked twelve and said you were twenty."

"I was nineteen," he said. "And a half."

"He was very proud of that seagull, too."

"August 2013." He nodded slowly. "It ate a Fudgsicle. He was still talking about it when I met him." He put the five down. "So you're

reading the notebooks."

"I'm in 2019."

He looked at her the way people look at a casket, like they know something's inside it and aren't going to say what. Then he said, "You should keep going," and took his Choco Taco, and went.

On the inside of the freezer lid she crossed out 75 and wrote 74.

. . .

She found out he taught history at Abraham Lincoln High on Ocean Parkway. Tenth grade. Global History, the one with the Regents exam everybody failed. He'd lifeguarded Coney every summer since he was nineteen, twelve summers, which made him thirty-one, and he did it, he said, because it was the only job he'd ever had where if you were good at it, nothing happened.

"You watch for nine hours," he said. He was leaning on the counter at 4:20, five minutes longer than he'd ever stayed. "If you're doing it right, nobody drowns, and nobody notices you did anything. You blow the whistle before they get to the rip and they get mad at you and swim back in."

"That sounds like accounting."

"How is that like accounting?"

"If I do my job right, nobody notices. If I do it wrong, somebody goes to jail."

He laughed. It came out of him sudden and loud, and a woman going by with a stroller turned to look. It made her want to say something

else funny right away, which was a dangerous feeling.

"So you're an accountant."

"CPA. On leave. From a firm with a coffee machine that makes eleven kinds of coffee and nobody's ever home before nine."

"And you came here. Why?"

She looked past him at the beach. The chairs every few blocks, the guards up in them in red like a row of cardinals. The Parachute Jump standing over everything, red and skeletal, and the Wonder Wheel turning slow as a clock.

"He left me the truck," she said. "He said I'd know what to do with it."

"Do you?"

"No," she said. "I'm selling it on Labor Day."

Something shifted in his face. Not much. Like the tide pulling back an inch.

"Huh," he said. And then, after a second, "Okay." And he took his Choco Taco and went back to his chair.

· · ·

Summer settled in the way it does on Coney Island, all at once and then forever.

The Cyclones played at night at Maimonides Park, and the organ came over the parking lot. Every Friday there were fireworks off the beach, and she'd stay late and sell out. The guy who ran the balloon-dart game on the Bowery, Benny, a skinny old man with a

gold tooth and a Mets visor, came by every afternoon for a root beer float and told her a different story about Gene, all of which he swore were true and none of which could possibly have been.

"He wrestled a guy from the Polar Bear Club," Benny said. "In 1998. In January. In the ocean."

"Why?"

"Over a parking spot." Benny sucked on his straw. "Gene won. He was a very cold man that day."

She learned to kick the generator low on the left, with the side of her foot. She learned that the jingle box would play through if you smacked it on top right at the fourth bar, the way you'd pat someone on the back who was choking. She learned the names of all of Marcus's crew, and that the smallest, Jayden, was allergic to everything except lemon ice, so she started keeping lemon ice.

And she learned Ryan.

He came at 4:15. Always. After a while he stopped needing to hold up the finger, because she'd have it on the counter by the time he got up the ramp. He paid with a five and said keep the change. He leaned on the window a little longer every week. Five minutes. Ten. One afternoon in late June a thunderstorm cleared the beach and he came up and sat in the passenger seat with the door open and the rain coming down sideways on Surf Avenue, and they ate soft serve out of paper cups and talked for two hours about nothing. About the Regents. About her worst client, a man who'd tried to deduct a racehorse. About his mother in Gerritsen Beach, who called him every Sunday to ask if he'd met a girl yet, and who this year had

started asking about "the ice cream girl," because Benny's nephew did her nails.

"Benny's a menace," Katie said.

"Benny is a public health crisis."

He had a scar on his chin from a jetty when he was nine. He had a way of watching the water even when he was talking to her, even from inside the truck, his eyes going out to the ocean every few seconds and coming back. Like part of him was always on duty.

She found it very hard not to look at him while he did it.

On the freezer lid she crossed out 62 and wrote 61.

. . .

The Fourth of July fell on a Saturday. She sold out by six, even the Push-Ups she was sure had been there since the Clinton administration. At eight, when the guards came off the chairs, Ryan came up the ramp in jeans and a gray T-shirt, the first time she'd ever seen him in real clothes, and leaned on the window.

"You sold out."

"I sold out."

"So you're closed. Come on. I want to show you something."

He took her down the boardwalk, past Ruby's, where two older couples were dancing to Motown like nobody had told them they were old, all the way to where the boardwalk ran out near the fence at Sea Gate and the beach went quiet. A long rock jetty ran out into the water. He climbed out onto it like it was a staircase, and held his hand

back for her, and she took it.

They sat at the very end with their shoes in their hands. Back down the beach the whole of Coney Island was lit up, the Wonder Wheel in pink and green, the Parachute Jump glowing red, and as they watched, the first fireworks went up. Gold. Then red. The sound came a full second after the light.

"Gene used to bring me out here," Ryan said. "After my dad. That summer. He'd close up at eight and we'd walk down here and sit, and he wouldn't say anything. Every night for like a month."

"He never told me any of that."

"Would you have asked?"

It wasn't mean. That was the worst part. He said it gently, like a question he actually wanted answered. She looked at the fireworks and didn't say anything, because the answer was no. She'd been on the thirty-first floor.

"Sorry," he said. "That came out wrong."

"It came out right," she said. "That's the problem."

He put his hand on the rock between them, near hers, not touching. A big one went up, white and crackling, and lit his face, and he was looking at her instead of the sky. He looked at her the way he watched the water. Like he couldn't stop.

She thought he was going to kiss her. She thought she was going to let him. She leaned in about an inch and he leaned in about an inch, and she could see the salt dried white in his eyelashes, and behind them on the beach a kid screamed, "LUKE! YO, IS THAT THE

LIFEGUARD?"

Marcus. Of course. With his whole crew, standing on the sand at the base of the jetty waving sparklers like an airport ground crew.

"Hey, Marcus," Ryan said, without turning around, in the voice of a man who would have him in Global History in a year and a half.

"IS THAT THE ICE CREAM LADY? Y'ALL ON A DATE?"

"Goodnight, Marcus."

"JAYDEN, THE LIFEGUARD AND THE ICE CREAM LADY ARE ON A—"

Katie put her face in her hands and laughed until she couldn't breathe. When she looked up Ryan was laughing too, head back, and the moment was gone, out to sea, and it was okay. It was almost better. Like they both knew it would come back.

· · ·

It came back in the third week of August, wrong.

The guy from Hoboken was named Trevor. He drove out on a Thursday in a white Range Rover with a clipboard and a man named Hunter who did his trucks' "aesthetic refreshes," and they walked around Sweet Gene's at the bottom of the ramp taking pictures with their phones.

"So obviously this goes," Hunter said, tapping the winking cone. "It's a little... regional. We'll do a matte pastel. Mint, maybe. Blush. Script logo. The soft-serve machine comes out, it's a liability at events. We put in a prosecco tap."

"A prosecco tap," Katie said.

"People love a moment."

"And the jingle box?"

Trevor laughed. "Bluetooth. Brides like to pick their own song."

She stood there with the sun on the back of her neck and watched Hunter photograph the place where Gene had painted, smaller than everything else, GOD BLESS, and she thought she might throw up.

That was when she saw Ryan.

He was standing at the top of the ramp in his red shorts. It was 4:15. He'd come for his Choco Taco. He was looking at the Range Rover and the clipboard and Hunter photographing the cone, and he had the most careful expression she'd ever seen on anybody, the look of someone holding very still so they don't scare a thing away.

She signed nothing. She told Trevor she'd confirm by Labor Day. When the Range Rover pulled out, she went around to the window and Ryan was standing there.

"A prosecco tap," he said.

"You heard that."

"The whole boardwalk heard that. Benny's going to tell people it was a mob hit."

"I told you I was selling it."

"In June. I thought you'd—" He stopped. He looked at the water. He looked back. "I thought you'd change your mind."

"Why would I change my mind? The commissary is eight hundred a month. The insurance is three grand. Gene's permit is up at the end of September, and the waitlist for a new one is like fifteen years, it's insane, and I have a job, Ryan. A real job that pays real money. They're not holding it forever."

"Gene would hate this."

"Gene's not here."

It came out loud. A couple coming off the beach with a rolling cooler looked over, and away.

He didn't flinch. He just stood there and took it, like a wave.

"He asked me," he said quietly, "to look out for you."

She went still.

"In March. At Coney Island Hospital, the week before he went home. He was all hooked up to everything and grumpy about the Jell-O, and he grabbed my wrist and said, Katie's gonna take the truck. She's gonna try to do it all by herself because she's a Moran and we're stubborn as mules. Keep an eye on her." He swallowed. "So I came by. The first day. To check. And I didn't know what to say, so I ordered a Choco Taco."

It went into her slowly, like cold water.

"So that's what this is," she said.

"Katie."

"Every day at 4:15. You're doing a favor for a dying man."

"That's how it started—"

"I'm a promise you made in a hospital." She laughed, and it wasn't a laugh. "Oh my God. All summer. The gasket. The jetty. I thought—" She couldn't finish. "I'm a chore. I'm Gene's last chore. You're checking on me like I'm a rip current."

"That's not—"

"You can stop," she said. "You did it. I'm okay. You can tell him you did it, wherever he is. You don't have to come anymore."

He looked at her for a long time. The tide pulling back.

Then he nodded once, and put a five on the counter, though she hadn't given him anything, and walked back down the ramp to his chair.

She didn't cross anything out on the freezer lid that day. Nine. It stayed nine.

. . .

He didn't come the next day.

She told herself she didn't care. She smacked the jingle box and smiled at the Russian grandmothers, and at 4:15 she watched the dashboard clock go to 4:16, and 4:17, and 4:30, and five, and down the beach he was in his chair at West 16th, facing the water, and he did not look back at the truck once.

He didn't come the day after that, either. Or the one after that.

Nine.

On the fourth night, in Gene's apartment, she couldn't sleep. The Q went by on the elevated tracks every twelve minutes and lit up the

ceiling. She got up and sat at the kitchen table and pulled the last milk crate toward her, the notebooks from the end, the ones she'd been not reading because she knew how they ended.

> *Jan 4 2026. Cold. Truck's in the commissary. Called Katie, she picked up!! 4 min. She sounds tired. Told her I'm fine.*

> *Feb 10 2026. Doc says the heart's not great. Didn't tell Donna. Don't tell Katie, it's busy season.*

> *Feb 28 2026. Ryan came by w/ soup from the Russian place. Says it's borscht. Tastes like a beet's revenge. Kid's good. Told him about Katie again. He says I talk about her more than the Mets. He's not wrong.*

> *Mar 2 2026. Told Ryan she's not coming, she's too busy, that's ok. He says "She'll come. And when she does I'll look out for her." Bet him a Choco Taco.*

She read it three times. Then she turned the page.

There was one more entry. The handwriting was worse. Shaky, slanting downhill.

> *Mar 9 2026. If Katie takes the truck: tell her she doesn't have to keep it. Tell her it's ok. The truck was never the point. The point is having somewhere to be every day where people are glad to see you. She can find that anywhere. I just hope she finds it.*

He'd died on the eleventh.

Katie sat at her uncle's kitchen table at three in the morning with the notebook open and cried until the Q went by four more times. And then she cried a little more, because she understood that by the time

Gene grabbed Ryan's wrist in that hospital bed, he wasn't asking for anything.

Ryan had already offered.

She's not coming, Gene had said. And Ryan had said, she'll come. Before he'd ever met her. Just because a man he loved wanted it to be true.

. . .

The storm came in on the twenty-ninth of August.

It had been a hurricane once, off the Carolinas, and by the time it reached New York it was a tropical storm with a lot of opinions. The Parks Department closed the beaches at noon. The city put out flash flood warnings for every neighborhood that had flooded in Sandy, which meant here. The sky over the ocean went the color of a bruise, then the color of a parking garage.

She should have left at noon. Benny came by at one, holding his visor on with both hands, and yelled through the window, "Katie, sweetheart, go home! Gene always went home!" and she said she was going, she was just finishing up, which was a lie, because there was nothing to finish. There was nobody on the boardwalk at all.

She stayed because it was almost 4:15.

She didn't decide to. She was just watching the dashboard clock, and it said 4:15, and his chair at West 16th stood empty, the guards pulled off hours ago. Nobody was coming. Of course nobody was coming. Nine days. And she sat there anyway with the rain starting so hard it sounded like gravel on the roof, and felt like the stupidest person

alive.

At 4:40 she tried to start the truck.

A click. Then another click.

The street was flooding. The storm drains at the bottom of West 15th had given up, and water was coming down brown and fast, an inch, two inches. A Nathan's cup went sailing past like a little boat. Gene had always parked here because it was the best spot. Gene had also always gone home at noon.

Click.

She put her forehead on the steering wheel.

Someone banged on the passenger window.

She almost screamed. It was a man in a dark Parks Department rain jacket with the hood up and water running off it in sheets, and then he pushed the hood back and it was Ryan. Soaked. Hair plastered to his forehead. His face furious and scared in a way she'd never seen.

She unlocked the door. He yanked it open and climbed in and slammed it, and for a second the rain was so loud she couldn't hear what he was saying.

"—beaches closed at NOON, Katie, there's a flash flood warning for the whole—"

"How are you here?"

"I was at the lifeguard station on Stillwell doing the storm checklist. Benny called the station." He wiped his face with both hands. "Benny called the actual Parks Department and told them the ice cream lady

was gonna drown."

"I'm not gonna drown."

"The water's halfway up your tires!"

"It won't start."

He leaned across her, all wet raincoat and cold, and turned the key. Click. He swore. He sat back. Then he said, "Pump the gas three times."

"What?"

"Three times, all the way to the floor. Then hold it halfway and turn it. And you have to say the thing."

"What thing?"

He looked embarrassed, even soaking wet, even with the street turning into a river. "Gene used to say, 'Saint Anthony, Saint Anthony, please come around, something is lost and must be found.' It's the prayer for lost things. He said it was the only thing that worked on a Chevy."

She looked at him. He looked at her.

She pumped the gas three times.

"Saint Anthony, Saint Anthony," she said, and her voice cracked, and she started laughing, and he was laughing too, "please come around—"

"Something is lost," Ryan said with her, "and must be found—"

She turned the key. The engine coughed, choked, caught, and roared.

"Go," he said. "Go go go. Left on Surf. Up to the stadium lot, it's higher."

She went. The truck plowed through the water at the bottom of West 15th like a tugboat, a wave peeling off the bumper, and she swung left onto Surf Avenue with every streetlight on Coney Island swinging in the wind and the rain coming so hard the wipers couldn't keep up, and somewhere in the jolt of the turn her elbow hit the switch for the jingle box.

Da-da-da-DUM. Da-da-da-DUM.

"Oh my God," she said. "Turn it off—"

"I'm not touching it," Ryan said. "It's good luck."

Da-da-da... gulp.

He reached up and smacked it on top. It caught, and went on. And Sweet Gene's drove up Surf Avenue through the worst storm of the summer, past the dark Wonder Wheel and the shuttered Nathan's and the empty Stillwell Avenue terminal with water pouring off its roof, playing "The Entertainer" at full volume to absolutely no one, and Katie laughed so hard she could barely see the road.

. . .

The lot by Maimonides Park was empty and high and shining with rain. She pulled into the middle of it, away from the light poles, and turned off the engine, and the jingle stopped, and then there was nothing but the rain on the roof and the two of them breathing.

The windows had fogged completely. The inside of the truck was gray and dim and close. The generator was still running, the freezer

humming, and the whole van smelled like vanilla and wet raincoat and the sea.

Ryan pushed his jacket off his shoulders. His T-shirt was soaked through anyway.

"You stayed," he said. "Why did you stay?"

She looked at the clock on the dashboard.

He followed her eyes. 5:02. She watched him understand it, slowly, like a tide coming in.

"Katie," he said.

"I read the last notebook," she said. She was looking at the fogged windshield, not at him. "March second. You offered first. Before the hospital, before he ever asked. He said I wasn't coming and you said I would. You bet him a Choco Taco."

He didn't say anything for a long time.

"He said you were too busy," Ryan said finally. "Like he was proud of it. And I sat there with my stupid borscht thinking, she's gonna come. Nobody gets a whole notebook a year written about them and doesn't come. I'd only ever seen a picture on his fridge of a kid with no front teeth." He laughed a little. "And then you were sitting in his window on Memorial Day with your face all blotchy like you'd just been crying, telling me they don't make Choco Tacos anymore. And I thought, okay. I'll make sure she's okay. One day. Two days."

"And then?"

"And then you tightened the gasket with a butter knife and you were so mad about it," he said. "So mad that I knew something about your

truck. And I sat in my chair for four hours thinking about how mad you were, and I thought, oh no." He turned and looked at her. "It stopped being a favor the second week. I came at 4:15 because it was the best part of my day. Because you smack the jingle box like you're mad at it. Because you keep lemon ice for Jayden. Because you laughed at Marcus on the jetty. I didn't come because of Gene. I came because of you." He swallowed. "And then you said I was doing a chore, and I thought, she's right about one thing. She's leaving on Labor Day. Back to Park Avenue. I'm the lifeguard. So I stopped."

"I'm sorry," she said. "I was awful to you."

"You were a little awful."

"A guy named Hunter was photographing GOD BLESS for a prosecco tap and I wanted to burn everything down, and you were standing right there."

"I know," he said. "I've been yelled at by a lot of people I was trying to keep from drowning. Usually they say sorry once they're on the sand."

"Is that where I am? On the sand?"

He looked at her in the gray light. The rain was so loud. The windows were completely white. It was like sitting inside a cloud.

"I don't know," he said. "Are you?"

She reached over and put her hand on his face. He was cold and wet, his skin rough with salt and a little stubble, and he closed his eyes when she touched him, like it hurt, like it was a relief.

"The count's been stuck," she said. "On the freezer lid. Nine. It's been nine for nine days."

"I know," he said. "I counted too."

She kissed him.

He made a sound against her mouth, low and surprised, like he'd been standing at the window for nine days and she'd finally opened it. Then his hand came up into her hair, wet and tangled from the storm, and he kissed her back, and it wasn't gentle at all. It was like going under a wave. He tasted like rain and salt. She was half out of the driver's seat, leaning across the gap, and the gearshift was in a terrible place, and neither of them cared. He pulled her across by the waist and she ended up in his lap in the passenger seat of a 1987 Chevy step van with her knees on either side of him and the door handle digging into her shin, and his hands were on her back under her wet T-shirt, cold palms on warm skin, and she gasped, and he said "sorry, sorry, my hands—" and she said "don't you dare move them," and he laughed into her neck and didn't.

She pulled back to breathe. His eyes were dark. There was sand, somehow, still, along his jaw. She brushed it off with her thumb.

"I've wanted to do that since the jetty," he said.

"I've wanted to do that since the gasket."

"You were furious about the gasket."

"I know. It was very confusing for me."

He laughed and kissed her again, slower, and she felt it go all the way through her, the long pull of it, like the undertow he spent all summer

watching for, and she thought, I'm going to swim straight into it and I don't care. His mouth was on her throat. Her hands were in his wet hair. She shifted in his lap and her elbow hit the dashboard and the jingle box came on again.

Da-da-da-DUM. Da-da-da-DUM.

They both froze. Then they both completely fell apart. She laughed so hard she had to put her forehead on his shoulder. He laughed so hard the truck rocked on its springs.

Da-da-da... gulp.

He reached up without looking and smacked it, and it caught, and played on, cheerful and ridiculous and loud, while the rain hammered on SWEET GENE'S and the two of them sat tangled up in the passenger seat laughing until they were crying, and somewhere in the middle of it she could swear she felt Gene laughing too.

"I live in Brighton," Ryan said finally, into her hair, when the song was over. "Brighton 6th. Third floor, over a Georgian bakery. It's like six minutes."

"Are you asking me to come over?"

"I'm asking you to come over."

"In a flood."

"I'm a lifeguard," he said. "I'll get you there."

. . .

The rain had gone soft by the time they left the truck. The storm had blown itself out toward Long Island, and the sky was breaking up into

ragged pieces, and through one of them, low over the ocean, there was a strip of clear gold where the sun was going down.

They took the boardwalk. It was empty in a way she'd never seen, not one person from the Aquarium to the Parachute Jump, the planks dark and shining, puddles holding the torn-up sky. The beach below was smooth and new, scraped clean. The lifeguard chairs stood every few blocks like tall white herons.

He held her hand. He walked on the ocean side, between her and the water, without thinking about it. She noticed. She didn't say anything.

Where the boardwalk reached Brighton he stopped and pulled her against the railing and kissed her again, the last of the sun on both of them. A man walking a very small dog in a very small raincoat went by and said something in Russian that sounded approving.

The bakery on Brighton 6th was closed, but it smelled like bread anyway, warm and sweet through the shutter. The stairs up to his place were narrow and painted a chipped green. On the second-floor landing he stopped to kiss her against the wall and she dropped her keys, which weren't keys to anything here, they were Gene's truck keys, and he picked them up and put them in her hand and closed her fingers around them.

"You sure?" he said.

"Ryan."

"I'm a lifeguard. I have to ask. It's in the training."

"I'm sure," she said. "I've been sure since a Wednesday in June. I just didn't tell anybody."

His door was blue. He opened it, and pulled her in by the hand, and she went. She kicked it shut behind them with her heel, and the rest of the storm stayed outside.

. . .

She woke early to the rumble of the Q and the smell of bread.

The light through his bedroom window was clean and white, the way it only ever is the morning after a storm. He was asleep on his stomach with one arm flung across her, his sunburn peeling a little at the shoulder, his face relaxed in a way she'd never seen it. Not watching anything. Off duty. She lay there looking at him and thought about a notebook entry that didn't exist yet.

> *Aug 30. Clear. 79. Woke up somewhere people are glad to see me.*

She got up and called the firm. It was 6:40 in the morning and nobody would be there, which was the point. She left a voicemail for her managing partner, Ellen, who had once told her she was the best second-year she'd ever had and then given her a hundred-hour week.

"Hi, Ellen. It's Katie Moran. I'm calling to let you know I won't be coming back in October. I'm really grateful for everything. I'll put it in writing today." She paused. "I'm starting a practice. Small. Bookkeeping and taxes for small businesses, mostly cash businesses. There are a lot of them out here and nobody's doing their books right. One of them tried to deduct a racehorse." She paused again. "That's all. Thank you."

She hung up and stood in Ryan's kitchen in his T-shirt with her heart going so hard she could feel it in her teeth.

"Did you just quit your job," Ryan said from the bedroom doorway, rubbing his eyes, "from my kitchen?"

"I did."

"At six-forty in the morning."

"I didn't want to talk to anybody."

He came and stood in front of her and put his hands on her face. "What about the truck?"

"I'm keeping it," she said. "Benny's nephew's girlfriend is a lawyer. She says Gene's permit can go to family if I file before the thirtieth. It's a whole thing, but it's possible. The truck in the summer, the books in the winter. Benny's been paying his taxes out of a shoebox, Ryan. Literally a shoebox."

"Benny is a public health crisis."

"He's my first client."

He kissed her. Then again. Then he said, against her mouth, "So you're staying."

"I'm staying."

"On the sand."

"On the sand," she said.

. . .

Labor Day was hot and bright and perfect, the kind of day that feels like summer apologizing for leaving.

Marcus and his crew came at two and paid in quarters and were short, and she counted wrong. Jayden got a lemon ice. Benny came by for a root beer float and told her that in 2004 Gene had won a hot dog eating contest, not the Nathan's one, a secret one, in a basement in Gravesend, and she said, "Benny, that's not true," and he said, "Sweetheart, everything's true if you tell it right."

Trevor from Hoboken had answered her email with one line, Your loss! Hunter is devastated about the cone, and she'd taped it next to the dashboard clock.

At 4:15, Ryan came up the ramp.

Red shorts. Whistle. Zinc. He'd been on the chair since ten, his last day of the season, and behind him on the beach the Parks trucks were already backing down onto the sand to haul the chairs away for the winter, one by one, like a crew striking a set.

She had it on the counter by the time he got there.

He looked at it. Then at her.

"How many's that leave?"

She went to the back and opened the freezer lid. On the inside, in grease pencil, there was a long column of crossed-out numbers. Ninety-six at the top. Down and down, every day of the summer. A nine, circled hard, so it stood out. And then down again, every day since the storm.

At the bottom of the column, the number was one.

"One," she said.

"Huh," he said. "One."

"It's because of the nine days." She closed the lid. "If you hadn't stopped coming we'd have run out a week ago. The fight's the only reason there's one left."

"So the fight was good for something."

"The fight was terrible."

"Terrible things can be good for something," he said. "That's the whole Global History Regents in one sentence."

He put a five on the counter. He said keep the change. He didn't take the Choco Taco. He slid it back across the counter toward her.

"What are you doing?"

"Keep it," he said. "Put it back. Bottom left. Behind the Bomb Pops."

"Why?"

He leaned on the window, the way he'd leaned on it all summer, a little longer every week. Behind him the Wonder Wheel turned slow as a clock. The last chair was going up onto the back of a Parks truck. Out on the water the light was going gold.

"Because as long as there's one left," he said, "it's not over."

She looked at him a long time. Then she reached up and smacked the jingle box on top, before it even got to the fourth bar, just to hear it play.

. . .

The Choco Taco spent the winter in the commissary lot in Gravesend, back freezer, bottom left, behind the Bomb Pops, in a Ziploc bag with a Post-it in her handwriting that said DO NOT SELL TO TOURISTS. Benny's taxes were filed in March, out of a shoebox, and he got a refund for the first time in thirty years and cried in her office, which was Gene's kitchen table. She has eleven clients now. One of them is the bakery on Brighton 6th, which pays her partly in bread.

Ryan still teaches Global History. Marcus is in his class this year and is failing on purpose, Ryan says, to get a reaction. Ryan's mother came to dinner at Gene's apartment in October with a lasagna the size of a tire, looked at Katie for a long time, and said, "So you're the ice cream girl," and Katie said yes, and his mother said, "Good," and that was the whole conversation, and it was enough.

In April, Katie repainted the side of the truck herself. A little crooked, leaning uphill. She left the winking cone. She left GOD BLESS. She just added one line under SWEET GENE'S, smaller.

& KATIE'S • SINCE LAST SUMMER

On the Saturday of Memorial Day weekend she parked at the bottom of the ramp at West 15th and turned on the jingle box to see if it still worked. It did. It stuck on the fourth bar. She didn't cry this time. She smacked it, and it went on.

At 4:15 he came up from the sand, barefoot, in red shorts, with a whistle on his chest and a white stripe of zinc down his nose. He stopped at the window and looked at her the way he had the very first day. Like he'd been expecting someone. Only this time it was

her.

"Hey," he said.

"Hi. What can I get you?"

"Choco Taco."

"They don't make those anymore," she said.

"I know," he said. "There's one left. Back freezer, bottom left."

She went and got it. It was hard as a brick. The wrapper crackled. She came around the side of the truck and climbed up onto the counter and sat there in the sun with her legs hanging down like she was eight years old, and unwrapped it, and broke it in half.

They ate it in about four bites, looking at the ocean.

It tasted like freezer burn and chocolate and the whole summer. It was the best thing she'd ever eaten.

"Well," she said when it was gone. "That's it. That's the last one in the world."

"Probably," he said.

"So it's over."

He wiped the chocolate off her lip with his thumb, and smiled, and reached into the pocket of his red windbreaker and set something on the counter beside her. A small square of paper, folded tight. For one wild second she thought it was going to be a ring. It wasn't. It was a Choco Taco wrapper, the one from the very first day, flattened and folded carefully into a little square, the way you'd fold a note in high school. She opened it. On the inside, in black marker, in his

handwriting:

> *Same time tomorrow? Every tomorrow. —L*

She looked up. He was watching her. He wasn't watching the water at all.

"It's not over," she said.

"It's never over," he said. "That's the whole point of summer. It comes back."

Down on the beach, a Parks truck was backing onto the sand with his chair on the back, tall and white, to set it in its place for the season. Behind them the Wonder Wheel turned. The jingle box played. It stuck on the fourth bar.

She smacked it without looking, and it went on.

— Shay

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