The Last Train to Montauk

The bride's sister and her ex's best friend can't stand each other, until the last train of Labor Day weekend dies in the pine barrens and leaves them fifty miles, one night, and one sealed letter from the end of the line.

The last train to Montauk on the Friday of Labor Day weekend left Penn Station at 8:12, and by 8:05 there wasn't a seat on it for anybody who hadn't been standing under the departures board since seven.

Ben Harper had not been standing under the departures board since seven. He'd been at work until 7:20, in a kitchen on Hudson Street, breaking down forty pounds of halibut, and he'd run the whole way to Penn with a garment bag over his shoulder and a duffel that kept hitting the backs of his knees, and he made it down the stairs to track 19 with ninety seconds to spare and a suit that he was pretty sure now smelled like fish.

Car seven had one seat left. It was on the aisle, in a three-seater, next to a woman with a laptop open on her knees who was typing like she was mad at it.

"Is anybody..."

"No," she said, without looking up, and moved her bag.

He sat. He shoved the duffel under the seat and laid the garment bag across his lap, and the doors closed, and the train lurched and began to pull out under Manhattan toward the river, and the woman next to him stopped typing.

He felt her look at him. Then he felt her keep looking.

"Oh," Kate Sullivan said. "You have got to be kidding me."

. . .

Ben had known Kate Sullivan for six years, in the way you know somebody you've stood across a room from at a lot of Thanksgivings.

She was Lindsay's older sister. Lindsay had been his best friend's girlfriend from the time they were all twenty-four until the time they were all thirty, and for those six years Ben had been around for everything: the apartment in Astoria, the dog they got and gave back, the Christmas in Lindsay's mother's house in Garden City where Kyle broke a ceramic angel and blamed the cat. Kate had been there for most of it, too, on the other side. Two years older than Lindsay, a lawyer at a big firm in Midtown, very sharp, very dry, always with her phone face down on the table and her eyes on Kyle like he was a stain she was trying to figure out how to get out.

She had never liked Kyle. She'd made that clear, often, with her eyebrows. And since Ben was Kyle's best friend, since the third grade in Massapequa, since Little League and the first apartment over the nail salon on Merrick Road, she had never liked Ben either. He'd been one of the stains.

The last time he'd seen her was a Fourth of July party two summers ago, in Kyle's parents' backyard, where she'd told Kyle in front of everybody that he was wasting her sister's life, and Kyle had laughed it off, and Ben had stood up for him, the way he always stood up for him, and said something he didn't remember now except that it had been stupid, and she'd looked at him with total, freezing contempt and said, "Of course you'd say that, Ben," like his name was a diagnosis.

Lindsay and Kyle broke up four months later. Fourteen months after that, Lindsay met Matt Carlson, a pediatric dentist from Huntington

with a sailboat and a golden retriever and a laugh you could hear through walls. Tomorrow, at five o'clock, on a bluff over the ocean in Montauk, she was marrying him.

And Ben was invited. Lindsay had called him herself, in March, which had surprised him so much he'd dropped a sheet pan.

"You were my friend too," she'd said on the phone. "Not just his. I want you there. Is that weird?"

"It's a little weird."

"Will you come anyway?"

He'd said yes.

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"I'm not following you," Ben said. "If that's what you're thinking."

"I'm not thinking anything." Kate had gone back to her laptop. She was typing very fast and, as far as he could tell, not making any words. "I'm working."

"On the train to your sister's wedding."

"On the last train to my sister's wedding, because I was supposed to be on the 1:30 with her, and then a client in Phoenix decided to have a crisis about an indemnification clause, and now I've missed the rehearsal dinner, and she's not speaking to me." She stabbed the keyboard. "So yes. I'm working. Because if I'm not working I'm going to think about the fact that I've missed the rehearsal dinner, and she's not speaking to me."

"She's speaking to you a little," he said, and nodded at her phone, which was face up on her bag and had been lighting up every thirty seconds since they left the station.

Kate turned it over without looking at it. Then, after a second, she turned it back and read it. He didn't mean to read it too, but it was right there.

> *Mom gave a toast about you not being here. Not a mean one. Worse. A sad one.*

> *Matt's mom asked if you were "the career one"*

> *Are you on the train?? Tell me you're on the train*

> *You promised. Sleepover. You PROMISED Katie*

Kate typed back, fast, I'm on the train. I'll be there by midnight. I promise. Then she put the phone face down again and stared out the window at the black wall of the tunnel going by.

"What's the sleepover?" Ben asked.

She didn't answer right away. The train came up out of the tunnel into Queens and the lights of Long Island City went by, and the Silvercup sign, and the rail yards in Sunnyside with all the dark empty cars lined up.

"When we were little," she said finally, "our parents split up. I was nine, she was seven. And the night before anything big, the first day of school, a recital, her driver's test, I'd let her sleep in my bed. She kicks. She's a terrible sleeper. But we've done it every time. The night before my bar exam. The night before her first job. I flew back from a

deposition in Chicago once for it." She was quiet. "The night before her wedding. Obviously. That's tonight."

"So you'll be there by midnight."

"So I'll be there by midnight," Kate said, and went back to typing, and it was the first thing she'd said to him in six years that hadn't sounded like she was cross-examining him.

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At Babylon everybody changed across the platform to the diesel, the way you always did on the Montauk line, and Kate sat down next to him again without comment, because it was that or the floor. Most of the commuters went home. The train filled up with the other kind of people: guys in boat shoes with a case of White Claw, two women playing gin rummy on a tray table, a family with a cooler and a beagle in a carrier.

Kate closed her laptop somewhere past Patchogue.

"Why are you going?" she said.

"Lindsay invited me."

"I know she invited you. I saw the list. I asked her why you were on it."

"What'd she say?"

"She said you drove her to JFK."

He'd forgotten she knew that. It had been the week after the breakup. Lindsay had gone to stay with a friend in Lisbon for a month, to get her head straight, and she'd had nobody to drive her to the airport at

five in the morning, and she'd called Ben, and he'd done it. He hadn't told Kyle.

"She said you were the only one of his friends who ever asked her what she thought about anything," Kate said. "She said you were the only one who didn't pick a side."

"I picked a side," Ben said. "I picked his. For a long time."

"I know. I was there." She looked at him. Her eyes were very dark brown, very direct, the kind of eyes that would be hard to lie to in a deposition. "So which side are you on now?"

He didn't answer. He thought about the envelope in the inside pocket of his jacket, the one Kyle had given him on Thursday night at a bar on Bleecker, with Lindsay's name on it in Kyle's terrible handwriting. Linds, it said. Read this before. He'd pressed it into Ben's hand and closed Ben's fingers over it and said, You're the only one I trust, man. You're the only one.

"I'm on the side of whoever's buying the first drink," Ben said, and Kate rolled her eyes so hard it was almost audible, and turned back to the window.

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At 10:41 p.m., four minutes past Speonk, in the pitch-black pine barrens of the South Fork, with nothing out the windows in any direction but scrub oak and the moon, the train made a long, low, grinding sound like a giant clearing his throat, and stopped.

The lights went out. Then the emergency lights came on, dim and orange. The air conditioning died with a sigh. The beagle started to

howl.

"Ladies and gentlemen," said the conductor over the speaker, after a long time, in the voice of a man who had been doing this for thirty years and had been looking forward to a cold beer in Montauk since noon. "We are experiencing a mechanical problem with the locomotive. We are working to resolve the issue. We appreciate your patience."

"Ladies and gentlemen. We have been informed that a rescue locomotive is being dispatched from Babylon. Estimated time to reach us is two to three hours. We will then be proceeding to Westhampton, where alternate arrangements will be made. We appreciate your patience."

The whole car groaned. One of the gin rummy women said, "Oh, for heaven's sake, Marion, deal."

Kate had gone completely still.

"Two to three hours," she said. "Then Westhampton. Then alternate arrangements."

"Which means a bus," Ben said. "Which means the bus they have to call a guy for. At two in the morning. On Labor Day weekend."

She looked at her phone. 11:04. Her battery was at nine percent. He watched her open Uber and type in Montauk, and watched the little car spin and spin, and then come back with a price, and watched her face.

"Three hundred and forty dollars," she said. "And it's forty-five minutes away. And that's if we were in Westhampton, which we're

not, because we're in a forest."

"Where's the nearest road?"

She opened the map. "There's a crossing. Up ahead, maybe half a mile. And then Montauk Highway's a mile past that." She stared at the little blue dot. Then she looked up at him. "If I walk to the road, I can get the Uber to come to the road."

"They won't let you off the train."

"Watch me," said Kate Sullivan.

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They wouldn't let her off the train. It took twenty-five minutes of polite, terrifying conversation between Kate and the conductor at the end of the car, during which she used the words liability and duty of care and the phrase "I'm not asking, Raymond, I'm informing," and the conductor, whose name was Raymond, said, "Ma'am," eleven times. Ben stood behind her with his duffel and her rolling bag and his garment bag and her garment bag, because somewhere in the middle of it she'd handed him her garment bag without looking, like he was a coat rack, and he'd taken it.

In the end Raymond let them off at the rear door, at the grade crossing, which the train had died just short of, like it knew. Mostly because Kate had worn him down, partly because the White Claw guys had started a chant.

"You're on your own," Raymond said, holding the door. "I did not see this. You understand? This did not happen."

"Thank you, Raymond."

"Ma'am," Raymond said, a twelfth time, and shut the door.

They stood on the gravel by the tracks, in the dark, in the middle of the Long Island pine barrens. The train sat there behind them, huge and dead and humming faintly. The crickets were deafening. The air smelled like pine and sand and, faintly, very far away, the ocean.

"Why'd you get off?" Kate said.

"You took my garment bag."

"I didn't take it. I gave you mine."

"Then you've got my suit," Ben said, and held out her garment bag, and she looked at it, and at the one over his own shoulder, and back at him.

"Oh my God," she said. "I'm sorry. Here."

"Keep it. I'll carry them both. You've got heels."

She looked down at her feet. She did have heels. She'd come straight from the office in a navy dress and a pair of shoes that were very nice for walking from a Midtown elevator to a car and very bad for walking a mile down a gravel shoulder on Long Island in the dark.

"I have flats," she said. "In my bag. I'm a professional."

"I'd expect nothing less," he said, and she almost smiled, and they started walking.

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The Uber driver canceled at 11:52, when they were halfway to Montauk Highway. The next one canceled at 11:58. Then there

weren't any cars at all. Kate stood on the shoulder of a road called Old Country Road, which was neither old nor country, just dark, and refreshed the app over and over with her thumb, and her battery went from six percent to five.

"Stop," Ben said. "You'll kill it."

"I need to call her."

"Call her, then. Don't keep refreshing."

She called. He walked a little way up the road, to give her room, and heard it anyway, because there was nothing else to hear out there but the crickets and the wind in the pines.

"Linds. Hey. No, I'm... The train broke. No, really, it broke, I'm not making it up, it's on the LIRR Twitter. I'm walking. I'm in Westhampton. Near Westhampton. I'm going to get there. I don't know when. I know. I know. I know I promised. Linds. Linds, please don't cry, you'll get puffy, it's your wedding, Linds..."

Then nothing. Then Kate saying, "Hello?" Then a long silence.

He came back. She was standing in the road with the phone at her side, and the screen was black.

"It died," she said.

"Did she hear you?"

"She heard 'I don't know when,'" Kate said, very evenly, and he saw that she was holding herself very still, the way people hold a full glass. "She heard that part."

He took out his own phone. Thirty-one percent. "Use mine. Call her back."

"I don't know her number."

"You don't know your sister's number?"

"Do you know anybody's number? Nobody knows anybody's number. It's in my phone." She pressed both hands to her face. "It's fine. It's fine. I'll get there. I'll just get there."

"Okay," he said. "Then let's get there."

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They got their first ride at 12:20 from a man named Hector who was driving a landscaping truck home to Hampton Bays after a fourteen-hour day trimming hedges in Quogue. He pulled over on Montauk Highway because, he said, he'd seen Kate's face in his headlights and thought she was a ghost.

"A rich lady ghost," he said, "from the eighteen-hundreds."

"I'm a lawyer," said Kate.

"Even worse," Hector said, and laughed, and let them ride up front with him, three across on the bench seat, with the garment bags laid on top of the mowers in the back and a Dominican radio station playing bachata quietly between them. Ben was in the middle. Kate's shoulder was against his. He tried not to think about it, which meant he thought about it the whole way across the Shinnecock Canal.

Hector dropped them at a diner on Montauk Highway in Hampton Bays that stayed open until two on summer weekends. He wouldn't

take money. "Go to your wedding," he said. "Somebody's waiting." Then he looked at the two of them. "Whose wedding is it? Yours?"

"No," they said, at the same time.

"Huh," said Hector, and drove off.

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The diner had a laminated menu the size of a newspaper and a waitress named Donna who had clearly seen everything a person could see in a diner on Montauk Highway at one in the morning and was not about to be impressed by two people in office clothes carrying garment bags. She sat them in a booth by the window. Kate plugged her phone into the outlet under the table. It showed a little red battery and stayed black.

"Coffee," Kate said. "Please. A lot."

"And the blueberry pie," said Ben. "Two forks." Then, to Kate, before she could object: "You haven't eaten since lunch."

"How do you know?"

"Because you didn't eat on the train, and you came from the office, and you're a lawyer at a big firm, so you didn't eat at the office either, and you've been looking at that pie case since we walked in like it owes you money."

She stared at him. Donna, who was writing it down, said, "He's got you there, hon," and walked away.

The pie came. Kate ate three-quarters of it. Ben ate the crust she left on the edge, which she watched him do with an expression he

couldn't read.

"What," he said.

"Nothing. Kyle used to do that. Eat my crusts. At Thanksgiving."

"I taught him that," Ben said. "In third grade. In the cafeteria at McKenna Elementary. He used to throw his away. I told him that's the best part."

"Of course you did." She turned her coffee cup around on the saucer. "You two. You were like a married couple. I never understood it."

"There's nothing to understand. We grew up together. His dad was gone a lot, my mom worked nights. We were at each other's houses so much our moms just started buying two of everything." He shrugged. "He's my brother. That's it."

"Even after what he did to her."

"What did he do to her?"

"Six years, Ben." Her voice got very quiet and very hard. "Six years of 'we'll talk about it next year.' Six years of her waiting for him to grow up. She wanted to get married. She wanted kids. She wanted a house with a yard and a dog we didn't have to give back. And every time she brought it up he made a joke, and you laughed at it."

"I know."

"You laughed at it."

"I know," he said again. "You're right."

She stopped. She'd been ready for a fight. He could see her reloading, and then not knowing what to do with it.

"I'm what?"

"You're right. You were right about him. That Fourth of July. You were right and I was wrong, and I knew it while I was saying it, and I said it anyway, because he was my friend." He looked down at the table. "I've thought about that a lot. What I said to you."

"What did you say? I don't even remember."

"I said maybe Lindsay should stop waiting around for a guy if she didn't like how long it was taking." He winced. "Which, you know. Turned out to be good advice. But I didn't mean it as advice. I meant it as a shot."

Kate looked at him for a long time across the booth. The neon sign in the window said OPEN in pink letters backward, and it lit up one side of her face.

"I called you a stain," she said. "In my head. For six years. You and Kyle. The stains."

"That's fair."

"It's not that fair," she said. "You drove her to the airport."

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Donna, it turned out, had a sister-in-law named Bev who was an ICU nurse at Stony Brook Southampton and got off at one-thirty and drove home to Springs every night down Montauk Highway, and if they were standing out front at 1:45, Donna said, Bev would probably take them as far as Amagansett, and if Bev didn't like the look of them, she wouldn't, so they should try to look nice.

"How do we look nice?" Ben asked.

"Hold hands or something," Donna said. "Bev's a romantic." And she cleared the pie plate and went into the kitchen.

They stood out in front of the diner in the dark parking lot under the yellow lights. It had gotten cold, the kind of cold that came off the ocean at night in September even when the days were still summer. Kate had her arms wrapped around herself.

"Here," Ben said, and took off his jacket and put it around her shoulders.

"I'm fine."

"You're shaking."

"I'm a little cold. It's not shaking."

"Okay," he said. "Wear the jacket anyway."

She pulled it around herself. It was too big for her. The sleeves came down over her hands. She looked down at them, then up at him, and in the yellow light of the parking lot she looked younger than he'd ever seen her, and tired, and like someone who hadn't been taken care of in a long time and had forgotten what it was supposed to feel like.

Headlights came up the highway. A red Subaru with a Stony Brook parking sticker slowed down and pulled into the lot.

Kate reached over and took his hand.

He looked at her.

"Bev's a romantic," Kate said, not looking at him, looking straight ahead at the Subaru, and laced her fingers through his.

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Bev was in her sixties, in purple scrubs, with reading glasses on a beaded chain and the radio tuned to WLNG, the oldies station out of Sag Harbor. She drove like she was being chased. She had questions.

"So how long have you two been together?"

"Oh," said Kate. "We're not..."

"Six years," said Ben.

Kate turned around in the front seat and looked at him in the back, where he was sitting with all four bags piled up around him like a fort.

"On and off," he said. "Mostly off. She didn't like me at first."

"That's the best kind," said Bev. "My husband, Frank, God rest him, I thought he was the stupidest man I'd ever met. Fished out of Montauk. Smelled like bait for forty-one years."

"How'd he win you over?" Ben asked.

"He didn't," Bev said, and swung the Subaru around a curve in Water Mill so hard Kate grabbed the door handle. "I won him over. He just stood there being the same every single day until I noticed." She glanced at Kate. "Some men are like that. You think they're furniture. Then one day you look around and you realize you've been leaning on them for years."

The Rolling Stones came on WLNG. Memory Motel.

"Oh, I love this one," Bev said, and turned it up, and sang the whole thing, very badly, all the way through Bridgehampton and Wainscott and East Hampton, all the way to the windmill on Main Street in Amagansett, where she pulled over and let them out at 2:40 in the morning.

"It's ten miles," she said, through the window. "Straight road. Just stay on the shoulder and don't let anybody hit you. And kiss her already, for God's sake, Frank would've kissed her in Water Mill." And she drove off toward Springs, still singing.

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Past Amagansett, Montauk Highway goes out onto Napeague.

It's a thin strip of land between the ocean and the bay, a few miles of nothing, low dunes and scrub pine and beach grass on both sides, and the road going straight through the middle of it like a ruler. In the daytime it's just a stretch you drive on the way to the lobster place. At three in the morning it was the edge of the world. There were no streetlights. There were no cars. The sky was huge, blacker and fuller of stars than either of them had seen in years, and the moon was going down over the bay on their left, and on their right, somewhere over the dunes, you could hear the ocean, steady and enormous, breathing in and out.

They walked on the shoulder with the bags. For a long time neither of them talked.

"Can I ask you something," she said.

"Yeah."

"Why did you really come? Not 'Lindsay invited me.' Really."

He was quiet for a while. "Because I wanted to see her happy," he said. "I was there for all the times she wasn't. I wanted to see one where she was."

"That's it?"

"That's mostly it."

"What's the rest?"

He didn't answer. She looked at him sideways, in the dark, with her hands deep in the pockets of his jacket. Then she stopped walking.

"What's this?" she said.

Her hand had found the inside pocket of his jacket. She was holding an envelope.

He felt his whole body go cold, from the top down.

"Kate."

She was looking at it. There was enough moon left to read it by. Kyle's handwriting, big and slanting and impossible to mistake.

Linds, it said. Read this before.

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"Before," Kate said.

"Kate, listen..."

"Before what, Ben?" She looked up at him, and her face in the starlight was so white and so furious it was almost beautiful. "Before

what? Before she says I do? Before she walks down the aisle? That's why you came. That's why you're here. You're delivering it."

"He gave it to me Thursday. He was drunk. He..."

"You've been carrying this the whole time. On the train. At the diner. In the car with Bev." Her voice went up. "I held your hand. I held your hand, in front of a stranger, and the whole time you had this in your pocket."

"I didn't know what to do with it."

"You could have thrown it in the garbage! At Penn Station! There's a garbage can every nine feet!"

"He's my best friend," Ben said, and it came out louder than he meant, out over the dunes. "Since I was eight years old. He asked me to do one thing. One thing. And I don't know what's in it, Kate, I swear to God, I haven't read it, I don't know if it's an apology or a goodbye or a, a, I don't know what it is. And I didn't know whether I was supposed to give it to her or not. That's the truth. I've been thinking about it since Thursday. I haven't slept."

"So you were going to decide. You. On her wedding day. Whether my sister gets a letter from the guy who wasted six years of her life."

"I was going to decide on the way there."

"Well, you're on the way there," Kate said. "Congratulations. Decide."

"You know what I thought?" she said. "At the diner. When you said I was right. I thought, oh, he's different. He's not what I thought. Six years, and I was wrong about him. And I was so happy to be wrong." She laughed, and it was a terrible little sound. "I'm never wrong. I'm

never wrong about people. That's my whole job. And I was so happy, Ben."

"You weren't wrong."

"Then why is this in your pocket?"

He took the envelope. She let go of it. Then she took off his jacket and held that out too, and when he didn't take it she dropped it on the bag at his feet, and picked up her rolling bag and her own garment bag off his shoulder, and turned, and started walking down Montauk Highway toward Montauk, alone, in the dark, in her flats, with the wheels of her bag rattling on the asphalt.

"Kate," he said.

She didn't turn around.

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He walked behind her for an hour. Fifty yards back. Not close enough to talk. Close enough that if a car came, he could see it before it hit her.

They passed the Lobster Roll, closed and dark, with the big hand-painted sign on the roof that every kid who ever rode out to Montauk in the back of a station wagon remembers.

LUNCH

The sky to the east was starting to change, the black getting thin at the bottom, going navy, going gray. The cold got colder, the way it does right before dawn.

At 4:50 a pickup truck came up behind them with its headlights on and slowed down. It was an old blue F-150 with a fiberglass cap over the bed and a tangle of fishing rods in a holder on the front bumper. The driver was a man of about seventy with a white beard and a Montauk Marine Basin hat. He rolled down the window and looked at Kate, and then back down the road at Ben, and then at Kate again.

"You two together?"

Kate didn't answer for a second. Then she said, "We're going to the same place."

"Well, I'm going to the docks," the man said. "I've got a charter at six. Bluefish. Get in, I'll take you to town."

They rode up front on the bench seat, Ben by the door, Kate by the driver, with as much space between them as a bench seat allowed, which was about four inches. The cab smelled like coffee and bait. The captain didn't talk. He drove, and the road came up off Napeague into the hills, and the sky got lighter, and lighter, until you could see the ocean on the right through the gaps in the trees, gray and silver and wide.

Ben had the envelope in his hand. He'd been holding it for an hour.

The truck came down the hill into town, past the IGA and the big white Montauk Manor up on its hill and the little green with the war memorial, and the captain said, "Where do you want out?"

"The beach," Ben said. "If that's okay. Anywhere on the beach."

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The captain let them out at Kirk Park Beach, at the edge of the village, and drove away toward the harbor with his rods rattling.

It was a little after six. The sun wasn't up yet, but it was close, a band of pink and orange along the bottom of the sky over the water, getting wider. The beach was empty except for a guy with a metal detector way down by the jetty and about a thousand seagulls. Kate picked up her bags and turned toward town without a word.

"Kate," he said. "Wait. One minute. Please."

She turned around.

He walked down onto the sand, a few steps. She didn't follow him. He held up the envelope.

"I was never going to give it to her," he said.

"Ben..."

"I'm not saying that to make myself look good. I'm saying it because it's true and I didn't know it until about an hour ago. I thought I didn't know. I told myself I'd decide on the way. But I knew. I knew on Thursday, at the bar, when he put it in my hand. I just didn't want to be the guy who threw it away. I wanted to keep being his friend, and be her friend, and not pick. Like you said. And you can't do that. You can't carry something for somebody and not pick." He looked down at it. Linds. Read this before. "So I'm picking."

He held it out to her.

"It's not mine," he said. "It was never mine. And it's not his anymore either. If anybody gets to decide what happens to it, it's you. You're the one who knows her. You're the one who walked here."

Kate looked at the envelope in his hand for a long time. The sky behind him was going gold. Down by the water, the gulls lifted all at once and wheeled out over the waves and came back.

Then she put down her bags and came down onto the sand.

She took it from him. She turned it over. She ran her thumb along the flap, which was sealed, and stuck, a little crooked, the way Kyle did everything.

"You really haven't read it?"

"I really haven't."

She tore it in half.

She tore it in half again, and again, until it was a handful of little white pieces, and she walked down to where the sand was wet and dark and the foam came running up in long thin sheets, and stood there with her flats getting soaked and her dress blowing against her legs, and opened her hand.

The wind took most of it. The water took the rest.

The sun came up all at once, the way it does over the ocean, and the light came across the water and hit the beach and hit her, standing there at the edge of it with her hand still open, and he thought he had never seen anything as beautiful in his life and was probably never going to again.

She turned around.

"I was wrong," she said. "On Napeague. I said you were... I said a lot of things."

"You were upset."

"I was wrong," Kate said again, firmly, like she was entering it into the record. "I'm never wrong. I was wrong twice tonight. Once at the diner and once on the road. I don't know what to do with that."

"Maybe just be wrong," he said. "See how it feels."

She walked up the sand to him. Her shoes were full of water. Her hair was full of salt. She stopped in front of him, close, closer than she'd ever been, and looked up at him with the sun on half her face, and he could see every one of her eyelashes and a little freckle under her left eye that he'd never noticed in six years of Thanksgivings.

"It feels terrible," she said.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," she said, and put her hand flat on his chest, over his heart, and rose up on her toes, and kissed him.

It was a short kiss. She tasted like diner coffee and salt. She pulled back almost right away and looked at him, wide-eyed, like she'd surprised herself, like she'd made an objection she hadn't planned to make. And then she did it again, longer, and he dropped his duffel in the sand and put his arms around her and held on, and the gulls went screaming up into the gold over their heads.

"I have to go," she said against his mouth. "She's going to wake up."

"I know. Go."

"I'm going."

"You're not going."

"I'm going right now," Kate said, and kissed him once more, hard, and grabbed her bags, and ran up the beach path into town in her soaked flats with her garment bag flying, toward the inn, toward her sister, and he stood on the beach in the sunrise and watched her go until she turned the corner and was gone.

. . .

She told him about it later.

She'd let herself in with the key Lindsay had left under the mat, which was exactly like Lindsay, and gone up the stairs in her bare feet, carrying her wet shoes, and opened the door of the bridal suite. Lindsay had been asleep in the middle of the big white bed, diagonally, the way she'd slept since she was seven, with one leg kicked out of the covers and her phone still in her hand.

Kate had climbed in next to her in her salt-stiff dress. Lindsay had woken up just enough to open one eye.

"Katie?"

"I'm here."

"What time is it?"

"Six-thirty."

"You said midnight." Lindsay's voice was thick with sleep. "You smell like the ocean."

"I walked."

"You walked from the city?"

"Kind of. Go back to sleep."

"Mm." Lindsay rolled over and threw an arm across her, and a leg, and kicked her once, hard, in the shin, the way she always did. "You came."

"I always come," Kate had said, and lain there in the gold light coming through the curtains, with her little sister's arm across her, and stared at the ceiling, and cried, quietly, for about ten minutes, for no reason she could name and every reason she could.

. . .

The wedding was at five, on the lawn of the inn, on the bluff above the ocean, with the white chairs set out in rows on the grass and an arch covered in hydrangeas and the whole Atlantic behind it, blue and endless and glittering. Ben sat on the bride's side, in the sixth row, in his suit, which had been steamed by the inn's front desk and only smelled a little like fish.

He watched Kate come down the aisle first, in a dusty-blue dress, carrying white flowers, with her hair up and her chin up and her face completely composed. Then she got to the front and turned around and saw him, in the sixth row, and her face did something that was not composed at all, just for a second, and then she looked down at her flowers and bit her lip.

Lindsay came down the aisle on her father's arm. She looked happy. She looked so happy it was hard to look at her directly, like the sun on the water that morning. Matt Carlson cried before she even got to the front, and laughed at himself for crying, and you could hear the laugh all the way out over the ocean.

And then the officiant said, "If anyone here has a reason," and the whole lawn held still, and nobody said anything, and the moment went by like a gull over the bluff and was gone, and he let it go with it.

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Kate's toast was the last one.

She stood up at the head table, under the big white tent, with the sun going down orange behind her and the strings of lights coming on, and tapped her glass, and looked at a card in her hand, and then put the card down.

"I had a speech," she said. "It was very good. It had structure. I'm not giving it, because last night I learned that sometimes you don't get there the way you planned."

People laughed. Lindsay was already crying.

"My train broke down," Kate said. "In the pine barrens. Past Speonk. If you don't know where that is, that's the point. I walked. I rode in a landscaping truck. I ate blueberry pie at one in the morning. I got a ride from an ICU nurse who sang the entire Rolling Stones catalog through Water Mill. And I walked the whole Napeague stretch at three in the morning, which I don't recommend, unless you want to see every star there is. And I got here at six-thirty, and my sister kicked me in the shin, and I knew I was home."

She looked down at Lindsay.

"Linds. When we were little, I promised you I'd always show up. And I always have. But I want you to know, I didn't show up last night because I promised. I showed up because there is no version of my life

where you're getting married and I'm not there. You're my favorite person. You always have been. And Matt..." She turned. "Matt, you're the first guy she's ever been with who I didn't want to push into the ocean. That's high praise. Ask anybody."

Everybody laughed. Matt put his hand on his heart.

"And I didn't get here by myself," Kate said, and her voice changed. She didn't look at the sixth table. She looked very carefully at a point just above it. "Somebody carried my bag. Ten miles. Even after I was terrible to him. So I guess what I learned last night is that sometimes the people you think are on the other side were just standing there the whole time, being the same, waiting for you to notice." She lifted her glass. "To Lindsay and Matt. And to getting there."

"To getting there," the whole tent said, and drank.

Lindsay leaned over to her sister as Kate sat down, and Ben, at the sixth table, could see her mouth move, could read it plain as day.

Ben? Kyle's Ben?

And Kate, looking right at him now, finally, across the whole tent, with the lights all on and the ocean going dark behind her, shook her head and said something back.

He couldn't hear it. He didn't need to. He found out later what it was, anyway, because he asked her, and she told him.

"No," she'd said. "Not Kyle's."

. . .

They danced to something slow at around ten. He'd asked her. She'd said, "Fine," the way she said everything, and then put her hand on his shoulder and her cheek against his chest and stayed there for three more songs after the slow one ended, including one by Pitbull.

"Where are you staying?" she said into his shirt.

"The Memory Motel."

She lifted her head. "You're kidding."

"I booked it in March. It was the only thing left. The rooms are behind the bar. Bev would be very excited."

"Bev would lose her mind," Kate said. She was looking at him in a way that made it hard to stand up straight. "My room's in the main house. Next to my mother's."

"That's unfortunate."

"It's very unfortunate. She's a light sleeper." She was quiet for a moment, swaying, her hand moving a little on his back, under his jacket. "What's the Memory Motel like?"

"I don't know," Ben said. "I haven't been yet."

She looked up at him. The lights of the tent were in her eyes, and the dark of the ocean was behind her, and she had that look, the one from the beach at dawn, the one like she was about to make an objection she hadn't planned.

"Then I guess we should go find out," she said.

• • •

They walked there. Of course they walked there. It was a mile, down the hill and along the main road into town, and she carried her shoes in one hand and held his hand with the other, and every few hundred yards she'd stop and pull him down and kiss him under a streetlight like she was making up for six years of Thanksgivings, which, he supposed, she was.

The bar was loud, the Stones on the jukebox, of course. The rooms were around the back. The room was small and old and very clean, with a quilt on the bed and a window that looked out at the dark and an air conditioner rattling in the wall.

He shut the door. He stood with his back against it.

Kate stood in the middle of the room, barefoot, in her blue dress, with the sand of three different beaches still in her hair, and looked at him.

"Ben," she said.

"Yeah."

"You carried my bag ten miles."

"It wasn't that heavy."

"It was very heavy. I packed four pairs of shoes." She came toward him across the old carpet. "And you didn't say anything. You just walked behind me. The whole way across Napeague. I could hear you."

"I didn't want you to get hit by a car."

"I know," she said, very softly, and put her hands on his chest, both of them, and slid them up under the lapels of his jacket, and pushed it off his shoulders, and let it fall on the floor. "That's what I mean."

He put his hands on either side of her face. He looked at her, for a long moment, the freckle under her eye, the salt on her skin, the tired, brave, impossible woman who had told an LIRR conductor she was informing him, and who had stood in the ocean at dawn and let go of a thing she wanted to hold.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi," said Kate.

He reached behind him, without looking, and turned the lock.

Across the lot, the jukebox in the bar started up again, and somebody started to sing along, and the old song carried all the way back to their door, where nobody was listening anymore.

. . .

On Tuesday they took the train back.

It was the 2:31 out of Montauk, a regular train, full of sunburned people and sandy kids and a man with a cooler of fluke on ice. It left on time. It ran perfectly. It did not break down, not once, not in the pine barrens past Speonk, not anywhere, which Kate said was frankly insulting.

She fell asleep on his shoulder somewhere around Westhampton. Her phone was face up on her knee, charged to a hundred percent, buzzing. He looked at it. He didn't mean to. It was right there.

> *Mom wants to know if "the guy with the bags" is coming to Thanksgiving*

> *I told her yes*

> *Don't be mad*

> *Also you owe me. I married a man with a sailboat and somehow YOU'RE the one everybody's talking about*

Ben smiled and looked out the window. The scrub pines went by, and the little stations, and the cranberry bogs, and the long flat light of September coming in through the glass. Kate shifted against him in her sleep and made a small, annoyed sound, and he put his arm around her, and she settled.

He'd called Kyle that morning, from the porch of the Memory Motel, while she slept. It had been a short call. Kyle hadn't asked about the letter. Ben hadn't told him. Kyle had said, "Was she happy?" and Ben had said, "Yeah, man. She was really happy," and Kyle had been quiet for a long time, and then said, "Good. That's good," and then, "You want to get a beer next week?" and Ben had said, "Yeah. I'll call you."

He would. He'd still be Kyle's friend. That was the thing nobody tells you about picking a side. Sometimes you find out you were standing in the middle of something, and the something was where you were supposed to be all along.

The conductor came through, punching tickets. It was Raymond. He looked at Ben's ticket, and then at the woman asleep on Ben's shoulder, and then he looked again, for a long time.

"Ma'am," he said, very softly, to nobody, and moved on down the car.

— Shay

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