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## Learning the Language

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# Learning the Language

I sat in the grocery store's parking lot, my forehead pressed against the top of the steering wheel, trying to remember what I needed. The store closed in ten minutes and Leila wasn't picking up her phone. I looked into the big, glaring white windows along the front of the supermarket. A college-aged girl was scanning a cart full of food. Her hair reminded me of Leila's before she had it cut short. The girl's face catered to no emotion as the scanner beeped the same incessant tone. She was young and sad and familiar.

It had only been fifteen minutes since Leila told me what I needed to get from the store. How could I not remember? The bathroom door had been closed and she was behind it getting ready for a bath. She told me what I needed and asked if I knew what the date was.

"December 11," I said, pretty sure I wasn't forgetting anything that could get me in trouble. Her birthday was in May, and I knew it wasn't our anniversary because we'd started dating in July, two years back.

"Today was the day we had planned on leaving," she said through the closed bathroom door.

"Leaving?"

"For Québec."

"Oh."

"Whatever happened to that?"

"What do you mean?"

I sat down on the bed. It felt cold and stiff.

"I mean, whatever happened to all those nights you said we were meant for Québec?"

“Traveling is pretty expensive right now.”

“But if we really try,” she said. “And if we saved and—”

“We can’t afford something like that this year,” I said.

“I don’t care.” She raised her voice. “I don’t care about money. I don’t care about what we have and don’t have.” She stepped closer to the door and I could see her shadow under it. “I just don’t care, Ryan. I can’t sit around here anymore.”

Her shadow disappeared. She slammed on the lever to the tub.

“Well, you...” she said, but I couldn’t hear her over the rushing water.

“What?”

She opened the door, leaving a small space between it and its frame where light broke through into the dark of the bedroom. The rising cloud of steam looked warm and thick from the cool shadow of the bedroom.

“You said we could before.” She was still out of sight on the other side of the door.

“It costs more now.”

“It wouldn’t have mattered to you then,” she said.

“Well, I was dumb then. Jesus, what do you want me to say, Leila?”

She was quiet.

“Things change sometimes,” I said.

The beating of the water was the only sound in the apartment until something made a hard noise as it dropped to the bathroom tile floor. I stared at the bright open space between the rooms.

“Today was the first time that I’ve left Stillwater in—I don’t know how long,” she said.

“You should go to Saratoga more often.” I lay down and gazed at the black ceiling. “Make it a weekend thing. It’s what? Twenty minutes?”

She slammed the cabinet under the sink shut.

“When would we start that?”

“Whenever you want,” I said.

“I’m not going alone again,” she said. “I hated it.”

I sat up slowly with my knees over the edge of the bed and my feet on the dark gray of the carpet.

“I never said you had to.”

Headlights flashed in the rearview mirror and into my eyes. A car pulled up close behind mine. I checked the clock: 8:51 p.m. A man stepped out of the car and closed the door. He hurried into the store before it closed. Stuck in that car alone, not knowing at all what I needed to get, the snow falling, Leila not answering my calls, I couldn’t watch the girl anymore. I turned on the radio.

"*Leçon dix*," a woman said through the speakers. "*L'université*."

I pressed the eject button and snatched the CD. *Learning French*. My face floated behind the words of the shining disc. I thought maybe she was learning it to impress me. I figured that she wanted to surprise me by ordering herself a *chocolat chaud* as we brushed off the Québec snow from our jackets inside a café. That was something she might've done then, back when we planned on Québec. Or, I thought, maybe she still planned on going.

Leila had tried asking me something in broken-up, out-of-order French that evening before I'd left for the store. She said it through the cracked open door between the bedroom and the bathroom, the steaming bathwater filling the tub. I stood up before the bed.

"Say it in English," I said, looking at the thin, fake wood of the door.

She turned off the tub. I heard the water move as she dipped in her toes.

I studied French for a while back at school. When Leila and I first met, she'd ask me to teach her some things every now and then. How to say things like *tu veux aller*. We'd read one of my old textbooks at the table with a bottle of wine every Friday night. That was back when the whole Québec thing was planned out.

"Do you ever miss speaking French?" she said from the bathroom.

"That's what you were trying to say?"

"No, I'm just curious."

It sounded like she was looking at the doorway.

"French isn't too convenient here in New York," I said.

She didn't laugh. I couldn't see her, but I knew she didn't smile, either. I thought about how she might've laughed at something like that before.

"You have to miss it a little," she said.

I stepped away and sat back on the bed.

"What were you trying to say?"

"I want to see what Sue's doing for Christmas this year," she said.

"That's what you were trying to say?"

"I just want to see what she's doing. That's all. Maybe she's finally skiing out West."

"I doubt that."

"Why?"

Sue didn't go anywhere besides to work or down the road to her brother's, not without Tom around, but I didn't say anything, hoping to prevent another argument. We'd been arguing a lot at that point and it wasn't looking good.

"She could," Leila said to the partly open door. "You never know."

"You should call her tomorrow," I suggested. I had learned the language when it came to certain topics with Leila.

"I'll bet she's off somewhere already." Her voice bounced off the mirror and slipped through the steam in the doorway and into the bedroom. "Remember how she'd talk about those ski trips?"

Leila and I had skied with them once.

Tom and I were on the lift, rising to the summit. It was Leila's first time skiing, and though I had snowboarded once before, I was nowhere near comfortable with the plank attached to my feet. I saw the girls in the following chair and watched the base of the mountain slide away. Tom looked at me and laughed.

"How you feeling?" he said.

"Ask me at the bottom."

"There's a lot of falling," he said. "But it's worth it."

I could barely slide down the mountain on my ass those first couple of runs. I dug the edge of the snowboard into the trail to keep from sliding off into the woods. Leila was standing with a ski and two poles in her one hand. She dug through a patch of powder with the other hand, searching for the ski that unclipped when she fell. Tom and Sue stopped waiting for us after a while and took off down the mountain, gliding over the trail's curves. I shook my head, amazed. I unclipped my snowboard and trudged through the powder to Leila.

"They make it look so easy," she said, out of breath.

I agreed and kicked at the snow until her ski emerged.

"Ha!" she shouted. "You found it." She kissed my cheek. Her lips were warm on my bare skin.

I brought the snowboard over to her and we leaned over to strap in together, not giving up. All of a sudden she let out this sort of *uh-uhh* sound, almost like a build-up to some giant sneeze. She was sliding down the mountain without one of her poles, and she hadn't exactly mastered stopping at that point.

"Ryan!" she said. I unclipped my boot and stood up. I sprinted after her and snatched the pole off the ground. I caught up. I wrapped my arm around her waist, and I felt pretty great—like Brad Pitt great—until I tried stopping her. One of my feet landed on the back of her ski while my other stayed put on the summit, sending Leila and me to the ground, and turning me from Brad Pitt to an abusive linebacker, sacking my one-hundred-and-five-pound girlfriend. We hit the ground pretty hard.

"Are you all right?" I asked her before I even slid off the back of her legs. She was on her stomach, her small frame bobbing up and down against the snow. "Leila," I said and rolled her over. She looked up at me, laughing.

"Thanks a lot, Ry." She pushed the front of my shoulders.

And then I knew Tom was right. An afternoon like that had to be worth it.

That mountain wasn't as cold as the sheets on our bed. That mountain wasn't as cold as the parking lot outside the grocery store, alone.

I watched my breath steam to the roof of the car. I put the CD back in the slot, turned off the radio, and stared at the cool blue light of the digital clock on the dashboard.

8:52 p.m. The store locked its doors for the night in eight minutes. I shifted in the seat of the car, my thumb tapping the button of the seatbelt. I stared at the clock and waited for her call.

8:53 p.m. No one was inside the market besides the girl leaning against the counter. She waited for the okay from her boss to count her drawer and end the shift. She just wanted to leave and go home, to sleep, to dream of places to see. Or maybe she'd go out with friends to Saratoga for the night. Something fun. Something that she really wanted and could still do. I thought about the last time I had brought Leila to Saratoga. It was in October, before the winter choked the life out of the season.

We sat in the front of our favorite downtown coffee shop looking out the windows from stools we must've sat on a thousand times before. We looked at the same street with its same cars, their same tires rolling over the same white lines of the crosswalk. The streetlights beamed across Broadway to the same motel with its brightly lit lobby that shined the same white all year long. But then, from those windows, the lights looked dim—distant.

“Did he say why he's leaving?” she said.

“No,” I whispered, as if Sue was behind me and Tom hadn't told her yet. But she wasn't and he had. He was already gone.

“How's she taking it?”

“Terribly,” I said. “How else?”

“Poor Sue.” Leila sipped from her coffee. “These kinds of things are always so tough.”

“What kinds of things?”

She raised her eyes and turned to me. Her knees touched the side of my legs.

“What? A break-up?” she said, as if that was all that it was.

Whenever I talked about Tom and Sue to my parents, they would interrupt me. “Are those two married yet?” they'd ask, and Leila and I would say, “No, not yet.”

I held up my forehead with my hand until I peeled my palm away. It was shining with sweat.

“Are you all right?”

I didn't look at her.

“You're pale and your face looks like it's sinking into your mouth.”

“I'm fine.”

“No, really. You look—”

“I said I’m fine, Leila. Jesus Christ.”

She looked behind us to see if anyone was listening.

“Do you want to leave?” she said.

“No. I’m sorry.” And I was then.

“Could Tom and Sue get their deposit back on the room?” she said.

It was Tom’s idea and we’d all fallen in love with—going to Québec to see the City Lights Festival.

“I don’t know. I only talked to him briefly.”

“What else did he say?”

“I only talked to him briefly,” I said again.

“Something’s bothering you, Ryan. He must’ve said something.”

“He said that it just hit him one morning.”

“Oh, stop. Is that what this is about?”

“No, it’s nothing. I told you—”

“An aneurism will just hit you one morning. Jesus, Ryan, a stroke will just hit you one morning. These kinds of things don’t just happen.”

Leila doubted it, but I figured if it could happen to Tom, it could happen to anyone.

“We’re still going to Québec, right?”

“I don’t know,” I said. I looked away from her and down the street. “I feel weird about going on their trip if they aren’t.”

“That trip wasn’t just theirs, you know.”

“Why don’t we play it by ear?” I said.

I took a sip from my cup and the coffee was cold. I wondered how long we’d been sitting there watching things go by.

In the silence of the car, my phone made a noise.

8:54 p.m. Low battery, and still no call. The man wheeled his cart with some food to the girl’s aisle. The guy was going to make her cash him out and I hated him for it. He was around my size—tall and a little too skinny. He couldn’t have gone earlier? I figured I would’ve gone earlier if I could have, and I would have been quick. Now though, I thought I might be even worse than him, just barely sneaking in the store in time. I made sure the ringer of the phone was on loud.

8:55 p.m. I watched her swipe the food through the blood-red light of the scanner. In between a carton of milk and a loaf of bread she looked up at the clock on the far wall. I checked my phone.

8:57 p.m. Nothing. He was helping her bag. He was really moving, too. Maybe he wasn’t such a bad guy, realizing how her shift was about to end. He saw that she needed to get out of there. He was practically throwing the bags in the cart. Some things he didn’t take the time to bag. Some things he actually threw. I pressed a button on the phone to light up the screen and check the messages.

8:58 p.m. Still no call, still no message. The cart was full again. The snow had stopped falling and the pavement of the parking lot was a thin white, the black of the ground still running through to the surface of the snow. He talked to her. She smiled as best as she could, but I knew it was fake. It had been fake for a while at that point. He still hadn't paid. I checked the time.

8:59 p.m. No call. He was talking to her. He was going to keep her in that place for too long. I decided I wasn't going to do that. I turned the keys in the ignition to start the car.

9:00 p.m. Leila didn't call in time. I looked to the girl to watch her leave the register. The shift was over, but she was still stuck there. She looked scared. The man said something, shook his head, and reached into his jacket. Her arms were stiff at her sides—frozen. He grabbed one of the tan plastic bags.

She screamed as he jumped over the counter and pushed her to the side. Another employee saw and ran away. The man shoved all the money in the register down into the bag. It looked heavy swinging in his hand as he took off out of the store, the cart abandoned at the counter. I saw that she was crying. Holding her chest, crying.

The first heel that hit the pavement slid, but with flailing arms he regained his balance. There were only two cars left in the parking lot—mine and his. The button on my seatbelt clicked in the quiet of the parking lot, where everything seemed like it should be loud but nothing was. He sprinted for our cars and I knew he was going to run right by me. And I knew I wasn't going to do a thing about it. I fingered the keys, still in the ignition.

The phone rang. I jumped in my seat, looked down at the screen and saw her name—too late. The store had closed and I was stuck in that parking lot. Over there at the register, she was crying, with no one to help her. The other employee was in the office, on the phone, calling the police or whoever fixes this sort of thing, although I was pretty sure it was too late to fix anything.

The man was getting closer in my mirror. His face was as dark as mine under the orange of the light pole. I heard his footsteps hit the ground, so clearly that they could have been my own. The lock to the door was loud as I clicked it with my thumb.

And he ran close. I didn't know what was happening. I let go of the keys. His footsteps screaming, Leila calling, phone ringing, while the girl was crying inside and the car door was unlocked, the bottom of my feet suddenly pressed against it, my hand ready to open it, the heaviest door I'd ever felt, and he looked down in the window, mid-stride, just before I kicked it open and it crashed into his side.

The only noise was the buzzing of the parking lot light above us. I stepped out beyond the door and into the light. By following the route of his feet on the thin snow, I could see that he had fallen backward after hitting the curb. He slouched against the cement base of the light pole. I wasn't really sure

what I'd done or why I'd done it. But she was looking at me. She had stopped crying. My fists were clenched and my fingers were slick with sweat. He made a noise, and I took my eyes away from her. I walked over and saw the line of blood sprouting out of his forehead, outlining his chin and neck. My hand reached into his coat. It was a gun—or, it felt like a gun. I pulled it out and realized it was light. It rattled when I moved it. It was a BB gun. A toy. She had lost everything because of a toy.

He looked up at me holding his weapon. Then he looked at the bag, and I followed his eyes to the car door, and his eyes, dazed, gave me a look that asked how this had just happened to a guy like him, no different than me. I started laughing—first slowly, once or twice, and then into a hysterical, exhaling laughter.

After the sirens, lights and questions, I got out of there as fast as I could.

I parked under the bright white lights at the pump of the gas station. I checked my phone. 10:21 p.m. Over an hour after I'd first called her, and only one missed call. She had given up.

I dialed her number. Steam swirled from a snowbank beside the road.

"Hello?" she said.

"Leila."

She said my name, and then I remembered what I'd forgotten.

Her words were slow and sharp as she said, "Where are you?"

"I'm at the gas station. I called you earlier because I forgot what I needed from the store."

"What did you say?"

"I was at the store. You won't believe what happened."

"What about the store?" she said. "Ryan, I have no clue what you're saying."

"No, listen." I spoke slower. "I forgot what I needed from the store. It's too late, but I can pick up something else."

"I don't know what you're saying, Ryan." She sounded young, and then laughed like she used to.

"Never mind," I said in English. "I'll be back soon."