

Layla

Morning sunlight spills into Rory's room, falls on a little red dot lumbering across the wall. Glasses on. Oh! A ladybug. She finds ladybugs everywhere lately, sitting patiently on her nightstand, clinging to her shoelaces, poised on laptop key *L*. She imagines luck coats her skin – careful, don't want to brush it off.

Eyes closed, listen to the apartment. Silence. She itches her calf furiously, trying not to dwell on the quiet casting its heavy shadow across their tiny college apartment. Move to arms, ignore the pink blossoming under the fingernails. God, the silence collects in the corners of rooms like sludge. Thick *sludge* she has to *scrape* off. Wouldn't want it to get under the skin too much, wouldn't want it to sink into the bones.

Move to kitchen, switch on cartoons, bang pans, turn on faucet. Yes, there we go. The whoosh of the gas stove lighting– *rhapsodic!* Put extra milk in the Bisquick, just like Dad taught. She makes syrup, the kind that's perfect for drizzling: not too viscous, hot from the pot. One cup of brown sugar, one cup of white sugar, one cup of water, and a dash of maple and vanilla. This will be good; this will make Layla smile again. Everything will be back to normal after pancakes, because how can it not be? A Friday morning without classes, with pancakes and cartoons and oh look there's a lil lady bug crawling on the window. The batter starts to bubble, time to flip.

She pads the tortilla warmer with paper towels and nestles pancakes inside. Food is about love, and friendship is about love, and the two just go together. She goes to Layla's door, knocks, pushes it open.

Hey, Layla. I made pancakes for us!

A muffled *oomph*. A cloying smell hangs in the room, like moldering fruit in the trash and unwashed skin. Rory shifts her weight. Come on, you've been sleeping for, like, 14 hours. You have to be starving.

Maybe should have kept the judgment from your voice, but a faint *I'm comimph* drifts from Layla's mattress and isn't that the coffee pot beeping?

A touch of half and half in each cup, wouldn't want to taste bitter with breakfast. Look up, see Layla, feel heaviness sink into stomach. Her hair, normally tight curls blossoming into a beautiful afro, now all matted into a strange form on the top of her head vaguely resembling an abstract formation leaning to its side in some sad sculpture garden. This isn't good, the last time Layla's hair was like this... that wasn't a good night. The twisting up of locks, the bestowal of the silk bonnet so her curls don't frizz, every night it is a ritual for her and if last night she didn't... Rory itches her neck. God is her skin really that dry?

Here's your plate! Get as much as you want.

Thanks. Layla picks two sand-dollar sized pancakes, barely eats them.

Aren't you hungry?

I don't really have an appetite.

No appetite on pancake morning? ... God, that sounded shrill.

Thanks for making this, it was sweet. But I didn't ask for it Rory, so please just let me be.

Oh, my God! Moody much?

Rory packs her weekend bag crisp and neat. Toothbrush, toothpaste in Ziploc. Makeup in brightly patterned Clinique bag. Morning lotion, night lotion, hair brush, contacts— oh wait that's Layla's pack. Not that she's been wearing them this week anyway. Geez she hates it when Layla gets like this, all snappy and sad. Just plain harsh, really. Yesterday Rory told her about how Professor Jonson came to class barefoot, and Layla told her she really didn't give a damn, and could Rory please just go away. That stung. Layla will get better, though. She always does. She'll be depressed for a few days, sleeping and spitting out harsh phrases— like, *find other friends if you want to go out tonight*— and then it passes and she'll bounce up to Rory and coerce her into getting tacos and

shopping. Probably best to leave for the weekend, give Layla some space. Give *herself* some space. God, sometimes this apartment gets so uncomfortable silent tense sad dark.

Hey, Layla. Big dark doe eyes turn to her, stare from the couch. I'm gonna head home for the weekend, do some laundry. Will you be good here?

I'll be fine.

Fingernails press into inner elbow at the heaviness in her voice. So unlike the bright off-key shower Layla voice, the Layla voice with laughter caught in the breath, the Layla voice when she shrieks RORY! delightedly. Uh... you sure?

Yeah Rory, I'm fine.

Geez. Definitely no delight that time. If she's gonna be so cold why should Rory feel bad about leaving? Shoulder bag strap, trudge to car, insert key in ignition. Stay in the parking lot for a long time, thinking of the dark doe eyes and the heavy voice completely alone all weekend.

The sky is an expansive blue plain and the freeway is open, hot black pavement slicing through forests and towns and fields to her parents' house. Kind of a boring road though. More fun to drive it with Layla riding shotgun, grinning at fellow drivers and snapping her fingers to Stevie Wonder's *Sir Duke*, a road trip staple, filling the car with laughter like bright shimmering bubbles. Everything is more fun with Layla, really. At least, it is when she isn't gloomy.

In a week she'll be happy again, like she was the first time they met on a burning mid-August day. Only two and a half years ago? Feels like a thousand. Like she's always *known* Layla, like as children they shared dreams about chocolate fondue and weeping willows strung up with lights. Rory had clutched her brand new dorm key and fumbled the lock once, twice, finally pushed the door open and there Layla was, sprawled on the bed. A desert goddess. Long caramel legs and black braids twisted up on her head cascading down her shoulders in woven intricacy. She looked up from her

laptop and smiled and said you must be my roommate and Rory's nerves eased at the possessive *my*, at the thought that she was attached to someone in the foreign place that was college.

The drive is easy. Easy for mind-wandering; the road curves into her mind, circles around Layla. Without her college would be so different. Horrible, probably, so horrible. But she makes it exciting wonderful fun. *Migos* and *Flavor of Love* reruns and wine nights with cheese and Ritz crackers. And Layla falling to the floor laughing, always laughing, at how Rory loves Barry White and put Cantu oil in her white girl hair and dances across the room in flowing movements like, what was the phrase, like a bohemian hippie. The wild Hennessey-fueled nights when they danced with boys they didn't know and teetered on too-tall stilettos. The summers when they lay out on the docks glistening with sunscreen and sipping iced bottles of lemonade, coolness from glass collecting on their fingers. Driving through the city at three in the morning with the windows rolled down so that Frank Ocean's voice drifted up toward a constellation of lights.

They're juniors now, juniors! Isn't it amazing how they've been roommates for almost three years! Rory knows her better than anyone— well, as much as anyone can know such a private girl. They lie in beds at midnight and speak of silly things in the darkness— love triangles in anime shows, absurd ideas for screenplays they *swear* they'll write (like, the wild truth behind Matt Damon's and Ben Affleck's friendship)— their laughter escaping, filling the room with a close intimacy and falling asleep with smiles pressed against pillows. She knows the rhythm of Layla's breathing like the moon knows the pull of the tides and she's attuned to the electricity of her moods, the cadence of her gestures. Sometimes Layla pulls a strand of Rory's hair out of her afro laughing how did it possibly get in there? Must be that they're turning into each other, she'll say. Puffs of her hair float across their apartment like tumbleweeds, and aw that's so cute! How *domestic!*

ZZZZZZzzzzzssshhhhhhhh. Oh, my God. Reminder: please focus. Reminder: please don't drift over the rumble strip. Not a pleasant noise. Forty-five more minutes to home, and no more day

dreaming— *drive* dreaming! Tap tap tap. Fingernails drum on the steering wheel. Like, why does she feel so nervous? Does she have an essay due Monday? Something she's forgotten? Tap tap tap.

Mom chops zucchini into thin circles. The dull thwack of the knife against the cutting board is comforting. So, honey, why'd you decide to come home this weekend?

I need to take a break from Layla, she's been super antagonistic lately. Like, she makes it impossible to stay in such a stifling apartment. I don't know if she's depressed or just moody or stressed or what, but I can't help her if she won't tell me what's wrong.

Are you sure it's a good idea to leave her, if she's depressed?

Well... I mean... I don't know, this same thing happens every few months, and nothing I do ever helps, and she's just too much to be around sometimes.

Mom screws up her lips. Okay, well I'll bake her those cookies she likes.

Sure, that's sweet of you. Mom pours the stir fry into the hot pan, and like, maybe she's tired but she swears she hears *Layla* whispered in the sizzles and pops of the vegetables. Tap tap tap. Was it a bad idea to leave Layla? A flush warms her face as she thinks about the little orange bottle of pills on Layla's nightstand, and how Rory Googled the name on the label, with all the x's and y's in it. Used to treat symptoms of depression. That scared Rory, and she tried to talk to her roommate about why she needed the pills but Layla just got mad: you snooped? What the hell? That's a total invasion of privacy, Rory. I can't believe you did that.

Well, what choice did I have? You're my roommate I need to know what's wrong with you. God knows you won't tell me.

I don't want to talk about it.

I respect that decision. It's just I want to help you but I don't know how to because I don't know what's the matter.

It's complicated Rory. It's like, it's like chemicals in my brain, and they create this loop where all I think about is how inadequate I am and how I'll never be successful and how no one likes me and... it runs in the family. I can't talk about this anymore, okay? I really can't.

Enough with the cringe-worthy memories. Get up, time for laundry. *Tide Free and Gentle* detergent slips gooey into the washing machine, looks like Layla drowning her pancakes this morning in slow fat drizzles. Enough! Layla is fine, really.

Rory lies in bed on Saturday morning, watches a lady bug ambling across the blade of her ceiling fan, and thinks Layla isn't fine. Not at all. She had strange dreams last night she can't remember but that have left her feeling sour; she imagines that she swallowed a peach pit and now it's rotting in her stomach. The room is washed out, bleached. The sky through the window is pale blue and it comes through the glass taking the warmth out of everything, even the yellow sea urchins in the duvet. Does the sky tint everything people see blue? Would things be different if the sky was pink, like at sunrise? Would her whole world then be infused with a rose-gold glow, always laughing? Maybe if that were the case, things would be better. Maybe then, Layla wouldn't keep a wall between herself and the whole world.

Rory thinks of last year, when Layla talked about transferring. It was terrifying. Bile would coat her throat at the T word, she bought college advice books and highlighted sections and gave them to Layla with stubborn desperate hands. She didn't want to be at college without her best friend.

I thought about transferring once, Layla. Freshman year. But I stayed because of you.

Maybe you should've transferred. Don't pin that on me, your life is exactly how you made it.

I'm not pinning anything on you, I'm trying to tell you that we make each other strong because we're so close, because we love each other. Like when you held me after I was rejected from that honors fraternity. Like when you pushed me to ask Trent out on a date. Like when you—

What, so you're saying I should stay because of you? That's so selfish, Rory.

No, I'm saying that whatever is wrong with you isn't a product of your environment. If you transfer you're just gonna be in a strange place with no friends to support you, and you're gonna be just as miserable because you have to fix whatever has you so fucked up and angsty—

God, could you be more insensitive? You think you get me, Rory, but you don't at all.

Whose fault is that? Not mine. You're the unaffectionate, unfeeling—

Rory blinks the angry words away. The lady bug has almost made it to the end of the blade. Her hands are sweaty. Get up. Brush teeth, wash face, pack up. Take stairs two at a time. Hey Mom, hey Dad, I'm leaving.

What, so soon? Why?

I don't know I have this really weird feeling? I feel like... I feel like Layla needs some support right now. I feel like I shouldn't have left.

But I haven't baked her the cookies yet!

Mom it's fine, the cookies can wait till next time.

Okay, well drive safe. Tell us how she is.

Kisses goodbye. Get laundry basket. Throw stuff in back seat. Peel out of driveway. Tap tap tap. She'll bring Layla Swiss Rolls and a glass of milk and turn on *The Princess Diaries* and create a blanket nest and make a playlist and cook up mac and cheese and— oops that was a red light. Oh well.

Wine. They could have wine tonight. Or not. Actually, better yet not. Alcohol always makes them over-sensitive. Clinging to the floor Rory will ask things like are we even best friends anymore? Because Layla will go days without saying more than a few words to her, because Layla will act annoyed when she wants to do something, making her feel clingy. But then Layla will assuage her doubts, call her a ray of sunlight, ask her to please forgive her being such a bitch at times and in the morning Rory will feel stupid for saying anything because of course Layla loves her why wouldn't she love her? And of course her best friend won't let Rory help with her sadness.

Oh, my God! Sir, could you please not drive in the fast lane if you're going the effing speed limit? Jesus Christ this isn't amateur hour. Tap tap tap. Like, why is her heart beating so fast? She feels so uneasy. Press harder on the gas. The speedometer creeps up up up past 75 past 80 now 85. The pretty spring weather mocks her. Look how inadequate a friend she is, cruising on an open freeway under the sun instead of listening sympathetically to her roommate's woes. It's fine. Everything will be fine between them soon enough.

Rory makes a two-hour drive in 90 minutes. Wow! What a speed demon. She pushes open the apartment door, stale air escapes.

Surprise! I'm back a day early.

Silence. Layla? I guess she's napping or out or something. Peek into her room. Oh, there she is! Fast asleep. Best to leave her to rest a little... Except. That's odd. Pause. What is it? Layla's breathing is different. It doesn't have that slight purr like a cat's on her exhales. No. Her breathing is so soft. Slow and soft and practically indiscernible. Move closer. An empty orange bottle on the nightstand. The sleeping pills Rory got when she had her wisdom teeth taken out last December.

Hands numb. Layla? Hope for a turn of the head. Layla? Try to breathe, Rory. Shift Layla towards her. Her head lolls. Her skin is cold and clammy. The room has taken on the hazy quality of a dream. Press fingers to neck. Feel pulse. Feel pulse that brings to mind the fading ripples in a pool. Breathe in one two three. Breathe out one two three. Pull out phone. Dial 911.

911 what's your emergency?

Yes, hello. My best friend is dying. She took a bunch of sleeping pills. She's still breathing, but it's faint. I would like some doctors to come now please. East Main Street, apartment 320.

Voice polite, voice monotone. Hang up phone, swallow the panic that lurches in throat. Crawl into bed with dying friend. Curl around her. Lend her life. Give her all the life that is possible to give. Rub arms, stroke hair, hold hand, talk.

Layla, you can't die, because you do life beautifully. Remember when we went to that pottery place? My clay kept drying out and cracking, but not yours. It smeared across your forearms like wet leaves, running along the roots of your veins growing into a gnarled earthy beautiful thing, into this beautiful sculpture of a dancing girl with wild hair. The harder I tried the more my sculpture crumbled but Layla, you were languorous in your effortlessness.

God, I was jealous. Things come so naturally to you. Your bright smile and easy grace. You could be so much, you're so charismatic, people love you. You could be a PR star, an international businesswoman, a brilliant screenwriter. It is hard being friends with someone who could cup the world in her hands if only she would reach. So I'm telling you now: reach reach reach. Layla, you can't bail now. There have been times when you've hugged me when I was upset because I felt unlikeable, and in doing so kept me from terrible sadness. There have been times when I should have done the same for you, but I didn't know how, so I didn't even try. And I stayed on my side of the room and listened to your sniffles in the darkness. I should have gone to you. I saw how you hurt, but I hurt too so I kept you at arms' length. You draw me out of my shell, and I'm scared I'll be dull and passive without you.

Keep smoothing her hair, keep holding on tight, keep talking on and on and on because no no no no no no no no the silence is too scary and because she'll hear the words and she'll come back. She'll come back. Cheeks flame hot.

Were you really going to leave me alone in the world? Were you really going to leave your parents? How could you do this?

The hiccupping won't stop, and for some reason Rory is shaking her and now there are strong arms lifting her up and they're trying to take her away from Layla and she's writhing in a grip she can't get out of and there's a stretcher that strange men are lifting Layla onto and can I please come? can I please ride in the ambulance with her? no? what do you mean no you can't say no and no sir I will not lower my voice thank you very much.

The chairs in the waiting room are hard and unforgiving. Don't think about Layla's mom's voice when you talked to her on the phone. Everything will be okay. Push away guilt rising up esophagus. Guilt over going home yesterday. Knees to chest, head to knees, a mantra looping through her head lovely Layla, my love Layla, I love Layla, Layla my love— please live.

That *Derek and the Dominoes* song Rory sings to her when she's grumpy: Laaaaayla, I'm begging darling, please. Laaaaayla, darling won't you ease my worried mind. She says it drives her nuts but Rory always catches the smile tugging at her lips before the pillow smacks Rory in the face. Maybe when she visits she will let the song leap through the hallway, and Layla will know it's her before she sees her and when Rory enters the room the first thing she'll see will be that grudging smile and neither of them will be quite as scared. And she'll tell her Layla, this is what you almost lost when you almost left the world. And she'll tell her Layla, don't you see how beautiful life is?

A doctor with a tired face appears. Your friend is going to be all right. I'm afraid I can't tell you more since you aren't family, though. But she's in stable condition.

Dizzy. Dizzy with relief. The unwinding of the tightness around the lungs.

She's lucky you found her when you did.

Lucky? Hopefully she thinks of it as lucky. Maybe the ladybugs were lucky. Maybe they tried to give Rory all the luck they could because they knew she was about to need a whole lot to save her friend. See, Layla, she'll say: even the ladybugs want you around. And she will tell her: we're soulmates, you and I. Can there be such a thing as platonic soul mates? If so, we're it. That one, holy, perfect union: friendship. If you died I think you might have killed me too.

And she will tell Layla that she knows everything is terrible right now. But that she's not alone because Rory is a part of her, just as she's a part of Rory. And Rory will be strong enough for the both of them, and she'll help her get better. She'll say close your eyes: do you hear that? It's me, singing your name, a melody scattering across the stars, *Layla* lighting up the heavens.