

Katy: a short story by Bryan Washington

A job offer reunites old friends in their home town in this exclusive tale by the prize-winning US writer

The ask felt abrupt. Noah told me – over a text, our first in years – that he and his mother were reopening their bakery, but then he asked if I could help. I could sleep on his father’s futon.

His folks had owned the business for decades. I’d even worked there for a few years, before I left Houston for New York, chasing some accountant fucker with a beard. And after I’d gone, the bakery kept going, and the world kept turning, and Noah stayed in Katy, our tiny town just outside of the city, stuck in that bubble – but when his father died, Noah and Lynne closed its doors. He worked as a florist for a minute. Lynne found a job at the mall. None of us kept in touch, with no plans for that to change.

But, now, here was Noah. With a whole job offer. And I was out of a place to live, courtesy of the accountant. And I knew Lynne wouldn’t charge me rent – so when I pulled into their parking lot, gassed from a 12-hour drive, a little nauseous from my old neighbourhood’s nostalgia, I caught Noah staring through the window, and there was a second where I thought about turning right back around.

Except that’s when Lynne popped into view, waving. So I waved back. And Noah stepped on to the driveway, huffing and puffing, in his usual way, grabbing at the lock of my trunk and asking why my bags were so fucking heavy because where the hell did I think I was going.

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Their bakery was actually just a tiny, two-story home. It sat on a lot beside a strip mall, beside the highway’s feeder road. If you drove too fast, you’d miss it. But the building brought a homeiness to its street. And its foyer led to a living room that’d been converted into a sitting area – and then there was the register, the kitchen, the bathroom beside it. A staircase stood hidden by the patio, in the back, behind all of that. It led to two bedrooms, and a game room, where I slept on the floor, crowded by a futon and some plants and this too-fluffy comforter.

Growing up, my fam lived across from the bakery. My folks weren’t ever really around. But Noah’s didn’t mind having me over. So I went from bullshitting

with him after school, in alleys and garages, to hanging around the bakery with his parents, to actually folding pastry dough in the kitchen. Noah's father, a young-ish Korean guy, taught me all about its creases, and the way it moulded to your palm. He taught me to trust my hands. He'd come from a family of bread-makers, and his wife – a black woman from San Diego – had grown up in a bakery. So when they told me I was pretty good at kneading loaves beside Noah, I believed them. And when Noah's father called me *better* than his son, enough that I ought to start thinking about apprenticing when I graduated, I didn't say anything about it.

But then Noah's dad got sick. And then, afterward, it was just Noah and Lynne. And then I came out, but Noah didn't, and it stopped making sense for me to hang around there so I left.

I bounced from LA to New Orleans to Vancouver to Brooklyn, wherever my boyfriend at the time lived. Noah stayed home. He got better at baking, but he'd never hear that from his father. I played houseboy for whoever, cooking pastries on weekends. We'd text most weekends, at first, but sometimes I forgot – and, eventually, I stopped forgetting. It became a choice. Then Noah stopped reaching out, too.

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The morning after I arrived, just before dawn, Noah nudged me awake with his foot. He loomed over me in boxers, squinting. He'd always been a heavier guy, and compact – like me – but now he'd grown some scruff, too, so that he nearly looked unrecognisable.

You could be gentler, I said.

You wouldn't know what to do with that, Noah said. Everyone's up.

It's just the three of us.

Whatever. Coffee's downstairs.

You'll never find a man acting like that, I said, and Noah winced, just a bit, before he turned the corner.

Lynne was already folding menus at the table, and I hugged her, glaring at her son. He stood by the counter, sipping from a mug. But then silently, naturally, we set to organising the pantry – and that's how we spent our morning. Dusting, sweeping, tinkering with recipes, testing drinks. When it came time

to work through recipes, the feel of dough felt familiar in my palms, but still a bit distant, and I found myself turning to Noah, watching after his gestures. He'd gotten better, clearly. And more comfortable with his hands. Eventually, he looked up to find me staring.

Is there something on my face, he said.

A smile would be nice, I said.

Noah grimaced, layering pastry after pastry with precision. He stopped to take a break, briefly, and then he started again.

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Growing up, Katy was all rice fields. We had a video store. The schools. Some fields for sports. A mall and a movie theatre. Back then, if you wanted to find real trouble, you had to make your way east towards the city. But of course all of that had changed: now there was an entire Chinatown. The Venezuelan transplants had started communities. There was an art theatre, endless places to score pot, and any number of art shops sat scrambled along the town's periphery – only, now, it wasn't really a town any more. The bakery stood dead in the centre of it.

I'd brought a boyfriend there, once, before my first move out of state. Noah's father met the guy, shaking both of his hands. Lynne did, too, smirking over his shoulder at me. And I remember coming back to Noah that night, entirely giddy, and so was he. Neither of us believed that anything like that could've possibly happened – to *us*, in *Katy*. We made plans for what Noah's guy would look like (a little older, taller), and how he'd court him (dinners downtown), and how, exactly, they'd consummate their love (in a field somewhere, probably).

But of course it wasn't long before my guy dropped me for some twink. And the night it happened, I told Noah, a little delirious in his car, while Noah sat beside me, nodding into space. We'd driven out to the football fields – for silence, for space – and I'd just started nodding off when I opened my eyes to find Noah leaning over to put his face on mine.

I kissed him back, hardly serious – and then very serious – before I pulled away. And then Noah laughed, a little manically, and I did, too, rocking the passenger side – until, at some point, we were both gasping, grabbing at our seatbelts, entirely delirious.

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With a week until the bakery's grand opening, the three of us fell into a routine: Noah nudged me awake before dawn, and we'd fiddle with the bakery in the morning, sipping coffee and checking lists. Lynne shuffled from the kitchen to the bank and back, and we'd work until the afternoon. That's when Noah took over the kitchen and I hopped on to the computer by the counter. Lynne asked me questions, kindly – about social media, about marketing – but it was all stuff she already knew, while Noah worked in the back, baking, ignoring us.

Eventually, the actual space came together just the way we'd envisioned it. But it still felt inconceivable, like a miracle, the sort of thing we'd have never been able to accomplish on our own, with our own hands.

Staring at the building from across the street, Lynne tilted her head, and asked if we couldn't hand paint our own sign. Noah called that too much of a hassle – and when I agreed, he laughed – but Lynne shook her head at both of us. She said there was no point in doing things halfway.

So, while she looked on, Noah and I painted. Lynne stood beside us, tilting her head one way and then the other. At some point, she said it looked finished, and that it looked beautiful, and we agreed with her that it did.

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Noah only told me about one guy in his life. This was years back, on one of our rare phone calls: I lived in Brooklyn at the time, with some doctor turned portraitist, and Noah was in Texas, etching out his own romance. Noah asked me about sex, and I told him what I knew. He asked me about etiquette in public. He asked about the difference between taking care of his partner and taking care of himself. And I was honest with him – but, sometimes, I brushed him off. One day, in the middle of it, the man I was seeing broke up with me, standing outside of his apartment. The doorman wouldn't let me up, so I called Noah from the cafe of his building.

When Noah broke up with his boyfriend, I was living with someone else. He only told me that there were some things they couldn't get over. That was it. And this was *my* chance to be warm, the same as he'd been for me, and I knew that. But I wasn't. I asked Noah what he'd done wrong. I asked why he was so fucking difficult. And I could feel Noah nodding on the other side of the phone, and I felt better than him, more experienced, like an absolute fucking asshole, and then my new man left me, too, and I came calling for Noah, but by then he'd stopped answering his phone, he was taking care of his father, I could hardly get him on the line.

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The night before we were set to open, Lynne turned in early. She said we had a long day ahead, and she suggested that we slept early, too. So I told her I'd follow her upstairs, and Noah did, too – but we both stayed downstairs, mopping, until midnight. I swept, scrubbing at the walls. Noah stayed silent, doing his own thing. And then, eventually, he looked up, and asked if I wanted to grab something to eat.

It was our first time in the same car in over a decade. We pulled out of the neighbourhood, toward the city, and then Noah just kept driving. I didn't stop him. We'd driven for nearly an hour before he pulled us into the drive-through of a Taco Cabana, and then we sat in the parking lot, facing the highway, chewing tortilla chips in the darkness.

Reaching into the bag between us, Noah said, I really didn't think you'd come back.

Well, I said, you were wrong.

I would've lost money on it.

Good thing you're no gambler.

You didn't come back for my dad, said Noah.

I know, I said.

You should've.

You're right, I said. I'm sorry.

Don't be fucking sorry, said Noah.

But, I said, I wasn't entirely sure you wanted me around.

What?

I'm serious. Maybe that's what surprised me. Had to see it for myself.

You left, said Noah, you left me.

That's because you gave up, I said – and, immediately, I wanted to grab the words back.

The two of us sat, chewing silently. Noah reached into the bag beside me, and I did, too.

Listen, he said. I don't think I have to tell you that isn't fair. You know what was going on. Everything changed.

OK, I said.

OK what?

That's an excuse, I said.

No, said Noah, it's a reason. *Everything* changed.
And the worst thing, said Noah, is that you changed, too.

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At some point, the two of us finished our food. We drove back home, and we didn't say a word to each other. I settled on to the floor, and Noah settled into his bedroom, and I listened to him snore until I was finally out.

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The morning of the bakery's opening, it snowed. This was the first snow Houston had seen in years. It was the sort of thing that we'd thought would kill our turn-out, and the three of us stood around the register, playing with our thumbs. Noah mopped. I tapped at my phone. Lynne stood beside us, convinced there was no need to worry. These things happened in waves, she said, we just needed to hold out, and Noah and I looked at each other, and I thought he'd say something but he didn't so of course I didn't either.

But Lynne was right. Just before lunch, a couple of white women popped in. And then an Asian guy and his daughter. Then a gaggle of students, phones in hand. And then, patches of folks in small groups, and sometimes alone, made their way to the counter, pointing behind the glass and fondling the menu. By the end of the afternoon, we'd nearly run out of pastries.

I was entirely occupied at the register, while Lynne handled our guests. Noah walked baggies out to tables, jogging laps around the kitchen. He and I hardly spoke, but it didn't exactly feel uncomfortable: if anything, it was familiar. We were working together again. In tandem, despite everything. It wasn't that we weren't speaking to each other, there just wasn't anything to say.

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That night, Lynne tallied the day's sales. It wasn't anything monumental, but it was better than we'd hoped for.

Afterward, the three of us cleaned, and ate, and then Lynne ducked upstairs, squeezing my shoulder, and I followed her. Noah stayed downstairs, leafing through recipes by the register. And I thought about him down there, and I listened for him turning the pages – and then, however much later, I woke up to him watching me, sitting across from my futon.

Neither of us said anything. Noah simply sat, cross-legged on the wood. He looked a little more familiar, despite everything, and I wondered if I did, too. And I thought about what I'd do if he made a move, and what move I'd make in response. And I wondered if, somehow, this was where we'd been heading all along. Then he squeezed my knee and told me to follow him downstairs.

I was groggy, but he'd been cooking. We leaned over the counter. Noah asked me to take a bite of the pastry in front of him, a brimming, flaking thing. It was luminous, and he knew it. And I knew that he knew it. And he wanted to show me. And I didn't know what to say, so, instead, I followed his lead: I took a bite. Looking to him. And he did, too. We leaned against the counter, warm and quiet, chewing softly, lightly, at the mess we'd made between us.