

Sirens

Jessica wakes to sirens again. The ceiling is cracked above her head. The siren-wail, already receding, reminds her of the insistent nightmares that would wake her as a girl but then fade from memory, leaving rapid heartbeats and shallow breaths and the vague impression of some sort of screech—her own, a floorboard, perhaps a shadowed creature. The hairs of her forearms bristling. This was in her childhood house, her parents and brother asleep down the hall in their respective rooms. Their rooms bedrooms, her room an afterthought of a converted office. Her eyes would snap open to the map of France tacked to the A-frame slant of her ceiling. She'd wake again all night, many nights, eyes half-lidded in class or church or her grandparents' house the next day.

Alone in her new apartment, hairs bristling, she thinks this is the third emergency vehicle of the night, the third in what seems like quick succession. She wonders what is happening, but can't focus her thoughts. She closes her eyes, rolls from one hip to the other, face almost touching the wall, and eventually, slowly, returns to sleep, to dreams she won't remember, leaving their psychosomatic remnants.

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When she wakes again, there is faint dawn light in the window, and her cellphone is flashing new messages. She ignores the phone and opens her computer, thinking to look for news of last night's sirens, but falls into a pit of status updates from Rachel, feeling vicariously alive

through her friend's day-to-day. After she's shut down her laptop, she remembers what she meant to look up and wonders if she dreamed the sirens. Her head aches and she knows, sirens or no, that she will suffer last night's restlessness all day.

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A few nights before, she had received a call from Cindy while at work. She thinks of herself as Jessica until Cindy calls; then it's Jess. The hotel was dead, so she took the call on her cell. She still has Cindy's picture in there, the one from their initial text-messaged exchange, before they'd even met. The picture—Cindy's arched eyebrow, prescription-less lenses, dimpled cheek—came up on the screen as the phone buzzed. It hurt somewhere hard to define to see her face; every time it hurt a little more or a little less, an ever-changing thing. That smile in Cindy's eyes but not her lips.

Cindy calls out of the blue every month or so. They broke up over a year ago now. Cindy's now with a guy named Buck, of all things. She's not happy. Jess is with no one. This is the way with them, their well-worn ruts: parallel, overgrown but still palpable, like the remains of the Oregon Trail she saw with her grandparents way out in Eastern Oregon one summer. Her grandma kneeling with her to run their hands over the sunken earth, then her grandpa checking them over for ticks.

When Jess answered the phone, Cindy told her how she and Buck went to the lake and flew kites. They ate cheese and crackers by this lake out in north Florida, Lake Ella. "We had Brie and cheap Cabernet, just like that time on the coast. You remember."

There was no question mark. Jess did not need a question mark. She closed her eyes and let Cindy's words do what they would.

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Jess had been there once, Lake Ella in Tallahassee. It's small, and there's a paved path around it, wider near the lake-front businesses, tapering as it moves away, fading to narrow root-cracked asphalt in places. There's a wide swath of grass on one side where scantily clad beautiful people lounge, and a paved jetty-like thing with a gazebo at the end, jutting out into the lake. There's a café and a farmers' market every Saturday. Jess and Cindy had watched a drum circle from a bench. They watched non-native ducks fucking each other ("raping" is the word Cindy used, and Jess shuddered, because, no, consent was not part of it, but she hid in "fucking"). There were signs posted saying not to feed the non-native ducks, with pictures for identification. Cindy called them "invasive Freddy Kruger fucks," because of this ugly, weird red shit glomming all over their faces. Jess remembers thinking it was the perfect description. She'd never seen *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, but it didn't matter. There was nothing better than Cindy's descriptions.

Jess and Cindy were on this bench, watching people stroll around the paths, watching the drum circle. They held hands and didn't say much, watching this expression of improbable Floridian subculture bang on home-made percussion instruments, Jess swaying to the beat. When they spoke, they disagreed. Cindy thought the drummers were free, enviable, riding whims. Jess thought they were an illusion of freedom, like their freedom trapped them in itself, making it impossible for them to do anything but whatever they wanted. What about the important things people didn't want to do, but needed to do? What about sacrifice, responsibility? Cindy said it wasn't like that at all, and the conversation devolved. She took her hand from Jess's and held her stomach.

"I think I'm gonna puke," she said.

"Your doctors piss me off," Jess said.

There was nothing more to say, and they left.

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After Cindy fell silent on the other end of the line, Jess asked if she'd just called to tell her about Buck and Brie and kites and hand-holding. When Cindy was still silent, Jess said something about that taking inordinate skill, the whole flying kites one-handed thing. And how had they managed to bring wine and cheese-robed crackers to their mouths? Was it with their kite hands, or did they unclasp their hold of one another, however briefly, to eat their dainty little meal? Cindy called Jess an ass.

"As always, you miss the point," she said.

"I don't think there is a point. I don't know why you call."

Cindy didn't respond. Wherever she was, it was windy, and the air blustered against the phone's mic.

Maybe she's right, Jess thought, I miss a whole lot, all the time. She waited a minute, and then hung up.

This is how their conversations go.

The problem, in Jess's mind at least, was and is that they're still in love with each other. And because of that, she thought, replacing her phone on the desk, they're a little half-human.

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When she checks her phone, after putting coffee on and slumping into a dining room chair, Jessica sees a missed call from Cindy, one from her brother in Boston, a third from the hotel (1 AM, no voicemail—Jessica's eyebrows arch). There's also an email, from James at work, time-stamped 1:34 AM. She swipes away the missed calls and, frowning, opens the email.

There was a fire. The hotel burned down; it is ashes and charred timber and blackened steel, and she's out of work for the foreseeable future. No casualties beyond minor smoke inhalation, the email notes. Jessica looks at the message, brow slack, not moving until the kettle whistles, making her start, and the phone slips from her fingers, the screen cracking on the kitchen tile.

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Two calls from Cindy in a week feels ominous; Jess picks her phone from the floor and places it, screen down, on the table. She walks through streaks of morning light from the improvised kitchen curtain, down the dark hallway, and into her room. She pulls the battered venetians and returns to bed. The gaps in the blinds, where slats are bent or cracked, leave flecks of light along the wall.

*

Yesterday, at the café down the street, Jessica flirted with a barista she'd seen often enough, but never engaged. Cindy's call and visions of Buck were still ringing in her mind, even after a couple days. When she ordered her drink, she smiled and leaned in over the counter to peer at the chalk menu over the barista's head. She smelled lavender shampoo and patchouli, marveling at face-to-face interaction. Unbidden, she remembered: Cindy's hair was always lavender, and she felt her nerve slip.

Jess blinked, willed herself back to Jessica, and let her eyes rest on the nametag above Tracy's left breast. It was crooked, and she felt she might fall in love with a crooked name tag. She asked what Tracy's favorite drink was, and ordered it—hazelnut mocha, hazelnuts from just down the road—Tracy said she had a cousin who worked the farm. She deliberately brushed her hand against Tracy's when she got change. Tracy's eyes got real squinty when she smiled.

Jessica thought of the café as an island, a place apart, a place she could imagine herself different, a person who wasn't floundering, a person who flirted with baristas and maybe, eventually, took them home. She also imagined the table where she sat—in the corner, with her back to the wall, facing the door—as an island within an island. A layered existence, with some essential Jessica at its core. Or perhaps like one of those pictures of a painter painting a picture.

She pulled out a book for show, casting glances at Tracy, at the door, at the other patrons. There was a dude done up in plaid and skinny jeans and thick-rimmed glasses typing things on a laptop, and Jessica rolled her eyes. She pictured him in an overlarge waxed moustache. His keys, clipped to his belt loop, clanked against the chair when he shifted. He also cast glances at the counter.

She caught herself looking for signs, like she'd done in high school. *If she glances this way and smiles while making pretty-little-thing's latte, it means something.* And when Tracy didn't, the "Thanks!" loopily lettered on the back of her receipt became heavy with innuendo.

After a while, Jessica realized she was again doing things because of Cindy, or the lack of Cindy—putting on a show, seeing things that weren't there, or probably weren't there, acting out a part for an audience a continent away.

She got up, glanced at the counter where skinny jeans was getting a refill. Tracy leaned around him, smiled, and waved to Jessica where she hovered at the door. As she left, a doubtful, hopeful smile itched at the corners of Jessica's mouth.

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The little irregular stipples of light are in different places when Jessica wakes again. Her headache is less. She remembers her phone is in the kitchen, and thinks she may have heard it go off mid-slumber, sending its song through her subconscious state. She imagines her phone is

flashing again and decides to ignore it and its cracked screen. Without work she feels unsure of what to do. She thinks of trying to go for a run for once, or straightening her room or scouring the sparse dishes from last night's pasta. Her mind wraps itself in coils so that soon she is thinking about the condition of her running-shoe laces and how they seem like moldy spaghetti strands, and then to the way Tracy's spaghetti strap fell off her shoulder, and how clear it was that there was rarely a strap beneath it, the fall of her thin top, the nametag tugging one side slightly lower, the smile when their hands brushed each other.

And why hadn't Jessica tried to talk to her before she left, to get behind that smile, and see what movements and thought-scapes were hidden there?

She recognizes Cindy in the thought, harping at her simple, lust-bent mind. Spaghetti straps rather than Tracy's favorite books. Bra-less contours instead of Tracy's aspirations. Cindy introduced her to Edward Gorey and Cormac McCarthy. Cindy wanted to start a massage therapy practice in a small town that could use it and would come to appreciate it. What does Jessica even know of Tracy? Her cousin harvests hazelnuts.

*

The last three months they were together, Jess and Cindy were apart: Jess back in Oregon, at the same job, in the same town, and Cindy in Tallahassee, seeing a specialist for her stomach problems and taking care of her mom's kids. They talked often until they didn't, and Jess made the flight out twice before her savings sputtered, and even when she made it out, Cindy was distracted or sick or taking one or other of her half-siblings to soccer practice. They hadn't had sex either time.

When Cindy suddenly decided to drive back west that time, after another battery of negative tests, after another fight with her mom and another tantrum from the kids about eating

vegetables, her car made it an hour before it collapsed in on itself, didn't even make it out of the state. Later, on the phone for the first time in weeks, Cindy told Jess a new friend, Sam, drove out and picked her up. Jess wanted to ask about Sam—man or woman? and what does “friend” mean? and why is this the first mention? and who drives an hour each way at the drop of a hat?—but she didn't, trying to hold on to the sounds of her syllables, the image of Cindy flashing on her screen whenever she called.

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After Jessica finally retrieves her phone from the kitchen, she thinks to call her brother, but he doesn't answer. She calls the man who's technically her boss at his home. James tells her there's nothing to be done; something about a clause in the contract. No severance, no chance of reopening anytime soon, if at all. Just blackened rubble on an unsalable lot. He sounds slightly smug on the phone, but Jessica assumes she's just projecting—James is out of the job, too, after all. But perhaps, for James, any fall for Jessica is a lift for him—that threatening-sexual-harassment-charges incident outweighing any of his own misfortune. Jessica wouldn't put it past him.

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When Jessica was little, and even into her late teens, she used to lie awake in bed and fantasize about getting shot in some lonely, heroic way. She practiced the way she would land, carefully splaying her arms and legs to seem haphazard, forming a peacefully pained expression as her death-mask. Rather her “near-death-mask.” She always imagined pulling through, waking in a hospital, battered but on the mend.

She usually pretended she was saving the boys in her class from some unknown assailant. Then it was the entire class—first humanities then history then chemistry—after she heard about

Columbine. She tackled boys with trench coats and guns nightly, saving the innocents and saving the troubled boys from themselves.

Then, in ninth grade, she began saving Georgia Powers from being raped by a masked man, playing the leading role she never did in the school theater productions. She jumped on his back and clawed at his eye-holes and choked him even though he flopped backward on top of her and her breath was gone.

Sometimes her parents would knock on the door, asking if everything was alright, because her bed springs would sing through the house as she fought her way into a love story. Her brother in the next room over would pound the wall with his fist.

As she fell asleep, Jessica imagined bouquets too big for her little bedside tray, and daily hospital visitors—especially Georgia Powers, hanging back after her parents had moved to the elevator. A smile with swimming eyes and a touch light as silk on her bare arm. The piteous wonder of it. The freedom from responsibility or agency. Just sit back, and let her fall in love with you, she'd think.

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The third call of the week, Cindy's face distorted in the fractured screen as the phone rumbles and chirps on the table, and Cindy leaves a message. "Call me. You need to." It's so simple and self-assured, Jess can't help but feel its pull all throughout the day. She cleans two dishes and picks up the clothes on the floor. Cindy's voice and whole ghost-images of Cindy waltz around the small apartment. Several times, Jess picks up her phone, looks at the cracked screen, and then puts it back on her bedside table.

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The last time Jess really remembers hearing sirens, the memory that comes to her mind every time a siren wails in a movie or television program, was before Cindy moved to Florida, when the ambulance arrived at Jess's apartment to take Cindy to the emergency room after two nights of puking up everything she ate. Jess had called in a panic, Cindy slumped over the toilet. She had chased the lights and wail in her car, running two red lights to keep pace. She thought if anything ever happened to Cindy, she'd collapse and never get up again.

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As the sun fades to shadows, she begins to settle into a rhythm. She walks to the table, picks up her phone, brings up Cindy's face, the crack scarring the right side of her, and Jess' thumb hovers over the silly green telephone. Then she gets wrapped up in a critique of the phone symbol, depicting an outmoded, endangered species handset—a handset this slimmer, more powerful and useful device in her hand has replaced. She can't figure out what she really thinks about the matter, or why she gives a shit, and she walks back to her chair, opens her book and reads the same page over and over.

Rinse; repeat.

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The night before, as she lay in bed trying to fall asleep, she fantasized of a life unfettered in which she could do as she pleased—no Grandma with bills, no parents to worry over her, no job, no money troubles. In her fantasy, she called Cindy and said, "Leave Buck; I'm coming." Cindy said, "What?" and Jess repeated, "Leave Buck; I'm coming." She didn't know how to finish the scenario, so she just repeated it, trying out different tones in her head, even speaking the words out loud once, and her voice cracked, and she got up to get water.

Back in bed, she held her pillow close to her, wrapping her arms around it, curling into a ball and wrapping her legs around it, clinging to it like salvation, like floating debris after a shipwreck.

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She again walks to her phone, stares at Cindy's eyes for a minute, then brings up her brother's face, and touches the little telephone.

"Hey, Sis." His voice sounds tired. "What's up?"

Jessica says she's just returning his call. She saw he'd called and is calling him back.

"Oh, right, yeah. Sorry about that. A bit of a butt dial."

Jessica closes her eyes and nods, and then, remembering herself, she vocalizes: "Oh, okay."

"Yeah, sorry. But hey, how're things? You doing okay? You sound weird."

"Nothing, no it's fine. I just thought your call meant something. I was reading meaning onto it."

"It can mean something. The butt can be a perceptive part of the body."

"Is that what they taught you in med school?"

"Among other things."

Jessica smiles. "Aaron?" She can't remember the last time she actually spoke his name aloud. "What do they teach you about loneliness?"

There's a long pause.

"Nothing, really. The workload makes you feel loneliness, but I think they assume you'll figure it out on your own. Listen, Jessica, are you alright? Boy trouble? I don't know if I can help on that score, but I can listen."

“No, it’s fine, I’m fine.” Jessica slumps against the wall. “Do you have a someone?”

Another pause.

“I did. It didn’t really work.”

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry I don’t call more.”

“Me, too. I’m sorry it took a fortuitous butt dial. Shit, Jessica, I have to go, but call soon, okay? Or I will? We’ll talk for real?”

“Sure.”

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She sits on the couch and reads the same page, this time squinting and only reading every other word. “...beauty...face...maiden...equaled...” It has a sense to it, she thinks, and twists the words to her will: face equaled maiden beauty. Maiden equaled face beauty. Choose your own adventure, she thinks.

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There are no sirens that evening. This feels symbolic of something.

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For months after they broke up, Jessica went out only for work and groceries. She smiled her required smile at the front desk, and her throat hurt from the forced inflections.

It was three months exactly, they hadn’t spoken in that time, and she lay in her bed halfway through a bottle of wine, making the crack in the ceiling squirm as she blinked and squinted and focused in and out. Her phone called out Cindy’s ring—she still hadn’t changed it from their shared song—and Jess knocked her glass to the floor reaching for it. Cindy’s face was staring at her, and she sat up quick, and her head swam.

She answered, and Cindy said, “Jess. You still want me.”

Jess nodded and picked up her empty glass. Her sock-clad foot soaked up wine from the carpet and purpled. Jess poured more wine. “Remember the picture of you trapped in my phone?” she asked. “The one that says hello every time you call? It’s winking at me.”

“You’re drunk and you can’t get over me.”

“It looks like—in that picture—it looks like you were trying to put on a serious face, but your eyes are still smiling. Your eyebrow is upside-down smiling.”

“You should be moving on, you know.”

Jess nodded. “I bet your hair’s longer,” she said.

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She decides, finally, to go to sleep. She decides not to fantasize about anything but falling asleep and sleeping through the night.

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Jess wrote down the last conversation she had with Cindy before they broke up, in a tattered spiral notebook. She had jotted it down the minute they hung up, as she did sometimes, imagining scenes in a play that ends in marriage. After they broke up, she wrote it again, copying from the previous page; then the next day, on the next page. This continued to the point that even Jess-sans-therapy knew it wasn’t healthy, pages filling up. And she wrote it a last time, mixing cursive and print where convenient:

“How are you feeling?” She remembered her inflections, the tremor, but she doesn’t know how to capture it on the page.

“The medication seems to be working a little. I feel a little better, I think. But, Jess, listen. The thing is, it’ll take time, and I don’t have any money, and my mom’s starting to rely on me, and when I’m not here the kids eat Mac n’ Cheese and nothing else. I can’t come back yet.”

“Okay.”

“It’s not okay. I don’t think I can come back at all.” Jess tried to speak Cindy’s voice as she wrote but got it all wrong. She tried again, and failed. She gave up, and wrote:

“No, stop saying things. Can I just listen to you breathe?”

She no longer knew how much of the conversation was actual memory and how much she’d filled in with close approximation.

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Jessica wakes when it’s still dark out and doesn’t fall back asleep. She flicks on the bedside lamp and opens her book and reads a sentence three times. She thinks of Tracy and how many names end in “y,” and then Lake Ella and drum circle punks. The café Tracy works at opens at seven. Jessica sometimes sees Tracy there early. She has enough money in her account right now to drive cross-country, sleeping in truck stops. Her lease is up in a couple months, a breach might not be too expensive. If she asked, Aaron could maybe send money to Grandma. Last she heard, he’s making decent enough money and paying down med school quickly. Her phone’s little light is flashing. Tie me to the mast, she thinks.

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Several months before she left, Cindy and Jess talked about pooling their funds to get to France. They’d both thought of France as a promised land as girls, though neither could say why exactly. Something about the language, something guttural or earthy in certain syllables.

Something beautifully off-kilter in the syntax.

Cindy did the math. They could get there with a little left over and figure it out from there. Jess said they wouldn’t last more than a week before they were broke and stranded. And what if Cindy got sick?

“Does it matter if no one can even figure out what the fuck’s wrong?” Cindy said.

That night, they went to bed angry.

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The sky is just beginning to lighten as Jessica walks down the street to the café. She has an idea about what she will do, and about what she should do, but she’s convinced it all depends on signs and symbols, and the idea seems to shudder from moment to moment. She pauses outside the door, puts a hand on her phone in her pocket and the other on the handle. In a minute, she’ll peer inside through the glass. Or maybe she’ll turn around.

Tracy being there could be a sign. She could let her in, love theater, have answers, be a whole human who could teach Jessica to be a whole human.

The missed calls could be a sign, the constant tug and pull of Cindy at the periphery of every day. She could call her and find out. The way she said “Jess” when she answered would tell her.

The clouds and their shapes or lack of shapes could be a sign.

If, somewhere in town, an emergency vehicle were to hit the siren, sending its echoes through the dawn stillness, that could be a sign, though a sign of what is hard to say.

Signs are overwhelming, she thinks. She hovers. She wavers.

Interpretation is key.