

Sirens · *Jennifer Majeske*

THE SUMMER I TURNED ELEVEN we spent most days in the scratchy humid woods that spread out from the highway all the way back to the rusting sand mine plant and further. It was infested, they say, but that kind of thing didn't matter then. Sissy found a couch. It was far in, a mile from the road, where no one goes. Mostly, trash is dumped at the curb, people don't go any farther in than they can get in the back of a pickup truck. In front of the couch there was a fire ring and loose dirt where empty hot dog packages had been buried. There was also clothing; raggedy shirts and a pair of new trousers tucked in the crotch of a tree. Sissy believed in the finders-keepers law and decided the couch was hers. Its damp polyester stuffing spewed from rips as we took turns jumping up and down on it until it was almost empty. The upholstery sagged against the broken slats, but it held together, so Sissy commandeered us to help steal it. We dragged it across the railroad tracks as she directed. Other kids had laid pennies on the track and unbreakable combs. We didn't hope for much. A split nickel would have been something to save.

But Sissy hoped to catch the train. She snuck out on dry nights and slept there, all night stretched across the broken springs of her couch, in charge of her own destiny, her head cradled beneath her arms. Calmly she watched the stars wink out.

Hundreds of old bottle caps were scattered in the sand banking the ties, but there was no sign of our pocket change. I imagined dark gangs of laid-off men, their blunt fingers stroking through the sand, plucking out the dirty coins and cleaning their fingernails with the edges of them, the unbroken unbreakable combs caught in the nests of their hair. Thirty years ago they would have been Hobos, pissing out from a rust colored freight car, dampening the surging clumps of pine as they rushed by, in a hurry to find new lives of imagined romance and sudden unboundedness and cruelty.

No kid had ever seen the train. Yet I think we all dream of it. At Sissy's sleep-over parties I woke in the early morning. I watched the older girls. They curled their fingers in the dingy light, as if clinging to the edge of a cargo door, holding on with tight certain desperation like ticks, knowing that other rides, other opportunities would not come. We dreamed of the

artificial rush of the train wind, so strong it forced our lips to part around our teeth. We dreamed our fierce grins were plastered with gnats. Sometimes Sissy cried in her sleep but not in sadness. It was the gale force of artificial wind causing her eyes to tear as she clung to her car, careening away from me. There hadn't been a documented train sighting for six years, still at night we heard its sonorous hollow whistle calling us.

She woke me again in the muddled hours of the night. The sharp edged strands of her hair pulled at my throat, the fine curls caught beneath my sticky chin. I unraveled myself, my nightgown twisted from under her. Our calves pulled apart with a sound like the pages of a book of stamps being pulled apart in August. I hissed at her my resentment of being pulled out of a dream. I tried to lock the last pieces of it into my memory. Sissy bent over me, the whites of her eyes caught the moonlight, gleaming blue in our shadow-transformed room. "Just keep it down." her voice hissed. "This is your last chance. Are you following me or not?" Her cool hand shook my shoulder. She wouldn't go until I spoke. She needed to be sure that I was awake.

"Yes," I said. I had said the same thing last night. And I meant it, I always did.

Sissy opened the window screen and climbed out, pushing past the clingy pink trimmed curtains, carrying her pillow with her, tucked beneath her night shirt. I lay straight in bed, the damp sheets twisted at my ankles. Coming through the screen were the screeches of tree frogs and the hums from the crickets rubbing their legs together beneath the layers of mildewing locust leaves. The singing cut off. Sissy disappeared past the dark tangle of branches. The black, head-sized eyes of all the crickets were there, waiting for her to leave.

I tried to hold my breath until the crickets clicked on again. I promised myself, this time, to follow her. I would go, even if she didn't really want me to. I would prove myself to her. I breathed three times, then the insects were going loud again. They don't run out of things to say.

I dream sometimes of the laid off men sleeping in pockets of roots beneath the oak trees in the thick part of the woods. Then I get out of my bed and go to Sissy's. I can tell that she doesn't mind, though when she discovers me in the morning, she sometimes gives me a look that says, "How imma-

ture.” Other times she just takes her arms from around my shoulders and gets up, hardly noticing me, as if that is how it always is. When I sleep near her, her long hair itches my nose, the flowery smell of her shampoo makes me imagine angels, which I think about, concentrating hard so bad dreams won’t come. But the angels are not always there. Sometimes the laid off men are closer. Sometimes they are sleeping in my locust trees, just outside the circle of the back stairs light, which is never turned off. Their look-away eyes sparkle like the eyes of cats.

I climbed out. The tangy window smell of old metal was overwhelmed by the green smells from outside and the sharp sting of cat spray coming from the straggly row of bushes that wound around the house. It was too simple; in the moonlight the window seemed like a security flaw, too large, a bad idea altogether. I backed up against it, determined to count to some number and launch myself into the woods after Sissy, where I could hear all the small inexplicable noises that cracked and whispered like alive things. But I couldn’t hear her.

I walk around the perimeter of the house, the cool grass prickling my feet. I want to go after her, to protect her from whatever those forest sounds could mean. Or let her protect me, like before when she still had to stay with me, when she was still a kid. I want to expose things. I open the twin doors to the cellar, setting them down softly so they don’t make a sound. I don’t even need a key. I open the wooden front door, and prop the screen door open with a broom. I go from room to room and push up the screens on every window. There is no hiding. Moving silently, I go even into our parents room. Big moths collect over their bed, spinning in circles. My parents are quiet soft things, swallows nesting in a barn where the cat passes by. The train whistles.

The stars fade out as the sky grays toward dawn. The whistle reverberates the air, I can feel its sound press my finger tips, stir in my hair. A siren whirs through the calm and fades out leaving tracks of quiet through the muttering birds. I can make out the edges of low clouds traced pink against the horizon. My hands in front of my face tinge with normal pink. My legs are bound up, slowed down with my nightgown falling over my jeans. I hike it up, looping it into a knot that hangs down my front, and run.

Sissy is already awake. The train fumes on the track a few dozen yards

behind her. The train men walk in circles shaking their heads up and down, the rims of their Dodgers caps bobbing like the ruffs of speckled grouse. I go sit with Sissy. She is cold, but I do not lean against her. The hot smell of the captured train strokes through my nostrils. It is a smell of many parts: there is scarred metal, and the smoky stench of burning oil, also an occasional whiff of perspiration from the slick back of the engineer. Sissy's smell is salt and musk, so delicate it is almost invisible, except for its shadow, which can be seen by a careful observer, passing over the hands of men.

Sissy had removed her clothes with the same reckless faith she brought to every game she ever tried. She didn't even pause to look around, to check if she was being watched. She knew she was being watched. She held her body with self-conscious surety, her heels slightly raised from the ground, her arms held away from her chest, as if she were a carnival performer poised on the heaving rump of a circus horse.

She did a cartwheel, then another. I sat at the edge of the smallish cliff and watched the currents blow like wind in the kelp. She didn't even look, she twirled right past me, did a high-up back hand spring, then dove. The rocks moved for her. I could hear their ancient grating voices, as they chose to shift, a fraction of an inch that way or this, and erode themselves for her, sparing the seamlessness of her skin. Gravelly chunks spattered into the sea. She paused for a moment at the surface breathing hard, then dove under. Her body shrank and became wavery as the water piled up over her. The soles of her feet became pale wrinkles in the sea, then she was gone. I counted my heartbeats, then lost count. The sun escaped from behind a bank of clouds. Light sluiced through the water like arrows.

I stared out, concentrating on distinguishing the line where the sea should drop off into the horizon, but there was none. There was no end to it. The waves stretched out, becoming more and more shallow, then hazy, then curving away into a sort of eternity that I didn't want to think about. I strained for noises, a sudden splash, a tortured gasp as she shattered the junction between water and air. I looked for her, straining to see around rocks to where she may have hidden, trying to frighten me. I felt for the earth to move up and down softly as she might sneak up behind me wet and gleaming with glee.

"Over here," Sissy said, smilingly, a hundred yards out in the ocean. I exhaled.

“Is it deep?” I asked.

“It’s deep,” she said, “but it’s not too deep.” A challenge hung on the tone of her voice. “You can get to the bottom if you try.” And she was away, going out, somewhere, refusing to look back at me, to watch, to see what I would do.

“Wait up, Sissy!” I said. Her perfect stroke split the water without a splash. She quit the swim team last year. It was juvenile, she said. But she swam fast. Her white legs were even whiter washed in the cool transparency of the sea.

The fall was only twelve feet, but the rocks were jagged. Some were crusted with barnacles and the sharp chipped edges of blue mussel shells. It was high tide. Most of them didn’t break the surface of the water. They stabbed upwards like pointed hats belonging to giants who had drowned on their feet. I was sure I would have enough time to jump and get a solid hold on a level boulder before the breakers could come and slap me away.

In the distance where Sissy swam, the water was the same solid color as the sky. It seemed to flatten out, so I thought if I could just reach out, somehow swim to that far place, the water would start to thicken and grow firm until finally it was safe. And then I could just stand up and walk away, anywhere I felt like going, the South of France, California, Pizza Hut, all of Sissy’s new places suddenly accessible.

I swam down, to measure the depth in body lengths. That’s how Sissy taught me to measure depths one week, on a vacation, before she could find someone else to hang out with. We measured a lake together. I held onto her slippery ankle. She kicked me down and I sank into the silt up to my knees. But I pulled her in too; her outstretched arm completely submerged before her wet skin slid away over my finger tips. Then I was alone at the bottom. My fingers, reaching up, were still warm but the water cooled going down the length of my body, all the way to my feet, which were the farthest from her, and felt clotted with ice. The clingy silt sucked at my ankles, while Sissy darted at the surface like a golden otter. Slick things brushed against my back. The water swallowed the noises my mouth made, as I freed myself and cut upward.

She had discarded her windbreaker, the one I had spotted in Sears’ window and wanted more than anything. It still lay on the grass beneath her shirt and jeans and the cotton underwear mom had picked out, identical to

my own. She was the most complete-looking naked person. Everyone else looked uncomfortable, like freshly shorn sheep, their skin raw and shivery.

She had leapt with determination. Of course she didn't look first, she didn't need to, she just took a leaping start, tumbling a couple skipping steps and plunged safely between two fists of rock. It was unfair, her unquestioning faith that nothing could ever harm her. I took Sissy's wind-breaker from the pile of her clothing and slipped it over my shoulders.

A ball bobs on the ocean, way out past the rocks. Other objects bob also, sleeping seagulls, trash. But the dark shape is Sissy, I recognize the way the sun glints off her hair. It is dark blonde but made brown by the wetness, except you can tell she really is blonde because of the way her hair absorbs the light with transparent greed. I watch from the cliff edge as she floats in and out of my sight, now and again disappearing behind a ridge of white caps. The tide is flowing out, but I can't tell if she's going with it or against. Also I don't know how far away from me she is. I don't know if she will come back to me, or even if I want her to.

I know what's going on at the beach, without looking I know. The kids in the water have stopped splashing and are standing up, their right hands shield their eyes from the glare as they all look out after Sissy. The picnic lunch people forget their chopped ham sandwiches and watch as she plunges on. Men with black hair on their shoulders follow her progress more intently than they did a year ago. Their eyes catch the harsh sun.

The wind makes noises in the rocks. It rubs against them, playing them like a bow. It circles in the smooth eddy-worn holes, whistling, haunting the crevices of rock with a high-pitched whining noise. It sounds like a girl whistling to herself. I peel off Sissy's wind breaker and put it on the pile with the rest of her clothing. She is hardly more than a dot on the horizon. She might be waving her arms to beckon me, or she may be tired and could use my help to pull herself back into the shallows, where one can stand up and doesn't always need to be fighting to keep above the relentless crack of the waves. The fright I feel for her is only my imagination; my fantasy. I take off the rest of my clothes and pile them next to hers. I cross my arms and sit down so I can't be seen from the beach. It would be warmer to be in the water.

I dangled my legs off the edge and I leaned forward. I kept leaning further against the pull of the wind, till I was doubled over, looking straight into the sea, which sparkled and moved too much, making me dizzy. From her indistinct distance, Sissy was waving, calling to me like I have always wanted her to. The thin line of her arm rose and disappeared with the passing of the waves. Then she was moving again. The cold spray splashed my feet and I slid my hips forward until I was just resting there, almost vertical, almost jumping in, my palms holding me onto the edge, my fingernails cracking against the rock. I slid a little further. Just the pads of my thumbs holding me on, my back arched way backwards to keep balance. Sissy was calling me. "Come out," she said. She sounded as though she were standing behind me whispering in my ear, her breath warm on the back of my neck. It was a trick of the wind. The edge of the precipice clawed at the small of my back. I couldn't make out what she was saying. The birds were loud. The wind whipped sound around like a blender, contorting it. High keening noises swept in with the tide. What seemed to be coming from close by could be unreachable. I sensed the surface of the water beneath me. It was rough and grainy with turbulence, and pocked with hard spots where just underneath, rocky fingers pointed. It was a mistake. I could no longer inch back. I could no longer hold on. I fell.

A wave bore down on me too quickly for me to catch my breath and pounded over my head. I dove under the waves like Sissy had. The world under was yellow and thick, the water fell on my eyes like a bent pane of glass. Dark masses of rock clustered around me and below. I weaved between them brushing against their rough encrusted skin. The cold stopped hurting. The digs on my back no longer stung. I jackknifed and swam deeper, following a body of stone.

It got smoother the lower I got. I climbed upside down pulling myself deeper with my hands. The water was colder here. I felt like I was crawling into a cave of ice. My skin was pressed alive with cold needles, my lungs too big for my chest. My pulse banged at my temples. Somewhere invisible to me, Sissy was swimming, soaking in the pleasure of the waves, basking in the gazes of others. I wondered how long I could stay down here. It seemed she had stayed down for a long time; minutes. My throat burned for the rasp of warmed air. I couldn't come up yet. I couldn't see the bottom, just shifting colors, a mass of sea grass. I swam into it, thinking of

stories I had heard of divers eager to find something getting tangled and drowning. The grass wrapped around my wrists, but broke away easily, tickling my face and limbs and back. I couldn't find the root. It was no use. I was enmeshed, I couldn't do what Sissy did. I let go of my last air, feeling each silver bubble break from my lips. There was nothing in my chest but ache. I needed to stay, just a little longer, just until I could be like her, but I couldn't. I shut my eyes.

I fell back into the daylight. I felt wilted and tired to the point of emptiness. I couldn't hope for things anymore. I floated, my body split between the planes of air and water, my lungs aching from the effort of heaving in my first breath. I had washed out aways. The first pangs of a sunburn prickled on my chest, but I didn't move. I knew from timing the swells when to catch my breath, so I rode beneath the waves easily, their coldness cleaned away the sensation of burn. I opened my eyes just to cool their inner surfaces. By chance I saw Sissy, her body from the shoulders down, looking at me across a thousand tons of water. I only had one want. I wanted to remain invisible. She was too close. She saw me. Her head ducked below the surface and she was swimming at me like a playful eel. My eyelids slipped shut. I rolled my head to face away from her. The vision of her dirtied my mind.

I wish she would go away.

I have always liked to watch fire trucks, ambulances, police cars. I like the lights. I like how they turn heads, and draw heads out of open windows. There is something social and friendly about gaping. It makes me feel that maybe what I want to know is the same as what everybody else wants to know. Our bodies all hang in the same direction. We are magpies. We want something shiny, the blue cop lights, the broken glass.

Sissy got a job cleaning up an old house which was to be put on auction. I helped her restore it. The last occupant had been an old woman who couldn't get out of bed. The death leaked from her body into the house, spreading out from her breath and sweat, into the bedroom air and the bathroom where the nurse emptied her waste, and finally across the whole house, seeking the lowest point like a flow of sour milk, soaking its way into the grain of the floorboards.

While sweeping the dust from closet shelves, Sissy knocked over an old

shoe box. Newspaper clippings fluttered to the floor burying the yellow husks of the moths that had been trapped here when the house was shut up. The papers were brown and brittle with age. They chronicled the theatrical career of the dead woman. We hadn't even known her name. Sissy rifled through the papers examining the old-style dresses. She was interested in fashion. The lady's eyes looked up from the floor, all her smiles were there flooded in stage lights, her looks of mock tragedy directed at the peeling paint. Other pictures were facing down, her delicate cheeks pressed close against the dried moth wings. Then Sissy swept it all up, moths, paper, and dirt, and took it to the trash bin so there was nothing left of her. The years of glitter and pretending were swept away.

Glade Fresh Scent Potpourri spray wasn't enough. We tried everything to kill the smell. Sissy was going to throw a house party. I shook out an entire box of baking soda. Sissy got a rusty can of Right Guard aerosol deodorant from under the sink. She stood in the center of the house with her eyes squeezed shut and her fingers pinching her nose. She stretched her arm out stiff and sprayed it, pivoting on her toes, pirouetting in circles around the room. The wet mist clung to her skin. When Sissy moved in front of a window, a ray of sun struck her, making her glow. Her arms looked full of glitter. I imagined that it must have felt good, like walking inside a cloud, or like the spray of surf on a suffocating day, because she was smiling. Or maybe it felt like snow. She stuck her tongue out. Just for a second her pink tongue darted into the air to catch a feel of the melting snowflakes.

When the party came, all my anticipation fled and was replaced with fear. I didn't know anyone. I didn't want to know anyone else. Bodies spilled into every room of the house. I escaped down the rickety back stairs, unhooking the rope that had tied them off. I could hear Sissy's laughter, deafening over the music. She never laughed like that. It made my skin burn. The whole staircase rocked at each foot fall and the third plank down cracked under my weight. I stamped on it until it broke all the way through. Then I threw it as hard as I could.

I backed away from the house. I wondered if Sissy would notice I was gone. I wondered if she would look for me if she noticed, and how hard she would look. My wet eyelashes stuck to my cheek. Sissy wasn't pretty when she cried. She never did in public, she tried not to even in front of me, but I had walked in on her once. Her eyelids were swollen and her lips

puffy. It wasn't really her. I had stepped around the corner to avoid looking at her. Then I heard the noises, the wet animal mewlings pressed into the palms of her hands.

I imagined her coming out the back door. Her thick hair, still fogged with Right Guard which would catch the backlight and blaze like a halo about her shadowed face. That's how I imagined her, sometimes before I fell asleep. Nothing bad could happen with Sissy there. If only I could keep her.

Sissy does come, though later I can't ask if it is for me. She steps out from the shadow of the overhang, her hair glowing. She takes one step down, then two steps. I should tell her to stop, to watch out. I am mesmerized. She takes another step. Her small foot slips down between the slats, contacting nothing and she is tumbling again. Her knee hits on the fourth step and she is diving sideways, over the edge. Her body twists into the light. For one final moment before she realizes where she is, her face is smiling. She is happy to be airborne. Her body is curved like an illumination of an angel, turning, bent about the corner of a page. Her ankle shatters beneath her.

In January her outrageous physical confidence came back as suddenly as it had been broken, and no one seemed to notice the difference. To everyone else she was Sissy as usual. She led us on a midnight foray to the abandoned sand mine plant. We knew a guard truck made rounds. I kept watch. I crawled beneath a stand of small pines which grew on the dune overlooking the road. I was to signal with a flashlight, but the truck never came. It was too late or too cold.

I watched as they helped lift her over the fence, their winter jackets tossed over the triple strings of barbed wire. The boys' muscles strained beneath their thin sleeved shirts. She was flattering them, she didn't need their help. Sissy climbed the spidery scaffolding. She hauled herself up to the roof beams. She stood up, her body silhouetted against the cloudless star bright sky. She was magical again. Her arms punched upwards at the blue night, shouting. Then she was running, running with a humiliating skip forced by her smashed ankle, hobbling over the turrets, the rise and slope of the rafters. Others clambered up after, following in her crooked steps. She lurched and stumbled, careening through the gutted length of the building. "Come on up!" she called to the kids who had stayed on the ground, including me, especially me. Somehow I couldn't move.

It started snowing, the first snowfall of the year. The flakes were big and were tossed about in the biting wind like feathers. Even the girls formed light mustaches where the moisture from their breath caught in the tiny hairs on their upper lips and frosted them stiff. It was time to go. I called to her but she was declining to hear. I could see her through the skeletal ribs of the roof, stretched out along its spine, maybe sleeping, her arms dangling on either side of her at right angles to her body. Her finger tips moving with each gust of wind. The giant gears of mining machinery were freezing over beneath her, their cogs rusted in place. Sissy's friends got bored and left without her.

I climbed the stairs to the roof beams, and crawled out on the main girder to her. The floors beneath me were lost in shadow. "Everyone's gone," I said. We were alone in the world. "They left soon as it turned a little cold." She didn't answer. The melting snowflakes ran into the puddles formed in the depressions around her eyelids. I studied the geography of her face. The ice built up in her eyebrows, making them stand out, snowy furrows whiter than her face. Her eyes were large and flat, reflecting the dulled gray light of the sky.

My balance was shaky. I lay down like her, head to head with her, so I could feel the warmth through her knit cap. I didn't close my eyes. Even when the snow landed right on my lens, I didn't blink. I watched it wheel towards me and past me, the shifting wind swirling it up again. It came from all directions. I imagined it was me, I, who was the center of the world. I stayed with her then. Not because I had to; not because she was my sister.

Several months before, in the time after her fall, I was made to come visit her. I asked the desk nurse for her room number and she gave me directions. I got lost anyway. I was intensely embarrassed, walking by the open doors trying to peek inside, horrified when the strangers looked back at me. A youngish man in pajamas sat in a folding chair watching the crumpled maple leaves drift to the street. He wore a plastic name tag which had been left blank. Everyone else had a set look to their features and walked with the clipped stride of people who knew where they were going. They seemed not to notice me. This embarrassed me further. Finally, I asked the man in pajamas and he led me to her door.

There was not enough room for all her gifts. Flower bouquets were set

on the floor. There were more varieties than I can remember. The smells were all mixed together with a touch of antiseptic and starch, but it was not completely unpleasant. Under it all was Sissy. She weaved through everything. She was unavoidable.

One of the smaller potted plants had slid beneath her bed. I kneeled down and pulled out a tray of pansies, meaning to give them to the man when I left. She wouldn't notice if I took them, or care particularly if she did decide to notice. Hushed voices came from the other side of the vinyl curtain which divided the room. I wondered how long one was supposed to visit with a sleeping person. I cradled the plant on my lap. I touched each flower with my finger tip, in the brown center that stared out from the butter colored petals, dark and hurt looking. Then I heard the rustle of cotton as she stirred. I felt the whisper of her fingers as she took my wrist in her hand, and she lifted my hand to her and pressed it to her cheek. I heard the scrape of the curtain rings on the metal rod as she drew it completely shut, sliding it over the window light. The coolness of its shadow crossed over the nape of my neck. I kneeled unmoving while it lasted, feeling the blood-heat through her skin and the dry friction of her hands. Her nails were smooth. Maybe she kissed me. I couldn't lift my face to look. I could never be sure. It is not the kind of thing I ask.

I don't remember what we said to each other that day. But she, unaccustomed to confinement, probably talked of escape; her plans for breaking out of the hospital hidden in a laundry cart, or stealing a nurses uniform and marching brazenly through the main lobby. Sissy may have carried out any number of exploits. I don't remember them. Yesterday I was examining my hands, preparing to find more new freckles. There is a trace of pink I found, there on my wrist, where maybe her lips had touched. Even now, I see her eyes searching me from the soft bruise of her face, trusting me, relying on my wonderment and fear to give her exploits significance, to make her life a fascination.