

## Signs and Messages

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I'm hiding in the closet at my parents' house. Crouched beneath my hanging pants and beside an open suitcase. There's banging on the front door. "Jessieeee!" I can hear my name, muffled through the wood, drawn out like a whale's song. Fuck off. Just Fuck Off. The phone is going too, it rings and rings. I don't know if it's him or my mother or who, but they need to just fuck off.

I scan my surroundings, pushing on my ears to block out the sounds. I've always loved my closet. It's long and wide—a true walk-in—with a window at the end, albeit a dirty one. And a Japanese paper shade softening the ceiling bulb. It's calming. I was going to miss it. Some of the other houses on this block, a manicured 1958 housing tract, have turned their upstairs closets into crummy extra bedrooms. I can't understand it. Why sacrifice the ultimate wardrobe for the sake of cheap cousins? My dresses are tickling my back. Caressing my neck. "Go gossip," I hiss at the ringing and clamoring.

You'd think they'd be happy I had the sense to call it off. Before. They can have their gifts back and frankly I don't care if they have to eat their reservations. Everyone should be here within a few hours, so they may as well make a vacation out of it. Florida in October—okay, we're on hurricane watch, but it can be perfect. What's more important here? Dad's been telling me to wake up my entire life. Wonder if this is what he had in mind?

Ugh, the list of things to do...to undo...is spinning through my mind. Will a maid of honor help with the undoing, or only the doing? I guess I will have to apologize about the dresses. Tea-

length, sea-green taffeta looked so good on that black girl in *Cosmo*. Next time I should either find tall thin African friends, or allow everyone to shop at “All Shapes and Sizes.” My life has turned upside-down, yet all I can think about is dresses. Clearly, I am not ready.

My dress is perfect. Those tiny little beads, each one lovingly stitched to help the bodice along. Hugging my curves. That gorgeous dress, getting smaller and smaller with each fitting. At least I can start eating again. I own a \$4500 dress. I own it but I’m not going to wear it. Not today anyway. I think I’ll keep it for a while though; looking at it is just my favorite pastime.

As a kid, when I was either guilty or angry, I would last hours in this closet. Once, when my dad got back from a trip, I overheard my mother shouting at him about some girls’ stuff in his suitcase. He had brought me Barbie’s Ultimate Dreamhouse, and I guessed my mom was furious about that. Terrified they would take it away, I hid so long I fell asleep. When I emerged I found my dinner cold on the table, my sister already in bed. My mom put down her catalogue and peered at me through her scotch. “Over it?” she inquired as always, not knowing nor caring why I had been in there. I expect for the first time she’ll have something else to say today. I close my eyes and nestle into the fabrics behind me, burgundy lycra brushing over my shoulder. This is a great dress too. Aah. Now that was a night.

Howler monkeys were swinging past the balcony. Freshly showered and hair still wet, I was wearing the hotel robe, a short cotton island print, and nothing else. My legs glistened from bug spray freshly applied in the humid dusk. The mosquitoes were sure to set in soon, but I was carefree on the porch with my feet up on the rail. I must have been flashing the entire jungle. Those monkeys screeched and performed, feeding my Tarzan-and-Jane fantasies as I sucked down a piña colada. Jason joined me, towel around his waist, his tanned shoulders looking almost strong in the

evening's forgiving light. "Now this is what honeymoons are made of," I had offered, never really sure exactly what he wanted or expected to hear.

But I guess I got it right 'cause "ours could be back here," was his reply, his chocolate eyes twinkling. The cold drink seemed on fire in my mouth as I brought my feet to the floor, barely avoiding a full choke.

"Wha?"

Jason smiled warmly. He has a great smile. "Jessie, sometimes you just know. And I'm sure I do. I'm done looking, Jess. Will you marry me?"

Now Jason's a decisive guy, but this pretty much floored me. My mind worked fast as the monkeys watched us, and Jason looked out into the jungle. I remember thinking that I had three choices. Doesn't every girl? YES. NO. MAYBE. I imagined saying NO, and thought...well, that's pretty final. But I wasn't sure I could end it, there at that moment, with four days left on the trip. Then I thought MAYBE and it fit like a glove. MAYBE. "It's all a bit unexpected and it's a huge thing, so can we have this vacation which we've been talking about forever, and resume this conversation over nachos and margaritas at Chili's next Friday night?" That's what I really wanted to say. But my mind was a step ahead. What if, at the bottom of that pitcher of margaritas, I decided YES? What if? Then, for I don't know how many days, I've forced him to sweat it out and I've been thinking about little else non-stop. He might get a little pissed off. He might even change his mind. It could happen. Then I'd say a committing 'YES!' with a heart full of dreams, and he'd be like..."Ugh, sorry, babe, I kinda got all caught up in the moment, and now I don't exactly know." I'd start downing the guacamole like it was fat free and...so I said YES. Then and there. Overlooking the Corcovado jungle in Costa Rica. Like in my life movie each moment could outdo

the one before it. “Yes, Jason, let’s get married.” The howler monkeys raced past us again and I thought if I saw a toucan just then that’d be a sign. But I didn’t.

Anxious about the bugs, we came inside, stumbling over the door frame, me trembling as my clenched fist warmed that piña colada. Jason fiddled with the screen as I slipped off my robe, and then saw him look at me. I remember thinking that would pretty much be the moment of a lifetime to do IT. Engaged for minutes, the sounds of the jungle and emerging mosquitoes just audible behind the safety of the screen. Instead I ran to the closet and pulled out the sexiest dress I’ve ever owned. Somehow I defeated that humid night and pulled it over my sticky body—gyrating my hips back and forth to keep the dress moving down over them. Like somehow looking good in a sexy dress was better than, or at least equal to, actually having sex.

That was the last time I wore this burgundy dress. I never have the right occasion any more, not even in South Beach. I was planning to take it on the honeymoon, though. Shit. Now that is a huge waste of money.

It all became clear this morning when I tossed my bikinis into the suitcase. I wasn’t packing for a honeymoon. As I imagined myself on the beach in my new suits, I was lying next to a mysterious stranger. A hunky surfer or sexy older man. My knees gave way at that moment and I haven’t moved since. I had to let him know right away.

I wonder when Jason checked his messages? He was supposed to be golfing with the guys. He’s such a slave to his cell phone I’m shocked he didn’t answer. It was weird; I was psyched to get his voicemail. At least I didn’t say NO at the altar. I honestly believe there is nothing in the world worse than that.

This is supposed to be my day. Where do they think I am? I hold my hand up, flexing my wrist in front of me as I consider the rock...again. I sure do love this ring. It's the one I've dreamt of since I was ten. What the hell am I doing? My cell phone vibrates in my pocket and I jump. After ignoring ringing phones for hours I go to hit the reject call button, but see from the ID it's my sister.

"Thank God," I answer.

"Jess, where the hell are you?"

"Hi Bell. Do you hate me?"

"Shit Jess, we've been waiting and the girls are getting pissed. When will you be here?"

"I don't know what started it, maybe those cute lifeguards at the beach last weekend. I don't know. In any case, I don't even think he cares anyway."

"What are you talking about? Do you need me to pick you up? It's a fuckup 'cause my nails are wet. Maybe Mom can. Mom, she needs a ride. Can you...?"

"Oh my God Annabel, you don't know. I called it off." I can hear shuffling noises on the other end of the phone.

"Jessica Lisa. This is not funny young lady." My mom's voice makes me feel 12 years old.

"Where are you, and it better be close if you expect me to pick you up?"

"Mom?"

"I don't know how we're going to make up this time."

"Mom. Didn't Jason call you? I thought he'd call you." Suddenly I'm sobbing but I'm not sure why.

"Now, now Jessie. It's your big day, we can't have this."

"Mom," I can barely speak through my tears, "I'm not marrying him."

“Now Jessie. It’s nerves honey. This is perfectly fine. Just don’t cry. Your eyes will be puffy.”

“Mom, it’s over. I left Jason a message hours ago.”

“Honey, I just heard from Dad. They’re leaving the course now and they had a wonderful time. Everything is right on schedule. Except you. Now where are you, because you’re missing out on all the fun?”

Instant panic freezes my tears. Oh my God. I am going to be standing him up at the altar. Maybe the phone didn’t have a signal on the golf course. “Mom, hear me. It’s not gonna happen.” I hang up and speed-dial Jason.

“Aargh!” It’s his voicemail again. “Jason! I don’t know how else to reach you. You’ll probably get these messages together, and I’m sorry. Super sorry. But it’s not gonna work. You don’t know me and I’m just not ready. I like other guys so I must not love you the way I said I did. You’re the best, you are, but I’m not myself with you. I gotta be me, Jas. I can’t marry you. Don’t hate me.” I turn off the phone before closing it.

I lean back in the closet, grinding my teeth like I used to. My heart is racing. Well, that ought to do it. Can’t say it any clearer than that. Why is today the day he doesn’t answer? That damn phone is practically attached to his ear. Kind of hoped he’d beg me not to do it and I could be strong and say “I’m sorry Jason, but my mind is made up.” Then he’d be understanding and offer me the honeymoon, so I could think.

I glance at my suitcase, only string bikinis and lingerie inside. As I study the hanging rail above it for what else I was going to bring, it occurs to me that we were meant to be boxing all this up. Our new condo is beautiful and we were going to have it all. Layered desserts whipped up in a

chrome Cuisinart. Dinner parties for 12 with matching dishes and flatware. “Crystal,” I whisper longingly. New answering machine. “If you’re looking for J&J then you’ve got the right number at the wrong time. Here comes the beep, you know what to do.” I was ready for that.

Mrs. Jason Apple. Jessie Apple. I stretch my legs out in front of me and roll my ankles; pins and needles surge through my feet. This is so weird. I have no plans. This Saturday night I can go anywhere. With anyone. I feel sick.

*Bang bang* goes the door again. I scramble out from under the clothes, knees cracking as I stand, and peer out the window. I’m scared it’s Jason but can make out the trunk of Bell’s car. “I’m coming! Wait a sec!” As I emerge from the closet I feel somewhat relieved. Glad for the company, but really glad to get out of the closet.

I pull hard on the front door as it always sticks this time of year. Bell is pushing from her end and she comes flying in. “In the car, now.” She grabs hold of my arm.

“Oh Bell,” I sob, without tears, and throw my arms around her.

“Alright Jess. I can’t play this game. Is this actually it? You really don’t want to get married, that’s fine with me. Just say it.” She is rubbing my back but the motion is taking on a Swedish turn.

I pull away and look at her face. She looks incredible with three layers of base. “Hey, that’s not aquamarine!” Her eye makeup is not as we discussed.

“Jessie, please. Is this wedding on or off?”

I sigh, my shoulders dropping about a foot as I look at the floor. “Off.”

“Fine.” Annabel puts her hands on her hips and narrows her eyes, then opens them wide.

“You going to tell me why?”

“Bell. It’s hard to explain. I can’t relax around him. And the thought of never sleeping with another guy. I don’t think I can do it.”

“Well, duh. Everyone feels like that. I still lust after other guys, and I’m sure Pete gets a hard-on every time we go to the beach. But we’re crazy in love. And believe me, within a year you’ll be taking shits in front of each other.”

“Uargh. You’re disgusting.”

“Maybe, but this is obviously the latest tantrum from the Royal Baby. I’m telling you, it’s about love, Jess. Get over yourself and get married. You’ve got the rest of your life coming to relax around him.”

Every chance she gets, I’m the RB. Well she’s an RB too—Royal Bitch that is. I should have stayed in the closet. I face her square on. “Well maybe that’s it. Maybe I don’t love him.”

“Only you can answer that. And you’ve got about ten seconds to make up your mind.”

“It’s too late. It’s already over.”

“Oh really? Then why is he putting on a tux right now?”

“Fuck. I keep leaving messages.”

“That is so you. Look Jessie, he has no idea. What’s it gonna be?”

“Oh my God. I’m freaking out.”

“No shit. In the car, let’s go. You can always change your mind while Antonio’s blowing out your hair.”

“O-mi-gowd, Jessie, thank God. She’s here!” As I collapse into the wide leather chair, I can hear Summer and June flitting around the salon in a tizzy. Antonio clips up my bangs. I can see the

back of my mom's head through the mirror in front of me. It looks enormous thanks to about 50 multi-colored curlers.

“Glad you could join us.” Mom's voice lingers in the air.

I look at myself. My eyes are puffy. My skin is blotchy and I'm not nearly as tan as I was yesterday. Summer slides up, refills my mom's glass, and hands me a full flute of champagne. “Jessie, you are so crazy! I can't even believe you,” she snorts, squinching up her nose. “Drink up, it's gonna be awesome.”

“What do you think?” June and Summer say together as they curtsy in unison. Dyed blond twins and my next-door neighbors since the seventh grade, it never occurred to me they would do their hair and makeup exactly the same today. I'm not sure how I feel about this. As they wave their arms in the air and twirl around I am shocked to find that no one is wearing aquamarine eye shadow. Antonio starts back-combing my hair. It's not about them anyway, I remind myself, taking another sip. My hair is growing all around my face. I'm starting to feel a lot better.

An hour later, tipsy and shimmery, we arrive at the Palm Gardens Resort. I start inspecting for perfection. The tents are up in the courtyard, their stakes wrapped in ivy and adorned with fairy lights—I couldn't decide between them so we went with both. The dining tables are fully set, including name cards shaped like four-leaf clovers, but the wildflower centerpieces are missing. People are buzzing about, busy covering the plastic folding chairs with linen drapery and sprinkling rose petals around the grounds.

“Daahling!” Jeannine’s voice assaults me from behind; her kisses and spicy perfume hover in the air around my ears. Her hair is even bigger than usual, adorned with a large white lily, to match the one wilting atop her left torpedo breast.

“Where are the flowers?” I try to smile.

“Mine. Leave it to me, daahling. It’s all mine. Go transform.” She shoos us away, toward the honeymoon suite where our dresses should be waiting. “And take it easy with the champers,” her finger wags at me, though she’s already instructing somebody else.

“I love you!” I holler over my shoulder. The girls and I hurry through the courtyard and as if by magic, each stone fountain springs to life as I pass it. I squeal with delight and clap my hands in front of my face. Sprouting water has got to be a sure sign that all is right. As I push open the double doors to the suite, I think I have entered a movie set in a funeral parlor. Here are all the centerpieces, rows deep, flanked on three sides by sea-green taffeta.

Confused, I stand quite still, until “Surprise! It was Jason’s idea. Bet you’ve never seen so many flowers,” says Jeannine pushing past me, followed closely by men in aprons. Standing in the doorway, I’m contemplating what Jason was thinking, what it all means. The men grab the clay pots, clearing the space of the overwhelming aroma. They force me into the room so they can exit, snapping me back.

The girls and I start stripping off slowly, careful not to smudge our faces or disturb our hairdos. We dump our clothes on the floor in the middle of the room and fiddle with the eyes and hooks on our gowns.

Annabel had been stashing my stuff at her house. I didn’t want Jason to get the slightest peek at my dress, veil, underwear, jewelry—none of it. “Oohhh, that’s pure heart-attack,” June

swoons as I retrieve my incredibly expensive lacy thong. My earrings are bigger than my underwear. I'm thoroughly enjoying this.

"More champagne, sweetie?" Annabel offers.

"You know it." I receive the glass of bubbly.

"In love then?" she mouths.

"Truly, madly, deeply," I reply. This is what we always said as kids when our dad would ask how much we wanted or enjoyed something. We were sort of raised on those words and they roll off my tongue easily as I take a dainty sip, careful to keep my lipstick where it is.

"Pictures in five everyone!" shouts Jeannine as she bursts back into the mayhem. I pause a moment and look around. The girls look amazing. Even in taffeta. Even in the wrong makeup. Summer and June are holding my dress out for me. I've got to step in through the side zipper hole and then duck my head under the puffy sleeve. Annabel steadies me on her arm as I make the pass.

"Suck in," she orders as she tugs on the zip. A moment later I slip on my strappy dyeables and there I am. The Bride. With her bridesmaids. This is it. We all stand tall, quiet, looking at each other.

"Wow, it's a room of beauty queens," my mom's slurry voice breaks the silence. Her face has softened and she looks younger somehow. "Lipshtick, then pictures," she orders, and the chatter begins again as we start rummaging through the piles of discarded clothes and bags, digging for makeup.

"Breeeze," Dad insists on bellowing a different eze, other than cheese, for each and every picture. We are on about the one-hundredth pose. My toes are aching in these too-high pumps. I

should have listened to Jeannine and worn them around the house last week, but I didn't want Jason to see them if he stopped by. It's another bride-and-her-dad shot, "On your kneeeees!" he booms, and I can't help but smile. Dad takes both of my hands in his, pulling me around to face him. I twist my shoulders and squirm, but finally meet his gaze. "Guess this makes me an old man, an old guy with women for daughters. When Jason gets here, your mom and I have something we want to give you."

"He better be here," says Jeannine as she steers me away to pose with my mom. "Though aren't you glad you didn't let him see you? He's gonna die when you come down that aisle."

"Swat the beeeees!" He's not even in the picture, but Dad's still doing it. "End it pleeeeeze!"

"Time to move, people." Jeannine is flicking her hands forward, herding us to the back of the courtyard where the aisle begins. I can hear chatter so dense it reminds me of mid-summer crickets. Jeannine has Summer and June in her clutches. She's pairing them up with Craig and Mikey, who glance at me, then look away. I'm a little insulted as frankly I expected more of a reaction. Craig keeps leaving his place in line to whisper to Mikey, which I'm finding annoying. But I guess I'm not the only one as Jeannine steps in. "Craig, how hard is it? Stand with Summer and wait for my cue. Nice even steps, remember?"

We're ready. Summer and Craig. June and Mikey. Annabel and Pete. Me and Dad. This really is it. I shudder at the thought of what I almost did. Inhaling deeply, I recall my promise to look around as I walk down the aisle. I want to see everyone, there to see me. As Jeannine has told me many times, "This is a one-shot deal, the only perfect moment in a lifetime." I'm going to turn around at the altar too, and look behind us. I want to see what it looks like from up there. Hidden

around a false corner made of potted fig trees, I'm dying to see everything but can't see anything now. I force a hole through the leaves, and can make out lots of colors darting around. People are moving, finding their seats I suppose, though I don't get what's taking so long.

Jeannine is walking up and down our mini procession, pacing anxiously. She's done a terrific job. I guess it helps to be neurotic. She mumbles something, disappearing around the back of us, and as she waddles off I cringe at the sight of her dress label sticking out at the nape of her neck. A sign?

The chatter then stops altogether. My dad squeezes my hand. And then it starts again, louder than before. This doesn't seem right and I go cold as I realize Jason may have gotten the messages. I never left another one saying it was all okay! What did I say? I can barely remember. Did I say I like other guys? Did I say I don't love him? Holy shit. What if he's not out there? What if this is why we're still standing in the bushes, our heels sinking into the soft earth?

Jeannine comes up behind me, fast. "Is everything okay?" the words fall from my mouth.

"Perfect, honey. Jason just needs Craig a minute. Don't smudge." Jeannine pulls Craig away, their elbows linked.

"What the heck?" My dad's face has turned stern. This is more like Dad.

"Oh thank God." I let the air flow back down my throat. He's here. He's here. He probably never got the messages, and I'll delete them later or explain or something. But it's all okay. He's here.

Craig returns and shuffles slowly past me, whispering what sounds like "sorry" in my ear. "What?" I call after him, but the organ drowns me out. We're starting. I don't know what Craig meant. His back is to me. I try to break free from my dad's sweaty palm, but Craig and Summer turn

the corner and head down the aisle. What did he mean? What does that mean? Did I even hear him right?

Jeannine cues June and Mikey. Then Annabel, and suddenly my dad and I are alone. We're stopped at the foot of the aisle, my eyes locked straight ahead. I'm looking down the longest runway I've ever seen and I think I'm going to be sick. I want to run and puke. The pause in the music is deafening. Then, as the "March of the Bride" rises, my eyes reach the end of the runway and find shiny black shoes. I scan up, following the reflective satin stripe on the side of a tuxedo trouser. A tan hand protrudes from a black jacket and my knees buckle as I see the glimmer of metal within. He's holding his phone. I'm walking now, all my weight in my dad's hand, and my eyes are frozen on that phone. Flashes jar me, left and right, but my eyes are fixed. I can see nothing else. We've reached the end of the aisle. My stomach is in my forehead. I can hear words; my father turns me to Jason, and my veil is lifted. I'm looking at the phone. Someone touches my chin, releasing the spell. My head springs up and I meet Jason's eyes. They are black and cold. They are staring into mine. Boring holes in my head. Jason forces a wide, clenched-jaw grin I've never seen before. Then turns away from me to face the judge.