

Sinestesiaonline

PERIODICO QUADRIMESTRALE DI STUDI SULLA LETTERATURA E LE ARTI

SUPPLEMENTO DELLA RIVISTA «SINESTESIE»

ISSN 2280-6849

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Modern-Day Siren's Song

Abstract

This short story is written considering some possibile, real declinations of the performing arts. An ambitious young woman named Jessie assumes the concurrent, yet seemingly-contradictory identities of academic intellectual by day and exotic dancer by night, driven by her struggles with the Madonna-Whore Complex and the assumptions that working in the field of sexual entertainment will quell her insecurities, and make her more desirable by increasing her sex appeal. Jessie's role as a racy entertainer boldly displays her sex appeal, but masks her potential as a desirable wife, subsequently creating an allusion to the Sirens of epic literature.

Keywords

Performing Arts,
Entertainment, Madonna-
Whore Complex, Siren

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Introduction

Utilizing the exotic dancing industry to highlight the struggle of the Madonna-whore complex, adult entertainer and protagonist Jessie Cappazuti challenges several notions of performing arts while developing personal realizations that provide insight into her deepest apprehensions by working under the assumptions that this role will quell her insecurities and increase her sex appeal, inevitably making her more desirable. Like most performers who consider their art as substantial facets of their personal identities, Jessie identifies her values by

indefinitely pinpointing her innermost desires throughout this endeavor. What begins as an innocent method of earning quick cash and attempting to boost her self-esteem after a callous breakup eventually transforms into Jessie's obsessive attempts to justify her sacrifices, the heartbreaking consequences of which eventually transpire following a shocking confrontation, and alleviate the loneliness that stems from her pursuits.

Wanting to make some quick cash and boost her self-esteem after a recent (and particularly painful) breakup, Jessie enters the world of exotic dancing and succumbs to the financial beckoning of the job, not realizing what she is potentially sacrificing in return. Shortly after discovering an interesting revelation about a fellow dancer, she encounters a lonely client one night at closing time who foreshadows her potential future on the current path she is pursuing. After being forced to face this possibility, Jessie must decide if her long-term goals undermine the immediate sense of satisfaction that she experiences from dancing or figure out if the two can exist simultaneously.

Like many women have likely experienced at some point or another, Jessie becomes confused by the Madonna-whore complex, which focuses specifically on the inherent conflict between the wholesome characteristics that men consider as spouse material and what sexually attracts – and arouses – them. This confusion eventually consumes Jessie as she exploits exotic dancing in her efforts to occupy the entire spectrum of male desire, prove her capabilities to her (now) ex-boyfriend, and secure a stable future grounded in true love that will presumably satisfy her emotional needs by leading into a lifetime of blissful joy. Jessie's role as a racy entertainer boldly displays her sex appeal but masks her potential as a desirable wife, subsequently creating an allusion to the Sirens of epic literature.

The allure of the Sirens' beautiful voices proved impossible for unsuspecting sailors to resist, leading those who indulge themselves in the temptation of this fatal attraction right to their dreadful demise, just as Jessie's role as a sexy dancer prevents the one who holds her heart from realizing her long-term potential as a suitable wife and ultimately proves lethal for the prospect of fulfilling her inherent desires. After grappling with this possibility, Jessie reevaluates her priorities and comes to understand that value and contentment are not necessarily measured by cash tips or a night out for a good time. This recognition provides Jessie little comfort, however, as it transpires concurrently as a much bleaker reality that consequentially descends from her inaccurate assumptions that desirability is based solely on outward sex appeal.

Although virtually all performers welcome spectators' extrinsic expressions of praise (applause, shouts, whistles, admiring gazes) as undoubtedly flattering and rewarding, most artists agree that their motivation develops inherently, as the joy and satisfaction that they obtain from engaging in their respective art forms propels them to constantly push to their utmost capacity to deliver flawless shows

and improve their abilities. Jessie challenges this concept by deriving sporadic jolts of motivation from her audiences' reactions while exclusively remaining driven by factors that extend beyond her own interest in exotic dancing. For Jessie, on the other hand, performances function as methods of achieving other goals, including money and lavish purchases, for these pricey material accumulations represent the most fulfilling aspects of the industry. Also, most performing artists perceive onlookers' expressions of approval as encouragement that often solidifies their poise, confidence, and self-efficacy and manifests as yet another rewarding aspect of participating in the entertainment industry.

For Jessie, however, not only does outward praise and admiration bear no positive impact on her self-esteem, contrary to her initial suppositions, it may be argued that, eventually, this feedback actually proves detrimental, as Jessie becomes consumed with attempting to substitute external rewards and material gains for her innermost, intangible desires following her realization of the hopeless improbability of ever attaining them. Attempting to confront her heartbreak, bitter disappointment, and isolation created by this void, Jessie then begins to redefine what makes her happy and reassess how she determines success.

Jessie's failure to face her problems directly yield unfavorable consequences by producing outcomes opposite of those that she initially seeks, her unchanged romantic situation remaining the most telling example. These revelations leave Jessie more confused regarding whether these outcomes occur solely as a result of poor timing, wholly because of her unsuccessful approach to the situation, or as a combination of both miscalculations. Ironically, channeling her energy in ineffective outlets, such as exotic dancing and shopping sprees, creates little more than temporary (and futile) distractions from her sorrows that merely sustain Jessie's denial of truths that she has likely known much longer than she acknowledges.

Through the hybrid spaces of private intellectual and public entertainer, Jessie learns how to assess her priorities and ultimately comes to understand that genuine significance and personal fulfillment are not determined by monetary tips or nights out for a good time, spurred not only by the realization that these things require her to suppress her own aspirations, but that they fulfill everyone's desires and fantasies *except* hers. Jessie's newfound clarity, however, proves untimely, thus manifesting a self-fulfilling prophecy that renders the possibility of ever fulfilling her innermost wants virtually unattainable and reveals the inherent dangers of attempting to substitute philosophical values and long-term goals for the instant, and consequentially transitory, gratification derived from material acquisitions and shallow adoration from irrelevant individuals.

Her delusion thrives from suppressing actuality, hoping for unlikely scenarios, and expecting to attain emotional fulfillment and psychological stability from

materialism, financial earnings, and insincere approval from insignificant people. This outlook renders Jessie's ambition pointless by foreshadowing a future filled with unsuccessful satisfaction of her innermost longings. Until she mentally moves forward, this psychological snare inexorably dooms Jessie to sing the Siren's Song, a tune that destroys all hope for philosophical prosperity by emphasizing nothing beyond her erotic charm, syncopated with a series of insubstantial substitutes characterized by an underlying melody of trivial, vain pursuits.

Modern-Day Siren's Song

"Last call, fellas!" the bouncer bellowed. "Last call for drinks and dances!" The bouncer's voice was overtaken by the DJ as he announced the final performance of the night.

"Gentlemen, let's give it up for Miss *Katrina Von Siren!*" he boomed.

As Jessie took the stage, the applause, shouts, and whistles mingled with the club's aroma of beer, cologne, and cigarette smoke. Feeling the vibrations from the music's bass pulsating throughout her entire body with every beat, she grasped the pole and whipped her long hair back, cascades of curls tumbling around her face and down her shoulders. Her adrenaline began to flow as she began her seductive dance, aptly transforming the stage into a shrine for the five minutes during which she was hailed a sex goddess, embodying lust, temptation, and desire. The six-inch platform stilettos pinched her toes and sweat trickled down her back. Although her rhinestone bra rubbed her armpits raw with every move, the sight of the money being thrown onto the stage and the growing crowd of slack-jawed admirers surrounding it motivated her to make her moves as sexy as possible. As she finished her performance and began her descent down the stairs, customers tucked wads of cash into her sparkly garter belt and thigh-high fishnet stockings.

"Thank you, love," she flirted with one.

"*Mmm*, I appreciate it, stud," she quipped to another.

Sometimes Jessie provided a kiss on the cheeks to the customers who gave her ten and twenty dollar bills. After all, she figured, it's part of the job. After the club closed and all of the tables had been wiped down, she looked at her phone. The tiny notification light blinked, informing her of text messages from male acquaintances that stated something along the lines of: *Hey sexy...u should cum over tonite*. Another one read: *I really wanna c u...miss u*. And, of course, there was always one who attempted to intrigue her by proclaiming: *I've got something 4 u*.

"You miss me, huh? Yeah, I'll bet!" Jessie muttered, wondering if these guys honestly thought they were charming her or if their actions were fueled only by wishful thinking underlying a slight bit of hope.

Arriving back at her apartment after the half-hour commute from the club, she glanced at the clock and figured how long she had to sleep in case she was called

to substitute teach at the local school district the next morning. As a graduate student, she had a research proposal and a reading assignment due for class the next week, but she quickly decided that homework could wait until her next night off.

I can get by on four hours of sleep, she thought, and headed to the bathroom to take a shower.

As she climbed into bed, she plugged her phone into the charger and glanced once more at the text messages. It wasn't like she had never had actual relationships, but all of her romances seemed to end in the same way: Jessie was accused of being overly possessive, as well as too controlling when things weren't going, at least in her mind, the way they *should*. Her parents married straight out of high school and recently celebrated their twenty-ninth wedding anniversary, so Jessie often compared her life to theirs and considered the incongruences as evidence that she herself was flawed in many ways.

She had been engaged twice during her first three years of college and had cohabited with her last boyfriend. Although she and Kyle seemed to epitomize the perfect relationship during their first few months of dating, differences began to arise soon thereafter. Kyle made it very clear that his future wife would be a refined, sophisticated, and dignified woman and frequently became belligerent if Jessie's appearance, demeanor, and persona failed to meet his strict criteria. Although most people praised her intelligence, admired her academic endeavors, and considered her a very attractive young woman, Jessie constantly felt defeated, as all effort she put into attempting to fit Kyle's preconceived mold proved futile.

Many times, Kyle complimented her appearance in a particularly flattering outfit, though it was not uncommon for him to criticize her soon afterwards by accusing her of looking 'trashy' and expressing his 'embarrassment' at her apparent lack of judgment and taste. Similarly, while he initially declared her intelligence a turn-on, he frequently distracted her from her assignments, became impatient when she tried to read, and hounded her daily about seeking full-time employment, despite the grueling demands of her graduate coursework and academic responsibilities. When she finally gave in to his demands and became a substitute teacher, he flew into an exasperated fit of rage, labeling her as lazy and unmotivated because of the inconsistent schedule and unpredictable paychecks. Kyle's complaints also involved her housekeeping skills and personal hygiene, which he expressed by dramatizing his disgust over thin layers of dust on the living room furniture or residual traces of makeup on the bathroom countertop and balking when Jessie went a couple of days in between shampoos, since she considered washing her hair daily unnecessary and even counterproductive to maintaining its health.

Often overwhelmed with anxiety and frustration, she struggled to establish a correlation between engaging in her own interests, pursuing her own goals, and desperately attempting to appease Kyle in whatever possible ways she could. Despite the mayhem that characterized much of their tumultuous relationship, she never stopped considering him as a permanent aspect of her life until the day that a conversation over Kyle's excessive drinking became an argument over how little

attention he paid to her, which was not necessarily a problem until compared with the amount of time he spent with his friends, who all happened to be proudly single.

“I don’t understand how you can possibly feel excluded when every time I ask you if you wanna come, you make this disgusted scowl, roll your eyes, and get in the same pissy mood that lasts for like the next two days. Besides, all you wanna do is sit here and read a damn book or type on the computer,” Kyle exclaimed.

“I am actually doing something *worthwhile* and *valuable* with my time so that I can have a lucrative career and be a distinguished professional in the near future! All you wanna do is get your ass drunk. I am *sick* of their immaturity. There are *numerous* reasons why those lame pigs will probably never be able to establish, much less maintain, legitimate relationships of *any* kind! Why would I want to go sit around in a nasty-ass place *covered* with naked girls all over the walls? I mean, is that why *you* enjoy going over there so much and doing God-knows-what? So that you can stare at them and not look at me, huh? I am *not* tolerating a guy who ogles other girls and dreams about fucking them when he’s with *me*,” she asserted.

“You are being absolutely ridiculous. If you weren’t so damn insecure, we wouldn’t have *any* problems!” Kyle alleged.

“And if *you* truly gave a damn, you would spend *ten times* the amount of time you do with me and half the amount of time with those jackass clowns,” Jessie retorted, expecting Kyle to put his arms around her and pacify her with reassuring statements that usually went something like, “*Baby*, you should *know* how much I love you, and I only want to look at you” or “You’re the prettiest girl I have ever seen and you know exactly where my heart is.”

Not even close. Jessie could tell that he was trying to suppress his rage as he clenched his jaw and glared at her.

“You have exactly two weeks to get the hell out of my house before I am calling the constable and evicting you,” he growled through gritted teeth.

Jessie grabbed her car keys and stormed outside, her vision blurred with tears brimming her eyes. It wasn’t the first time Kyle had threatened her with an extreme ultimatum, but as she was about to slide into her car, he swung open the door and tossed her coffee table and bistro set into the front yard while screaming *stupid bitch*, *lazy ass*, and *nasty slut*.

Knowing this time was different, Jessie immediately began searching for a new place to live with what little money she had. Now desperate for sufficient income, she turned to exotic dancing, lured by the promise of quick money. After coming home with \$320 on her first night, in the two weeks Kyle had oh-so-graciously granted her, she had saved up enough money to put down a security deposit and pay the first two months’ rent on a spacious apartment in an upscale part of town.

As she constantly reminded herself that this job was only temporary, the money continued to roll in. Jessie loved it. Now able to indulge in her more expensive tastes, Jessie began looking at new cars, exquisite furniture, and designer clothes. She dreamed of the day that she would run into Kyle while out and about and, upon witnessing her luxuries, he would be proud of her success and beg her to be in his life again, rekindling their love and restoring their romance to the way it was in the beginning. She clipped photos of things she wanted and that she knew Kyle would love and posted them on her refrigerator as reminders to stay focused. Every time

she made a new purchase, she took that particular picture down and another one went up in its place. Since her role as a dancer meant nothing more to her than a slice of luxury pie, Jessie felt she had nothing to lose and everything to gain.

I'm just in it for the money, she reminded herself.

While Jessie attempted to keep her new occupation hush-hush, her closest friend became suspicious after observing some of her recent purchases. Upon reassuring Emily that she was indeed *not* selling drugs nor prostituting herself, Jessie confessed her new role as they cruised around town in Emily's outdated Mitsubishi Galant.

"But you'll never be able to get out of that industry!" Emily avowed. "Look! You're already addicted to the money."

"I enjoy it, but I'm not addicted to it! Besides, I'm only going to do it for a little while," Jessie reassured her. "You should come and do it with me! We could carpool and stuff! It would be fun! And, you could probably make enough money to get rid of this drag wagon and get you something hot and sleek!"

Emily's jaw dropped. "*Yeah*. Wouldn't *that* be a sight. They'd pay me to *stop* dancing! Besides, I happen to like my 'drag wagon,' thank-you-very-much. Sure, it has a few dents and scratches, but I love the color and they quit manufacturing this color nine years ago. It's now considered one-of-a-kind!"

"Whatever floats your boat...which is hopefully in better shape than your car!" Jessie teased.

"Har-dee-har-har-*har*. You're just full of it, aren't cha! But seriously. You're, like, much better than that. You're super smart. Don't strip for money," Emily begged.

"Okay, the amount that I make in forty-five minutes is equivalent to the amount that most people make in five hours. Sometimes more. That's pretty smart to me! And..." Jessie hesitated.

"What?" Emily pressed.

"I-I like the attention. I like having guys think I'm sexy. I have never really felt like I was good enough, and it's nice to be admired and wanted for a change," Jessie admitted.

"You *do* know *why* they want you, right? It's meaningless; there's no emotion attached to it at all," Emily explained. "That has always been an issue with you. You place a *lot* of merit on physicality and completely undermine most other aspects."

Jessie replied with a mocking laugh, "Well yeah, 'cause don't no guy want an ogre!"

"It has already started to steal your soul!"

Furrowing her eyebrows, Jessie finally responded, "Seriously Em, lay off the vampire shit for a while."

Settling onto the couch on her next night away from the club, Jessie picked up one of her textbooks to complete her assigned reading. She tried to focus, but after reading the same sentence five times, she put the book on the coffee table and lay her head on the throw pillow.

I'm not used to it being so quiet, Jessie mused. I wonder if everyone's homes are this quiet.

A child's cry coming from down the hallway and a couple laughing to what seemed to be a sitcom next door answered her question.

During her drives to and from the club, Jessie rarely played the radio because she barely even noticed when it was on. Her mind usually bounced between practical thoughts such as her next day to substitute, due dates for bills, and when her busy schedule would slow down for a bit, which often led to much more philosophically-complex notions, such as past relationships, wondering if she would ever meet 'the one,' to wondering if there actually *is* a 'right one' for everybody.

"I think my Mister Right got hit by a bus," she often joked with Emily.

"Hey Jess? Are you working next Saturday?" Mandy, otherwise known by her stage name as Destiny Starr, asked shortly after arriving to work. "I'm scheduled for it, but I won't be here. Tomorrow's my last night."

"I didn't know you were leaving!" Jessie exclaimed.

"Yup. Bigger and better things are calling my name. No pun intended," Mandy replied. Jessie wanted to ask her what she was planning on doing, but noticed that opening time was quickly approaching and she still had to style her performance hair and apply her makeup.

"But yeah, I'll be here," Jessie confirmed.

When the next Saturday night rolled around, a rowdy group of guys came into the club. She had worked plenty of parties here, so she was accustomed to the routine.

"We have a reservation for a party tonight," one of the guys told the bouncer. "Follow me," the bouncer responded.

Jessie and two other dancers, Trixxxie Tease and Crystal Caliente, were waiting in one of the private rooms when the group arrived. The walls were draped with floor-to-ceiling leopard print velour and each private room was equipped with its own mini-stage, pole, and sound system.

"You must be Derrick! We've been waiting for you," Jessie purred.

"Well, hell-o, doll! Actually, I'm not Derrick. He is," he announced as he pointed to a guy in the middle of the group. "He's gettin' married next week and he's gonna have a good time before he signs his life away!" The guys whooped and cheered.

Here we go, another bachelor party, thought Jessie.

"Let's have Derrick sit front and center while we get this party started!" Crystal announced.

“Who’s gonna be the first to buy our groom here a dance?” Jessie prompted. “Whoo-hoo!” Several of the guys cheered as Jessie collected the ten, twenty, and even fifty dollar bills that they waved in the air. She performed the first dance for Derrick as Trixxxie and Crystal made their rounds, first to Derrick and then to the others in the group.

As the guys began taking shots and making crude toasts, including “Here’s to titties and beer,” the dancers settled themselves onto the chairs and booths with member of the party. Easing her way beside Derrick, Jessie decided to go out on a limb and ask him about the connection between gentlemen’s clubs and bachelor parties.

“Why the sudden fascination with strippers right before you get married?” she asked.

Without missing a beat, Derrick looked at her in disbelief, “Because you’re hot as hell!” Jessie flashed a smug grin, but her delight began to diminish as he slid his hand onto her leg and began rubbing the inside of her thigh. She played along all the while, yet her mind kept contemplating potential images of Derrick’s fiancée.

Did she know he was here? Would she approve of him doing this right before their wedding? Is she doing the same while he’s away? These thoughts raced through her mind.

Another guy remarked, “The closest way we get to girls like you all is to pay for it.”

As the party wound down, Jessie could not stop wondering how men who were about to pledge their love and devote the rest of their lives to a woman could possibly allow *other* nude women to rub breasts in their faces, grind on their laps, and head into the secluded rooms for other “services.”

As she drove home that night, Jessie wondered just what makes girls the “marrying type.” Was it beauty? Check. Financial independence? Check. Possibly a strong work ethic? Double check. *I have at least some things to offer*, she thought with unsteady assurance. But inevitably shortly after, small twinges of uncertainty manifested into self-doubting second-guesses of *I guess Kyle was right...After all why would he have said all those things to me for so long if there weren’t at least some truths underlying them?*

The Sunday morning newspaper, the only edition that she ever actually read, had already been delivered and was waiting on the ground in front of her apartment door when she arrived home. Jessie picked it up and tossed it onto the couch when she got inside. She felt a slight rush of excitement as she took the thick bundle of cash that she had made that night out of her wallet and organized it by ones, fives, tens, and twenties. Trips to the bank to make deposits, once a mundane errand, had become a thrill, as she considered each deposit a mini accomplishment and felt one step closer to achieving her dreams. Deciding to unwind a bit before going to sleep, she slid the newspaper out of its plastic bag, unfolded it, and scanned the front page. She flipped through the first section, glancing over each page for anything remotely interesting. The next section was sports.

Blah, she thought, tossing the sports section completely aside.

She removed the comics and set them on the coffee table to read the next morning. Behind the comic sections, was “Lifestyles.”

She scanned the first page and then turned it. On the back of the first page and the front of the next were the spread of engagement, marriage, and anniversary announcements. Perusing the photographs of the happy-looking couples stimulated the romantic aspect of her disposition, as she contemplated that, for the rest of these couples’ lives, they will have someone to kiss goodbye when they leave each morning and someone to fall asleep beside every night. She also couldn’t help noticing that, while she maintains the customers’ attention at the club, in this moment, the attention was on these girls, and not one of them seemed like her. They held degrees, established careers, and maintained long-term relationships. *They* were the ones getting married.

Jessie leaned back on the couch and recalled moments from Derrick’s party and other parties she had attended since she began working at the club. Men came into the club to gawk at her and the other girls, but none of the dancers were ever any of the ones tying the knot. As far as she knew, most were not even in any type of relationship. This notion momentarily reminded her of the indecent posters that plastered the walls of Kyle’s friends’ houses and garages. As she flipped the page to finish looking at the announcements, one photograph in particular caught her completely by surprise. It was a couple seated on a bench, gazing at each other, and smiling brightly. Underneath the picture, was the caption: “Amanda Ann Stevens and Bradley Dean Wallace set to wed October 2015.”

Mandy? Jessie thought. *She’s getting married? I sure didn’t see that coming*, she admitted to herself. She then acknowledged that she didn’t recognize Mandy’s fiancée, as she was not able to recall ever seeing him in the club.

Jessie looked closely at the picture and then read the caption again. It wasn’t that she didn’t believe it was possible for Mandy to have a boyfriend, let alone a fiancée, but she had often been told that men perceived the type of girls who worked at the club as nothing more than a good time or two.

That’s not true, she always told herself. *People who think that are just jealous, especially the women. I mean, why would guys keep coming back time after time to watch us?* As much as she repeated it to herself, questions of its validity always floated around in her mind for reasons she couldn’t quite pinpoint. Still, she could never decide if she was basing her judgments on irrational assumptions or if she was just secretly hoping she was.

She slowly folded the newspaper and stood up to go to bed. All the while, she mentally replayed her last conversation with Mandy. Although Jessie was usually too busy or exhausted to be bothered by loneliness, she realized then that she could no longer ignore the reality of her solitude and blinked hard as tears began welling up in her eyes. Climbing into bed and plugging her phone into the charger, she noticed that it was already almost eight o’clock in the morning. Knowing that Emily had probably been up for at least half an hour now, she decided to give her a call. After four rings, she heard Emily’s professionally cheerful voicemail greeting: *Hi! You have reached the voicemail of Emily Preston with Randle and Cunningham Real Estate. I am unable to take your call at this moment, but I would love to speak with you about finding the home of your dreams. If you will leave your name, number, and a brief*

*message, I will be happy to return your call as soon as possible, and I look forward to speaking with you. Have a wonderful day. *Beep.**

“Hey Em, it’s me, Jess. Call me when you get this, okay? Bye.”

Jessie got up to use the bathroom. When she crawled back in bed, a text message flashed across the screen of her phone. It was from Emily.

Hey. You okay?

With a sigh, Jessie typed: *Yeah, I guess...It’s just....Idk. Come over and hang out later?*

Within seconds, Emily texted back: *Look, I have plans. I’m sorry, but I feel like I barely know you anymore. All you talk about is how much money you made on this night or who you danced for on that night and it’s just weird.*

Jessie felt as if her chest and stomach had become hollow as she stared at the screen. Her thumbs moved swiftly over the touch-screen keyboard: *I KNEW it. You’re jealous. You and everyone else. You can’t stand that I make a hell of a lot of money. You can’t stand that guys think I am sexy and that they want me. Your goody-two-shoes self should be happy for me and proud of me, but no. You HATE it.*

Emily’s reply came through like rapid-fire in three separate consecutive messages: *Are you serious? Listen to yourself! No, not jealous. Far from it. NEWS FLASH: guys don’t want you except for one thing, and believe me honey, they can get that anywhere! I told you that. You mean nothing whatsoever to them. I was worried when you got into all that, but you said you were only doing it “for the money.” Well, you obviously have money...what’s your excuse now?*

Jessie wanted to reread those last three texts in case she had misread something but knowing that it was too painful to do so let her know instantly that she had caught every word. She didn’t know whether she could identify her exact emotion at the moment as disbelief, shock, anger, or sadness, but the simultaneous combination of them all was dumbfounding. Ignoring the low battery alert that popped up on the front of the screen, Jessie set the phone face down on the nightstand, as though not being able to see the screen would make the phone’s contents disappear, thus un-doing the maelstrom of events that had just occurred within the past twenty minutes. In a daze of helpless confusion, Jessie wanted to do something—anything to help dissipate the negative energy that had put her mind into a state of emotional turmoil and clear her head, but she felt as though her body was made of concrete. She flung herself into her pillow, the only thing muffling the sound of her sobs, and cried until she was overcome with sleep.

The following week, Jessie glanced up from wiping a table at closing time and noticed a customer sitting alone at the bar. She often gave him dances because he was known to tip well.

“Hey there, handsome,” she addressed him in her deeper and more seductive-than-normal voice while easing onto his lap. “You have a good night tonight?”

“Oh, I suppose,” the man replied. “Just always hate closin’ time.”

“Why, d’ya miss us?” Jessie bantered.

“I always come in here lookin’ for somethin’ but I just don’t know what it is,” he said, a far-off expression in his eyes.

“Well, how can you look for it if you don’t know what it is you’re lookin’ for?” Jessie continued her flirty charade, hoping to squeeze some extra cash out of him before he left.

“‘Cause when I get home every night, I always know I didn’t find it,” he said in a soft voice. Jessie recognized the expressions of loneliness and disappointment on his face so well that she might as well have been looking in a mirror.

Dropping her teasing, coquettish manner and sex-kitten façade, she slid off of his lap and replied, “I really don’t think you’re gonna find it here.”

“Guess I always figured that,” he answered as he collected his coat and made his way out the door.

Following the other dancers, bartenders, and bouncers out of the club and into the parking lot that night, Jessie quickly got into her car, locked the doors, and cranked the engine. As she sorted, counted, and tucked away that night’s earnings, she watched all of the other vehicles slowly ease their way to the front drive entrance, pause briefly, and then head off to their destinations. As the taillights of the last car faded into tiny red specks, Jessie pulled from the parking lot and began her commute home, nothing ahead of her but a long stretch of highway that blended into the night’s darkness.

All the way home, she tried to assess the implications of her conversation, as part of her wanted to feel happy for him for coming to that realization, but, on the other hand, she wasn’t sure when, or even *if*, he would be back, and he was one of the big spenders. She knew she would miss the money from him. Naturally, her thoughts eventually settled onto the text conversation she had had with Emily the previous week, as it had been at the forefront of her mind ever since the day it happened. She analyzed, assessed, evaluated, and did every type of thinking she knew of in an attempt to figure out the situation.

Apparently lost in deep thought, Jessie did not realize that she had passed the exit ramp for her usual route home. She took the very next exit and let out a sigh as it dawned on her that the particular exit ramp led straight to the house she had once shared with Kyle. Under any other circumstances, she could have made a U-turn through the underpass and headed back toward her usual exit; this route, however, provided a much shorter distance to her neighborhood, and since her gasoline light had been on for at least the past twenty miles, she had no choice but to take this route or risk running out of gasoline and being stranded roadside at this hour.

The closer she came to the house, the harder her heart pounded in her chest. Jessie remembered that it was the same feeling she got when she and Kyle first started dating, and she smiled at the memory. With the thin shred of hope she retained from the day she moved out and clung to every waking moment since

then, she slowed her speed to a slight crawl and picked up her phone to see if she had received any new text messages or notifications from anyone important, knowing all too well that the only name that she truly cared to see was probably the least likely one to appear. She tossed her phone back into the passenger seat and refocused her attention on driving, looking up just as she was passing the house at which Kyle's truck sat parked in the driveway...with an old Mitsubishi Galant sitting right beside it.

Feeling her stomach instantly turn upside down, Jessie felt as though time had either come to a screeching halt or that she was trapped within some alternate reality in which nothing was as it appeared. Her apartment now seemed as though it was thousands of miles away, and the gasoline light now blinking furiously within the dashboard of her car seemed insignificant. Feeling as though she was in a trance and moving in slow motion, she clutched her phone, this time out of habit only, sat it in her lap, and reached for her wallet. Unsnapping it with one hand while the other gripped the steering wheel, she ran her fingers over the money she had made dancing that night, her eyes never averting their fixated frontal gaze.