

ERIN SOROS

Cord

Content warning: This work addresses sexual violence and the murder of women, primarily Indigenous women, in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside: details elliptical but potentially jarring.

SOMEONE MUST HAVE BROKEN into my apartment. The cell phone was just there on the table—I am sure that's where I left it, the cover speckled with hearts. My door was locked. Did the burglar lock it on the way out? Anyone entering would have needed the key, and I have the key. I am holding the key in my hand but not the phone. I didn't have it when I left this morning, even though I should have brought it because then I could have held it to my mouth whenever I needed to speak and no one would have looked at me the way they looked at me.

I email my friend and ask her to contact me so that I can hear the phone, its low hum. I always keep it turned to vibrate because the ring makes me startle. I've left plates in the sink without rinsing them and can feel the stiff crud as I lift each plate, checking to see if I left the phone underneath. I search the fridge. Ruffle a pile of laundry. Listening could be anywhere.

I check my email. C. says she'll phone. She knows I'm in trouble, C. does. She can't see me but wants to be here, to hear here, helping me in this kitchen with the papers clumped on the table like a pile of leaves. One sock. A bowl half-full of soggy cereal. I am not my normal self. Self. E for Erin. C. for the woman who is trying to see me on the phone, through the phone, but I ant aunt ain't can't find the phone now words are starting to shimmer, slidper, slippher, sheheron the

phone, I can hear the hum now, I tis somewhere here, I can find I if I just listen. Erin? I innerhear her worryword.

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Flees in too directions at once.

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Can an essay tak tank a friend? E.S. say. Oh say can you see.

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She emails me that she is erining. Running ringing. Crying sound like a quiet animal. I look for the phone and I can't fid fiddle find. Phone. Again she ringlets. All ricochets now in the kitchen with the one sock like one foot as the body slides into

Can't cunt. I can't say
it isn't mine

Say it's just a sock. Tell yourself. Sock one where is too when you need it. And the hone is still ringing.

Too much. I tisher because you can hear it. She is a cross out, she is a cross atop a nocrosswhat, no cross white. She is an indiancross-whenocrosseslie.

My friend on the phone is alive, a Métis woman, chosen sister, survivor of other people's stories. Little sister, she calls me, our words for each other forming a cord no one else can see. I can hear the slightest vibration of her.

Erin, she says through that persistent metal hum. I am here. I am right here.

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Years ago I was the woman who listened. I took calls from five p.m. to ten a.m. at home on a heavy black phone with a cord like a pig's tale. I slept hollow and shook awake to the pager's buzz and knew another woman had been raped. The dispatch connected us, that cool voice. Then rush of a woman's words. I twirled that cord. Syllables spiralling as the night outside made blankness possible, sleep dangling at the edges of my hearing so that sometimes dream thoughts gripped her story. If she wanted me to meet her at the hospital, I slipped out of my pyjamas and into jeans and a t-shirt, hailing a cab paid for by the crisis centre so I didn't have to carry anything but

myself. I waited in a plastic chair. Would her face match her voice? Adrenaline like sweet coffee. It's me. A shy hi, such an innocent word, the two of us under fluorescent lights standing and smiling. I held her hand as the doctor pressed new fingers into an orifice.

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I can't tilllthis sorry unless.

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Story I meant, but who can use that word when it holds so much murder?

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The one who laughed while we sipped coffee in the cafeteria, well, that's it—I've been raped. I'm in the club, eh? The one whose nails split the skin of my palm. The one who called me a white bitch as the doctor sewed her stitches.

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Are you alive?

Are you?

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The doctor's gloved hands, how that transparent barrier protected her body.

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In the caught kitchen, a magazine, just a slick page I found of some woman's torso and brought home like a shell I'd collected at the beach that starts to smell rotten.

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This must be hard for you too, I said to the doctor as she conducted the examination, the woman's feet tucked in the stirrups so her legs made an *M* blocking the doctor's face.

Not really, she said, her hand inside the woman's body. I wouldn't have put myself in her position.

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That's right, I said to the woman clenching my hand, as I gazed down at her upside eyes, bruises forming their blue alphabet across her face. I'm your white bitch.

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If I could just reach the phone humming underneath the folds, detritus of mud days thick with whaching, I could tell C.

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I sit on the edge of my bed, dark water rising through night of noseepnoseleap choking with scare tissue I heave into the stealstale air trying to get those women out of.

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June sunshine one Sunday morning after a shift at the hospital, stinktongued and coffeerattled I walked for hours, past a bald white man mowing a lawn, past tables of people eating pancakes and a white woman walking home from yoga class holding a mauve mat like a tiny body needing care.

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The calls echoed each other. The calls held echoes within themselves. The present spoke an unspeakable past. An Indigenous woman began talking about one rape—fresh violation that evening, a man offering to walk her home and suddenly pushing her down, holding her throat—and then another time emerged, a smaller voice, a priest's hands.

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Can you breathe? Can you just take one deep breath? Now let it out. Let it all out.

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Sometimes I glimpsed my reflection in the night window, receiver held to my ear, my mouth still then moving, still then moving, a stranger's anguish pacing my face.

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Floating like a hologram in the bedroom dark is a wide-eyed Indigenous boy with a cap of black hair. He cocks his head. His eyes shift to the priest then to the eyes of his brother.

I see resistance. Do I? Sketches that the children leave, rough warnings, ink scratches, carvings on hidden wood under a bed where the priests won't reach.

I see how they signal each other, which men to trust, which ones not to trust.

I see glances from child to child when one girl is taken by the hand.
I see a door, a knob I can't turn.

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youcantseethisbeast

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Best stay in the here. Metal hum brings me to the kitchen. When was the last time I ate? When was the last time I slept? I now. Eye then. I hear the phone rattle in a basket—it must have slipped inside that safety.

I touch vibration! I grasp it! I hear C.!

"Erin? I'm glad I'm talking to you."

Her syllables careful calm as instructions from a flight attendant when a plane soars through dangerous air.

"How are you feeling? Were you able to sleep at all last night? I want you to tell me what you've been doing."

The only way I'm going back to the psych ward is in handcuffs. She tells me I don't have to go. But I need to reach my doctor—C. will stay on the phone with me while I walk. Just a small dose so you can sleep, she says. No hospital.

The taxi cabs in Toronto are turquoise and orange, code for me and him, my long lost love, my blue clothes and his red hair, together, zip-ping in and out of traffic, honking joy. The taxi cabs in this town, I tell C. I hate orange, I tell C. So do I, she says. Such a glaring colour, isn't it? I sit in the doctor's office and there are two pregnant wewoewomen

and I think this is a plant. It's a trick, right? You guys and your games! The office is bugged. I laugh as I look for the cameras. While I talk to the doctor, C. listens through the phone, as if she is with me in the room. She says there won't be any opera. No I mean poke. No police.

I walk to the drugstore where I think my other friend, L., will meet me to take me to the ceremony. A man strides past and says into his cell phone that he is running late and I nowknow this means that *he* is, the man who is on the way to the wedding in one of those orange and turquoise taxis. Glass doors swing into the inside. Sane sanitary. Everything is a little joke. Over the speakers rises the voice of Sarah McLachlan singing of angels. Someone is watching over me. Sham. Shampoo and conditioner, floozy and toothpaste, each *t* like a cross as white as those strips will make your teeth. Who will know where my family is hiding, where my beloved is waiting? No more nightmares, only this plan, our shared sparkling secret, promise of escape.

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They weren't schools, I told my partner in the solace of our bedroom, morning light streaking through the thin paisley sheet we used as a curtain. We were in our twenties. The decade was the nineties. What did we know? No frame for the Castro poster we thumbtacked to the walls. No frame for anything I heard.

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Oh Canada.

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I wait for the prescription to be filled. I can't stop talking. But I am not talking to myself. I am talking to C. Witness: her ears. The constant rhythm of our long-distance accord. I am a woman who can afford a smart phone. Good haircut, good teeth, white skin. I know the worth of these protections. I raise my voice, just slightly, when the pharmacist talks down to me. I know the urgency of maintaining my place. No andcufss, cutcuffs, nothistime.

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When I return to my apartment, C. tells me to let the tablet dissolve under my tongue. I put the phone down to pick up the pill and place it under that mouth muscle. C. is so far away, across the country and

earlier in time. She can't bring me food but I television her that there's loss in the fridge. Lots. Soy milk. I can drink a hole carton without turning on the stove. That's right, she says. You won't need to turn on the stove. And if I have a shower, I say, I might electrocute myself. There are so many deaths. I want you to pour yourself a glass of soy-milk. I open the fridge. I take out the carton. I pour the glass. I sit in the kitchen and drink it empty, phone face-up full of her voice.

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Our cords a chord, we speak our intimate music. The light fades. I spell her about the wewedding. He waits! She listens. I know this means a lot to you, Erin. Then a shift in the kitchen, the way you suddenly realize you need to turn on the lights after sitting in the dusk.

There isn't a wedding, is there? C.?

She pauses.

He isn't trying to find me?

She pauses. What do you think is happening? She asks, trusting that I can find my way back.

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