

The Song of Sirens

by Macha Lopez

It was a typical Friday night in Paris: gray-skyed, seasonally cool, air heavy with cigarette smoke and excitement. I was wearing bangs that year, the side-swept type, constantly oily from the ceaseless side-sweeping. You know the type. The year was 2015. I'd just turned 24.

I was headed to a concert that evening. A friend was playing at a small venue in Ménilmontant, and a bunch of us were going. My boyfriend of six years had decided to sit this one out although, if I'm being honest, the friends I was meeting were his more than mine. That was fine by me—we had been fighting a lot lately, and I was thankful at the prospect of a quiet night.

On my way to the venue, my father called. As was his habit, he put my siblings on the phone so they could say hi, which they did—halfheartedly, like children do. Then Dad and I exchanged a few words, and I told him I was on my way to a concert. He wished me goodnight and we left it at that. Walking uphill along Rue Laurence Savart, the heels of my boots hitting the cobblestone at a regular pace, I breathed in the autumn air and its many promises. The night was young and giddy, and so was I.

As I entered the theater, I remember thinking how felted and solemn the atmosphere of the place was, how this didn't sit quite right with the show's line-up—a rap concert. But a man ushered me through a back door and let me find my way to a second stage, in a smaller building across the rear courtyard. That's where I met my friends. I have no recollection of the show itself. I did find videos I shot of that night, before it all happened. The audience was pretty limp, but then the music wasn't great either. No offense to my friend—he got better since then. What I do remember clearly, though, is my dad calling again, some half an hour into the concert. I found that odd. My father and I have a complicated relationship, one that hardly warrants calling me twice the same night. Even today, I would be lucky if he called me once a month. So I did not pick up. A few minutes later, he tried me again, and I screened his call again. In retrospect, I remember feeling bad about it. I can't imagine what he was feeling in that moment, those few hectic minutes when he was trying to get a hold of me. Finally, at 10:25 PM, after a third call, I texted him.

"I'm at the concert, what's up?"

His answer came seconds later. Cascade texts, frenziedly popping in the blue glow of my screen.

"Terror attacks in Paris and Saint Denis."

"Several bombs. President Hollande evacuated. Take a taxi home."

"Be careful. I don't think this is over."

I frowned as my eyes adjusted to the blinding light against the dark of the room, and read the words again. And then once more. I looked up at the moving crowd around me, friends and strangers alike, unaware, banging their heads to the music. For a second, I envied them. I turned on my heels and headed for the courtyard.

The cold night caught me as I opened the swing doors and made my way out. Then I heard the sirens. Police cars. Ambulances. Firefighters. In France, they all have different sounds. All of them at once were blaring, out of tune, in a hellish threnody. I noticed the rotor engines of helicopters tearing up the night sky, flying low above my head. Too low. Too close, the sirens. The noise was total. It erupted from all corners of the physical world,

saturating the air, both matter and antimatter. So palpable yet invisible. It could have swallowed me whole, but a sudden shiver down my spine brought me back.

I took out my phone, pins and needles in my fingers from the cold and panic, and texted Dad back.

“Oh shit. Yes, I can hear sirens.”

“Fuck.”

“I’ll be careful.”

Running from the chilling lament of the emergency vehicles, I walked back into a room filled with bliss and music. The rest of the night is a mix of vivid memories and complete blur. At some point, someone from the venue stopped the concert. They went on stage and took the mic to let everyone know that the theatre was going under lockdown due to an ongoing situation outside. Throughout these fuzzy, chaotic moments, and all through the night, my phone kept ringing from increasingly alarmed texts. My father, way down in Valencia, was following the news live on Spanish TV.

“Active shooters everywhere.”

“What a mess.”

“Shooting is happening in the 10th arrondissement.”

My throat tightened. The 10th was very close. Barely more than a mile away, in a quasi-straight line. It was hard to know what was happening. Phone lines had started to go down, the Internet was sluggish, as tens of thousands across the country were trying to reach loved ones in Paris. At one point, I remembered a professor in one of my PoliSci classes telling us that radios were your best bet for a reliable source of information in emergency situations, as frequencies are not impacted by numbers. We found a radio and tuned in on a news channel. For hours, we listened to the live report of events, the mass casualties on the path the terrorists had followed, how they’d fired at packed *terrasses* of people drinking and eating and enjoying each other’s company. The President declared a state of emergency. All borders were now closed. Subway stations closed. Situation still unstable. Stay inside. Stay inside.

“3 bombs went off near the Stade de France.”

“Hostage situation underway in a concert hall.”

“It’s a disaster.”

Turns out the concert hall where the hostage situation was occurring was the *Bataclan*, a historic venue and pinnacle of the Paris music scene. I’d been there before, of course. Many a time, I’d attended sold-out shows from its red velvet balconies. Hard-wood floors. High ceilings. Nice acoustics. No wonder most nights sold out. On my roller derby team’s group chat, someone said that two of our teammates were at the *Bataclan*. No one had heard from them. I sat in a corner and cried. A friend came to sit next to me and held me close while I sobbed against his chest.

“I’m so glad you’re not at the Bataclan.”

We sheltered in place in this theatre hours after the assault of the special forces on the Bataclan was over and the terrorists had been neutralized. Sometime after midnight, my boyfriend joined us—I’d asked the manager to let him in. In retrospect, that was pretty reckless of him to open the doors, and stupid of me to ask. I did not even want him there. Of course, he took it as an opportunity to party the night away with his buddies, unbothered by the collective trauma we were all experiencing. I found that obscene, but then I suppose we all cope our own way.

Around 3 AM the doors of the theatre reopened. I called a taxi and shared it with two girls from the concert; dropping them off on the way home. From my bed, I called Mom. Thankfully, she had slept through it all. Her voice sounded foreign when she answered the phone, barely awake from a deep sleep.

"I am safe. Go back to sleep."

I did not sleep that night. No one in Paris did. Phones kept ringing with texts and calls to and from everyone we held close to our hearts. This was two years before the Facebook Safety Check was implemented. We had to check on everyone individually, the old way. But we had a lot of time on our hands, that night. Time and hope.

How are you?

Are you safe?

I am home.

My colleague is missing.

I'm at some friends'.

I spent the night sheltering in a bar.

I'm away on vacation.

Take care.

Take care.

Take care.

The day after, I got the news that one of my teammates who was at the *Bataclan* had been shot in the leg, but she had managed to escape through a back door. The other was still missing. Later that evening, we learned that she'd been killed. Her name was Lola Salines, she was about to be 29. A few months before, Lola had put me in touch with a friend of hers for a babysitting gig. She was a good person. Her father too. Years later, he and one of the terrorists' fathers wrote a book together¹. It took their four hands and two broken hearts to write about terror, grief and compassion.

A few weeks later, I broke up with my boyfriend and promised myself not to date anyone ever again who would let me go home alone after a terror attack.

In many ways, that night of Friday 13th 2015 marked my entry into adulthood. It also irreversibly changed Paris for me. Paris was a party. A fever dream. It was a place of freedom and insouciance, somewhere I had moved to at age 17, freshly graduated from high school with a head full of dreams. All those years I had played pretend at being an adult, moved in and out of apartments, studied, partied, made love and friends. After November 13th, I couldn't sit at a *terrasse* or go to a concert for months. And when I finally did, I stayed on high alert, constantly looking over my shoulder for an anomaly, a ripple in the fabric of things. Spot the emergency exits. Wear sneakers not high heels. Don't sit too close to the street. Don't stand too close to the door. I want to leave. Why is that guy alone in the back row of the movie theater? If anything happens, should I play dead or run for it?

¹ Salines, George & Amimour, Azdyne. *Il nous reste les mots*. Robert Laffont, 2020.

When Covid hit, half a decade later, I was still living in Paris. The uncanny likeness of those two moments shook me to my core. The relentless complaint of ambulance sirens. Another lockdown. Without my noticing, the sensory scars of that night had lived under my bones all this time. Shaped me into the cautious, compassionate and attuned person I am today. I left Paris that same year.

That night also changed my relationship with my dad for the better, bringing us closer even though we now live on different continents. So what is left of that night? The static of a radio. A good friend's hug. The song of sirens. And my father's texts, a lifeline in the chaos, each ping a warm embrace—*I'm with you through it all*.