

SAINTS PRESERVE US IN HOT YOUNG STUFF

Parker Desautell

Lest you mock the afflicted, remember: God hears their prayers before He hears yours, and you are only one trainwreck away from being in the same state as them.

In this case the afflicted was my best friend Cassandra Holloway. She'd fallen on hard times. Everything in her life was totally out of hand and had been for a long time. Most recently, last summer, she'd slept with a Hinge date who turned out to be a distant cousin of hers. On top of all her other woes, Cassandra had convinced herself that she was going to die from the encounter. She spent all her time googling obscure sexual illnesses and reading huge tomes on the stuff.

Stacked on the coffee table were *Munson's Guide to Venereal Diseases*, *An Oral History of Anal*, and *The Myth of Syphilis*. Part of me wondered if these books acted as some leftover stain of guilt from her evangelical days,

some need to fall back on familiar forms of self-hatred. The other part wondered if she was going insane.

I hadn't seen Cassandra in almost a year. I lived halfway across the country now but, seeing her in a state like this, I felt guilty that I ever moved. So I flew out to see her for a couple weeks to give her the attention that I knew she wasn't giving herself.

"Get rid of these," I said, grabbing the pile of books.

"No. They're good for me," she said.

"My *God*, Cassie. They are not *good* for you."

"How else will I know if I have any symptoms?"

"*Do* you have any symptoms?"

"No, not yet," she said, pale and shuddering. "But it's the calm before the storm."

"Yeah yeah yeah. You're probably fine. Have you been tested?"

"Yeah."

"And what did they say?"

"Results came back negative."

"See? You're fine."

“You never know. I got tested early. If the test is taken too soon, there’s a chance it’s not accurate.”

Her blonde hair was ragged. Her hands were chalky and red. Acne had broken out on her forehead and dark circles had formed under her eyes. She had really let herself go.

Her apartment didn’t look much better. There were dust bunnies the size of baseballs, stinkbugs crawling under the doorways, and a smell like rotting vegetables coming from the kitchen. She had the dishes piled up like a Jenga tower. God, I couldn’t believe this was the Cassandra of old, the same one who was always so clean and hygienic and ready to freak the fuck out when bugs got in.

“I think you should be seeing someone,” I said, stepping on an ant that may or may not have already been dead.

“What? Like fucking someone?”

“No, you goon. Like seeing a *therapist*.”

“*Oh*.”

“Yeah.”

“What would I talk about?”

“Your thoughts. Your feelings. Your fear of sexual diseases. Where that fear comes from. The unhealed trauma behind it. The emotional wounds that—”

“I prefer not to feel anything.”

“Therapists have a term for that. Numbing out.”

“Fuck it. Let’s talk about something else,” she said, slumping sideways in her big, pockmarked leather armchair. She always sat in chairs the wrong way—it was her trademark. “Let’s talk about you for a change. How’s your life? How’s college?”

“I dropped out. Remember?”

“Oh, shit. That’s right,” she said, biting her lip. I could tell she genuinely didn’t remember, which worried me. I chalked her poor memory up to depression. Everything had evaded her the last few years, even the past.

“I got a job at Victoria’s Secret,” I said.

“How’s that?”

“Boring as fuck. I picked the worst possible time.”

“What do you mean?”

“Since it’s Christmastime, all day long I have to deal with insecure-ass men buying lingerie for their girlfriends and telling me, their faces beet-red, ‘It’s for my girlfriend.’ Like no shit. Thanks for letting me know, Bozo.”

“Oh my God. That is so *cringe*.”

“Sometimes I’ll just look at them and say, ‘Your poor girlfriend.’”

“You’re a queen.”

“I try.”

“Things didn’t work out at the princess academy?” she asked.

Damn it, I thought. Even *I* had almost forgotten about my time at the princess academy. A part of me wished that Cassandra had, too. I had no desire to revisit that chapter of my life, but such is the nature of playing catch-up with old friends. They remind you of a version of yourself you’re always dying to forget.

“Nah,” I said. “It was nothing like I expected.”

“What do you mean?”

“I thought it would just be, you know, dressing up as Cinderella for little girls’ birthday parties and getting paid to sing ‘Let it Go.’ But it was depressing as hell. The dresses choked me. My boss was a bitch. And all the little girls did

was ask, ‘Where’s your prince?’ Yeah. They were there to remind me I didn’t have one.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.”

There was another long silence. The pale sunlight illuminated Cassandra’s cheekbones. Ordinarily she had very nice cheekbones, but now they were jutting and awkward, almost cadaverous. She had lost serious weight, and even though she wore a big, baggy sweater, you could see the weight loss in her face. Her smile lines had deepened. Her cheeks were sunken. I wanted to ask if she was eating but didn’t want to seem invasive.

You know how it is. Cassandra and I were still very close in spirit, but we only saw each other once or twice a year now. I didn’t want to muscle in on her business. But I was worried. A part of me felt guilty for not keeping in touch. She had deleted her OnlyFans (which, in addition to her job as a barista, brought her enough to get by on), deactivated her Twitter (which she kept under the username of Edgelord69, mostly using it to anonymously troll old high school bullies), and become a full-time hypochondriac (who knew everything there was to know about STDs simply out of fear). I was worried sick. Almost as worried as she was.

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Cassandra's woes began seven years ago, night of her high school graduation. To celebrate afterward, her boyfriend, Nigel Stott, had thrown a big party at his place. Towards the end of the night, when everyone was high out of their minds, Cassandra and Nigel decided to go train-surfing. For Nigel, who was something of an amateur daredevil, this was not surprising behavior.

But for Cassandra, this was not exactly her schtick. Nonetheless, where Nigel went she went. The two were a match made in hell.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" I'd asked her that fateful night as we stood overlooking the tracks.

"It's OK," she said. "When you're hot and insane you can do anything."

"You're high out of your mind, Cassie. Be careful."

Cassandra sighed. "Every time I get settled into a comfortable way of life, Monica, the world reminds me that I'm way funnier and sexier when I'm living in chaos," she said.

"Whatever floats your dreamboat."

I should've tried to stop her, because later that night, in the middle of train-surfing, things took a dark turn. Nigel Stone got decapitated by an overhead wire. Cassandra survived but wished she hadn't. She was beset by survivor's guilt.

For the rest of the summer she spent long stretches of time at the railroad, watching the trains, pining for the dead. Time and again I would visit her house only to find she was not there. I would text her and she would say she was having her "alone time." Which meant she was out at the tracks, mourning Nigel. Some nights she would sit there for hours in her ill-fitting nightie, crying onto the big steel beams, the rusty rails, those shock absorbers of all her grief and trauma...

The first time I found her there, I asked her what she was doing. She said: "I shared with him in life. It's only fair that I share with him in death."

"You're not going to hurt yourself, are you?"

"No. I don't mean it like that. I mean sharing as in, like, *communing*."

"Like talking to him?"

She looked at me with pensive, brooding eyes, bloodshot from lack of sleep. Soot-streaked calves. Dirt in her hair. Fire in her eyes. Then she lost it.

“I held it in my hands,” she said, shaking her fists. “I held his head—his fucking *head*—in my bare hands.”

On and on it went for the rest of the summer. She was glued to the tracks, stuck in the bargaining stage of grief, wheeling and dealing with death to give Nigel back and take her instead. Hell, she even held a *séance* for Nigel. She invited all her friends to come down to the tracks and channel Nigel’s spirit.

I didn’t go on account of sickness, but I heard all about it. Apparently there was a fight. Things got real ugly. I don’t remember all the details, but some guy told Cassandra that Nigel cheated on her, and someone else tried to hit him with a broken rail beam.

Oh, Cassie, my Cassie.

The next several years weren’t any kinder to Cassandra Holloway. She skipped out on college and decided to work as a florist. But she made a very bad florist, having found out she was colorblind. Colorblind enough to piss off clients and keep her managers from wanting her around.

She gave up on all her dreams. She slept around, shot up, and hit the self-destruct button. She was messed up on skag. She was without her old friends. And now she believed she was going to die.

Worst of all, I lived halfway across the country and couldn't be there for her. We still FaceTimed here and there and sent each other stupid cat videos, but I only saw her in person about once a year. I had my own shit to deal with, yet I was committed to self-improvement. I was working on myself—going to therapy, healing from religious trauma, taking yoga classes, and volunteering at a correctional facility for young women. It's not like I had it all together, but as my therapist said, I had the baby steps down.

I wished I could say the same for Cassandra.

Cassandra, Cassandra, Cassandra. I can see you now, in your soot-smearred Birkenstocks and ill-fitting nightie, searching the tracks for a sign of the one you love, your face pale and cadaverous, your hair askew, your mind on things too big and beautiful for this world...

§

After sitting around for a while with nothing to think about, Cassandra and I took a walk. It was one of those weird, snow-blown days where all the ice has melted but the world is not beautiful. The snow was grimy and shit-colored. The town was just as ugly as I remembered it.

We passed the boarded-up cinema, the creepy-ass porn shop, and the fleabag motel behind which Cassandra had her infamous UFO sighting (i.e.,

her wildest acid trip). We passed our old high school, Sycamore Lynn High, all the seeds of our teenage love and rage contained in its ancient, snow-laden rust-hulk. Purer times.

A group of teens walked out of the school and passed us. They wore baggy, Boho outfits and carried themselves like a bunch of wanna-be failures. One of them wore a “MAKE SOMETHING BEAUTIFUL BEFORE YOU DIE” T-shirt. They made eye contact with us for an uncomfortably long time, sizing us up, probably whispering among themselves when we passed (probably saying, “Did you see that girl with gray hair? She couldn’t be more than twenty-*five*,” or, “The blonde one was cute, but the other one? Ugly as shit”). I knew I shouldn’t care what they thought of me—they’re just kids, I told myself—but I did.

“Do you ever stop being afraid of teenagers,” Cassandra asked, reading my mind. “Or does the fear never go away, even as you age?”

“Shit. You’re asking me.”

“I’m asking you. Nothing is scarier than a bunch of teens in groups. I swear. It’s those shifty eyes. The way they stare at you, all together, like pack-rats.”

“Like they’re sizing you up,” I said.

“Sizing you up. Checking you for weakness. Probably reporting you to some evil teenage overlord.”

“Like you weren’t a teenager four years ago, you goon.”

“I was not *that* kind of teenager.”

“Oh? What kind were you?”

“The kind you couldn’t even pay to talk to cute boys.”

“*You?*”

“OK, OK, I did a 360, I had my hoe phase. But freshman, sophomore year? I got anxiety just sending flirty messages to dudes. Fast forward a couple years and I’m drunk-texting them, ‘I want you to fuck my brains out.’ Then I got sober. Or, rather, life *made* me sober.”

She stopped to catch her breath. I could tell she didn’t get out much—her breathing was heavy and labored. “Now I don’t want to fuck anyone,” she said. “Now I don’t even *have* a love life. I’m afraid I’ll pass on syphilis.”

“You do *not* have syphilis, Cassie.”

“God, I hope. Right now I’m going through my *anti-hoe* phase. This is the longest I’ve been celibate since I was 17.”

Cassandra’s life was one of sudden upheavals and about-faces. The hoe phase, the daredevil phase, the stoner phase, etc. Hers was a life the rest of us

could only stand and gawk at. We didn't have the energy to keep up. Maybe that's what drew me to her. The feeling that you could love someone and they could love you back despite them being a new person every other year.

Which gave me hope, of course, that the Cassandra of yore would return. Or maybe a new one would emerge in her place. Anything to shake the poor girl out of her current depressive bender.

"What about you? What about *your* love life? Did you ask that girl from the thrift store out yet?" she asked.

Hey, at least she still had some of her memory intact. I hadn't talked to the girl at the thrift store in over three months now.

"Nah."

"Why not?"

"Too hot. Hot people stress me out."

"Oh, come on," she said, elbowing me. "*I* don't stress you out."

"That's different."

"How so?"

"You don't have the personality of a hot person."

"What do I have, then? The personality of a *cold* person?"

"Yes. Cold and heartless."

“Dawww,” she said, side-hugging me. We almost tripped over ourselves. “But seriously. You put yourself out there and someone will fall for you. I swear. You’re just too *interesting*.”

“Yeah right, Cassie. My entire personality is just having a Boston accent and hating authority.”

“So? Mine is listening to Billie Eilish and watching stupid cat videos. We’re even.”

Cassandra was back in her element. It was a joy to see. Sure, she was still pale as a ghost, huffing like she hadn’t left the house in years, but she was Cassie again. An ounce of her wit and personality had returned.

For the moment, anyway. Next thing I knew we were turning down a dead-end road toward the railroad tracks. Here I’d been, following her along and walking on autopilot, and we were headed straight for the place where Cassandra died to herself seven years ago. The seed of all her ills.

“Do we have to go down here?” I asked.

“Where else would we go?”

“Somewhere happier.”

“There’s no such thing as somewhere happier. It’s only happy if you make it happy,” she said.

“Do you still come here often?”

“Sometimes. It helps me. It purges me. Gets it all out of my system.”

I pictured Cassandra coming here, all alone, day after day and year after year, to commune with her demons. To welcome them with open arms. My stomach sank. I wanted to drop all I had and move back into this godforsaken town, if only for Cassandra. I couldn't bear the thought of her going on and on like this without me, wallowing in her trauma. How did she do it? The girl deserved to be sainted.

She was friendless and alone out here. And like me, she didn't have much in the way of family. What family she had wasn't good to her. Her parents were so conservative that, not only did they not believe in sex before marriage, but they didn't believe in oral sex, period. When they found out Cassandra's older sister, Bella, was doing it with her husband, they didn't speak to her for half a year.

So you can imagine what they made of Cassandra and her “wayward lifestyle.” At 16, the girl was kicked out of St. Dymphna's for smoking marijuana in the rectory. They found her and Dee Dee Wright hiding under the portrait of St. Dymphna herself, passing a dab pen back and forth.

Hell, I was practically kicked out of church for being *friends* with Cassandra. Time and again, when my mom would hold her weekly in-house prayer meetings, I would listen in and hear her and all her church friends praying for “divine intercession” in my life. Cassandra was “leading me astray.” Cassandra was making me “dress immodestly.” Cassandra was their scapegoat for all my wayward ways.

“Let’s stop for a minute,” Cassandra said.

We stopped at a clearing where the tracks ran by a landfill, mounds of scrap and iron rimming the edge of the woods. I’d forgotten what a trashed-out hellscape this place was. I didn’t miss it.

Cassandra sat down on the big steel beam at the track’s edge. She took off her sneaker and shook it, little pebbles falling out between the wooden sleepers. She stared into the dirt, hair in her eyes.

“My whole body feels heavy. Swollen,” she said.

“It happens, honey. You haven’t been out much.”

“Feeling heavy and swollen is one of the main signs of LGV.”

“What’s LGV?”

“Lymphogranuloma.”

“And what is *that*?”

“It’s an ulcer disease. Has three stages, just like syphilis. The first stage is ulcers, bumps on your skin, and—”

“Cassie,” I said, my hand on her shoulder, “you’ve read yourself into the ground.”

A whistle sounded. We saw the train coming in the distance and got out of the way. It blew by at a thousand miles per hour but we didn’t see anyone in it. The only thing I saw was Cassandra’s face reflected in the windows.

She spat. She watched the train with a far-off look in her eyes, like she was pining after her sorrows and begging them to come back. Her face bore the empty-eyed look of the living undead.

She closed her eyes. “His head,” she said. “The way it rolled. The way it *flew*. It didn’t look real. It looked fake. Like something out of a movie. And his body—the way it sat there, perfectly upright, like he was still alive, even after he was dead.”

“Oh, honey,” I said. “You’re gonna make yourself feel even worse.”

“That’s impossible. I’ve seen it so many times, in my mind, that it doesn’t make a difference now.”

“Here. Let’s go.”

“I’m totally numb to it. I see it and I no longer feel anything. Not even grief.”

There was a long pause. The sun was going down in a molten and glorious way and the clouds were on fire. The light had turned all the snow pink like strawberry ice cream. It was all too beautiful to contain our sadness.

Cassandra sat back down on the track’s edge, kicking a rock into the landfill.

“Why don’t we grab something to eat?” I asked.

“I’m not hungry.”

“You still need to eat.”

“I haven’t been hungry in years.”

I bit my lip. “OK, Cassie. Not to butt into your business. But you *really* need to see someone. This isn’t normal.”

She blinked up at me. She looked wan and sad but, somehow, okay. And that’s what troubled me most—how at peace she seemed with all her numbness and depression.

“For what? So I could go back to feeling hunger? Heartache? Grief? All that jazz?”

“Cassie.”

“Cassie *what?*” she said, exasperated.

“You are *not* in a good place. You’re not eating. You’re not leaving the house. You spend all your spare time googling sexual diseases and thinking you’re going to die. This is not, and I mean *not*, a healthy way to—

“I don’t *think* I’m going to die. I know I’m going to die.”

“You’re not gonna die. Besides, he was what, third cousin twice removed? We’re all related when you get right down to it.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

“What do you mean?”

“I know I’m going to die because we’re *all* going to die.”

I rolled my eyes. “Let’s get something to eat.”

§

We went out for ice cream but were too tired to walk all the way home. We clambered back through the tracks, the woods, and came upon a tire-less pickup truck, an absolute jalopy, lying amidst some grass stalks in the middle of the scrapyard. We lay on the flatbed of the truck and fell asleep there, watching the sun disappear behind ashen clouds.

When I woke up the sky had turned from black to blue. The sun was out again, casting the snow-tipped fields in a volcanic light. It bore down like a

meteor, hitting the earth in a mushroom cloud, and together we experienced the end of the world. The grass stalks shriveled and died. The car started melting under us.

“Wake up,” I said, shaking Cassandra. “Wake up, wake up.”

She was absolutely gone, snoring her life away.

Then I woke up, and realized I was wrong—she was awake, and I’d been asleep. The world was still there, just as we’d left it. The scrapyard was still intact. The grass stalks stood proud and tall. And it was still nighttime.

“Hey,” I said.

“Hey.”

“I had a crazy dream. About the end of the world. You slept through the whole thing.”

She laughed, yawning and stretching. But I didn’t find it funny. I was still reeling inside.

“Story of my life,” she said. “Did we die?”

“I don’t know. I woke up too soon to tell.”

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