

Pasta Salad

Cassandra goes by Cass. It's gender neutral; she likes that. Neutrality is important to her. The year is 1991. Rage Against the Machine has just released its first album. Bush—the old one—is president. Cass has no opinion about either of these things. What she does have, sitting on her kitchen windowsill, is a pet cactus that's dying of neglect.

Cass is dying of neglect, too. She's just doing a better job of pacing herself.

She lives in Fargo, which is cold and flat and no kind of place for a fulfilling life. Cass doesn't have hobbies. She doesn't do enjoyable things. It's North Dakota; there isn't much to do except hide from snowstorms and pick your nose when your boogers finally melt in June.

She works in accounting for a company that sells used light fixtures. Lamps, chandeliers, even florescent bulbs. She balances budgets, mostly, and occasionally cleans the filter on the coffee maker in the kitchen. She works Monday through Thursday, takes Friday off, and works the weekend, too. On Fridays she bakes cookies and knits cardigans for her three Jack Russell terriers. She is thirty-four years old.

There is a homeless man who is in love with Cassandra (though love, she thinks, is a strong word). He says he's in love with her, at least. She met him yesterday, which was a Wednesday, leaving Starbucks on 34th Street with a Mocha Frappuccino and feeling around in her purse for her car keys.

Pasta Salad

“Hey,” he said, and she turned around and there he was, sitting under the awning of a tattoo parlor across the street. He smiled at her with his gums since most of his teeth were missing.

Cass didn't respond. She'd seen a made for TV movie on Lifetime about this kind of thing. A woman who talked to a homeless man could get raped. Killed. Robbed, even. She didn't want to lose her valuables.

“Hey,” he said again, “got a minute?” He stood up and walked across the street. Something was wrong with his left leg. He moved slowly, jerkily, like a wind up toy whose cogs needed greasing. A red Sedan with tinted windows honked at him, waiting to get by.

Cass stood and watched all of this and didn't move because somehow she found that she couldn't. It was an odd sensation, a waking paralysis that pinched her like a corset as she watched him slide and grind his way across the road and onto the curb where she waited.

“Hi,” she said, for lack of anything better.

“I've been watching you.”

“Really?”

“Yeah,” he said, and he reached into his pocket and for a moment Cass was sure that he'd pull out a gun. Instead it was a Hallmark card. He handed it to her. “I want you to have this,” he said, and he limped back across the street.

Cass looked at the card. It was the color of a can of Lysol and had some kind of flowers on the front. Daisies, maybe. In loopy purple cursive made to look like handwriting it said *for that special someone*. She opened it. More daisies and cursive:

Pasta Salad

all the best birthday wishes. There was nothing else. No personal note, no signature. No context. It wasn't Cass's birthday for another four months.

She put it on the dashboard of her car and drove to work with the radio off.

Cass gets another card when she leaves the coffee shop on Thursday. This time it's for Father's Day. She asks the man's name. "Call me Bruce," he says. She thanks him and tells him she will. He limps back across the street, sits under the same awning as the day before.

At work Cass puts both of the cards on her desk. She props them up, half open, in front of the pictures of her cats in gold trimmed frames. "Happy birthday?" Dan says when he walks by. Cass doesn't try to correct him.

Dan has worked with her for eleven years and never remembered her birthday. Sometimes he doesn't remember that she exists. She'll get up for some coffee or a bathroom break and he'll walk by and look over at Sarah, who's young and pretty and wears aggressive push up bras, and he'll ask her who works at this desk, this one here, with the pictures of the cats. Sarah will just laugh and flip her hair, which is her stock response to any interaction with a male coworker. Cass is certain that she has daddy issues.

The end of the quarter is in two weeks. That means that Cass has to sift through the cluster fuck of manila folders on her desk and scribble little numbers inside squares on the ledgers she keeps. She has a tube of Neosporin on her desk to deal with paper cuts, which she sees as a standard occupational hazard in her line of work.

Pasta Salad

Across the aisle, Sarah pops her chewing gum and runs her manicured nails along the glossy pages of *Cosmo*. The manager walks by in a three-piece suit. “Good work,” he says.

Sarah’s boyfriend comes by for lunch. He’s tall and tan and he’s got a jawline like an anvil. He’s wearing gym shorts and a tank top. His name is Hank or Harry or maybe Harvey. Cass can’t remember.

“I just came from the gym. Check out my pump!” He says, flexing biceps so big that they make his skin stretch thin like Kleenex. Cass thinks he could be the love child of Thor and a potato. Thor gave him his looks; the potato gave him his intelligence. He slaps Dan on the back when he walks by. “What’s up, my man?”

Cass watches them eat. Well, she watches Hank eat. Sarah just moves the salad around on her plate like she’s trying to improve the greenery’s feng shui. Hank pulls a top hat and wand out of his gym bag. He’s an amateur magician. “Want to see my new trick, baby?”

“Sure,” Sarah says, and she laughs and flips her hair and continues to be insufferably ditzy. Cass puts down her pen and watches.

Hank stands up. He coughs. He scratches his sweaty armpits with the wand. And then he taps the hat three times, *click, click, click*, and pulls a stuffed dove out of it. Sarah claps and giggles. “It’s great!” She says, and Cass can tell that she really means it.

She can’t tolerate any more. She gets up and goes to the kitchen for coffee and maybe one of the thin mints that she’s been stealing from Dan’s lunch bags.

Pasta Salad

There's a flyer for the Christmas party stuck to the refrigerator with a smiley face magnet. Smiley faces have always bothered Cass; they're not anatomically correct. They're yellow. They look like they have liver disease.

The Christmas party is in five days. Cass doesn't have a date. She never has a date, for this or any other party. She usually sits near the food and makes sure people are eating her pasta salad.

Cass wakes up early the next morning. She puts on the makeup that she bought after work last night— mascara and Orgasm Red lipstick. She's not sure why an orgasm would be red. It doesn't sound healthy.

She orders a Caramel Frappuccino today. The barista smiles at her. He seems nice enough.

Bruce is waiting for her outside with a get well soon card. She wonders whether he picks randomly or if he genuinely thinks each one is somehow applicable to her. Maybe he doesn't even open them.

"Hey," she says, grabbing his shoulder before he can walk away. It's firm, like a football pad or a stale piece of farfalle from Macaroni Grill. "What are you doing on Tuesday night?"

She takes him to JC Penny and buys him new clothes. He can't go to the Christmas party looking like some kind of vagrant, she explains. It would be embarrassing. He picks out an orange blazer and a bow tie with a dolphin print on it. The saleswoman smiles at them. It's a glassy smile, the smile of someone who is one

Pasta Salad

staff meeting away from hanging themselves with a tie in the employee lounge. It's the kind of smile Cass has had at every previous Christmas party.

But this year, she thinks, will be different.

"Do they have one of those places with the rolls?" Bruce asks as they're walking out of the mall.

"Rolls?"

"Yeah. Like, with the icing. And swirls."

"A Cinnabon?"

"Yeah."

She has to ask a security guard where the food court is; she hasn't been to the mall in years— thirty-four of them, to be exact.

"I don't like the look of your friend," he tells her, and then he points out the Cinnabon on a map.

The line is backed around the corner. It's all middle-aged Desperate Housewives types, stay at home cougars chatting about Botox injections over low fat bran muffins that they're planning to throw up when they get home.

Cass is not one of them. But she has a man with her today, her very own suitor, and she wears him like a bracelet.

"Stop squeezing my arm so hard," he says. "It hurts."

They sit in the back of the food court near a rectangle of fake vegetation that catches the sunlight on its glossy plastic leaves. "I wonder what happens when the trees get up to the ceiling," Bruce says. He is being entirely serious.

Pasta Salad

“Maybe they knock out a hole for them to grow through.”

“Yeah, but that might compromise the building’s structural integrity.” He mops up excess icing with a starchy hunk of cinnamon roll, chasing it around the plate until he gets it all. “I know a lot about architecture.”

“Really?” She asks. She tries to remember the thing Sarah does with her lip when she’s listening to guys speak. Cass gives it a shot but only ends up looking like she’s mildly constipated.

He tells her that he studied architecture in Tokyo. It was very crowded there, he says. Lots of people. Lots of strangers. He took a year off to join a Shaolin temple, to study martial arts with eighty-year-old vegans who could break a man’s arm with their index finger. One year turned into two, then five, and before he knew it he was thirty and U.S. Marshals were escorting him back to America because his Visa had run out months ago.

“And then I met you,” he concludes, as if the rest of his story had been building towards this singular logical ending.

She asks him if he misses his time in Japan. “I carry a part of it with me everywhere I go,” he says, slapping his gimpy leg.

Cass tells Bruce to carry in her pasta salad and put it on the table. She has a feeling that there won’t be any leftovers this year. “Nice place,” Bruce says, picking up a file folder from a desk and inverting it over the trashcan. “Is this where you live?”

Hank is drinking Vodka out of a Pillsbury Doughboy cookie jar that he found in the cabinet. His shirt is stuffed under a couch in the corner, because where else was he

Pasta Salad

supposed to put it when he took it off? Sarah has a death grip on his veiny bicep, giggling and trying not to fall over. It's only eight o'clock.

Cass drags Bruce over their way. "This is Bruce. He's my date."

"What's up, Bruce?" Hank yells, slapping him on the shoulder with the force of a Muay Thai black belt.

"Hibajeegiblitiz," Sarah says, and lets go of Hank's arm and falls down.

This isn't having the effect that Cass had imagined. "Bruce is in love with me," she adds.

"Beautiful!" Says Hank. "Look at those Christmas lights!"

Cass wanders back over to the kitchen and pours herself a drink. There are other people piddling around in there, the kids who work the shipping dock, the security guard with the penis-shaped birthmark and the name she can never manage to remember.

She comes back to find Hank climbing on her desk, knocking away all of her photos and holiday cards like an overly assertive Jehovah's Witness. "I have an announcement!" He screams. "An announcement! Everybody listen!" Everybody does except for Sarah, who is too busy sucking the Febreeze off the carpet.

"Eating pussy is like eating a burrito," Hank explains, drunk, slurring his words like they're greased with baby oil and hard for his tongue to hold on to.

"What?"

"Eating pussy," Bruce tells her. "He's talking about eating pussy." Cass is visited with an image of her cats boiling in a pot of water on the stovetop. She walks outside to get some air, to try and regroup.

Pasta Salad

Dan is in the parking lot lighting a Marlboro. He leans against the wall and slurps up a lungful of carcinogens. “How’s it going?”

“Swell.”

He offers her a hand. She’s always thought he had feminine fingers, long and thin and with nails like seashells. “I don’t think we’ve met. Dan.”

“I’m Cass,” she says, “we’ve worked together for eleven years.” She sits down on the curb and listens to the awkward silence.

“So who’s your friend?” He asks, grasping at conversational straws.

“That’s Bruce. He loves me. He sends me cards every day.”

“That’s nice.”

“It is. It’s so comforting to know that someone loves you. That they care about you. Have you ever felt that?”

Dan thinks. He finishes his cigarette and drops it in a crack on the sidewalk, watches it smolder like a fire-eater’s mouth. “Guess not.”

“Well,” Cass says, getting up and smoothing out her smock-sized skirt, “that’s rather sad, don’t you think?” She walks inside and lets him think about it, lets him think about eleven years worth of unperceived slights at her. She hopes he commits suicide.

She steps inside and finds Bruce’s head tucked under Sarah’s skirt like a light bulb in a lampshade. Hank is watching, chugging Vodka from the cookie jar and yelling encouragement.

“That a boy. Remember, the tongue is for flicking. Tease her, then go in for the kill!”

Pasta Salad

Cass feels bile rising like a chunky green tide in her throat, feels it choking her and pushing past her uvula and up through her nose and her lips. It spews out with the pressure of a fire hose and hits Hank in the back so hard that he falls over. A small rainbow forms behind it.

This, she thinks, spitting out the final bastions of vomitus from her cheeks and gums, will truly be a Christmas party to remember. She should probably take a few pictures to show to her cats.

Bruce removes himself from Sarah's nether regions. He sees Cass, hands on her knees, doubled over, and tells her, "It isn't what it looks like."

The door swings open and Dan steps back inside wearing the poor man's perfume of cigarette smoke. He sees Hank, the puke, the passed out Sarah. "What the hell is going on here?"

Cass shoves Bruce away, choking, heaving, bent on vengeance and validation, and she runs into Dan's reeking olfactory field and kisses him, right there on the carpet, barf breath on nicotine breath.

She sucks on Dan's lips and thinks that this was never about Bruce. It was never about Hank or Sarah or even the pasta salad, when you got down to it. It was about her, only about her, because who else was there? Who did she have? Her cats? Her knitting?

It didn't matter who she kissed. What mattered were the things she hoped would be behind the kiss, the caring, the idea that yes, there *is* someone who wants you to keep on existing.

Maybe, Cass thinks, it's not being cared about that matters. What matters is having a reason to care about yourself.

Pasta Salad

She breaks away, sucks in air like an HVAC.

“Ouch,” Dan says. His lip is bleeding from Cass’s overenthusiasm. “What was that for?”

Cass punches him, a straight jab to the nose. She turns around and punches Bruce, who is still torn between intervening and wiping Sarah’s vaginal fluid off of his stubble. She punches herself, too, right in the gut, and she keeps doing that until she splutters and coughs up more gooey hunks of pasta salad.

“What’s going on?” Hank asks from on top of her desk. “Are we doing charades?”

Cass punches him, too, just for good measure, and she goes and gets her pasta salad out of the kitchen. She runs to her car, not caring that she’s leaving a trail of mayonnaise and wayward egg noodles behind her. She needs to be alone now. She needs to be somewhere quiet, somewhere that will allow her to deal with the hollowness she feels rooted somewhere between her pelvis and bellybutton. She drives home.

Everything is normal but nothing is okay.

She goes inside and drops her coat on the couch and notices how brown and withered her pet cactus looks, like a piece of jerky left in the glove compartment for too long, like how she imagines her heart does. She gets some herbs out of the fridge and chops them up, thinking she’ll sprinkle them into the pot to enrich the soil. She cuts them with the Dyson 500 Herbinator, which she ordered after she saw it slice through a block of concrete on an *Oxygen* infomercial last year. She slips and nicks her index finger. The blade is sharp—sharp enough to split molecules, to cut a hole in space and time. Perhaps it is sharp enough to sever complacency as well. After all, Cass thinks, looking

Pasta Salad

at the shriveled cactus on the windowsill, complacency is the slowest and most painful death that anyone could ever suffer.