

Wilderness House Literary Review 17/2

Kay Summers
Cassie

Cassie had to admit that these past few years had been rough. Rough for the whole world, sure, but try living through it with her specific outlook. I mean, it was hard enough to endure the Trump Administration if the whole thing caught you by surprise, but if you'd spent all of 2016 telling anyone who would listen that the man wasn't a modern-day P.T. Barnum—a huckster trying to remove people's money from their wallet while they kept right on smiling—then it was a special kind of hell. He's a demagogue, she said to anyone who would listen. He's not a joke, she insisted, and if he was, the joke was on all of them, not him. Never him.

One day sticks out in her mind. She was at work—and working in an environmental organization was just about perfect for her. You go around screaming about the end of the world in one of those places, they just nod and ask you if you want to grab a salad with them for lunch. A person who's worked up about bad things she insists are coming fits right in a place like that.

On this day, folks were milling about the cubicle village after one of the all-staff pep talks they'd get, one of those things where the boss would broadcast in to everyone from his glass-enclosed office in New York with a scripted message about how much good he was doing, how his work talking to rich Wall Street types was really mustering what he called “impact investing” in environmental work, while the older, crunchy types, clad in their worn fleece jackets, rolled their eyes and wondered how their little eco-group had been taken over by The Man. The organization was headquartered in DC, of course, which wasn't a bad place to be if you were Cassie. If you're going to be burdened by visions of a terrible future, might as well be near the center of the action.

Anyway, after one of those meetings, people were always chattier than usual, at least for a while. There was an unspoken dispensation from the also-unspoken rule against talking in anything above a whisper, lest you disturb someone tucked in the cubicle warren, diligently saving a plot of land in Tennessee or maybe an acre of Amazonian rain forest, looking at their screen with the same intensity that Cassie's cousin had when he played Call of Duty in her aunt's basement even though he was pushing 30, but would Cassie's aunt listen to her 15 years ago when Cassie tried to tell her to take away his video games before he got addicted? No.

Geez, this always happens. Cassie tries to focus on something, to really make sense of when something veered off track in the world, but she gets distracted, because on the way to that moment in her memory, she runs into ANOTHER couple of terrible outcomes people should've foreseen, but no one ever does. No one except Cassie.

But back to the woman in the cubicle village: she was chatting amiably with a man who normally worked five aisles over, but like I said, all-staff meeting=after-meeting chattiness. They were jawing about the election, which at that point must've been at least...seven months away? Yeah, that's right. They were still having debates and men in suits were standing

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at lecterns just like they always had, back as far as Nixon and Kennedy, anyway, and instead of the usual scripts, these men were trading insults like a group of high school football team managers, you know, the ones who aren't big enough to play football, so they spend all their free time running clean towels and coolers of Gatorade back and forth from the gym to the practice field just so they can feel like they're catching some of that jock energy, like it's contagious, like some hottie will say, "oh, I just hate sweaty, big, muscly guys, but I really get moist in the lady parts when I think about the guy wearing ill-fitting polyester shorts and a white polo who carries all the Ace bandages."

I mean, these debates were full of stupid shit with these homophobic men sounding for all the world like size queens. Then, news commentators had to fill hours on-air trying to sound serious discussing a guy in an ill-fitting suit with a spray tan holding up his tiny hands and saying, "believe me, there's no problem," like that was supposed to settle it, like saying you have a big dick has ever actually meant you have one.

But the woman at work thought it was all beneath the American people, and she said, and I'm quoting here: "It's great that we have time to dick around with this nonsense," meaning that it's lucky that we're in America and we know everything will be ok so we can waste all this time with this idiot because in the end, the American people always come through, because they have some deep well of common sense that has kept the Jeffersonian experiment going strong lo these many years now.

Cassie nearly barfed in her cubicle trash can, not in a mean way, but in a totally spontaneous levitation of her breakfast back up from whence it came. It was the feeling she always got when she was seized by The Truth. And she knew, in that moment, without a doubt, that things were about to go south. She knew that all the dark visions that had haunted her ever since she was a little girl were nothing but the cartoon before the main reel of what was coming for everyone in the U-S-of-A.

Imagine being the person who sees what's coming? Imagine knowing that the little virus was not only going to kill more than five million people, but also that people were going to act like straight-up fools who refused to take a vaccine because they "wanted to do more research." Fauci didn't see that coming, but Cassie did.

Helen, Cassie's twin sister who was born a boy named Hector but let everybody know when she was 18 that she would be Helen from now on, had always said that Cassie should keep her visions to herself.

By the way, Cassie hadn't seen that Hector-becomes-Helen transition coming, which is odd for someone who has visions and even odder when it's about someone you once shared a uterus with. But Hector's future had always been opaque to Cassie, and now Helen's was as well.

But back when they were in junior high in Troy, Alabama, and Cassie tried to tell the youth pastor that he really, really should not let himself be alone with this other girl named Helen, because Helen, a real beauty but a Class-A manipulative bitch, was exactly the type to make a move on a good-looking guy like him and then make up a story if he turned her down. Paris (the youth pastor's name was Paris—he said his parents went there on their honeymoon or something, and all Cassie could be was

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grateful that her parents, who honeymooned in Gatlinburg, hadn't done the same thing) just smiled at Cassie and said something like You know Helen just likes to get attention, but she's really a very sad girl ever since her parents split up. And Cassie said yes but – and Paris had just smiled at her and told her not to worry about him.

Then, wouldn't you know it, Helen (cis Helen, the mean girl, not Cassie's sister who was still her brother, Hector, at that point) tells her mama that Paris offered to give her a ride home but stopped off behind the Piggly-Wiggly and stuck his hand up her skirt and that was the end of Paris as their youth pastor. After that, the church hired some middle-aged married guy with bad hair and acne scars who wanted to spend every Sunday evening talking with them about their own personal faith journey instead of rustling up a trip to Dairy Queen and the Putt-Putt Place after church the way Paris always did when the weather was nice.

Anyway, Helen, who was still Hector at that point, told her to keep her mouth shut next time, because telling Paris didn't do any good, plus Paris went and told her parents, who fussed at her about not claiming visions because prophecy was a spiritual gift and God condemns a liar.

Nowadays, everybody is all "live your truth," and Cassie is truly glad, because folks like her sister, Helen (not the mean, cis Helen – she dropped out of college and left for Hollywood and the last anyone saw her was on a DVD cover for a movie called *The Face That Launched A Thousand Dicks*), could be who they really were and that is a good thing.

But for Cassie, the truth remained: no one wanted her truth, even if everyone ended up living it.