

# Cassandra's Photographs

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The best car to smuggle reptiles in is a Subaru station wagon," Aurora said at the wheel of the car. "Because it's got four-wheel drive, and great brights so you can see them on the road at night, and because the panels come out easy. So you can hide the snakes and stuff behind them. I'm gonna get one when I can afford it."

I was sitting in the back seat of the car (which was, unfortunately for Aurora, only an old VW squareback) wondering how things had progressed this far. We had been on our way to get burgers when Aurora decided that, since it was such a nice summer day and everything, we should go down to Mexico and see if we could find some snakes to round out Aurora's collection. After all, she said, it was only a few hundred miles away. So we made a stop at the corner J.C. Penney's to buy pillowcases to put the snakes in, and headed out on Highway 5 to Baja California.

Cassie, Aurora's sister, was sitting up front next to Aurora. Cassie was the reason I was on this trip in the first place. I had noticed her the minute she walked into my class in beginning calculus at the college. Everyone says you shouldn't date your students, and everyone is probably right, but within a month we were going out two or three times a week. And since I was just the teaching assistant, and not responsible for grades, we had nothing to quarrel about at the end of the semester when Cassie got a C in the class. She didn't even seem to mind all that much.

I sat still and looked at Cassie's orange-red hair flying out the window and tried to figure out if there was something I needed to do in the next few days. School was over, so I didn't have classes. I badly wanted to take out my small pocket diary and flip through it, but I knew what Cassie would say if I did. "Stop being so responsible all the time," she'd say. "We're on vacation. Put that

book away ”

Lately all our arguments had been about how obsessive (her word) I was, and how childish (my word) she was. She was constantly late, not just once or twice but every single time. I hadn't seen the beginning of a movie since I started going out with her. So I didn't say anything when Aurora suggested going to Mexico. I wanted to prove that I could be as open to adventure as the rest of Cassie's crazy family. It occurred to me that Cassie had to go in to work tomorrow (she cleaned up at a day care center), but I said nothing and looked at her hair, brilliant in the sun. The sight of her hair made it all worthwhile.

“Did you bring the book?” Chris said. Chris was in Aurora's grade in high school and, like half the class (if the phone ringing day and night was any indication), found it impossible to resist Aurora's manic energy, her wild schemes. If Aurora was going to collect and trade illegal reptiles then she, Chris, was going to collect and trade illegal reptiles too. The book, *The Field Guide to North American Reptiles and Amphibians*, had become Chris's bible.

“No, it's at home,” Aurora said. “But don't worry. I know the ones we want.”

On the other side of Chris sat Alan. Alan had said nothing for the past ten miles. Later it turned out that he was deathly afraid of snakes. But he was in love with Aurora, so what could he do? Poor boy. I knew exactly how he felt.

We stopped just this side of the Mexican border for our last hamburger and fries. It was 7:30. “We're making good time,” Aurora said when we sat down to eat. “We should be at this place I know in a few hours. And we can spend the night driving up and down, and be back by tomorrow afternoon.”

“What about sleep?” I said. Immediately I cursed myself. Someone setting out on the grand adventure wouldn't think of sleep.

“Who needs sleep?” Cassie said. I thought she looked a little disappointed in me.

“Certainly not you,” I said, trying to make a joke of the whole thing. “Or the rest of your crazy family.”

“What makes you think we're crazy?” Cassie said.

I thought she was being reasonable. That was my first mistake. I

looked across the table at her red hair and brown eyes, both tinted with the same shade of gold, and I started to relax and enjoy the trip for the first time. If I could be with her it didn't matter where we were going. Anyway her eccentricities were only part of her charm. "Well, you know," I said. "Your great-uncle, what's-his-name, the one who thinks he's an Egyptian."

"He doesn't think he's an Egyptian," Cassie said. Alan was watching us glumly. Chris drew pictures of snakes on her napkin. "He's an Osirian. The cult of Osiris. He explained it all to you when you were over at the house."

"He didn't explain anything," I said. "He asked me questions. 'Knowest thou the name of this door, and canst thou tell it?' And then the lintel, and the doorpost, and the threshold—"

"You weren't listening," Cassie said. She still sounded reasonable. "If you know all the names you can get past the door into the land of the dead. And if you don't you're stuck. He's got to keep all that in his head. It's a long list."

"And you don't think that's a little strange," I said. "That he believes all this."

"Well, what if he's right?" Cassie said. "I mean, millions of people used to believe in it. Maybe they knew something."

"Well, what about your grandmother?" I said. "She stays in her room for weeks on end and then she comes out and makes these cryptic utterances—"

"Look, Robert," Cassie said. Something passed between the two sisters then, something I was too much of an outsider to understand, and Aurora turned to Chris and started talking rapidly. The gold seemed to leave Cassie's eyes; they became flat, muddy. "Just because you came from a boring home doesn't give you the right to pass judgment on other people's families. Okay? I mean, I know your parents belonged to the right kind of religion and had the right kind of jobs and never said anything unusual or anything that would make you think, but that doesn't mean that everyone's family is like that. Some of us wouldn't want to be like that, okay? So you can just keep your stupid opinions to yourself."

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't mean—I was just joking around. I'm sorry."

Cassie turned away from me to talk to Aurora and Chris. Alan

looked at me sympathetically, but I refused to catch his eye.

The rest of the trip was a nightmare. To my surprise we made it past the border guards with no problems. Sometime in the middle of the night we reached the place Aurora had heard about with two snakes we had picked up along the way. Aurora and Chris were ecstatic, I didn't know why. I'm afraid one snake looks like another to me. Alan, rigid and wild-eyed, was starting to look like a speed freak. We found one more snake, put it in a pillowcase, put the pillowcases in the trunk and headed back. Then Aurora fell asleep at the wheel.

The car swerved, bounced over a few rocks and stalled. Aurora hadn't woken up. "Aurora?" Cassie said, shaking her. "Aurora?"

"Hmm. Mf," Aurora said.

We pulled her out and set her in Cassie's seat. I was hoping she didn't have a concussion. Naturally no one in the car was wearing a seat belt. Cassie drove a few more miles and then said, "God, I'm sleepy," and came to a dead stop in the middle of the one lane road.

"I'll drive!" Alan said, a bright note of desperation in his voice. Then he looked over Cassie's shoulder and leaned back, but not too far back. Ever since we put the snakes in the trunk his body hadn't made contact with the back of the seat. "Oh. Stick shift. I can't do it."

"Look," I said. "There was a big city just a few miles back. We'll find a hotel or a motel or something and get some sleep. All right?"

No one said anything. "Do you want me to drive?" I asked Cassie. "Or can you handle it? It's only a few more miles, I think."

"Sure, I can do it," Cassie said. She never stayed angry at anything for long. This always confused me; I come from a long line of grudge-holders.

The city was more than a few miles away, but we made it. Aurora, wide awake now, cheerfully told us about a man who had been bitten by a cobra and was immobilized just as he picked up the phone and started to dial the hospital. In the street outside a seedy one-story hotel we counted our money and discovered that between us we had eleven dollars and ninety-two cents. Warily I went inside and found to my absolute amazement that they would take my charge card. I motioned Alan inside. We had already decided that the two men would rent the room and we would sneak the

three women in later. I wanted as little trouble as possible. As I was stretching out on the floor, prepared to offer someone else the sagging double bed, I noticed Cassie and Aurora come in. Cassie lay on the floor next to me. In my sleep-fogged mind I thought the sacks Aurora was carrying were her luggage.

Cassie and I were the last ones up. We went outside and found the others at a restaurant down the street. None of them, it turned out, knew Spanish, and they had ordered in gestures and pidgin English. Despite all the warnings and jokes, each of them was drinking a glass of Mexican water. I wondered how they thought they were going to pay for the meal.

Aurora picked up one of the pillowcases scattered around her and looked inside. “Damn,” she said. “One of the snakes escaped. I wonder if it’s back at the hotel. Alan? Alan!” The poor kid’s eyes had rolled up under his fluttering eyelids. “Well if you’re afraid of snakes you should have said something when we started out.”

I hadn’t had any water, but I was sick for a week after we got home. Lying in bed with a hundred-and-two-degree temperature I had time to think about the trip, go over the details, figure out how one thing led to another. I felt as though it had happened to someone else, someone who had far less of a grip on reality than I did.

That trip clarified things for me. Life just wasn’t lived that way, the way Cassie and her family lived it. You didn’t just jump in a car and drive to Mexico because you felt like it. What if I hadn’t been there with my credit card? What if Aurora had gotten a concussion? I wanted something more for my life—order, sanity. I wanted to complete my studies, get my doctorate in math and get a job in industry.

I recovered, got busy with fall classes and stopped calling her. I didn’t consciously think that we had broken up, but I’d think of her or her family from time to time with nostalgic regret. There was a guy who hung around their house—I don’t know if he was part of the family or what—who had been in films as a saxophone player. The only thing was, he couldn’t play the saxophone. He just *looked* like a saxophone player. So there’d be these close-ups of this guy and someone else on the soundtrack. I used to watch him practice, moving the saxophone this way and that without making a sound. It was eerie.

And I'd remember her great-uncle, asking Cassie to name some part of a doorway in ancient Egyptian. Sometimes she'd know the answer, and he'd beam with satisfaction. Other times she wouldn't, and he'd shake his head sadly from side to side and say, "Cassandra, my pet, what will become of you?" Once I caught myself shaking my head with regret just thinking of him.

I probably would have called her eventually, but one day my office-mate's sister came wandering into the office looking for him, and I ended up taking her out for coffee. Her name was Laura, and she was very sensible.

I was home, a few weeks after I'd started seeing Laura, when I heard a loud pounding at the door. I set down the *Journal of Multivariate Analysis* and got up. Once I'd unlocked the door to the apartment I wished I hadn't. It was Cassie.

"You want order in your life!" she said with no preamble. Her face was twisted and ugly, her brown eyes hard and flat. I tried to stop her but she pushed her way into the room. "God damn it, you want everything to be dull and predictable, you want to know what's going to happen in your life at every minute. Don't you?"

I couldn't think of anything to say.

"Well, don't you?" she said loudly. I knew enough about her to tell that she was on the verge of tears. "The way I live is too unpredictable for you, right? If somebody gave you a timetable of your life that told you everything that was going to happen from now until you die you'd welcome it, wouldn't you? Well?"

She reached into her purse and took out a small manila envelope. "Cassie, I—" I said.

"Well, here!" she said, thrusting the envelope at me. "I hope you're happy!"

A little dazed, I took it. It seemed too slight to be a timetable of my life. I reached inside and took out—photographs. Photographs of me.

She was turning to go. "Cassie," I said. "Where did you get these?"

"My grandmother!" she said, and broke away and ran loudly down the hall.

I took all the photographs out and looked at them after she had

gone. There were only five of them. The first one showed me at my graduation walking across the stage in a cap and gown to receive my diploma. But I hadn't been at either of my graduations, not the one at my high school or the one at college where I received my B.A. degree. I turned the picture this way and that, trying to figure out how it had been done. There were these odd details—the guy in front of me was in a wheelchair, for example—but on the whole it was very believable. The person on stage looked a lot like me.

The next picture showed me in an unfamiliar kitchen, pouring myself a cup of coffee. In the third one I was running down the street in the rain, a briefcase flying out from one hand. I looked harassed, and older too, in some indefinable way. The next one was a picture of me and a woman I had never met. We were in a tight embrace and I had a look of perfect peace on my face. The picture ended just below the neck, but I had the impression we were both naked. And in the last picture I was definitely older—at least thirty—and bending down to talk to a five- or six-year-old boy.

I ran the pictures through my hands, shuffling them like a deck of cards. So that's what Cassie's grandmother had been doing all those months in her room. She must have had a darkroom in there. I could see her bent over the photographs, cutting a head from this one, a background from that one, maybe re-touching them, arranging them so that they looked like actual photographs. What a strange hobby. No wonder when she came out of her room she would say things like "The wind blows the skeleton of his lips."

I looked at the photographs again. Very nice, but I didn't see what the hell I was supposed to do with them. I put them back in the envelope, stuffed the envelope in a drawer and forgot about them.

There was a man in a wheelchair in front of me at my graduation. I felt vaguely uneasy when I saw him—he reminded me of something unpleasant, but I couldn't remember what—but I managed to put him out of my mind. My parents had come out from Chicago to see me graduate—otherwise, I suppose, I wouldn't have gone to this graduation either—and at the reception afterward I introduced them to Laura and my friends without thinking too much about the ceremony. It was only when we were out to dinner that I remembered the photograph.

"What is it?" Laura said. "Is something wrong?" Later she told me that until she saw me that night she had never believed in the

cliché “his jaw dropped.”

“Nothing,” I said uneasily, and, I guess, closed my jaw. Amazing, I thought. An amazing coincidence. I wondered what Cassie’s grandmother would make of it. Cassie. I shook my head. I hadn’t thought of her in months. “I just remembered something, that’s all.”

When I got home that night I pulled out all my drawers looking for the photographs. I found them at last, buried under the first few drafts of my dissertation. My fingers were shaking when I pulled the photographs out of the manila envelope.

The scene in the photograph matched point for point with the scene on stage. It might almost have been a picture taken by someone in the audience. There was Dr. Miller, who had been hastily invited to speak when Dr. Fine became ill. There was my friend Larry walking across the stage behind me. You could see his sneakers under the edge of his gown; he hadn’t had time to change his shoes. There was the guy in the wheelchair, rolling down the ramp off stage.

I felt as though someone had opened a window and let in a blast of cold air. I was shivering and had to sit down. How had the old lady done it? How on earth had she known?

I looked at the other photographs more intently than I’d ever looked at anything before. My hands were trembling badly. So that’s what Cassie had meant. This was to be my life. Someday I’d live in a house with a kitchen like the one in the photograph. I’d have a job that involved carrying a briefcase. And in about ten years I’d talk to a boy about five or six years old. Could the boy be my son? At the thought I felt another chill wind through the room and I shuffled that photograph to the end of the pile.

The picture I looked at the longest, though, was the one of me and the woman embracing. Her face was just under my chin and turned in slightly toward my chest, but from what little I saw I thought that she was beautiful. She had blond, almost gold, hair cut very short, and fine, delicate features. The one eye visible in the picture was closed. I thought she looked happy.

Surprisingly my trembling had stopped. I accepted—somehow—that I was seeing scenes from my future, but the idea no longer frightened me. I saw nothing bad in these pictures, no death or grief or pain. In fact, the future seemed to hold only good things



for me. A job, a house, a beautiful woman, perhaps a child.

If Cassie had hoped to frighten me with these photos, hoped somehow to win me back, she had badly miscalculated. It was with a feeling of profound satisfaction that I put the photographs in the manila envelope and put the envelope carefully back in the drawer.

After graduation I got a job with an aircraft company in a suburb of L.A. Feeling a little foolish, I carefully studied the briefcase in the photograph and then went out and got one just like it. I was looking at the photos about two or three times a week now, noting small details. The woman seemed to have small freckles scattered like stars across her face. The boy looked vaguely familiar, though if he were my son that wouldn't be surprising. A car was parked directly in back of him. There was a poster on the wall of the kitchen on which, after a week of effort, I could read the words "Save the Whales."

Laura and I had several arguments around this time. None of them was very serious—I had thrown out a pamphlet she had given me without reading it, for example, or she disapproved of my choice of restaurants—but each time I would think, "The woman in the photograph wouldn't act this way." The woman in the photograph, I thought, was wise and loving and giving. After a while Laura and I drifted apart.

I began to date women for a week or a month and then drop them, secretaries from the aircraft company or women I'd pick up in singles bars in the Marina. One morning I woke up in an unfamiliar bed next to a woman I could barely remember and saw by her alarm clock that I had to be at work in an hour. I staggered out to her kitchen and poured myself a cup of coffee. It was only after I drank the coffee that I turned around and saw the Save the Whales poster tacked up on the wall.

I was buoyant all that day. Several people at work even asked me what I was smiling about. If another one of the pictures had come true, I thought, the rest couldn't be that far behind.

The next few months were probably the happiest in my life. I lived in a state of almost constant anticipation. At any moment I might see her, turning the corner or buying a pair of shoes. I invented names for her, Alexandra, Deirdre. I fantasized taking her home and showing her the photograph, telling her the story and seeing her eyes open wide in amazement. I worked hard, dated

some, and spent long evenings running the photographs back and forth through my hands.

You can only anticipate for so long, though. Gradually, so gradually I barely noticed it, the photos became less and less important. I only looked at them once or twice a week, then once a month. I stopped holding my breath whenever I saw a woman with short blond hair. I still felt that my future held something wonderful, that my life was more intense than most people's, but I no longer thought about why I felt that way.

After about five years I quit the aircraft company and went into consulting. I had saved some money, but the first year on my own was very rocky. Then I began to make a reputation for myself and in the second year earned almost twice what I would have with the company. I bought a house in the suburbs. I was working very hard now, so hard I had almost no time to date or entertain friends. It didn't matter, because I knew that sooner or later I would see the blond woman and my life would change. Sometimes, working late into the night, I caught myself wondering what she would think of the way I'd decorated the spare bedroom, or whether she'd like it if I had a pool put in the back yard.

One day I locked my keys in my car and hurried to a phone booth to call the automobile club. It was raining lightly, and suddenly I recognized the scene from the photograph. I felt vindicated. My life was on the right track.

Ten years after I graduated I saw Cassie again. I had gone to a firm in an unfamiliar part of town, and on my way to the car I remembered that I didn't have any food in the house. I crossed the street to the supermarket, and in the parking lot, holding a bag of groceries in one hand and a child's hand in the other, was Cassie. It took me a few minutes to recognize her. By that time she had already turned to me. She knew who I was immediately. "Robert?" she said, grinning widely. She looked as though she'd hardly aged.

"Cassie!" I said. "How you doing?"

"Fine, just fine," she said. "How are you?"

"I'm fine. How's Aurora? When did you get married?" I nodded at the kid, now pulling hard on Cassie's arm and humming to himself.

"I'm not married," she said. Of course. Same old Cassie.

The kid said something I couldn't catch, and I squatted down to

hear him better. “My mommy’s a singing parent,” he said, talking around the largest piece of candy I had ever seen.

“A singing parent?” I said.

“Single parent,” Cassie said, and I stood up, feeling foolish. “So I guess you graduated, huh?”

People in school or at the aircraft company sometimes talked about inspiration, about suddenly solving a problem that had bothered them for weeks, seeing the problems that their solution brought up and going on to solve them too, on and on, effortlessly. I had always envied them profoundly. That sort of thing had never happened to me. But now, as I stood up, I realized that Cassie’s son was the boy in the photograph; that he looked familiar because he looked like Cassie, though without her red hair; that since I was the oldest in the photograph with the child all the other scenes must have happened to me already. All this took a fraction of a second, and I was able to say, “Yeah, I did,” before the realization hit me and I said, “You cheated me!”

The boy, so familiar now, looked up, alarmed. “What do you mean?” Cassie said.

“Those photographs,” I said. “Those goddamn photographs you gave me, you little bitch. You wanted to get my hopes up, you wanted me to think that some day I’d meet a woman I’d fall in love with, and all this time it was a lie. All the scenes have happened, including the one with your stupid son just now, all except the one with that woman. And I’m too old for that one now. You put it in there just to— to—

“I remember now,” Cassie said, looking thoughtful. The boy started to pull her hand again. “I gave you those photographs, that’s right. I was mad at you, because you never called me. I got them from my grandmother. But all the scenes were true, she told me. All of them. If they said you were going to meet a woman then you’ll meet her. I didn’t really look at the pictures all that closely. Wait. You’re right— there was one with a woman in it. I asked my grandmother who she was and she said she worked in a department store. Was my son in one? I don’t remember that.”

In a department store, I thought, feeling bereft. Now I remembered a woman I’d taken home about five years ago. Halfway through the evening I’d realized she looked a little like the woman in the photograph, but she had turned to face me and the

illusion was broken. Her name was Irma, and she had worked in a department store, I thought, amazed that I could remember so much. She'd left in the middle of the night because she'd been worried about her dog. I never called her back.

"You mean I've been waiting—" I said. "Waiting ten years for a woman, and all this time—"

Cassie shrugged. "I don't know," she said. "Look, I'm sorry if—"

"Sorry," I said numbly. "Somehow that doesn't seem to cover wasting ten years of my life. I guess you got your revenge after all."

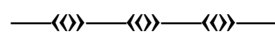
"I wasn't out for revenge," she said. "I wanted to show you something. To show you that life isn't as much fun when you know what's going to happen. To make you loosen up a bit."

"Yeah, well, you did just the opposite," I said, turning away.

"Robert?" she said, tentatively. I didn't look back.

When I got home I took the photographs out and spread them across my desk. I was surprised to see how worn they were, how frayed at the edges. How many hours had I spent looking at them, planning a future that never existed? I lit a match and held it up to one photograph, then threw them in the fireplace. Five seconds later they had all burned.

Now, in the evenings, mostly I sit and think. I feel lost, as though I've survived a great tragedy. I neglect my work, and my answering service has one or two messages every day from irate clients. I think about my wasted ten years, about Cassie and her crazy family, and their strange ability to charm. I think that sooner or later it will be time to call Cassie back, to start a life that was stopped—that I stopped—ten years ago. I'm pretty sure Cassie will turn me down. But for the first time in a long time, *I don't know for sure*. And that excites me.



## Afterword

Sometimes two separate story ideas combine to make one story. The idea of photographs that show the future had come to me about three or four years before I'd started this story; I'd tried writing it then but it hadn't worked out. And I knew a few reptile smugglers and thought that they might be interesting to write about. It was only when I tried putting these two things together, when I came

up with the character of Aurora the reptile fanatic, that the story started to work.

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