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The Cassandra Chronicles

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Extract

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GETTING THROUGH THE DAY

Deli Man

Every morning I wake up and order a double latte from the deli downstairs.

In New York they deliver anything, any time. No matter what, the deli man always sounds delighted to hear from me. 'Hello, honey!' It's like a husband. Only better. I don't have to see him. And, more important, he doesn't see me.

All I am to him is a raspy voice that says slightly suggestive things like 'Can you make it extra-hot?' and 'I'd like a ripe banana too.' The conversation never lasts longer than three minutes and ends with certainty. We'll speak again tomorrow.

We have a special connection. I know him as 'Deli Man' and he knows me as '15-A'. Once, he asked for my name but he has since forgotten it. I don't care. As long as he gets me my extra-hot latte in under twenty minutes.

And I get preferential treatment, so I feel special. If I don't have enough cash, he'll let me pay the following day. If I tell him I've been up all night working, he'll throw in an extra espresso shot.

'You work too hard,' he says. I appreciate his concern.

He's intuitive too. He picks up on the fact that before I have my coffee, I don't really want a long conversation. If he asks me 'How are you?' I respond with 'Fine,' and that's enough. He doesn't push it. Sometimes, before I go away, I'll let him know I'll be out of town so that he doesn't think I'm abandoning him.

But instead of asking where I'm going and what I'm doing, he'll say simply: 'Okay, honey, have a good trip.'

Of course, when he has no time to talk to me, that's different. There

are some mornings I can tell he's rushing me off the phone. I feel rejected and find myself dragging it out. 'Maybe I'll have an iced coffee today . . .' Then he'll snap at me: 'Come on, honey, I got others waiting here!'

That's when I realize we're not meant to be.

The best thing about my relationship with Deli Man is he had no idea what I look like. All I know about him is that he has a Mediterranean accent, whereas the delivery man is Mexican. I've often wondered if he reports back on what I'm wearing. For instance: 'She was wearing the plaid pyjamas again.'

I make sure to tip him well.

There are days I think it's the ideal relationship. I accept that he'll never be available on a Sunday, and I don't take it personally. I also enjoy the fact that he thinks I'm a lot more enthralling than I am. As 15-A, I'm a mystery.

But then, one morning, everything changed. I ordered the usual, the doorbell rang, I opened up and there he was. He'd delivered it himself.

Why would he do that? 'Hello, honey,' he said – but he looked so disappointed.

I was in my glasses and pyjamas, looking like an un-caffeinated, unshowered mess. What did he expect? Pamela Anderson? It was horrible.

There was only one thing to do. I pretended not to know it was him, handed over the money, grabbed my latte and shut the door.

We'll see if he calls me honey again. Or if he even answers the phone. But even if he sounds the same, I'll know that on the inside, his dream has died. We both lose out. He's lost the fantasy of talking to someone hot. I've lost the special attention that comes from him thinking I'm hot. And most troubling of all? I have to start making my own coffee.

Something to Look Forward to

Everyone needs something to look forward to. Without it, there's nothing to keep us going. But there is a big drawback. As soon as it's happened, you're back to square one. Even as it's happening, you may begin to feel strange and wonder what that feeling is. I can tell you what it is. It's the void creeping back and reminding you you've got to come up with something else, fast, or you're going to crash.

All my life I've had to have something to look forward to, and it's a constant struggle to replenish. It's exhausting, like laundry. As soon as it's done, you're already into the next load. It used to be that I could look forward to growing up. I hung onto that for as long as possible.

Even though I had a suspicion it would be a let-down, I didn't really accept it until I was thirty. That's when it hit me: thirty more years to fill?

My best friend Liza always makes sure she has a date lined up. That gives her something to look forward to. Once she is on the date, it's another story. Then she can look forward to it ending.

Because my father lives so far away, I've had talking to him and seeing him to look forward to. So last week, I called him in Bali. I told him I was looking forward to our trip to Italy. He said he was too. I told him I was looking forward to us having some time together, face to face, to reconnect and talk.

'What are you looking forward to?' I asked. He said he was looking forward to getting off the phone.

Another friend, Audrey, is in love and all she can talk about is how much she's looking forward to the weekend, looking forward to the evening, looking forward to lunch. Today my lunch was a yoghurt and half a brownie. I looked forward to the brownie.

And then it was gone. Which is precisely the problem. Now what do I have?

My eyesight is deteriorating, my skin is only going to get blotchier,

my metabolism is slowing down and my cholesterol is going up. I suppose I can look forward to my next blood test.

I tried to think of more things to get me through the day. I looked forward to there being only a few more hours before I could go to sleep. Oh, and my hair's getting longer. That cheered me up. Then I remembered as soon as that happens I'll have to book an appointment to get it cut. Not looking forward to that.

Recently, I was working on a story about someone who has just had his leg amputated. He said he was looking forward to getting a prosthetic leg and going horse-riding. You'd think that would put things in perspective – but it didn't. He has something to look forward to and I don't. I felt even worse.

I think that the whole idea of looking forward to something might be the problem. That's when I decided: from now on, I'll look forward to nothing. That way, I won't feel let down. I have nothing to look forward to.

I'm feeling better already.

Napping

People are very judgmental when it comes to naps. Especially a nap in the middle of the day. If it's four o'clock in the afternoon and you tell someone you've just woken up from a nap, the disapproval hangs in the air. There is a self-righteous tone in their voice. Why? Because they were awake while you weren't. Here's what I want to know: why is it so important to live every second of life conscious?

Usually, a nap is for when you are tired. Not in my case. For me, the purpose of a nap is to get to the end of the day sooner. There is nothing better than waking up with the better part of the day behind me. Closer to dinner.

The problem is I have to justify it. So the excuses kick in. Jet lag is a great excuse. I love this one because afternoon, morning, early evening – it always works. Unfortunately, it has an expiration date. If you're still claiming jet lag three weeks after a trip, people get suspicious. Or, claiming jet lag from a train ride. They don't buy it.

'I was up all night' is good. But only if you add 'working' after it.

My friend Heather once broke up with her boyfriend because of his napping. She gets up at 5 a.m. to go to her high-powered job as a TV producer. He woke up at 10 to get to his menial job that required no skills. She would call before lunch to see what he was up to and he would say: I'm taking a nap. He wasn't busy enough to be napping.

'You have to earn a nap!' She says, still annoyed. 'What was he tired from? Breakfast?'

Napping is a complex subject. It's not only why or when you nap, but where. Another friend, Lori, is an afternoon napper who's taken to hiding it from her husband. If she tells him she just took a nap he'll ask: where were you? He doesn't mind if she naps on the sofa with the sun streaming in. But if she naps on the bed, it's an issue. He finds it depressing.

I've tried to figure out what this is about and I think it's because a nap on the couch is accidental. It says: I didn't mean to fall asleep; I must have just drifted off. But a nap on the bed is definitive. It says: I made a commitment. I intended to sleep the day away.

I only nap on the bed.

Medically Induced Coma

Sometimes I wish I could be placed in a medically induced coma. Is that wrong? Just for a few days. I'd wake up feeling rested and refreshed. I'd lose a few pounds and the dark circles would be gone. It would be like having time off.

Maybe a few days isn't enough. Now I think about it, I wouldn't mind being comatose for the month of December. Every year. I could avoid all the holidays, then on New Year's Day I'd wake up and ask if anything new had happened while I'd been out. Had anyone paid my bills for me? Did my apartment clean itself? Was my neighbour evicted? No? Okay, put me down for another month.

It would be a good way to save money too. It's impossible to get through a single day without a trip to the cash machine, but in a coma I could stick to a budget. I wouldn't be using my mobile phone and what I'd save on groceries and shoes I'd put towards medical procedures. I could have them all done at once – my fillings replaced, my eyes lasered. I'd wake up with an absence of tooth decay and 20/20 vision.

But I'd need to be groomed. Liza would have to get someone to come in and tweeze my eyebrows, give me a mani-pedi, and maybe some highlights. I'm far too impatient to sit still at a salon, but in a coma there's nothing but time.

I'd probably want to keep it going. Fifty years in a coma doesn't sound so bad to me. I'd wake up just in time to die.

The ideal way to be in a medically induced coma is when I'm waiting to hear back about something. For instance, let's say my novel has been sent to the publishers. That's a time when I'll be filled with anxiety and unable to focus on anything else. So my instructions would be: wake me up when there's a book deal.

Another good time for a coma: just after getting dumped. People say that time heals all wounds. Well, time passes when you're unconscious, so why not fast-forward to six months later, fully healed.

For some people, the best part of being in a coma has got to be waking up. When you open your eyes, you're surrounded by friends and family who are all crying tears of joy at your recovery. But if I was in a coma, who would hold a vigil at my bedside? Thinking about this, I could feel myself getting depressed.

I don't want to wake up from a coma alone. I could see myself

shouting: 'Hello? I'm out of my coma now? Anyone there?' I wouldn't know what to do.

The other day I called my GP, Dr Samuelson. He told me a coma is only induced when a patient is in dire circumstances. 'Define dire,' I said. 'When the brain needs to rest,' he replied.

I told him my brain needed a rest. There was a long silence.

Then he hung up.

Complaining vs Lamenting

Complaining can be about anything and everything, day or night, anywhere, anytime. Complaining is a lot like talking, only more constructive.

People often confuse telling a story with complaining. But every good story needs a complaint. Otherwise, what's the point? Who wants to hear a story about how great someone's life is? If I'm going to participate in the discussion, there has to be something in it I can relate to. A complaint makes it interesting.

A lament is far more complex. I consider it a sophisticated version of complaining with weeping, despair and regret mixed in. For instance, I would lament the fact that I'm in a tiny apartment with a weird smell of pickles and chicken and now all my clothes smell of pickles and chicken and the dry cleaner ruined my sweater when I sent it in to have the smell removed and soon it will be the holidays and I'll be alone and what if it never changes, in spite of what people say, and this is all there is. I complain about the elevator.

Recently in the elevator, I found myself enjoying a conversation with another tenant in the building. This rarely happens. People always feel compelled to talk to me and usually, that's what I'm complaining about. But yesterday was different. Why? Because we were

complaining in tandem. She complained about how slow they run – then I complained about how one is always broken – then she nodded and complained about how complaining to the management is useless, and I heartily agreed and complained that it's the same with the laundry room and the broken washing machines. Next thing I knew, the sixteenth floor had arrived.

There are three elevators in the building but one is continually out of service, so waiting requires patience and stamina. I have often found my neighbour in the hallway with reading material. Even if he's only going downstairs to collect his mail, he knows he'll be there for a while and passes the time productively.

I, on the other hand, prefer to stand idly by getting older and more anxious with every passing second. I tend to use the time to ruminate about my life and itemize the bad choices, putting them into categories like Work, Men, General, and so on. I don't want anyone interrupting me. Unless it's with a complaint.

A Carrot for One

I was in the supermarket, waiting in line to pay for my carrot. An elderly woman was in front of me holding a lime. We looked at each other and smiled. That's when I realized: I'm ninety. When you're elderly, you don't mind waiting in line for twenty minutes. What's the rush? Then the elderly woman looked at her watch.

Why would she do that? Maybe there was somewhere else she had to be. Someone waiting for her to get home with the lime? Or a party she had to get to? This bothered me. She had somewhere to be. It ruined the moment.

Usually I enjoy standing in line quietly. It's where I do my best thinking about where it all went wrong. Standing in line is acceptable

time out. Sometimes I like to think about other things, like why the line I'm in isn't moving and the one next to me is – but I never feel like switching because if a line isn't moving, that's the one I want to be in.

The last time I went out to dinner with a friend she put her mobile on the table. So I put my phone on it too. Hers rang. Mine didn't. Hers rang again. Mine didn't. I put mine away. The only thing worse than a mobile on the table that rings is a mobile on the table that doesn't.

Liza is never without her BlackBerry. This summer, I was in a car with her for three hours stuck in traffic. Something I didn't mind. Except, the entire time, she was working. Between making deals and her social life, it was nonstop. 'I can't do Tuesday: I've got a book party at six and an opening after. Wednesday I can do . . . after the premiere.' It was awful. Who wants to hear that? At one point I was so excited because my phone rang. It was my father.

I've always wondered what it would feel like to be someone who has so many people needing their attention that they complain about it all the time. There are people who say, 'Everyone wants a piece of me,' and whenever I hear that I think: 'What on earth are you talking about?' No-one wants a piece of me.

I bet if I was the type of person who had a BlackBerry or a tan or, better yet, a BlackBerry *and* a tan, I'd be eager for whatever line I was standing in to move quicker.

But then I'd start thinking how much I missed the time in my life when I had twenty minutes to spare.

After I purchased my carrot, I was walking home when I was confronted by a blockade of people walking three abreast. How is someone meant to get past three people taking up the entire pavement? 'Excuse me!' I shouted. Then I elbowed past them. I might not have had anywhere I needed to be, but I had to get there as soon as possible.

Coffee

People are always doing studies. Now there's one that says drinking coffee can lead to the prevention of memory loss in old age. This is terrible news. Drinking coffee is my greatest pleasure in life. That, and forgetting.

I first started drinking coffee at the age of seven. Even at that age I knew I wouldn't make it through the day without an incentive to get out of bed. Every morning it was the same: white coffee, two sugars. You know those memory games that children play in the car? I was always winning. Now I know why.

One day at lunch my science teacher saw me drinking coffee in the cafeteria and complained to my mother. He told her that he didn't think it was a good idea for me to have caffeine and that's probably why I wasn't paying attention in class. But she told him the reason I didn't pay attention in class was because he was a moron. After that, he left me alone.

Now that I've learnt coffee improves my memory, I'll have to reconsider how much of it I drink.

During my last relationship I would recount entire conversations – sometimes from two years earlier. I'd point out something that was an inconsistency and feel proud as my ex looked stunned. I've found there's nothing a guy loves more than to hear a woman begin a sentence with: 'But you said . . .'

The main problem with having an acute memory is, why would I want to spend my old age recalling parts of my life that while they're happening, I'm not really engaging in? That's why I never take photos. Everyone is so excited about digital cameras but I don't get it at all. I'm not that into reliving a moment if I didn't enjoy it the first time round.

Not to mention that digital cameras aren't really capturing the moment anyway. They're capturing a moment after you've made sure you don't look like a hippo.

When I was in Italy over the summer, every morning I would wake

up and all I could think about was that soon I would be drinking a double espresso. The time it took between my eyes opening and getting to the café in the square where I could be caffeinated was time that did not exist. It was a fifteen-minute interim during which I managed to brush my teeth, splash some water on my face, get dressed and trudge up the hill. No talking. Once I got to the café, I'd order the espresso with hot milk on the side. The only Italian word I remember is *schiuma*, which means foam.

I'm inclined to keep drinking coffee and suffer the consequences later on. Here's my plan. Just when it gets to the point where all the memories start taking over, I'll quit. That way, the cold-turkey migraine headaches and sleeplessness will divert my attention.

I can't imagine a life without coffee. The way some people can't imagine a life without children.

Therapy or Dinner

Lately, I've been thinking I should go back to therapy. The problem is, I live in the West Village and my therapist's office is seventy blocks uptown on the Upper West Side. It's such a commitment. Leaving the apartment, walking to the subway, waiting for the train to arrive, possibly not getting the express then walking another three long blocks, in the rain. I should be more motivated.

My friend Audrey is the same way. She's shopping for a shrink at the moment and her only criterion is that he or she is in the same neighbourhood. 'I loved my old shrink,' she says. 'But I had stop going because her office was across town.'

This is someone who would cross the Alps barefoot for a sale at Diane von Furstenberg. A few weeks ago she went to a sale at Frette linens in DUMBO. Brooklyn. A different borough. When it comes to

Egyptian cotton sheets, she's audacious. When it comes to mental health, not so much.

Money is also an issue. My therapy isn't covered on insurance so for the past few years I've had to choose between dinner out or a healthy future. Turns out I'd sooner spend $75 on a piece of salmon than sorting out my emotional wellbeing.

That's not a good sign.