

## This Could be Us

“Annie, hey, Annie”.

You have been calling me Annie for the past week now. My name is Cassie. I let you call me whatever you please. I have been calling myself a veterinary assistant to friends and family when in reality I am a kennel attendant; you answer the phones while I clean and put the bodies in the freezer for the crematorium to pick up every Monday. The freezer is full, you told me that the holidays are a busy time for the hospital, a bunch of dogs getting into things they aren't supposed to and cats snacking on poinsettias. The laundry room where I was meant to reside reeked of bleach but it still was not enough to conceal the distinct yet easily recognizable aroma of towels heavy with urine or the surgery gowns littered with little bits of tissue and blood spatter.

A corpse should go away, and as far as I knew at the time they always did. I had not yet been handed a hair dryer and told to “breathe out your mouth and just get them defrosted enough to move the limbs.” All for a clay paw print. A paw print which pet parents occasionally were too grief stricken to ask for at the time of euthanasia. Days later they call and contest over tears, is it too late? Begrudgingly, the answer is no. Fluffy is still in the freezer and has been since Tuesday.

Tuesdays I worked 6pm-12am, you worked 12pm-12am. Slimy liquor soaked gummy bears coat our throats as you tell me about Michael or John and whatever outrageous act of affection they had performed for you that day. You tell me about the restraining order against Ronny for threatening your ex and how you entertained Michael putting a baby in you even

though you know damn well you're infertile. I wish I could ask for your paw-print all these months later. Though fortunately, you are not in the freezer. Instead all I have are gray and blue text bubbles of us talking shit about anything and everything. You probably prefer it this way.

My limp mop stops in front of the triage desk as I balance on my tip toes, peering over the fake granite countertop encircling you. The first thing I see, the first thing I always see even after the first time, is the orange lily embellished with stars painted into your skin with needles. There are between five and eight other receptionists on the ER side of the hospital at any given time but this was always *your* seat. Adorned with sparkling pens, an abundance of snacks and a tumblr with a cat on it which I soon learned to be your life elixir, no one dared to make themselves at home the way you did. But then again, how could you not when you worked there sixty hours a week?

Behind the partition separating triage from treatment area our favorite person to verbally shit all over resided doing the bare minimum per usual: Dr. Dorkus. He drives a bright red Audi and wears his scrub top tucked into his scrub bottoms looking like an absolute scrub. His sexist comments about how he's going to "fill this ER with young and hungry female veterinarians" are unfortunately interspersed with details about his twenty-three year old "girlfriend."

"The hospital made fifty thousand dollars and these fools give us a hard time about a fifty cent raise."

You are who I thought you were when I first met you yet everyday since you have evolved to mean so much more. Whenever I feel small or silent I think of you and I open my goddamn mouth and say what the fuck I want to say. You never let anyone silence you or rearrange your words and I will not let that happen now.

At first you called me Annie, eventually you learned to call me Cass. To me, you have always been and will stay Vanessa. You never knew how to be anyone else. I admire you for that but I fear it for myself. I wonder if that's why you left in the end. I remember your tattoo of a gravestone with the text "this could be us" surrounded by flowers. This could be us but it won't be. It can't be us because it is you. Sometimes I want to get a tattoo from that same shop you always went to in Hartford. But then I remember how you got so many for free. No shame though, never any shame with you. When I miss you I think of myself as Annie; A caricature of myself frozen in time. A caricature of my best parts, the parts which you so quickly recognized in me and allowed to identify with yourself.

"Be kind to yourself, the world is cruel enough". Vanessa's Facebook, 10/13/21