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bestselling author of *THE ROSIE PROJECT*

# CASSANDRA



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# REVERSE

HOLLY SMALE

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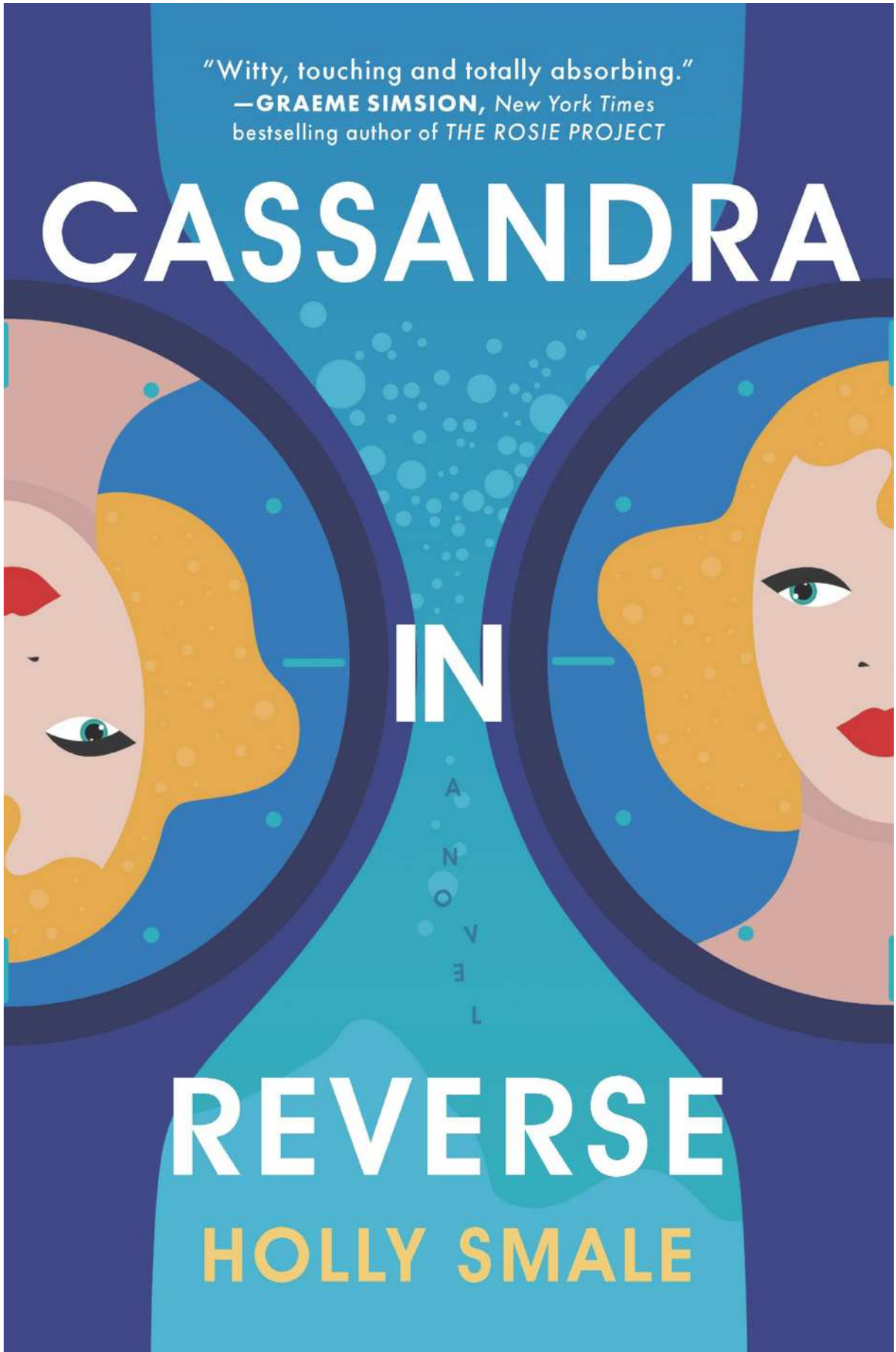
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**HOLLY SMALE**



“Cassandra is a funny and sharply-observed character who I loved spending time with.”

—Graeme Simsion, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Rosie Project*

“A pure delight from start to finish. Cassandra Dankworth is a character as unique as she is endearing: hilariously prickly and unapologetically clever yet delicate and tragically misunderstood. *Cassandra in Reverse* is an unexpected take on time travel, exploring the challenges of human connection.... An absolute gem of a novel.”

—Margarita Montimore, *USA TODAY* bestselling author of *Oona Out of Order*

“Sharp, funny, quirky, insightful and so very, very relatable.”

—Joanne Harris, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Chocolat* and *The Girl with No Shadow*

“*Cassandra in Reverse* reinvigorates the time loop trope with the perfect match of character and concept. Utter genius!”

—Catriona Silvey, internationally bestselling author of *Meet Me in Another Life*

“I adored *Cassandra in Reverse*—fresh, funny, insightful and honest. Everyone should read it and everyone will love it. Holly Smale is an exceptional writer, and this book is a treasure.”

—Lindsey Kelk, bestselling author of *I Heart New York* and *On a Night Like This*

**Holly Smale** is the internationally bestselling, award-winning author of the *Geek Girl* and *The Valentines* teen series, which have sold 3.4 million copies worldwide. In January 2021, Holly was diagnosed autistic at the age of thirty-nine. Suddenly a lot of things made sense. Holly regularly shares, debates about and celebrates neurodiversity on [Twitter](#) and [Instagram @holsmale](#).

*Holly Smale*

**Cassandra in Reverse**



For my sister, Tara.

Always an army of two.

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When things go well, a shadow overturns it all.  
When badly, a damp sponge wipes away the picture.

Aeschylus

Where does a story start?

It's a lie, the first page of a book, because it masquerades as a beginning. A *real* beginning—the opening of something—when what you're being offered is an arbitrary line in the sand. *This story starts here.* Pick a random event. Ignore whatever came before it or catch up later. Pretend the world stops when the book closes, or that a resolution isn't simply another random moment on a curated timeline.

But life isn't like that, so books are dishonest.

Maybe that's why humans like them.

And it's saying that kind of shit that gets me thrown out of the Fentiman Road Book Club.

Here are some other things I've been asked not to return to:

- The Blenheim Road Readers Group
- A large flat-share I briefly attempted in Walthamstow
- My last relationship
- My current job

The final two have been in quick succession. This morning, Will—my boyfriend of four months—kissed me, listed my virtues out of nowhere and concluded the pep talk by ending our relationship.

The job situation I found out about eighty seconds ago.

According to the flexing jaw and flared nostrils of my boss, I've yet to respond to this new information. He seems faint and muted, as if he's behind a pane of thick frosted glass. He also has a dried oat on his shirt collar but now doesn't seem the right time to point it out: he's married—his wife can do it later.

"Cassie," he says more loudly. "Did you hear me?"

Obviously I heard him or I'd still be giving a detailed report on the client meeting I just had, which is exactly what I was doing when he fired me.

"The issue isn't so much your work performance," he plows on gallantly. "Although, Christ knows, somebody who hates phone calls as much as you do shouldn't be working in public relations."

I nod: that's an accurate assessment.

"It's your *general demeanor* I can't have in this office. You are rude.

Insubordinate. Arrogant, frankly. You are not a team player, and do you know what this office needs?”

“A better coffee machine.”

“That’s exactly the kind of bullshit I’m talking about.”

I’d tell you my boss’s name and give him a brief description, but judging by this conversation, he isn’t going to be a prominent character for much longer.

“I’ve spoken to you about this on multiple occasions—Cassandra, look at me when I’m talking to you. Our highest-paying client just dropped us because of your quote, unquote *relentlessly grating behavior*. You are unlikable. That’s the exact word they used. *Unlikable*. Public relations is a People Job. For People People.”

Now, just hang on a minute.

“I’m a person,” I object, lifting my chin and doing my best to stare directly into his pupils. “And, as far as I’m aware, being *likable* is irrelevant to my job description. It’s certainly not in my contract, because I’ve checked.”

My boss’s nostrils flare into horsiness.

I rarely understand what another human is thinking, but I frequently feel it: a wave of emotion that pours out of them into me, like a teapot into a cup. While it fills me up, I have to work out what the hell it is, where it came from and what I’m supposed to do to stop it spilling everywhere.

Rage that doesn’t feel like mine pulses through me: dark purple and red. His colors are an invasion and I do not like it.

“Look,” my boss concludes with a patient sigh that is nothing like the emotion bolting out of him. “This just isn’t working out, Cassie, and on some level you must already know that. Maybe you should find something that is better suited to your...specific skill set.”

That’s essentially what Will told me this morning too. I don’t know why they’re both under the impression I must have seen the end coming when I very much did not.

“Your job has the word *relations* in it,” my boss clarifies helpfully.

“Perhaps you could find one that doesn’t?”

Standing up, I clear my throat and look at my watch: it’s not even Wednesday lunchtime yet.

Relationship: over.

Job: over.

“Well,” I say calmly. “Fuck.”

\* \* \*

So that's where my story starts.

It could have started anywhere: I just had to pick a moment. It could have been waking up this morning to the sound of my flatmates screaming at each other, or eating my breakfast (porridge and banana, always), or making an elaborate gift for my first anniversary with Will (slightly preemptive).

It could have been the moment just before I met him, which would have been a more positive beginning. It could have been the day my parents died in a car accident, which would have been considerably less so.

But I chose here: kind of in the middle.

Thirty-one years into *my* story and a long time after the dramatic end of some others. Packing a cardboard box with very little, because it transpires the only thing on my desk that doesn't belong to the agency is a gifted coffee mug with a picture of a cartoon deer on it. I put it in the box anyway. There's no real way of knowing what's going to happen next, but I assume there will still be caffeine.

"Oh shit!" My colleague Sophie leans across our desks as I stick a wilting plant under my arm just to look like I'm not leaving another year of my life behind with literally nothing to show for it. "They haven't *fired* you? That's *awful*. I'm sure we will all miss you *so much*."

I genuinely have no idea if she means this or not. If she does, it's certainly unexpected: we've been sitting opposite each other since I got here and all I really know about her is that she's twenty-two years old and likes tuna sandwiches, typing aggressively and picking her nose as if none of us have peripheral vision.

"Will you?" I ask, genuinely curious. "Why?"

Sophie opens her mouth, shuts it again and goes back to smashing her keyboard as if she's playing whack-a-mole with her fingertips.

"Cassandra!" My boss appears in the doorway just as I start cleaning down my keyboard with one of my little antiseptic wipes. "What the hell are you doing? I didn't mean leave *right now*. Jesus on a yellow bicycle, what is wrong with you? I'd prefer you to work out your notice period, please."

"Oh." I look down at the box and my plant. I've packed now. "No, thank you."

Finished with cleaning, I sling my handbag over my shoulder and my coat over my arm, hold the box against my stomach, awkwardly hook the plant in the crook of my elbow and try to get the agency door open on my own. Then I hold it open with my knee while I look back, even though—much like Orpheus at the border of the Underworld—I know I shouldn't.

The office has never been this quiet.

Heads are conscientiously turned away from me, as if I'm a sudden bright light. There's a light patter of keyboards like pigeons walking on a roof (punctuated by the violent death stabs of Sophie), the radiator by the window is gurgling, the reception is blindingly gold-leafed and the watercooler drips. If I'm looking for something good to come out of today—and I think I probably should—it's that I won't have to hear *that* every second for the rest of my working life.

It's a productivity triumph. They should fire people for fundamental personality flaws more often.

The door slams behind me and I jump even though I'm the one who slammed it. Then my phone beeps, so I balance everything precariously on one knee and fumble for it. I try to avoid having unread notifications if I can. They make my bag feel heavy.

Dankworth please clean your shit up

I frown as I reply:

Which shit in particular

There's another beep.

Very funny. Keep the kitchen clear

It is a COMMUNAL SPACE.

It wasn't funny a couple of weeks ago when I came down for a glass of water in the middle of the night and found Sal and Derek having sex against the fridge.

Although perhaps that is the *definition* of communal.

Still frowning, I hit the button for the lift and mentally scour the flat for what I've done wrong this time. I forgot to wash my porridge bowl and spoon. There's also my favorite yellow scarf on the floor and a purple jumper over the arm of the sofa. This is my sixth flat-share in ten years and I'm starting to feel like a snail: carrying my belongings around with me so I leave no visible trace.

I send back:

OK.

\* \* \*

My intestines are rapidly liquidizing, my cheeks are hot and a bright pink

rash I can't see is forming across my chest. Dull pain wraps itself around my neck, like a scarf pulled tight.

It's fascinating how emotions can tie your life together.

One minute you're twelve, standing in the middle of a playground while people fight over who doesn't get you as a teammate. The next you're in your thirties, single and standing by the lifts of an office you've just been fired from because nobody wants you as a teammate. Same sensations, different body. Literally: my cells have cunningly replaced themselves at least twice in the interim.

The office door swings open. "Cassandra?"

Ronald has worn the same thing—a navy cashmere jumper—every day since he started working here a few months ago. It smells really lovely, so I'm guessing there must be plural.

He walks toward me and I immediately panic. Now and then I've caught him looking at me from the neighboring desk with an incalculable expression on his face, and I have no idea what it could be. Lust? Repulsion? I've been scripting a response to the former for a month now, just in case.

*I am honored by your romantic and/or sexual interest in me given that we've only exchanged perfunctory greetings, but I have a long-term boyfriend I am almost definitely in the process of falling in love with.*

Well, that excuse isn't going to work anymore, is it.

Ronald clears his throat and runs a large hand over his buzz-cut Afro. "That's mine."

"Who?" I blink, disoriented by the grammar. "Me?"

"The plant." He points at the shrubbery now clutched under my sweaty armpit. "It's mine and I'd like to keep it."

Ah, the sweet, giddy flush of humiliation is now complete.

"Of course," I say stiffly. "Sorry, Ronald."

Ronald blinks and reaches out a hand; I move quickly away so his fingers won't touch mine, nearly dropping the pot in the process. It's the same fun little dance I do when I have to pay with cash at the supermarket checkout, which is why I always carry cards.

I get into the lift and press the button. Ronald now appears to be casually assessing me as if I'm a half-ripe avocado, so I stare at the floor until he reaches a conclusion.

"Bye," he says finally.

"Bye," I say as the lift doors slide shut.

\* \* \*

And that's how my story starts.

With a novelty mug in a box, a full character assassination and the realization that when I leave a building I am missed considerably less than a half-dead rubber plant.

It's not all bad.

At least tomorrow I won't be sitting in a loud office with a reception that looks like it's been licked by King Midas, listening to people who don't like me eat crisps, desperately hoping nobody calls for an Idea Hurricane, and pretending all the lies I'm being paid to tell don't make me want to rip my skin off with my fingernails.

Tomorrow will be a *good* day.

Obviously, the day after that I'll be sitting in my bank manager's office, breathing into a paper bag and begging him to extend my overdraft, so I should probably make the most of it.

\* \* \*

"Cassandra?"

The lift doors slide open with a *ping* and I charge toward the exit, holding my cardboard box defensively out in front of me like some kind of Trojan shield.

"Miss Dankworth?" Credit to the receptionist: she isn't easily ignored. "Hang on a second—I've got Mr. Fawcett on line nine, and he says it's company policy to make sure you hand in your pass before you leave."

Cassandra Penelope Dankworth: that's my name. Thanks to my (dead) parents, I sound like a cross between a Greek heroine and a killer's basement.

"Can't stop," I manage. "In flight mode."

My heart is racing, my veins and pupils are dilating, my lungs are expanding and oxygen is racing to my brain in preparation for what it now assumes is imminent physical danger. Which is super handy if you need to run away from a rampaging woolly mammoth and not so handy if you're just trying to get out of an office block in central London without vomiting on your trainers.

Panicked, I body-slam the front door repeatedly until the receptionist takes pity on me and lets me out with a *click*.

Fresh air hits me in the face like a bright wall.

Eyes shut, I stand on the street for a few seconds and attempt to recalibrate. The insides of my eyelids are flickering—tiny warning flares sent up by dozens of sinking ships—and if I don't find a way to calm



down immediately, *it* is going to happen, and nobody wants that: not here, not on a public pavement, not in central Soho surrounded by people eating eight-pound crayfish baguettes.

This is why Will keeps telling me to start yoga. But I just don't feel comfortable with that many simultaneous bottoms in the air.

"Excuse me." A woman in a viciously orange bomber jacket taps me lightly on the shoulder and I jump as if she just stabbed me with a cattle prod. "You're kind of blocking the entrance to the—Are you okay?"

I blink at her. "Banana muffin."

"I'm sorry?"

A giddy wave of relief. "I need a banana muffin."

With my cardboard box gripped tightly, I begin urgently scurrying toward the tiny café on the corner. Banana muffins are comforting. Banana muffins are reassuring and familiar. Banana muffins don't wake up in the morning and tell you they care about you immensely but just don't see a future with you anymore.

The blue café doorbell tinkles behind me and it makes me briefly think of *It's a Wonderful Life*, which is a beautiful film about a much-loved man who has a positive impact on the world around him and which I, therefore, find difficult to relate to.

"Hello, young lady! Goodness, is it one o' clock already? Or are you early?"

I stare at the place where banana muffins should be.

"Oh!" The café owner smiles as if the whole world isn't now disintegrating beneath my feet. "I'm afraid we had a delivery issue this morning and they didn't have the banana ones you like so much, but we *do* have some delicious chocolate muffins and a lovely salted caramel, which I can personally attest is—"

"Banana," I insist, abruptly welling up.

"Not today," he clarifies gently. "Come in at your normal time tomorrow and I'll make sure I put a big one aside for you, okay?"

"But—" my grief feels overwhelming "—I won't be here tomorrow."

"Then why don't you take a seat for a minute and I'll see if I can find you something else instead?"

The old man points with concern at the green velvet chairs and a vivid memory flashes: Will, drinking a cappuccino and grinning at me with the sharpened mouth of a cat, lined with chocolate.

"Don't cry, sweetheart," the café man adds in alarm. "How about I put some banana muffins aside tomorrow so you can take extras home and freeze them?"

I'm never going to see Will again, am I?

That's the rule, right? They tell you they'll stay in touch, that you'll always be part of each other's lives, except it's just a script—a lie you're supposed to see through—but you believe them until they slowly stop answering your text messages and cat GIFs and one day you see them in Pizza Express with someone else and they pretend they can't see you even though you're waving as hard as you can.

I just didn't think it would happen with Will. Everything was going so well. I didn't get a chance to construct a suitable exit strategy from our relationship or plan a response to being dumped or properly rehearse how my heartbreak might feel in my head first.

I wasn't *prepared*.

"Hey," a woman in a big gray hat says as I stumble back out of the café door. "Wait just a—"

Everything is too far away and too close at the same time, too loud and also too quiet; a yellow door, an orange can, a blue sliver of sky, a dropped navy glove, the red ring around a street sign; a kaleidoscope turning.

A pigeon flaps violently and I put my hands over my face.

It's coming.

It's coming and without my banana muffin there is nothing I can do to stop it.

I need to get home *now*.

Struggling to breathe, I stagger round the corner into a sudden blast of noise so raw and so painful it takes a moment to establish that it's not coming from inside me.

*"Fur's not fair! Fur's not fair! Fur's not fair!"*

"Fashion has no compassion!" A woman with a purple bowl cut thrusts a leaflet at me. "A hundred million animals every year are raised and killed for their fur! They spend their lives in tiny cages before being viciously slaughtered so that humans can wear their skins!"

Blue-tinged magenta; cheese and onion breath. A surge of hot electricity careers from one side of my head to the other. Cringing, I'm pushed into the sticky, bare flesh of a topless man.

"Minks are semiaquatic animals!" he shouts as I stare at his nipples. "They are biologically designed to hold their breath and so suffer horribly during the gassing process!"

"I—" I manage, tripping over a banner, and now I'm being swept down Regent Street like a paralyzed dolphin caught in a shoal of hundreds of bright, screaming, woolly-hatted fish with megaphones and whistles.

"FUR IS DEATH!"

“Fur is death!”

“FUR IS DEATH!”

Drums bang, purple smoke explodes, a car horn blasts, a child starts screaming and a dog barks. A sheet of pure sound passes through me and I start to pull apart on a cellular level, the way a glass shakes just before it shatters.

“Head-to-toe electrocution!” An old lady gets right in my face: pores like orange coral, emotions neon yellow. “Foxes get an electrode up their butts. Does that sound fun to you?”

I follow the direction of her eyes to the large furry tail clipped to the front of my handbag. Will teases me for being “such a child sometimes,” but I like to hold on to it tightly when I’m on a busy train or someone gets too close to me in the post office queue. It’s also clearly artificial: it’s bright bloody *green*.

Which is what I open my mouth to politely explain when a spray of sticky liquid hits my face. It smells sour; tastes like ink and rotting Jelly Babies.

When I put my hand up, it comes away red.

Somebody starts wailing loudly.

And it’s only as I start desperately clawing and elbowing my way out of the crowd that I realize the horrible monotone noise is coming out of me.

It’s here.

It’s here and I’m covered in (blood? Paint? Corn syrup?) and fireworks are exploding behind my eyelids and I’m *unlikable* and *relentlessly grating* and unemployed again and a siren goes off and a shop alarm shoots through my head and Will doesn’t love me, couldn’t love me, maybe there’s nothing to love and there are no *fucking banana muffins anywhere*.

Openly sobbing now, I take the only option I have left. I find the nearest empty doorway, crouch in a small ball on the ground with my arms wrapped tightly around my head.

(“Cassandra must stop reacting to stress like a hedgehog.”)

And I wait for everything to go black.

### 3

It's odd behavior, I know.

People have been telling me how weird I am since I was a small child, with varying degrees of anger and irritation. Over the years my "little episodes" have been put down to:

- Victorian-esque hysteria ("Get her some smelling salts")
- A dramatic disposition
- A desperate need for attention
- A pathological inclination toward ruining parties

All I know for sure is that as long as I can get somewhere dark and silent as soon as I feel one coming on, my "hissy fits" often recede just before peaking, like a sneeze or an orgasm.

And if I don't...

Let's just say a large proportion of my life is spent in constant fear that the next one will happen in a client meeting, in the middle of Zara on a Saturday afternoon or at somebody else's wedding. ("Cassandra must stop making everything about her.") My theory is that my brain is like a lazy IT department, and every time there's a problem with the electrics it just panics and pulls the plug out at the wall.

Switch her off, switch her back on again: see if that helps.

This must have been a particularly bad one; by the time I finally resurface, my limbs are covered in scratch marks, my body feels swollen—a balloon filled with water—and the street is dark and back to normal. The protest has gone.

Shivering, I look more closely at my wrist: so has my watch.

I look around: plus my box with my mug in it.

Nice one. Thanks, London.

Aching all over, I groggily attempt to rise like Aphrodite, except that instead of the Greek goddess of love and beauty, I'm obviously a snot-covered, unemployed woman in her early thirties, and instead of gracefully emerging from a seashell, I'm hanging sweatily on to the doorknob of a new establishment called Bar Humbug, attempting not to make eye contact with a judgmental binman.

On the upside, I feel infinitely calmer now.

You can say what you like about my brain—and a lot of people have