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Casey Candle

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“You *cannot* refer to Erik Henlin as ‘alleged actor Erik Henlin,’” said Eden.

Tessa looked up from her notebook. “I don’t see the factual inaccuracy,” she said.

“It’s not that it’s a factual inaccuracy—”

“So you agree?”

Eden sighed. “I thought you promised to stop being inordinately harsh about the actors.”

“When did I promise that? That doesn’t sound like something I would promise.”

“It was after you wrote that Andrea Moon’s talents were wasted as a leading woman, and she should henceforth portray a cadaver in every movie she acts in,” said Eden. Alfie whistled quietly from across the room. “That’s a direct quote.”

“I have no memory of making that promise,” said Tessa.

“This isn’t a forum to discuss your personal biases about actors,” Eden said, exasperated. “Casey Candle is honest and objective, but not cruel. The key word being objective.”

Casey Candle was the pseudonym under which Tessa Byrd, Eden Geary, and Alfie Danes collectively wrote the column ‘Casey Candle’s Cinema Criticism’, which appeared weekly in the *Beatosa High School Review*. Tessa had been outvoted with regards to the alliterative title. There were many things, including alliteration as comedy, that Tessa disapproved of; therefore, every third week there were many things that Casey Candle disapproved of. On the whole, they attempted to make Casey an established, consistent character: she was a popcorn vendor at a movie theater where, once a week, she snuck into a screening of a movie, then reviewed it—for reasons unknown and unexplained—in a high school newspaper. She was knowledgeable about literature and world history, but, under Alfie’s influence, she occasionally displayed a surprising awareness of hockey. Many times, she had been engaged, and possessed a multitude of stories from these unfortunate periods to compare to the romantic storylines in the movies she watched, but she had always succeeded in escaping the entanglement before a suitor could carry her off from the popcorn booth.

“Just to confirm,” Tessa said in her debate voice, which was the voice she usually used, “Do you or do you not agree that Erik Henlin speaks like he has water in his mouth and he’s trying not to spill it?”

Eden laughed, which was as good as admitting defeat.

“Did you read mine yet?” Alfie asked. He was eating a jam sandwich in a corner so he didn’t get crumbs on any papers.

“It was good,” Tessa said slowly. She had learned to adapt a more polite mode of criticism after their first meeting freshman year, almost four years ago, during which she’d made him cry and been forced by Eden to write an apology letter. Eden sometimes said that Tessa required a translator when she spoke to people who weren’t used to her. “Didn’t I put on *The List* that more than three plane crashes in a movie in which aviation isn’t an integral part of the plot was minus two points?” Each movie that Casey Candle reviewed began with a hundred points, and points were deducted when she spotted a mistake.

“That was helicopter crashes,” Alfie pointed out.

“I think we should add planes,” said Tessa. Alfie flipped through *The List*, a document that had grown to thirty-eight pages, front and back, of Tessa’s tiny, spiky handwriting. It was a reference guide mostly referred to by Alfie, who got very nervous about making mistakes and always asked Tessa to check his columns at least twice. It detailed, at length, every film convention that Tessa hated: concert scenes in which the actors are clearly not playing the instruments, overt product placement, love at first sight, dream sequences, amnesia as a plot contrivance, a single musical number in a movie that contains no other musical numbers, makeover scenes, when a character tells another

character something the audience already knows, coming-of-age stories that involve dogs, movies that require you to watch other movies in order to understand the movie you are currently watching, scenes that start with a character being late for something, sisters who call each other 'sis', child actors who learn their lines phonetically.

"You can put Erik Henlin on The List," said Tessa.

"You can't just put an actor on The List," Eden protested. She turned to Alfie. "Don't do that." He put his pencil down.

"Why not? He was the worst part of every movie I've ever seen him in. Every time he comes onscreen, my immediate reaction is visceral disgust. I would argue that visceral disgust is the opposite of what an actor should evoke. Ergo, he is not an actor. Ergo, we can put him on The List."

"Have you seen the paper for this week?" Alfie asked suddenly. He held the newspaper out, and Tessa stood up to reach for it. When she did, Eden noticed for the first time that day that Tessa was wearing a ratty, oversized orange sweater with green leaves embroidered around the neck and sleeves. With her skinny legs sticking out the bottom and her curly hair poking out in every direction, she looked like a scarecrow. If Eden were the one wearing that sweater, she was sure, Tessa would say, "Where'd you get the clown shirt?" Sometimes, Eden really didn't like Tessa. For months at a time, Tessa would treat her like a mangy dog that she had deliberately left by the side of the road, only to get home and discover the dog waiting there, wagging its tail. Then, just when Eden had made up her mind to confront her, Tessa would do or say something so uncharacteristically nice that Eden would forget about being mad for a few more months. For at least eight years, she had been putting off this issue, like deferring a loan that had never enabled her to pay for anything.

"Oh," said Tessa. Her dark eyebrows sank lower and lower, and a tiny wrinkle appeared between them. "I see what you mean." She handed the paper to Eden.

It was not the column Tessa had written, the one they had all read over and approved, removing some of the more personal attacks on actors, directors, and screenwriters. It still addressed the same movie, a mystery drama called *Copycat* about a series of cat burglars who steal ancient Egyptian cat idols, but unlike Tessa's review, which had been among the tamest she had written, the article that Eden read under the heading 'Casey Candle's Cinema Criticism' was an intense indictment of every song choice in the movie.

"The decision to play 'Wounded Creature' over the first romantic scene makes this viewer fear for the safety of every woman that the hero associates with for the rest of the movie, and, more concerning, for the safety of all female acquaintances of the music supervisor," Eden read aloud. She turned to Tessa. "Did you write this?"

"No," said Tessa. "Of course not. Mine was completely different. We all read it."

"I didn't write it," said Alfie.

"Well, it obviously wasn't me," said Eden. She and Alfie looked at Tessa.

"I'm not mad," said Eden. "I just don't understand why you would put so much work into a column, then write another without telling us."

"I already told you, I didn't write that," Tessa said. Eden had always believed that if anything ever went wrong with the column, Tessa would be furious, but she seemed calm and vaguely entertained. Of course she was, Eden reminded herself. Why wouldn't she be? It was her column. "The Rotten Asteroids have come back from the dead to produce one last dusty death rattle in the form of 'Streets of Seattle', a song that hopes you don't notice that it's about gentrification," Eden read. "You're saying that's not you? Because it sounds like you."

"Look," said Tessa, "I know we have this weird 'Peppermint Patty and Marcie' dynamic, but I never thought you thought I was a liar."

"That's not fair," Eden said.

"I'll bet it wasn't any of us," Alfie said quickly, before Tessa could respond. "It was probably a— what is it?"

"An outside job," said Tessa, still looking at Eden.

The next week, Eden tossed a copy of the *Beatosa High School Review* onto the table in front of Tessa. "It happened again," she announced. Alfie stopped playing a drum solo on the table and came over to investigate.

Tessa picked up the paper and read aloud, "Only once has the question been asked: can a wise sage in the form of a middle school janitor, five dorky pre-teens armed with nothing but tragic backstories and bicycles, and a time-travelling masquerade ball combine to create an iconic eighties movie that still holds up almost forty years later? The answer is yes."

"I don't get it," Eden said. "*The Eternal Party* isn't even a current movie. Someone went out and rented it with the intention of writing a review to replace Alfie's."

"Someone?" Tessa said, raising her eyebrows. "So you don't think it's me anymore?"

"Of course not," Eden said dismissively. "You hate movies like that."

"Like what?" Tessa asked.

"It would be in the negatives on the scale," laughed Alfie. "Inconsistent time travel rules, fish-out-of-

water comedy, electronic hair metal soundtrack, those weird double belts people wore in the eighties. It's like a conga line of everything you hate." Tessa frowned and squinted resentfully at the newspaper.

"We'll have to give the columns directly to Mr. Franklin from now on," Eden said.

"I guess we could do that," Tessa said, with an air of strange disappointment. "This is your week to write the column, isn't it?"

"Yes," Eden said suspiciously. Tessa always knew whose week it was. "I'm going to see *Mechanical Heart* tonight."

"The cartoon with the robots?" Tessa said. "I'll come with you."

"You won't like it," said Eden. It was impossible to watch a movie with Tessa and still like her afterwards. Eden had accomplished it only twice, with movies chosen specifically because she had already seen them and was indifferent; all other attempts had ended in a cataclysmic fight or one or both of them storming out of the theater. Additionally, Tessa didn't drive, so she would have to go fifteen miles out of her way to pick her up from her house, which was in the middle of nowhere and looked like the setting of a horror movie. When Tessa got in the car, she knew, she would adjust the seats, the air conditioning, and the radio. She would find a rock station, turn it up as loud as it would go, and then talk over it. At the theater, she would convince the ticket seller that she was young enough for a child's ticket, which Eden could not do, then buy more food than either of them could eat and take the leftovers home. She would shush Eden if she tried to talk during the previews, then talk through the entire movie. She would predict who would die, who would kiss, who the murderer was, who would turn out to be an alien or a ghost or a figment of someone else's imagination or three thousand grasshoppers in a human suit, and invariably and infuriatingly, she would be right.

"How do you know I won't like it?" said Tessa. "I like robots."

"You like evil robots," Eden said. "Not robots who make a human connection and learn to love."

"Can I come, too?" said Alfie. Eden heaved a sigh of defeat. Alfie couldn't drive either.

As soon as they sat down in the theater, Tessa pulled bottles of lemonade from inside pockets of her jacket. Alfie poured his into his blueberry Slushee, creating an unholy, greenish-brown concoction.

"We're getting kicked out again," Eden mumbled, and took a sip of her lemonade.

Before the previews, an advertisement popped up on the screen, announcing that a free robot pin came with the purchase of a large popcorn bucket. A familiar gleam came into Tessa's eyes. "No," said Eden hopelessly.

"I want one," said Tessa.

"We already have popcorn," Eden said, but Tessa had gotten up, climbed over Alfie's outstretched legs, and made a break for the door.

Alfie leaned over Tessa's vacated seat. "I have to tell you something," he whispered.

"Is it that you're going to throw up from drinking that?" Eden whispered back.

"No. Well—the jury's still out." He looked down at his knees and pulled his shirt up over his mouth.

"What is it?" said Eden.

"I wrote the column," he said through the shirt.

Eden reached over and pulled it down. "Are you serious?" she demanded.

"Yeah." He glanced at her. "It's just, you and Tessa know so much about movies, and I don't. I know about music, and I thought, maybe I could write about that the way Tessa writes about movies." He looked at Eden and added, "And you, too, of course."

Eden shook her head. As unfathomably strange as Tessa was, she was such a good writer that it was not insulting to be compared unfavorably to her. "And you thought that instead of just saying, 'Hey, I'm going to write about the soundtrack on this one,' you would sneak it in and not say anything?"

"I know," said Alfie. "I guess sometimes it feels like everybody thinks they know everything about me, and I thought I could write a good column by myself, and you guys would read it and be impressed, and I'd be able to say, 'Surprise! I'm good at stuff too!'" But nobody was impressed."

"Nobody thinks you're bad at anything," said Eden.

"Tessa does. She made The List for me."

"That's just the only way she knows how to be nice," said Eden. There was, under so many layers of exhaustion and disappointment, a little fondness in her voice that she could never quite lose when it came to Tessa. "Yeah," said Alfie. He took a long drink of his Slurpee, winced, and took another. "But I only wrote the first one. I promise. I don't know where the column about *The Eternal Party* came from."

Eden shrugged. "Maybe an outside job, like you said." She took Alfie's cup and sipped hesitantly, before making a face and, with effort, swallowing. "What you said, about everybody knowing who you are—I think everybody feels like that sometimes. Like they're locked into someone else's idea of them." Before she could say anything else, Tessa returned, carrying a bathtub-sized bucket of popcorn. A pin shaped like a silver robot with a bright red heart on the left side of its tiny metal chest was pinned to the collar of her jacket.

"I tried to get extras for you guys," she said, "But they wanted me to buy more popcorn."

"You realize there's no robot battles in this movie, don't you?" said Eden.

"You don't know. You haven't seen it," said Tessa. She handed her popcorn bucket to Alfie.

"I already have popcorn," he protested, even as he shifted everything else he was holding to take it.

"I don't really like popcorn," said Tessa. This meant, Eden knew, "I don't really want popcorn right now, so I'll make you hold it until I decide to eat it."

The lights went down, and a robot appeared onscreen, putting rivets into a bridge. He looked down through a tangle of metal and saw a teenage girl with red hair standing out in a glowing mass around her head like a halo. His eyes, which were previously dull and grey, were lit from behind by a red light. Eden braced herself and looked at Tessa. But Tessa, staring transfixed at the screen, said nothing.

Later, after she had dropped Alfie off at home, Eden said, "I'm impressed. You never even asked how a human and a robot would reproduce."

"It was cool," said Tessa. "Even if you were right about the battles." For a moment, she stopped trying to reprogram the car radio. "You know, I do— like stuff. I guess it's easier to talk about things you don't like when you're writing. I know I probably come across like I hate everything, but I don't."

"Yeah," Eden laughed, "Apparently, you like robots learning to love."

"I like lots of things," Tessa said defensively. She seemed to decide something. "I like *The Eternal Party*."

"You do *not*," said Eden. She pulled over, breaking several traffic laws in the process. "Explain," she demanded.

"I don't know," Tessa said. "I was angry that you thought I lied. So—" She shrugged, grinning. "I lied. I wanted to prove that I don't hate everything."

"You don't hate everything," said Eden. She thought, then clarified, "You don't hate most things filmed before 1950."

Tessa snorted. "Exactly. I sound so pretentious and awful. I must be, I guess. I have one friend, and she thinks I'm a liar."

"What about Alfie?"

Tessa smirked, then covered her mouth with her hand. "Wait," said Eden. "What do you know?"

"I know *I* didn't write that first column. And I know you didn't."

Eden slapped the dashboard. "You knew the whole time!" she shouted triumphantly.

"Of course I did," Tessa said. "I know everything."

"Remember the good old days when you didn't want to be pretentious and awful?" said Eden. Tessa laughed. "Did you really like the movie?" she asked.

"Yeah," said Tessa. "I mean, it wasn't—" She put on a self-mocking voice. "It wasn't a staggering, landmark work of cinematic genius. But it doesn't have to be. It was cute. There were robots."

"Do you want to write the review?"

Tessa looked at her. "It's your week," she said.

"I'll trade with you," said Eden. "If you want to."

Tessa took the pin off her jacket and looked at the robot's heart, the half-smile that bisected its round, silver face. "Want to have a heart, too?" she imagined it said to her, in a series of electronic beeps.

"Yeah," she said. "I want to."