

A Victim of Circumstance

Characters

CASS: 20, an autistic college student whose special interest is history. Struggles to be understood and taken seriously.

CLAIRE: 21, Cass's friend. More practical than Cass. Supportive and loyal. She loves to ask questions and understand everything about a given situation.

Playwright's notes

When Cass is doing her presentation, the actor playing her is free to be as dramatic as they want, writing on the whiteboard or making grand gestures. Cass should be played by a neurodivergent actor. Dashes and [] imply that a line is being interrupted and spoken over.

Setting

A college classroom.

Time

Present day.

ACT I

Scene I

(Cass stands in front of the blank whiteboard. Claire sits in a chair nearby, watching her friend with a mixture of confusion and curiosity. Cass picks up a phone to start a timer, and begins to speak once the time starts.)

CASS

(in a dramatic voice.)

Sarajevo, June 1914.

(in a more normal voice.)

Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austro-Hungary is on a tour with his wife, Sophie. He was pretty unliked by [most of his—]

CLAIRE

I thought this presentation was about someone you found inspirational.

CASS

It is.

CLAIRE

And you chose... *this guy*? Of all the people you could have chosen? What about Eleanor Roosevelt? Winston Churchill? Or—

CASS

I know more about Archduke Franz Ferdinand.

CLAIRE

Are you going to call him by his full name the whole time? It's such a mouthful.

CASS

Yep.

CLAIRE

Okay then.

CASS

Can I keep going?

CLAIRE

Yeah, Sorry.

CASS

(muttering)

Just gotta restart my timer...

(Cass continues when it is ready.)

Okay. There. Take two. Sarajevo, June 1914. Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austro-Hungary is on a tour with his wife, Sophie. He was pretty unliked by most of his family. They didn't think he fit their idea of a perfect royal model.

CLAIRE

Harsh.

CASS

Kinda, yeah. But he was in line for the throne, so it wasn't like they could get rid of him without causing some problems for succession.

CLAIRE

(in dramatic fashion.)

Oh no, not the succession!

CASS

(holding in laughter.)

Anyway, in an attempt to make the guy more likeable to the 'common man,' the Archduke and his wife went on parade in Sarajevo. It was a Big Deal. And because of that, it got the attention of some people who wanted to make a statement—The Black Hand. The Black Hand was this underground organization that planned to assassinate Archduke Franz Ferdinand while on his visit. So they made a plan. They set multiple people up along the route the motorcade was set to go on, so there were backup plans in case something happened. Spoiler: something happened!

CLAIRE

Oh, whatever could it have been?

(In the following section, Cass becomes more dramatic, and as she gets further into the story, she begins to laugh, almost too hard to continue speaking. Claire looks on with growing concern.)

CASS

The day of the assassination came. When the cars passed the first guy, nothing happened. He chickened out! But it's fine. There's five more guys, surely the next one will take the chance to kill *Archduke Franz Ferdinand!* But what do you know, the second guy didn't do it either! The third guy was actually able to throw his bomb, surprisingly. *But he hit the wrong car!* The car exploded, wounding and killing many people in the process, but Archduke Franz Ferdinand was totally fine. The guy who threw the bomb took a cyanide pill and jumped into a river after he finished his mission. *But he didn't die!* The cyanide was *expired!* He got caught and was arrested, obviously. After that, the motorcade decided to take a different route than planned, to avoid any other issues. Guys four and five never had a chance to see their potential victim. But the sixth

guy? He left his post after hearing about the failed attempts, and ended up at a food market and was just chilling there when a certain someone goes by in his motorcade! Gavrilo Princip was the last one in the line, and disappointed in his comrades' performance, he decided to take matters into his own hands. He *rushed* to the car, gun drawn, and shot Archduke Franz Ferdinand point-blank. Obviously the guy's freaking out, he's just been *shot*, so he turns to his wife and says "Sophie! Sophie! Don't die! Live for the children!" But Sophie *had also been shot!* She was dead!

(Cass laughs a little more, then sits down on the floor. Claire looks down at her friend, confused and a bit worried.)

CLAIRE

Um... are you okay?

CASS

(still laughing.)

Yeah! Yeah, I'm fine! It's just... he said that, and she was already *dead!* It was pointless! All of it was just a prolonged way to make this guy's final day of living absolutely terrible! Sure, he was a terrible person and all, but how often does something like this happen? The way fate had to work in order for this to play out the way it did... it's just amazing!

CLAIRE

I wouldn't say someone *dying* is amazing, Cass.

CASS

(starting to sober up.)

No, the *coincidences* are what's amazing! Six assassins, two of which couldn't go through with it and one who couldn't even kill himself because of expired cyanide? And what's worse, Archduke Franz Ferdinand wasn't even their original target! They were going to kill the mayor of Sarajevo, but once they found out the Archduke would be there, they changed course! And that course caused World War One to get set into motion! *The Great War! The War to End All Wars!* You know, *that war!*

CLAIRE

Yes, I know what war you're talking about.

CASS

Exactly! The war that introduced trench warfare and mustard gas and so, so many new ways to kill people without a second thought came about because this one guy died! Yes, there were countless other factors that went into the war– the Austro-Hungarian influence on many smaller countries in southeast Europe, the familial rivalries between the leaders of England, Germany, and Russia– they were cousins, all related to each other through Queen Victoria– and that's just the start! But Archduke Franz Ferdinand– the 'poor' Archduke– it was his death that finally dissolved the last chance at keeping the peace between all of these powder keg countries. After he was killed, the Austro-Hungarian empire declared war on Serbia, despite the fact that none of the assassins were even Serbian, and they sent the Serbian government the longest list of

demands *ever*. Like, they asked for the most outrageous stuff.

CLAIRE

Such as?

CASS

I mean, total control of Serbia, for starters. What else?

(pausing, finally, to consider.)

I can't remember right now, but it was a lot of crazy stuff, I can tell [you that]–

CLAIRE

You don't remember? I think you've lost your touch.

CASS

Leave me alone! I'm just... riled up. That's all.

CLAIRE

I see that.

CASS

It's just so weird, right? How the world can be changed so drastically, how all hell can break loose, just because one nineteen year old rebel took a shot at royalty?

CLAIRE

Wait, the guy was only nineteen?

CASS

Yep. Most of the would-be assassins were about our age, if not younger.

CLAIRE

Really?

CASS

And that's another thing!

(standing.)

People our age all over the world– that is, in countries involved in the war, because despite the name, the war didn't include every country– were so inspired to sign up and fight for their countries despite still being in college or not being old enough to drink! And they went to the trenches and *shot people* and *killed people* all for their country and for honor or whatever you want to call it! All because Archduke Franz Ferdinand was *shot*!

CLAIRE

Well, didn't you say it's not entirely [because]–

CASS

But isn't it? Isn't it, really? Sure, something else could have been that final spark if Archduke Franz Ferdinand hadn't died, but what would our world be like? It's like the butterfly effect. Change one thing, and the ramifications could be catastrophic or generally world-altering. Suppose the Black Hand actually went through with their original plan and killed Sarajevo's mayor. What would have happened?

CLAIRE

I don't [know]–

CASS

Exactly, Claire! Exactly! *We don't know!* We don't know *anything!* We just know what's happened, with the added disclaimer that we can never truly know what things were like in the moment unless we were *present* for said moment.

CLAIRE

So by that logic, you don't actually know what happened that day, do you?

CASS

Yes, I do. I've done research.

CLAIRE

(teasing)

But were you *there*?

CASS

Oh, shut up! I didn't say it's *impossible* to know, just that we can't know every detail! Like, we don't know exactly what color socks the car's driver was wearing. We don't know the exact pattern of the blood spilled onto the seats of the car once Archduke Franz Ferdinand and Sophie had been shot. We don't know exactly how expired the cyanide pill was. We don't know what Gavrilo Princip was thinking once he got convicted of killing the couple and we certainly don't know what was running through his head when he died of illness in a war prison a few years later. We just know what's been passed on, and that's what we have to use.

CLAIRE

(after a beat.)

I don't know how to respond to that.

CASS

Why not? Did it not make sense?

CLAIRE

No, it did, it's just... how is this inspirational, exactly? Wasn't that the point of all this? From everything you've said, this seems way too depressing to be inspirational.

CASS

It is. Totally. That's why I like it. I mean, I don't like that he *died*, that's morbid and honestly really mean to say—

CLAIRE

I get it. Keep going.

CASS

Yeah... I mean— I just— I lost it. I lost it!

(Cass sinks to the floor, starting to sniffle. She's working herself up.)

CLAIRE

It's okay. I get it. It's okay.

CASS

No, it isn't! I don't know how to put the rest of it into words...

CLAIRE

You're doing a great job. I didn't know anything about this guy before you started, and now I know so much— too much, if you ask me, but that's not the point. This is something you're passionate about, and you don't need to explain yourself to me.

CASS

But I do! My presentation—

CLAIRE

Is *yours*. You can do whatever you want with it. Your reasons for thinking this guy is inspirational to you don't have to make sense to anyone but you. And if anyone has any more questions after you finish the presentation, they'll ask you. And you'll be able to answer, because you know exactly what you're talking about. And you have more time to think about it, right?

CASS

I don't know...

CLAIRE

I do. How about we take a minute, and then we can run it again and try to figure out what you find inspirational as we go? Would that be helpful?

(Cass nods, and Claire pulls her into a hug.)

CLAIRE

It's okay. Just take some deep breaths and try to shake out the tension. I've got you. Do you want me to grab your headphones, or do you just want some quiet?

CASS

Headphones are good.

CLAIRE

Okay. Gimme a second.

(Claire gets up and grabs Cass's headphones from her bag and her phone from the table, bringing them back to her friend. Cass uses her phone to turn on music, which could be faintly heard. Cass and Claire sit on the floor. Cass's shaky breaths may be heard. Eventually, Cass sniffles for a final time and attempts to stand up.)

CLAIRE

You ready to try again?

CASS

I think so, yeah. Yeah. Yeah, I'm fine. I just have to, um...
(muttering.)

What do I have to do?

CLAIRE

Take your time.

CASS

Where should I start?

CLAIRE

Let's just start at the beginning.

CASS

Okay.

(she takes a deep breath, then takes her place in front of the whiteboard.)

Sarajevo, June 19– wait.

CLAIRE

What?

CASS

Have to set the timer.

(Cass grabs the phone to reset the timer.)

CASS

(laughing weakly.)

We didn't turn it off from before.

CLAIRE

Oh. Oops.

CASS

There. Take... three? Take three. From the beginning.

CLAIRE

Yep.

CASS

Sarajevo, June 1914. Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austro-Hungary is on a tour with his wife, Sophie...

(Cass's voice fades out as she restarts the story, with Claire listening attentively from her seat.)

CURTAIN