

Such Is Life: Episode VIII

By: Dwan L. Hearn

“Hey there, Zack. It’s about damn time you answered your phone.”

Never, to my memory, had the sound of someone’s voice triggered so many thoughts in me at one time. Each thought morphed itself into a question. Each question treated my mind like a stock exchange-esque arena, fighting and clawing for the long-awaited opportunity to be asked first.

“I swear, Zachary, if you zoned out on me...”

“Venus? Is it really you?”

“Yeah, it’s me,” Venus declared.

“Where have you been?!” I asked, “What happened to you?”

Venus sighed, “It’s a really...” Venus stopped mid-sentence though her silence spoke volumes. I could feel anguish in the air. Sadness and confusion followed. After what had to be the longest 15 seconds anyone has ever experienced, Venus eventually continued, “...it’s complicated. It’s a lot to unpack and I needed some space.”

“Why couldn’t you’ve just called me?” I asked.

“What am I doing now?” Venus countered.

“Sooner than this,” I counter-counter.

“Space, Zack, I needed to get my thoughts straight.” I tried to interject, but Venus stopped me. “Listen, I wanted to apologize for making ‘Chelle keep this from you. I felt like you deserved to hear all this from me and I didn’t know that you guys had a meeting today. I was hoping to talk to you before you saw ‘Chelle again. If it makes you feel better, I only called her two days ago. She hadn’t kept anything from you for long. She’s pretty upset that she hurt your feelings. Go easy on her, okay?”

“I’ll call her later,” I said, the weight of Michelle’s betrayal lifting off my soul’s shoulders. I was probably too hard on her.

“Do that. She’s a good friend. Apparently, you were kind of an ass!” she chuckled.

“I wasn’t trying...”

“I know. She knows, too. I was telling her...” Venus stopped talking. In the background, I heard what sounded like a door shut. “Hey, I gotta go. I’ll be back in town soon. We’ll talk more then.”

I was silent.

“Okay, well, I’ll take that as a yes.” Venus blows a kiss into the phone. “Bye, Zack. I’ll see you soon.”

The call ended. I sat in the driver’s seat staring down at the phone laying in my lap, my emotions flooded my mind causing chills to wash over my body. While I’m relieved to have heard from her, I’m now left with more questions than answers. Where is she? Was someone with her? When will she come home? What made her leave that night in the first place?

I put my phone away in my cup holder, started the car, and began my drive home. My mind was racing the entire ride home. Aside from everything with Venus, I couldn’t get Sandy’s words out of my head. She said ‘another Waterman life ruined by a Miles’. I have no idea what she meant by that and my best shot for an answer is, surprisingly enough, my mom.

I pulled into the driveway and got out of the car. As I walked toward the house I saw my grandmother sitting on the porch reading a book with headphones on. She saw me walking up the steps and smiled. I smiled back and gave her a little wave. She tapped her ear indicating that she was listening to something on her iPod but had no intention of stopping. This was typical for her when something else was going on around her that she was actively trying to ignore. I tapped my own ear, acknowledging that she couldn’t hear me. I then pointed to the book in her hand and tilted my head, silently asking her what she was reading. She looked down at her lap, where the book rested, and showed me the front cover. A post-apocalyptic scene with the title *Rising Ash* at the top in red and “R.G. Westerman” at the bottom in yellow. I nodded. I raised my two index fingers to my mouth and pointed downward, my impression of a vampire. Grandma shook her head and held her arms out in front of her, tilting her head from side to side. Zombies. I kissed her forehead and went into the house as Grandma went back to reading her book.

I walked inside the house to the sound of semi-rhythmic stomping coming from above the living room. The stomping was coming from Mom’s room because, of course, it was. I walked up the stairs, passed my opened bedroom door where I threw my jacket, and on to Mom’s room.

There she was in the center of her room, staring at her television, with the VCR remote in one hand taking a sip of water from the bottle in the other. She put the bottle down and hit play on the remote. On the screen, the muted music video to N'SYNC's "I Want You Back". As the video began to play again, Mom began dancing, picking up the routine where she apparently left off before her water break. As she did a jump, stomp, and turn, she saw me standing in her already-opened doorway.

I smiled at Mom, "Hey Mom."

Mom jumped a little bit before pausing the video again, grabbing her water bottle, and taking another sip. "Oh, hey there Zack," she said while trying to catch her breath.

"How's the dance-a-thon going?" I asked. She's been working on learning all of the dances from the boy band's videos for a while now.

"Pretty good, I think. I think I'll have this one down by the end of the day," Mom paused for a moment, "Mom's outside again, isn't she?"

"Yeah, but she's just reading. She's good."

Mom nodded, grabbed her towel to wipe away her sweat, and sat on her bed. "Was there something you needed, Zack?"

I walked in, taking a seat at her desk. "There actually was something I wanted to run by you."

"Sure, what's going on?"

I took a moment to gather my thoughts. "So I went to that meeting at work today, right?"

"Uh-huh."

"Turns out it wasn't Daniel that called the meeting."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, it was Jim's sister, Sandy."

Mom's face just kinda froze. Her smile just faded away.

"Mom? You okay?" I asked.

Composing herself, she said, “Sandra Waterman is back in town?”

Confused, I answered, “Yeah, seems like it. And of course, she’s mad at me for whatever happened to Jimmy. But it’s something else she said to me that I thought was weird.”

I wasn’t exactly sure, but it seemed like Mom was slowly getting even more concerned or angry. She started to breathe a bit heavier which at first, I thought was just because of the dancing, but now I’m not so sure. She started to blink a little bit more often and the tone of her voice lowered a little. “Let me guess,” Mom said, “something like, ‘Nothing good ever happens when a Miles is around.’”

No less confused I replied, “Something kinda like that. Something about how a Miles ruined another Waterman life. I didn’t ruin anyone’s life. I don’t know why she would blame me.”

Mom stood up, threw her towel in her hamper, sat back down on the bed, and motioned for me to sit next to her.

“So, I don’t know all the details, but this is what I remember.” Mom re-adjusted on the bed, now leaning back against the headboard. “You know that Jim Sr. and your grandpa used to be close, right?”

I nodded. “Yeah, Grandpa talks about him all the time.”

“Did he ever tell you why they stopped?”

I thought about it for a minute. In all the stories that Grandpa has told me about him and Jim Sr., not once did he explain why they stopped being friends. Only that they did. “No,” I answered.

“Well, I remember when I was a kid, the Watermans were over all the time. I used to hang out with Sandy all the time. Then the Watermans opened the store and a while later, they came over less often. I’d see Sandy at school and things were just different between us.”

“Oh Honey, let me tell it. This has nothing to do with either of you.” Grandma was standing in the doorway holding a tray with some sandwiches on it. She walked in, sat the tray on Mom’s bed between us, and pulled the desk chair over by the bed.

I turned to Grandma. “So did something really happen between Jim Sr. and Grandpa?”

“Well, yes and no. The long and short of it is, Jim and Charlotte, that’s Mrs. Waterman, were fine until the store became a big deal because when the store became a big deal, Jim became a big deal. Charlotte would come over still, but Jim would be always working.

“At one point, Charlotte came to me and told me that she was tired of being treated like one of his employees and wanted a divorce. Paul, Grandpa, you know, tried to warn Jim because he didn’t want to see him go through all that. Turned out to be a huge mistake. Charlotte had already hinted at the divorce, but Paul didn’t know. Jim told Paul that Charlotte was always talking about how happy we were and wanting a marriage like ours. Jim was, I guess you could call it jealous, and blamed Paul for, I think he said that we made his wife unhappy in their marriage, which, you know, has nothing to do with us. They argued and Jim even accused Paul of sleeping with Charlotte and planting the idea of a divorce in her head.”

Mom and I sat on the bed staring at Grandma. I felt like my jaw dropped but I couldn’t see my face. I glanced at Mom and it looked like she was trying to drop her jaw, but it was more like murmuring without words.

Grandma continued, “Charlotte was a sweetheart, honestly, and just wanted to feel important to her husband. Her and Paul didn’t do anything wrong, except Paul tried to be a good friend to Jim and help him save his marriage.” Grandma turned to Mom. “As for you and Sandy, Sandy was a daddy’s girl from birth. If Jim didn’t like the Miles family, she wouldn’t either. If Jim blamed us for the divorce, she would too. That’s what happened between you and Sandy.”

Mom was confused. “So, she wasn’t mad about my pregnancy?”

“Oh, Ashley, if anything, she used that as an excuse to be mad at you. It doesn’t make a lot of sense to be mad at you for her parent’s divorce, but she probably needed a reason and the pregnancy probably became your target.”

Grandma turned to me now. “Zack, you are just the unfortunate target of a family full of jealousy and bitterness. Jim Sr. blamed us, Sandy blamed us, and Jim Jr. listened to everything his big sister told him, so I’m sure you noticed him acting a bit strange around you, too.”

I let out a chuckle, “He’s pretty strange around everyone!”

Mom chimed in, “That’s pretty true, Momma,”

We all kind of laughed that weird awkward laugh before it settled down. Grandma looked at me again and asked, “Why are you two talking about Sandra Waterman anyway?”

Mom turned to me too, “Yeah, what all did she say at your meeting?”

“Well, she said that until Jimmy can be cleared to run the company, she’s in charge.”

Grandma sat back in the chair. “Sandra Waterman is going to be running the company now? Well, Zachary, you might want to look for new employment.”

“Yeah, Zack,” Mom added, “Sandy is going to turn the general store into a vanity project and I’m sure she’ll can you as soon as she can.”

“I thought so too,” I told them, not mentioning that Sandy basically said as much, but I want to ride this out. I’m good with Daniel now so I might be okay.”

“Just keep your eyes open, Son,” Mom told me, “You never know with Sandra Waterman.”

I nodded in agreement, stood up, and kissed Mom on the forehead. I grabbed my sandwich, thanked Grandma, and kissed her on the forehead too.

As I was leaving the room, Grandma called out to me. “Hey, Zachary,”

“Yes, Grandma?”

“You know, I could try calling Charlotte, you know, if you want. Maybe she could talk some sense into Sandy.”

I thought about it for a moment considering that maybe some backup wouldn’t hurt. I decided against it. “It’s okay, Grandma. I handled Jimmy this long. I think I’ll manage with Sandy.”

Grandma smiled at me. “Well, alright, Zachary. Just a thought.”

I kissed her forehead again, left Mom’s room, and went to my room. I grabbed my jacket from the floor and pulled my phone out of the jacket pocket. I was about to call Mitch and give him the update I promised him, but I see that I have two missed calls from Michelle. I redialed her number. It only rings once.

“Zacky Boy?” she said quickly.

“Hey, ‘Chelle. Look I’m really sorry about -”

“Look, I don’t have that kind of time,” she interrupted. “Are you free tonight?”

I looked down at my phone. The clock said 7:15 pm. I put the phone back up to my ear. “I mean, I guess. What’s up?”

Michelle was quiet for a few more seconds than I really liked. Okay, we need to meet. Tonight. Like, right now.”

“I really just got home. We had the meeting and I had coffee with Danny and I just talked -”

“Like, right now. It’s about V and the party.” She let out a deep sigh. “Listen, there’s a lot I need to tell you. Honestly, I should have just told you earlier, but it wasn’t my place. Still isn’t, but it’s getting heavy and I don’t know what to do. I need help. I need your help.”

I paused for a moment then jokingly asked, “How am I always in the middle of these things?”

“Just lucky I guess.”

I gave in. “Okay, where do you wanna go?”

Michelle said something away from the phone, likely to someone in the room with her. “Do you know where J. Sabata’s is?”

I confirmed.

“Good, meet there are eight, okay?”

“Gotcha.”

“Okay, Zacky. We’ll see you soon and I’m really sorry I didn’t tell you this sooner.”

“We’ll talk about it. I’ll see you soon.” I hung up the phone, told Mom I was heading out, and got back in the car. As annoyed as I am being back in this car, I have to admit that I’m intrigued to finally find out what happened at that party.

This better be good.