

Such Is Life: Episode VII

By: Dwan L. Hearn

I swear! I am forever getting stuck in traffic! If I have somewhere to be, something happens to keep me from getting there. Whether it's a protest against public demonstrations, a car hitting a parked train, or this - yet another A.R.C. parade. Seriously, why do we even have an Association of Retired Clowns and why must they ALWAYS have parades? How many parades do they even need? I swear, last time, I just missed the parade by, like, a minute. I mean, who cares if -

My ringtone threw off my train of thought. Looking down, I saw Mitch's name on the screen. He's probably wondering where I am. I picked up the phone and answered it. "Hello?"

"Hey Zack, it's Mitch."

"I know, Mitch. What's up?"

"I called to make sure you were coming today,"

"You mean this stupid ass meeting your cousin is pulling out of his ass? Yeah. As long as this mime doesn't pretend to die in the middle of 10th and General, I'll be there,"

Mitch was quiet for a moment, seemingly trying to process the sentence. He broke the silence with a simply inquisitive, "Did you say, 'mime'?"

In the background, I could hear a voice asking Mitch about what he just said that I said.

I asked Mitch, "Mitch, is that Danny in the back?"

"Daniel is with me, yes," Mitch replied.

Again, in the background, Daniel can be heard talking to me through Mitch, "Are you coming or not Zack?"

"Mitch," I said, "tell Daniel, word for word, the A.R.C. is marching and a mime is being treated."

Yet another pause before I heard him repeat the message to Daniel. Daniel, now clearly closer to the phone, asked the only question there is to ask someone at this point in the conversation. Daniel asked me, "Car accident or heart attack?"

“Car,” I told him.

“Is he on the stretcher yet?”

“Just now.”

Daniel asked, “So, about 15 minutes?”

“Thereabouts,” I answered.

“Fine. Come in on the Jackson Street side,”

“Gotcha, Daniel. See ya, Mitch.” I hung up the phone as some of the clowns carried a mime away on an imaginary stretcher. Once the clowns were clear, a cop in clown makeup - or a clown in a cop’s uniform - either way, someone directed traffic through the intersection. About ten minutes later, I pulled into the parking lot of Waterman’s General Store.

The parking lot was surprisingly full of Waterman employees. I parked the car and walked through the crowd of cashiers, freightmates, and cleaning crew, looking for Mitch and Daniel. Everyone was gathered in smaller groups, almost exclusively to their department or shift. I saw some of the freightmates, including Michelle, who was talking to Kimberly and the rest of the cleaning staff, and good ol’ Mike Topps, who was now apparently growing his beard out, and Dave. I don’t really know Dave. He’s a quiet guy who keeps to himself a lot, but I always see him talking to Mike and I’m not 100% sure if that’s by choice.

I saw a pair of broad shoulders walking towards a couple of guys standing in front of a make-shift stage. As I approached, I saw that it’s Hank talking to Daniel, with Mitch seemingly very engaged. I walked up as Hank was clearly not liking whatever answer Daniel just gave him.

Hank, to Daniel, “...not know?”

Daniel, to Hank, “I told you. I’m not the one that called the meeting. I just texted you all”

Hank, to Daniel, “But how do you not know who called you?”

Daniel, annoyed, to Hank, “Again, the call came from the Hotline. It just said, ‘Daniel, call the staff for a meeting Saturday.’ and hung up. I tried calling them right back to no answer.” Daniel looked down at his watch, looked over, saw me, nodded, looked back at his watch, looked up at the stage, then back to Hank. “And whoever is supposed to be here is late.”

No more than 30 seconds passed before a bright blue BMW slowly drove through the crowd of people; its horn blaring to clear its path. The car, making it clear that it's going to park where we were standing, in front of the stage, made its way to us, stopped, and then pressed on the horn in pulses to summon everyone to it. Not sure how everyone knew what to do, but they did, so they did.

The super clean sedan, beaming in the sunlight like a bright blue beacon, gathering the masses to it, looked so out of place amongst the much older cars in the surrounding lot - except for Mike Topps's car, a newer-but-not-brand-new-but-new-to-him Mercedes that he got last year thanks to some investments because of course Mike does. The workers, including myself, tried to sneak a peek through the overly tinted windows to catch a glimpse of the driver.

Mitch, standing next to me, tapped me on my shoulder. "That's not Mr. Waterman, do you think? I mean, I'm no professional, but I strongly doubt he could recover from such a psychotic episode so quickly."

"Can people snap back like that?" I asked him.

"As I said, I'm not a professional so -"

"Okay, okay." I cut him off. "I got it."

After what seemed to be forever, the driver's door opened and out stepped a young-looking guy, dressed in a black dress shirt, no tie, and black slacks. I've never seen this guy before. He looked around at all of us and noticed Daniel take a step forward from the opposite side of the car. The man walked around the front of the car, towards Daniel. Daniel reached out his hand expecting a handshake. Instead, Daniel, along with me, Mitch, and Hank, were pushed back away from the car.

The man stared at Daniel for a moment, looking him up and down. "Are you Daniel the manager?" he asked in a very stern authoritarian tone.

Daniel stood up a bit straighter before giving a very firm, "Yes, that's me. Who are you?"

With no change to the apparently permanent scowl on his face, the man nodded and opened the back passenger door. Out stepped a woman, probably in her late 30s or early 40s, with long hair under one of those fancy horse race hats and a full-length flower-pattern sleeveless dress, the pattern matching the flower on the hat. She took a step back, giving her driver space to close the door, before looking around at the crowd a bit. Her hidden gaze stopped at our group, standing a few feet from her. The driver loudly whispered to her that Daniel was the manager and she

nodded in acknowledgment. She moved her hair from her face as she walked towards the make-shift stage. My eyes widened as I got a better look at her face. “Daniel, right?” she asked, looking at him, “Come on stage with me.” She guided Daniel upfront towards the stage. “Excuse us, Zachary.”

Hearing her call me by name surprised Mitch, who was now looking at me funny. It surprised me, too, until it clicked to me who this was and I was shocked that she was here and surprised it took me this long to figure it out.

“Zack, how does she know you and not Daniel?” he asked, still looking at me awkwardly.

Before I had the chance to answer him, the woman, with Daniel at her side, addressed the crowd with a megaphone.

“Excuse me!” she started, “Can I have your attention, now? Please and thank you. Now, it’s fair to assume you all know this man to my left, Daniel, yes?” The crowd collectively said yes, or at least gave some confirmation. “Yes. Good. Now I also assume you all have no idea who I am or why you’re here, yes?” The crowd stammers much more confused now. The woman, now looking at me, smiling, “Well, at least one of you knows who I am, isn’t that right Zachary?” I maintained eye contact and said nothing. She continued, “Anywho, I guess I should go ahead and get on with this. Bare with me and I won’t keep you longer than I have to. Save any questions for the end and I’ll make sure that Daniel here gets back to you as soon as possible.

“My name is Waterman. Sandra Waterman. I am the daughter of James and Charlotte Waterman, the founders of the store that employs you. In light of my father’s death, my mother’s unwillingness, and my brother’s...” she paused, her lips looking at if they had to conference with her brain to find the right words to say, “... my brother’s current condition, and in accordance with my father’s Last Will and Testament, I have taken on the mantle as the Chief Executive over the company. In short, I’m taking over Waterman’s General Store.”

The crowd clambered into multiple side conversations trying to determine what all this meant for them. I kept my eyes on the stage, but I could see Mitch out of the corner of my eye looking back and forth between Daniel on stage and me, searching for answers. Daniel seemed lost, too, but I can’t tell if it’s from the news or the look on my face. I think it’s both.

Sandra Waterman waved her arm in an attempt to bring down the crowd noise so she could continue. A moment passed and she succeeded. “People! People! Quiet, please and thank you! Now, listen to me. I don’t want you all worrying about your jobs or anything and I know things have been...” another pause, “... different this past week, but I assure you, after about one week to review the situation, in full, and formulate a proper plan of action, you all will be back to work

as if nothing has happened. There may have to be some employee reviews, but I'm sure the vast majority of you will maintain employment here. Now, if there are any questions feel free to bother Mr. Daniel here and he will get your answers double-time, yes? Good. Great. Okay, now I must be going. Busy, busy, busy." And with that, Sandra Waterman stepped away as the staff started to swarm around Daniel, still on stage.

As she made her way to the car, I approached her, Mitch still by my side. Her driver came up to me as if to tackle me, switching into bodyguard mode, but she waved him off. He stood down, but now he was just standing there brooding at me.

"Ms. Sandy. I didn't recognize you at first. How was Europe? You were in Europe, right?" I asked.

"First of all, Zachary, it's Ms. Waterman to you now, please and thank you. From here forth, you should address me the way you did my brother."

I chuckled, "Okay, but you don't look like a Jim or a Jimmy or Jim Bob, or one of the other many names I called him." Her fake smile slowly turned into a very real frustrated pucker; poised but clearly not a fan of my humor, as I knew she wouldn't be.

"Really, Zachary, it's a wonder my brother kept you here for as long as he has and hasn't yet figured out how to fire you yet."

"Ah, well, he tried."

"Evidently, not hard enough, Zachary," she fired back. "Listen to me, now, yes? Listen to me, now and good. From what I understand, you are the reason why we are all in this mess in the first place. It's only fitting, I suppose, that yet another Waterman life is ruined by a Miles. First my father, then me, and now my brother. Hear me, Zachary, hear my voice now and good, I will not let the Waterman legacy in Kingston be ruined too, especially by a Miles!"

I stood there, both angry and confused. There was so much wrong in all that she just said, but there was also so much that didn't make sense. By the time I was able to process all this, Sandra Waterman was already back inside her car and the driver was backing up the car and driving away.

Mitch was itching to say something, but before he could, Daniel walked up behind him. "Hey, Mitch, we have got to get going. I need to start on whatever this takeover is and if I have to hear one more person's question, I might scream." Daniel walked away, towards his car, and Mitch hesitantly followed him.

“I’ll call you later, Mitch. I need a few more answers and I’ll lay it all out for you.” I said to him. He nodded and followed Daniel.

Looking to see where my own car was, I noticed Michelle standing in a crowd a bit larger than before. Not trying to stay in this parking lot any longer than I had to, I pulled my phone out and called her. I figured I could talk to her on my drive home. I could see her check her phone as my call went through, but she rejected the call. That’s not like her. I could see her looking around, but not towards me. She’s got to know I’m here. I walked towards her as she walked away from her group and called her again. Again, I saw her check her phone and reject my call.

I walked up to her while she was standing outside of her car and called out her name, not too loud, but loud enough that I knew she’d hear me.

“Oh, God, hi Zack,” she says, kinda startled.

“Hey, what’s the deal with the F-you button?” I asked semi-aggressively.

She sighed. She’s clearly uncomfortable and I took a step back. “Umm...” she sighed again, “I’m sorry, Zack. It’s just... It’s been a long ass week, you know?”

“Yeah, I bet. Explains why I haven’t heard much from you.”

“Yeah, Zack, it’s been,” she stumbled over her words, “I don’t even know what to say, Zacky Boy.”

Her blatant discomfort was making me uncomfortable. “Is everything okay? You’re acting strange. What’s going on?”

“It’s just this whole thing, you know. The party and work and whoever that lady was. It’s just been a lot, you know? Even Janet’s worried.”

Slightly confused about this now, I asked, “Janet from the car? You still talk to her?”

“Oh yeah. So I took her to her place the next day so she could try to figure things out with what’s-his-name, and it didn’t go so well. I think especially since I was with her. She gathered up some of her things and has been staying with me since then, so lots of moving things around and whatnot. As I said, it’s been busy.”

After a moment, her expression switched, more so like normal, as she remembered something. “Oh man, I heard something about your Mom, right? She okay?”

It was my turn to do the sighing. “Oh, yeah. It was a, you know, a really bad day for her, but everything is okay, for the most part.” I felt myself giving her a look as if to hide something really important just below the surface. Looking Michelle in the eyes, I could see that she was doing the same thing. She saw me see her and we both knew the other was about to crack with something major. I cracked first.

“I know who my father is.”

Then, Michelle cracked, “I know where Venus is.”

“What?!” I exclaimed.

“Wait, what?!” she exclaimed.

“You know where she is?!” I asked.

“You met your dad?!” she asked.

“No, not quite,” I answered.

“Yeah, no, not exactly,” she answered.

“Wait, stop! You know where Venus is? How long have you known? Where is she? Why haven’t you told me?”

Michelle took a step back away from me, obviously much more apprehensive now. “Zack,” she sighs, now in deep frustration, “I can’t. I really can’t. I’m so so sorry. I just can’t.”

I could feel my blood pressure rising. I was beside myself. To say I was angry would be an understatement. “What the hell do you mean you can’t tell me?” My voice got louder. “What are you hiding from me?! Why would you keep something like this from me?!”

Michelle looked around and saw a few people who must have heard me yelling. She waved them off and looked down at her feet. “Zack, I know how important she is to you. Trust me, I don’t want to do this to you. You deserve answers, you do. It’s just that I’m not the one to give them to you. This is why I’ve been kinda avoiding you. This is really hard for me too. Not talking to you about all this is killing me.”

I was overcome with disbelief. I was beyond upset, but even I don't know if it was anger or sadness that I was feeling. "Michelle, I can't... I don't ... I can't believe you'd keep something like this from me."

Michelle unlocked her car and opened the door. "Please, Zack," she got into the car, "try to understand." Michelle, failing to fight back tears, "I just... I just can't be the one to tell you. It's just not my place. It's private and it's not my story to tell. Please, Zack, please don't hold this against me."

I couldn't speak. My tongue and my lips are overcome with disappointment. I walked away, the sound of Michelle's tears at my back.

I don't know what to even think right now. I was sad. I was hurt. Why? Why would anyone hide the whereabouts of a beloved friend after all we've been through? What secrets could we have? V and I talked all the time. I was confused. I was angry. I was pissed. I was ...thirsty. I couldn't think straight.

I found my car, got inside, started it up, and drove off, but instead of going home as I planned, I decided to go to ADJC Coffee Shop to clear my head. On the way there, I tried to call Michelle one more time. Again, she sent me straight to voicemail. I tossed my phone in the back seat of the car with my jacket. As I pulled into the coffee shop's parking lot, I heard my phone ring. At this point, I have nothing to say to Michelle, so I let it continue to ring as I went inside. Let's see how she likes it.

Robbie and Jill were both behind the counter today. They called out, "Hey Zack!" I looked over at them and waved. I continued to the corner of the shop where I typically sat down and found myself a table. A couple of minutes passed and Robbie sat down at the table with me, with two cups in tow. "Columbian, just sugar, right?"

I stared at the table and remained silent. Robbie repeated himself, "Columbian, just sugar, right?"

I took a deep breath and looked up and saw the look of genuine concern on Robbie's face. This man had always had my back. I didn't deserve the silent treatment. "Like every day, Robbie. Like, every day." That brought a smile to his face.

"Hey, Zack, my man, what's going on today? Your mom, okay?"

"Yeah, man. Just a lot hit me all at once today. Work stuff. Friend stuff."

“So, what’s that, a typical day around here, right?” Robbie cracked a smile and slid a cup over to me. “Don’t worry, this one’s on the house.”

“Thanks, Robbie,” I told him, looking back down at the table.

“Hey, you work at Waterman’s, right? Heard it’s been a day there.”

“Dude, you have no idea.” I paused and looked up at him again. “Wait, how do you know?”

Robbie pointed across the shop to a guy sitting at a table by himself. “That guy has the same look on his face as you do and he said he manages Waterman’s.”

I followed Robbie’s finger as he pointed across to shop to a man, sitting alone at a table trying really hard to ignore his phone that was sitting on the table and failing miserably. I half smiled, picked up my coffee, and thanked Robbie again for the coffee.

“Don’t mention it, Zack!” Robbie laughed, “No, really, don’t mention it. I charged him full price. I don’t know him like I know you!” With that, Robbie went back behind the counter to help Jill.

I walked over to the table and sat down across from Daniel. I took a sip from my cup as he looked up surprised to see me.

Daniel sat his phone down, thankful that I gave him an excuse to not look at it. “You do come here all the time, don’t you?”

I nodded and took a sip. “Yep, I sure do. Been coming here since it opened. That’s Robbie, the owner over there.”

“I met him.”

“He said as much. Also said you were upset.”

“That’s funny. Mitch said you were upset. And your face during the meeting said as much. You know her, don’t you?” Daniel asked me. I, again, nodded and I, again, sipped. “Man, is she a piece of work.”

“Something like that. She was friends with my mom for a while when I was a kid. Then she went to Europe and did whatever she did there. Now she’s here and mad at me about something.” I took another long drink from my cup until I finished the coffee. “And now, she blames me for all this shit with Jim Jr. I’ll never understand how this is all my fault.”

“It’s not,” Daniel reassured. “After you so kindly helped me get the security footage from the fight, I reviewed it and you’re fine. Sorry, about all that, by the way.”

“It’s water under the bridge, man. It’s been a mess there. Then Waterman hiding in the building like that. How long do you think he’d been in there all crazy?”

“No clue, Zack. The police said he’d been there for at least a few days. And somehow he never made himself known to anyone on any of the shifts. I don’t know. It was all very strange.”

“Yeah, now Sandy is all ‘Miss Corporate Takeover’ or whatever. I don’t know, man. This is too much.”

Daniel looked down at the table and noticed his cup, almost as if he forgot it was there. He took a drink and threw it away in the nearby trash can. I followed suit. Daniel’s face looked like it flipped on a switch to manager mode. “Hey, were you yelling at Michelle?”

I rolled my eyes. He noticed. “No, I wasn’t yelling,” I told him, leaning back in my chair, “but I was pretty pissed off. You know how close we all are, right?”

“You and Michelle or you and Venus?” he asked.

“Both, really. I haven’t seen Venus since the last time she worked. I mean, I saw her that night, but haven’t talked to her since. ‘Chelle apparently knows where she is or has talked to her or something, but won’t tell me. How could she not tell me, man?”

“I don’t know. I know her mom called me and told me that she’d be gone for a while and asked if there was any paperwork she needed and I told her I’d handle it. So she’s on an official leave of absence.”

Daniel stood up and pushed his chair under. I did the same. He was about to say something else, but I led him to the counter so I could order another coffee and pay for it this time. Daniel continued, “I only asked because I was on the phone with one of the employees and they mentioned it. I’m sure things are fine. Everyone is on edge and if this Waterman does have something against you, my advice would be to not give her any ammo.”

When my coffee was ready, Daniel handed a five-dollar bill to Robbie and told him to keep the change. Robbie smiled at me and said, “Hey! Look at that, Zack. Must be a good day after all.” I smiled back at Robbie, dropped a couple of dollars in the tip jar, and walked outside with Daniel. We walked to my car, parked near the front door.

“Thanks for the advice, Danny.”

“No problem, Zack. Oh, by the way, Mitch is expecting that call from you later. I’m surprised he hasn’t tried to call you already.”

“He might have. I left my phone in the car. Someone tried to call me when I got here. I figured it was Michelle so I ignored it. It might have been Mitch.” I opened the door to the back seat and heard my phone ringing. I picked it up and looked at the screen. It’s an unknown number.

“Is that Mitch? Tell him whatever it is that you need to tell him. He doesn’t let up, as I’m sure you know.”

I managed a real smile. “Nah, it wasn’t him. It was Unknown.”

“Ah, well, you’ll wanna call him soon.”

“I will. Have a good one, Daniel.” I said as his phone began to ring. “Is that unknown, too?”

“No, I wish. Another employee. Gotta run.”

“Later, Danny,” and with that, we parted ways. I hopped in the car and started the engine.

I sat there in my car for a moment, drinking my second cup of coffee and looking through the notifications, including several missed calls from the same unknown number. No voicemails. No texts. No names, so it’s not a person I know. The phone rang again in my hand. Again, I stared at it while it rang. I don’t answer numbers I don’t know, but for whatever reason, I felt compelled to answer it. The phone fell silent and I waited for the voicemail. Nothing.

Against my better judgment, I decided to call the number back. I was leery because I’ve heard all of those stories about those scammer calls that use your voice to steal your identity or something like that. I was told that if I got one of those calls, to answer it quietly. A machine won’t recognize your voice, but a person would.

I looked at my phone and hit redial on the last number. I put the phone up to my ear. One ring. Two rings. Three rings. Four - silence. I look at the screen and the call timer is running. With the phone back to my ear I can hear rustling in the background. This isn’t a machine. Someone picked up.

Realizing that this isn't a machine, I was a bit annoyed that whoever had been calling me hadn't said the customary 'Hello' yet. I spoke first. Quietly, but firmly, I said, "Hello?"

About ten anxiety-filled seconds passed before an equally quiet and reserved voice replied hello back. Although it was hard to hear, the voice was almost familiar. The person seemed scared or maybe just timid. I repeated myself, louder this time, "Hello?"

The voice on the other end, following my lead, responded louder and a bit reassured, "Hello? Zack? Are you there?"

I almost dropped the phone in disbelief. Recognizing the voice, I called out, "Venus?!"