

Such Is Life: Episode VI

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Have you ever noticed the ridiculous amount of red lights, stop signs, and old people afraid of their gas pedals you find yourself driving behind when you're in a hurry? An accident on your way to work or a family of ducks on your way to a friend's house or a group of nuns and a marching band when you're trying to get rid of a ...

My phone rang and it startled me so badly I almost slammed on the breaks. My nerves were already on edge. Going from Crazy Man Jim to my missing mother with no sleep, alcohol, or at least coffee should be a crime. I looked down at my phone to see my grandma calling.

"Hey, Grandma. Heard anything?" I asked.

"No, Zachary. Your grandfather talked to a few neighbors, but they haven't seen or heard anything. Are you still out looking?"

I heard the worry in Grandma's voice. There was this quivering tone that she was unsuccessfully trying to hold back. If I'm being honest, it just made the worry stand out more.

"Is her bike gone?" I asked her.

She thought about it. "Yes, why?"

"It tells me how far she's capable of going," I answered.

"Please Zachary," she pleaded, "please find her. I'm so worried!"

"I know, Grandma," I said, my voice softened. "I have a few more places to check out," I told my grandmother I loved her and hung up. I found a place to pull the car over so I could collect my thoughts. I'd been looking around our part of town for over an hour now. No one was sure when she left. No one knew why she left.

I called my mom after I read her troubling text. When I got no answer from Mom, I called Grandma. Grandma said that she had been kinda off yesterday. Mom came home from her volunteer gig babysitting local goats, went through the mail, and grabbed something to eat. After her snack, she went to her room and hadn't been seen since. She left no note and said nothing to anyone. I remembered her being in her room when I left for work, but I didn't think too much of it because it was late. What did we miss? What did I miss?

As the sun started to rise over the eastside of the Kings River, I realized that I was only a few blocks away from ADJC Coffee Shop, our favorite coffee spot. It had always been our go-to place to stop and think and, to be honest, a cup of coffee wouldn't hurt about now. My night ended pretty rough.

The coffee shop's only been around about 10 years. Mom and I were there the day it opened. They had a huge Grand Opening, complete with a small parade, a live band, and clowns. Still not sure why the clowns, but there had always been something about Kingston that didn't quite make sense.

The shop opened at about 10 am and we weren't quite first, but we were pretty close to the front of the line. I was about 16 and had my first cup of coffee that day. My mom hadn't slept well the night before so she talked to the guy behind the counter, the owner, Robbie, and asked him for whatever was going to really get her going.

"You, my dear lady," he said to her flirtatiously, "need an espresso. Maybe even a double!"

Excitedly, Mom replied, "Make it a triple! Oh, and make it sweet!"

Robbie turned around and made my regular coffee and Mom had her triple espresso with extra sugar and we walked around to the other booths and nearby stores. Things were okay for about an hour or so.

It was fall and the temperature was cool outside. Out of nowhere, Mom started to complain about getting really hot. I didn't think too much of it until she seemed to disappear. I saw some of my friends from school and completely lost track of her.

One of the kids from school came from inside the coffee shop, whispered into another kid's ear, and they just ran back inside. The rest of us, obviously curious, ran inside the shop behind them. This was a mistake, for me at least. I walked through the door and couldn't get three feet past the entrance. The first thing that I noticed was a cowboy hat flying through the air. The rowdy crowd shifted forward to grab the hat. This gave me enough space to move closer to the front.

As I made my way closer, there was my mother, in front of the bakery case, dancing (if you can call it that), topless.

Yes, this happens a lot with her.

No, I don't know why.

I looked behind the counter for Robbie, but he was nowhere to be seen. As much as I felt the need to cover her up, I didn't want to be "that kid" with "that mom" so I just stayed back.

I sat in my 'observation corner' to make sure that the other guys were behaving themselves. They were. From this spot, I could see my super hyper, super caffeinated, and super popular mother doing her part to drum up business - I guess that's what she was doing - and the front door where I noticed Robbie trying to make his way into the shop. Unlike me, Robbie had the 'I'm the owner so you either move or I kick you out' face and he used it.

When Robbie made his way up to the front, he was shocked. I'm sure he didn't expect a striptease as part of the day's entertainment. He wasn't quick to stop her either. He was starting to get into the show until he noticed someone else was watching the show next to him. He was the local health inspector. With this, Robbie froze. The inspector smiled.

Robbie started to explain what was happening to the inspector, or at least try, and the inspector cut him off. "Hey man," the inspector said, "it's day one. You're good."

Robbie gave a sigh of relief and when Mom saw him watching, she gave him a wink and started pointing to the menus. People started buying more coffee and cakes just as an excuse to stick around and watch the performance. The more they bought, the more she danced.

Needless to say, we blamed the espresso. Since that day, we decided that any time she asked for her repeat order of the triple espresso with extra sugar we agreed to replace it with a mocha decaf latte.

When I pulled up to the shop, I parked by the front doors and saw Robbie sweeping by the entrance. He greeted me right away.

"Hey, Zack! You're out early. Still working late?" he asked.

Almost automatically, I rubbed my face and irked out a yeah before yarning. "It's been a rough few hours, man!"

"Oh, I bet. Here for the usual? Colombian, just sugar, right?"

"Like every day!" This was the conversation every time I came in. More like a ritual at this point. You can imagine my family isn't easily forgettable.

I walked in and Robbie popped his head in after me. He called out to his barista, “Hey Jill! Remake the Colombian from earlier please!”

I turned back to Robbie and said thanks. He nodded, said no problem, and went back to sweeping outside. I walked over to the counter for my coffee. The new girl, Jill, seemed to be really on it. She made my coffee rather quickly and I went ahead and threw in an oatmeal cookie. I paid for my stuff, tipped Jill, walked back outside, and sat on the hood of my car.

“Your new girl is pretty good,” I told Robbie.

“Yeah, she’s great,” he replied. “She’s catching on rather quickly.”

I took a sip of my coffee. “Always great coffee, man. Appreciate the fresh pot, by the way.”

“Did you have to wait for a fresh pot?” he asked curiously.

“Well,” I stopped and thought about it, “it didn’t seem like it. Didn’t you tell her to make the coffee again?”

Robbie also stopped and thought for a moment. Nothing.

“You told her to remake the Colombian,” I reminded him.

“Oh yeah!” he remembered. “Sorry, we made your coffee earlier when your mom came by.” Robbie chuckled a bit, “I got confused there for a second.”

Startled, I almost fell off the hood of my car. “You’ve seen my mom? Today?”

“Yeah, about an hour ago. Everything okay?”

“Was she okay? Was she safe?” I asked.

He paused. “You know,” he paused again, “she wasn’t quite herself.”

I gave a worried look. He noticed.

“I mean, she seemed safe, but she just didn’t seem her usual peppy self. She didn’t even order the same thing.”

I was curious. “What did she get?”

“Lemon tea. Figured that’d be okay. She didn’t start dancing!” Robbie chuckled again. It was pretty clear that Robbie has had a crush on my mom for a while. He’s bad at hiding it. You could tell if you’ve ever seen his girlfriend’s face when we came into the shop when she was there.

“That’s fine. Did she say where she was going? Maybe what she was doing?”

Robbie leaned his broom against the wall and took a seat at one of the tables set up outside near my car. Although I was comfortable on the hood of my car, I got up and sat at the table with Robbie. My worried look morphed into an anxious one. He noticed this too. “Is she in trouble?” he asked worriedly.

“I don’t think so, man. She just left in the middle of the night and no one’s really heard from her. I’m out looking for her now. I just stopped in for something to drink.”

“She didn’t say much. I believe she went into the park when she left here. It’s been a while, but she could still be there.”

I turned my head and looked towards the park along the bank of the river. When I was younger, Mom and my grandparents would take me to the Kings River playground and let me play for as long as I wanted.

Across the street, the sunlight was coming over the horizon, reflecting on the metal poles making up the swing sets at the park. A couple was jogging while walking their dogs. It would make sense that she’d be there. We spent so much time there together.

The riverside seemed to be the only place where my mother ever came across as normal. Playtimes. Picnics. This is where I learned how to ride my bike. This is where my mother really felt like my mother, you know?

Robbie, snapping his fingers, “Hey Zack, if she’s there, you might want to, you know, go find her.”

I stood up from the table. “No,” I said, “I think, if I’m right, she’s waiting for me.” I’m not sure what clicked exactly. I felt as if I just knew she was there. I walked inside the coffee shop, purchased two more large teas with two more cookies, tipped Jill again, got back in my car, and drove into the park.

About half a mile down Riverside Road, I parked the car by the walking bridge. Chained to the end of the handrail was my mom’s bike, complete with her “ARM” bike plate. Although a body

part randomly on her bike wouldn't be abnormal for her, those are her initials, standing for Ashley Renee Miles.

Carrying the teas and cookies, I walked across the bridge and there, under the big tree, sat my mother, leaning back against the trunk, taking a nap. I walked up to Mom, sat the drinks down, and texted Grandma letting her know Mom was okay.

I sat on the ground by the tree next to her. She's usually a light sleeper so I thought I'd just talk to her. This was how I would wake her on the weekends.

I laid my head against the tree near her. "I love you, Mom." I paused. No reaction. I continued, "I'm sorry I had to work last night. Trust me, it was a hell... heck of a night."

"It's okay, Zack," Mom whispered groggily, "you're old enough to say hell in front of your mother."

I smiled and kissed her forehead. She readjusted herself against the tree and laid her head on my shoulder. "Okay. So, yeah, Waterman's back, kinda."

Without moving or opening her eyes, Mom asked, "Is that right? Is he better now?"

"Not at all! He almost beat up Daniel's cousin."

Mom's face slightly wrinkled, "Why was Daniel's cousin there in the store?"

"I was training him."

"You had two trainees?"

"No. It turns out that Mitch is Daniel's cousin."

Her head, slightly tilted, "That kid is Daniel's cousin? Why did he fight Jimmy?"

I put my arm around her. "Who knows, Momma. Who ever really knows with that guy?"

She chuckled and sat up. "Oh Zack, I'm so sorry!"

I pulled her closer and tried to comfort her. "It's okay Mom. Took me a while, but I found you and you're safe. Everything's okay now."

Mom let out a deep sigh and pulled away from me. She scooted to sit upright in front of me. She grabbed my hands and lowered her head shamefully. “Zachary,” she started, holding back tears, “I’m sorry for not giving you the life that you deserved.”

I kissed her forehead and held her hands tightly. “Momma, I’m good. We’re good.”

“You deserved a father, Zachary.”

“I don’t know him. I don’t need him.”

“Zachary, listen -”

“No, Mom, you listen.” I lifted her head and maintained eye contact. “I already know. I’ve known for a while. And I don’t judge you. These kinds of things happen. You were young, Momma -”

“Wait. What are you talking about? What do you think you already know?”

An odd feeling washed over me. You know that feeling when you’re absolutely sure of something until someone asks you if you’re sure and you’re suddenly not sure at all? That! That’s the feeling. “That you don’t know who my dad is, right?”

Mom lowered her head again. “I know exactly who your father is, Zack.”

I looked at her in shock. “You...you know him? You’ve known him this whole time?”

“I said I know who he is, not that I know him.”

“I don’t... Wait, what?!” I couldn’t speak.

Mom straightened up. She noticed the drinks. She pointed to one of the cups. I nodded and she grabbed one. She took a really long sip. “This is so much better than the chocolate coffee stuff you guys give me.”

“Wait? You noticed?” I asked confused.

“I’m a bit zippy, sure, but I’m not stupid.”

Embarrassed, I apologized, “Wow, I’m sorry, Momma.”

“I like attention, Zack. I can’t help that.” Mom took another long sip. “The attention I get from men is entertaining to me.”

“Mom, do we have to -”

“You just listen to me, Zack. I do a lot of things for attention. Men act so stupid when a pretty girl so much as flips her hair!” She flipped her hair and I noticed a guy, who was jogging on a nearby path, slowed down. “Did you see him? That’s funny to me. I maintain control. I keep my distance. I look around to see if there’s any danger. I can’t explain it, but I crave attention.

“Zack, when I met your father, I was somewhere I had no business being. I was a teenager. I wanted to be like the girls on TV. I saw this guy at a club. I wanted to have a good story to tell the girls in the locker room. Wasn’t even that great.” Mom finally smiled. “Never even left the parking lot.

“The next week, the bouncer could tell the ID was fake and I was banned. Later, I’d ask around and I got a name and age. Took forever to track him down, but I never got a hold of him to tell him about you.”

I asked, “So, he doesn’t even know?”

“Not exactly,” she answered. “I gave up on searching for him for a long time. I turned my attention to just raising you, but the guilt never left me.” Mom’s eyes started to well up. She took a drink, trying to hide it.

She continued, “I looked him up online and found his address. For the last, maybe, six years or so, I sent him a certified letter to make sure he got them. I told him about you and what you’ve been up to over the years. He’s only written me back once. That letter came yesterday.”

Mom reached into her pocket and pulled out an envelope. She doesn’t open it. She just held it and stared at it, as if to read its mind. “He told me to leave him alone.” She started to sob. “He also told me that -”

Mom paused for an uncomfortably long time. She really tried to hold the tears back, but it was clearly not working. She couldn’t look me in the face. Instead, she just grabbed me, hugging me tighter than I’ve ever been hugged before by anyone. All I could do was hold her during her breakdown. I wanted to say something to console her, but there were no words to heal her heart.

Several minutes passed. We just sat in silence as my mom collected herself. Mom drank both of the teas.

“Momma, you okay?” I asked her eventually.

“Zack, he denied you. I had only been with one boy one time before him. It was months before and trust me, it shouldn’t count. I’m absolutely sure that he is your father.” She wiped her face. “I couldn’t handle that. I needed to clear my head. I wanted to talk to you to apologize, but you were working and my phone died and I got mad and threw it in the river.”

“It’s okay, Momma. Hell, I don’t know him so it doesn’t even matter. I’ve had you and Grandma and Grandpa. Fuck that guy!”

“Hey,” she scolded, “don’t get carried away! I said you could say 'hell'. I didn’t tell you to just cuss at me all willy-nilly!”

“Sorry, Momma.”

Mom smiled, “It’s okay.” She looked around. “Baby, can we go home now?”

“Yeah, Momma. Let’s go home.”

We picked up our cups and trash and walked back over the bridge to the car. We tied Mom’s bike to the roof of the car, threw the trash away, and drove back home in silence.

Grandma and Grandpa met us outside the house when we got home. They both hugged Mom and Grandma took her inside. Grandpa stayed outside with me. He asked me, “She okay? Where was she?”

“She was at the park. She was mad about my dad.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, she knows who he is and tried to contact him for me. He denied me.”

Grandpa put his hand on my shoulder. “You good?”

“I don’t know, really, but I think I’m okay for now.”

“You’re fine, Son.” He patted my back. “You did good today. You did damn good today.”

I smiled and thanked him.

Walking up onto the porch, he asked me, “How was work last night?”

I chuckled. “Man, you don’t even wanna know.”