

Such Is Life: Episode V

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Days have passed and I still haven't heard from her. No one has. She hadn't returned any of my calls or my text messages. I haven't talked to Michelle either. The last time I talked to Michelle was the following morning when she said that Venus had left in the middle of the night or left very early in the morning before either she or Janet had woken up. Venus' mom said that she came home, packed a bag, and was going to be gone for a while to clear her head. With me working Overnight stock, I don't get to see her at work. I'm not even sure she's been there. I guess not. I'm concerned. Why would she just up and-

"So where do these go?" Mitch asked, pointing to the pallet he was pulling.

"What? Oh, sorry. Back in that corner by the gorilla," I replied.

Puzzled, Mitch asked me, "Why is there an inflatable gorilla again?"

I sighed, "Don't ask. It's just gonna be a thing to get used to around here."

Mitch just stared at me for an awkwardly long time. He nodded, shrugged, and pulled the power jack to the Gorilla Corner and dropped off the pallet of deceptively heavy napkins.

When he was finished, I signaled to Mitch to put the power jack away and we walked to the breakroom.

"Is 4 am always the break time?" Mitch asked me.

"Honestly," I told him, "I don't know if Overnight has an official break time. I don't normally work this shift."

"Oh yeah, that's right! And about that, I wanted to say that I appreciate you for volunteering to work the late shift to train me."

"Oh no, it's – wait..." I stopped because Mitch's statement caught me off guard, "...what did you say?"

"I said thanks for training me and working nights to do it. I know it is never easy changing shifts like that. It throws off one's sleeping patterns and all and I just appreciate you. That's all."

I stood there looking at him surprised and bewildered. Does he think I volunteered? Why would he think that? Who would tell him something like that?

“Training’s no problem. I don’t mind that part.” I paused to yawn. “The night part is tricky.” My tone shifted from humble dismissal to inquiry. “I gotta ask, who told you I volunteered?”

With a smirk and his head cocked to one side, Mitch answered, “ Well,” He hunched his shoulders mimicking Daniel’s stance and changed his tone of voice to match, “Daniel said ‘I’m going to put you with Zack. He’d just love to train a new guy overnight’ and I thought that was cool. The girls in the break room said you were pretty nice and I was excited I got to meet you on that same day.”

I gave Mitch a mostly blank stare. It was apparent that reading between the lines was a skill Mitch had mastered. The realization hit him like a wave.

“You didn’t volunteer, did you?”

With an uncomfortable grin, I shook my head no.

“You didn’t want to train me at all, did you?”

I knew where this was going. “Dude, it’s not that,” I told him. “To be honest, I didn’t know anything about it until you said something. Venus said something about a schedule change, but before you came up to me, I was clueless. It was so quiet in the room, I heard his heart drop. I continued, “But hey, I’ve really enjoyed the change of pace and you’re cool to talk to so I’d say it was a good call on Danny’s part.”

Mitch looked up at me and smiled, full grin, and finished his snack bar. I got up from the table, walked past the Crystal Idol, and stepped out in the hall to get a drink from the vending machine. I put in my dollar and heard a whirl and two thuds. I paused. The machine typically made a whirl and one thud and the second one sounded close, but not soda-machine-in-the-face close. Mitch came and joined me.

“When does the next shift come in today?” he asked, glancing down at his watch.

I looked over to the clock on the wall. 4:14 am. “Daniel should be here about five.” I looked around and heard a sound towards the sales floor. “Hey, Mitch,”

“Hey Zack!” he comedically replied.

“Night cleaning left already, right?” I knew the answer, but I had to ask. See, the way they schedule the Overnight staff, Freightmates work until about 10 pm and the Overnight group, two

stockers and two cleaners, usually come in before the store closed at 11. The cleaners restocked their carts and ordered materials, gave the store a decent once-over, and they're out by 3 or 3:30. Overnight stock organized and prepped the storefront for the early crowd. It should be just us until Daniel got here in the morning.

"Yeah, they're long gone. You okay, Zack?"

"Someone is here."

Crime isn't exactly commonplace in Kingston. It happens, but not often. Waterman's has only been broken into twice before. The first time it was broken into, three homeless people, a young woman and two middle-aged men, broke in during an incredibly bad snowstorm. When Waterman and the police were able to respond to the alarm, no charges were filed as long as the homeless people worked to maintain the store until the weather allowed it to re-open. Once the store reopened, the two middle-aged men thanked Jim and went on their way. The young woman still works here on the overnight cleaning crew. Her name is Kimberly and she's one of the sweetest people I've ever met in this town.

As for the second time, it was a bit more complicated. Again, the weather, rain this time, played a part. There was a pretty heavy storm coming through the area and one of the surrounding roads flooded. A truck was driving through Kingston when he hydroplaned turning the corner at Jackson Street and whipped the back of the truck through the big glass windows in front of the store. The truck was transporting an unusual load of monkeys. No, wait, lemurs. It was a truck full of lemurs! This is when things got weird.

My friend Kyle lived about a block away from Waterman's. I had a late shift that day and an early shift the next day so instead of going home, I just planned to crash at his place. We were in the middle of some weird horror/action movie called *Hexa-Panda from Hell* that featured a homicidal six-legged panda bear when we heard the unmistakable sound of a truck crashing into the large glass windows of the store.

Considering how loud the crash was, I was surprised that not many people came out to see what happened. A few house lights came on and a couple of people stood on their porches, but only Kyle and I went over to check on the driver.

The truck had hydroplaned, hopped the curb, driven through the windows, flipped over, and eventually stopped after knocking over a bunch of shelves - about 40 to 50 feet inside. Kyle and I hurried to the driver who, to my surprise, was just a little banged up. I still had a box cutter in my pocket so I cut him out of his seatbelt. Some time in the midst of all this, Kyle appeared very distracted. I looked up at him and asked, "Dude, you okay? What's wrong?"

Even with his attention as far away from me as possible, he managed to reply. “Someone else is in here!” he loudly whispered before walking away to investigate.

Moments later, as I was helping the driver out of what was left of his truck, it occurred to me that there were others in the store - the cleaning crew. I was content assuming that it must have been them that Kyle heard until I heard sounds of things crashing and Kyle yelling out, “YOU FUCKING ZEBRA MONKEYS!!!”

Thoroughly confused, I asked myself out loud, “Zebra monkeys?”

“Lemurs,” the driver corrected, “I was transporting lemurs.”

Even more confused, I asked him, “Why are you driving around a bunch of lemurs?”

“Rich guy. I don’t ask questions.”

“Fair enough.”

Although the driver seemed fine, I handed him my phone to call 911 while I went to check on Kyle. Carefully stepping over fields of broken glass and climbing over mountains of toppled shelving, I made it to what appeared to be a battlefield. On the other side of the shelves, there was Kyle, quietly being cornered by the lemurs. Shouldn’t have been as funny as it was, but imagine turning a corner and seeing your friend fighting off about eight lemurs with a short broom sword, a dustpan shield, and a spray bottle of water as the secret backup weapon.

“Get back, Zack! I got this!” Kyle called out once he saw me.

“You sure about that?” I replied.

“Oh yeah! I’m luring them in!”

“Uh huh. Then what?”

He froze. I knew he didn’t have a plan and now he knew it too. And, of course, it was then that all of the lemurs attacked him at once. He dropped all of his weapons and curled up into the fetal position absorbing all the kicks, slaps, and stomps that the little “zebra monkeys” could dish out. It was the scariest and funniest mix of National Geographic and WorldStar Hip Hop I never would have otherwise imagined.

After a few minutes, the driver jumped in and got control of some of the lemurs while animal control, who were now responding, took control of the rest of them. Kyle didn’t move from his

spot for quite a while. EMTs checked him out and although he wasn't injured, it's fair to say Kyle won't be joining me for Beer Night at the Kingston Zoo for maybe ever.

I looked up to see Mitch staring at me. He just stood there with his head cocked to the side. "You really do zone out a lot, don't you?"

Before I had the chance to respond, the sound of a door slamming grabbed our attention. "You heard that, right?" I said to Mitch.

Mitch verified, "The door slam?"

"Yeah! I'm not trippin' right?"

Mitch looked down at my feet. "No, you're not. Who could that be?"

"Could be Daniel, I guess." I paused and thought about it. "Should be Daniel."

"Cool. Let's go look!" Mitch started walking toward the sales floor. He walked up to the doors, swung them open, and just went. He's fearless in that 'doesn't know any better' kinda way. He's very matter-of-factly about everything. Everything is black and white; clear vision. I like this kid.

Mitch and I walked straight for the main entrance doors. Mitch seemed excited to be suddenly thrown into an investigation. Me? I'll be honest, I wanted to be by the door in case we had to go. Some things are worth dying for. Waterman's General Store isn't one of them. I had no idea what I was walking into. Kingston is such a random town. How is Mitch so calm?

As we approached the doors, I put my hands on Mitch's shoulder, prompting him to turn around. "Hey," I started, "why are you so calm? We have no idea what's out here."

Mitch turned to me with the simplest and most calming smile. "How do you know it's something worth fearing?"

I was speechless. I felt like all the muscles in my face were having a meeting about how we were supposed to feel. No decision had yet been made.

I checked the alarm panel on the wall to the left of the main entrance. The perimeter alarm had been turned off, but the doors themselves were locked; probably re-locked. Someone was absolutely here. But where?

I was preparing myself to formulate a new course of action when I heard the sound of footsteps approaching. I reached out and pulled Mitch behind a nearby shelf.

I motioned to Mitch to be quiet and pointed in the direction of the footsteps. With a nod, Mitch followed me around behind where the sound was coming from. We armed ourselves with a couple of glass bottles from the shelf and quietly came up behind our mystery guy.

We were ready to strike as the man reached the customer service desk. Well, I assume it's a man. Anyway, wanting to hit him before he turned around, I looked over to Mitch and silently started a countdown, starting at three, with the idea of hitting him in the back. I don't want to hurt the guy. I just want to stop him. My plan didn't work out anywhere near the way I pictured it.

In our stealthiness, we weren't able to coordinate key parts of the plan. For example, we didn't clarify whether we attack "on one" or "after one". I was planning on moving in "after one". Mitch moved ahead "on one". Also, we didn't exactly clarify what "attack" meant. My plan was to hit the guy with the bottle across his back, between the shoulder blades. Just enough to stop him. Mitch had a different idea. He decided to confront the man and turn him around. He turned the man around just in time for me to see myself hit Daniel right in the chest.

After my bottle made contact with Daniel, his hand made contact with his chest, and then he made contact with the ground. We threw down our weapons and helped Daniel to his feet. Not surprisingly, he pulled away from us and took a moment to gather himself.

I figured I should apologize first before Daniel had the chance to yell at me for hitting him with a bottle. "Dude, I'm so, so, so sorry!"

"What the hell were you thinking?" Daniel tried really hard to push through the pain and speak through his teeth.

"I was thinking of a pre-emptive strike."

"Did you just get here?" Mitch asked kinda suddenly.

"As a matter of fact, I did. I went to the bathroom first."

"Restroom," I interjected. Judging by the looks on Daniel's face, I should probably - ummm - 'Outerject'? Yeah, I'll go with that.

Daniel turned to Mitch, "How do you work all night with him?"

Mitch turned to Daniel, "He's not that bad. He knows his stuff."

I looked at Mitch and smiled, mouthing the words thank you. I turned to Daniel. He wasn't smiling. Suddenly, neither was I.

Mitch continued, "So you came in and went to the," he paused and looked at me, "restroom, right? So you haven't been in the back yet?"

Daniel looked confused yet intrigued, "Not yet. Why?"

Mitch looked at me, glanced towards the backroom, then back to Daniel. "Zack and I heard a noise in the backroom. Should have just been us, but we both heard it and came out here to investigate. Neither of us thought you'd be here yet so you can see why we reacted the way we did."

Daniel seemed to understand. "I suppose."

All three of us turned our heads to the sound of the backroom door slamming shut. I felt a chill wash over me and back down my spine. I admit, I wanted to go explore the noise, but my feet had an emergency safety meeting with my legs and they voted against. With a pat on the back, it seemed that Mitch had the overriding vote. Mitch walked straight to the back. Daniel and I follow.

As Mitch walked into the backroom, I tugged Daniel's shirt and pulled him back.

"Hey Danny, listen - I really am sorry about earlier." I patted at his chest where the bottle hit. He flinched. I stepped back.

"I'll be honest with you, Zack. You're a good worker. That's why I wanted you to train my cousin, Mitch."

"He's your cousin?" I was surprised, but I should have known something was up.

"Yeah, he just moved back in with my aunt and needed a job. All that happened at the same time Waterman flaked. Anyway, you do good work, but you can be a real asshole at times. I'm starting to see why Waterman can't stand you."

"I suppose. Waterman has always had something against me. I don't know what his problem is." I looked down at my watch to check the time. "You know," I continued, "you could have called to say you'd be in early."

Daniel was clearly annoyed by this. I could see it in the way his face scrunched up. "First of all, I don't answer to you," he said through his teeth. "And second," he pulled out his new phone and opened an app, "I called you and texted you!"

I leaned in to see the message closer. He did call and text me. “Hey! Look at that! You did! Nice phone, by the way!”

I thought about double-checking my phone to see if I got the message, but that was when we remembered we left Mitch in the backroom alone with a stranger. The sound of Mitch yelling for help was a hell of a reminder.

We pushed through the doors. Nothing. We didn’t see Mitch anywhere. I looked over to the right, near the gorilla corner, and noticed shadows. I tapped Daniel’s shoulder and pointed. We slowly walked in the direction of the shadows and saw Mitch backing up with a broomstick in his hand. He turned his head towards us and smiled. “Hey,” he yelled, “I found the guy in a broom closet! Some help would be great!”

At this point, all we could see was Mitch standing defensively with a broomstick. Daniel and I stood back waiting for Mitch’s opponent to turn the corner. We all passed a synchronized glance when the stranger came into view. Daniel and I stood there in shock.

“Jim?!” said Daniel, confused.

“Waterman?!” I said, equally confused.

Mitch was also confused, but for different reasons. He looked over at us and asked, “Wait, you know this man?”

“That man,” I told Mitch, “is the owner of the store.”

Mitch went to lower his broomstick. Waterman, who was also wielding a broomstick, didn’t lower his an inch. Mitch re-raised his.

You could see Daniel shift back into manager mode. He ran between Mitch and Waterman and waved Mitch towards me. I felt like the right thing to do at this point was to just leave and let Daniel handle Jim Jr., but I couldn’t turn away.

You should see Jim, though! Holding that broomstick, he was all hunched over like he graduated from the bell tower at Notre Dame. His clothes were dirty, worn, and seemingly the wrong size. I’m not even sure they were his. His hair was matted. He was dragging his left leg as opposed to taking actual steps and his shoes, at least the shoes he had on, didn’t even have laces. I don’t know where he’s been, but it’s clearly been a rough trip.

“Sir, what are you doing here? Why do you have a weapon?” I couldn’t tell if Daniel was confused or genuinely concerned. Daniel tried to take the broomstick away from Waterman.

Waterman gave Daniel a menacing, wide-eyed stare and swatted at him. Wisely, Daniel stepped back towards me and Mitch. Waterman, as disheveled as he looked, appeared to be laser-focused and we were his targets.

Walking backward, Mitch asked me, “Is this the owner?”

“He is, but I don’t think he knows it,” Daniel replied.

Waterman continued to advance towards us. Jim Jr. was obviously not himself. His facial expressions grew more and more cynical with every step. I reached into my pocket and slowly pulled out my phone to see the time. Then I remembered I had a watch. Either way, it was time to go.

I tugged at Mitch and Daniel and nodded towards the time clock. “You know, I’ve already seen a Waterman freak-out. I’m out!” Without taking my eyes off of Waterman, I walked over to the time clock, typed in my employee number, and clocked out.

“Good idea, Zack!” Mitch walked over to the time clock and followed suit.

Daniel looked back and forth between us and Waterman. He doesn’t seem to know what he should do next.

“Dude,” I said to Daniel, backing towards the sales floor, “it’s not worth it!”

Daniel doesn’t move. It was as if he was making a full-body decision and his legs refused to vote; he was frozen.

“I gotta agree with Zack. Do you want to spend all day with him lurking in the shadows?” Mitch implored.

Waterman’s smile was ear-to-ear with blatant discontent. Whether it was indecision or fear, Daniel would not move. He was stuck in place. Mitch and I were standing by the backroom door urging Daniel to come with us and away from Psycho Jim. There were maybe two feet between them.

Before I could continue to plead with Daniel, Waterman took his broomstick, swung it low, and clubbed Daniel in the leg. Mitch and I stood there in disbelief. Waterman really hit him! As Waterman went for another swing on Daniel, I rushed him, tackling Waterman to the ground. Mitch ran to Daniel and led him out to the sales floor.

I got back to my feet before Waterman did. He didn't even stand all the way up before he charged at me. I managed to sidestep him when I noticed that the broomstick was still on the floor. I reached for it as Waterman turned around for what I assumed was another attack.

He stared at me as I held his broomstick in my hands and paused. Our stalemate lasted for what felt like forever. His eyes widened more than before. His breathing became shallow. This was strange. What the hell happened to this guy?

Just as suddenly as his attack on Daniel was, a disarmed Waterman backed away. I wasn't going to wait around for Psycho Jim to change his mind. I went through the backroom doors, met up with Daniel and Mitch, and we headed out the front door. Daniel locked the doors behind us, leaving behind a sign saying that we were closed for the week due to an emergency. I do not envy Daniel for having to deal with all that.

Finally able to sit calmly in my car, I pulled out my phone to clear my notifications from Daniel. I looked through my phone and saw I had one missed call from Daniel and three from my mom. She never called so early in the morning. There was only one voicemail and it was from her last call. I called the voicemail service, entered the code, and played the message. Nothing but static and rustling, like she pocket-dialed me.

I delete the voicemails and notice another notification; a text. It's also from Mom. I looked at the message and quickly started to panic. I wasn't worried before, but now I was. All the text message read was: Please Help Me!