

## **Such Is Life: Episode III**

**By: Dwan L. Hearn**

Ah! Finally, some peace and relaxation! The inside of the car is one of the only places in all of Kingston I feel calm. Kingston isn't exactly known for conventional thinking. The most unconventional place in town is Waterman's General Store and the locals are incredibly loyal to the Watermans. Here, Waterman's is the premier store in town and was even able to run Walmart out of town. Seriously!

I remember the zoning meeting being held at City Hall. Grandma and Grandpa went and I tagged along. Nearly the entire town had come out in opposition to the supercenter opening a location here. There were people everywhere, many of which had signs protesting the idea of Waterman competition. With messages ranging from "Mute the 'Mart" to "We 'heart' Waterman" to "Waterman: King of Kingston" - that last one was ours. As I mentioned before, Jim Sr. was a dear friend of my grandfather and I've known him for a long time. Whenever we all went out together, the city treated him like royalty. He really was the King of Kingston.

We went to a...

"Yo! Zacky Boy!"

The knock on my window scared the hell out of me so much that my heart jumped out of my chest. I gave Michelle a certified death stare as I rolled my window down. "Do you HAVE to do that?!" I asked, trying to regain my composure.

"Well, I did wave my arms but you didn't see me and I did call your name as I walked up but you were in La La Land again so, yeah, I did!" The smile Michelle gave you just made you wonder if she had ever killed anyone before, you know what I mean? Like the wheels in her mind were turning but in the wrong direction.

"Really? Huh. My bad. Didn't see you. What did you need?"

She exchanged the crazy girl smile for a more sincere one. "So, there's a party tonight and another one next week. Venus wanted me to make sure you knew. Ya comin'?"

"I can't tonight. Promised my mom I'd be home and help her with whatever it was she needed help with. When is the other one?"

"Monday night! It's going to be lame, I'm sure, but we're going anyway."

"Can't. I work."

"...and that night?"

"They got me training on Overnight."

"Freight? Who did you piss off... oh yeah... right... damn!"

"Yeah." It's moments like this that I realized I'm going to be branded as Jim Jr.'s Enemy No. 1. I shrugged my shoulders dismissively. "Yeah, no way out of it. Plus, that new guy is training with me... I mean, he's the one I'm training."

"Dude from the break room? He was weird. Popped out of nowhere! Creepy."

"In all fairness, we were distracted."

"I guess. So, tonight, you're in, right?!"

Bewildered, I repeated myself, "No, I gotta chill with Mom."

"Right... gotcha! See ya there!" The creepy serial killer smile returned to Michelle's face as she skipped... literally skipped back into the building. I watched her cross the lot as she approached the doors where Venus was waiting. Smiling and nodding to Venus, Michelle looked back at me, giving me the thumbs up. Venus smiled, more shyly, and gave me the thumbs up too. I'm not sure what my face was saying, but I knew they couldn't hear my words even if I was to speak aloud. I lowered my head, started the car, and began my drive home.

With all the zaniness of working at Waterman's and the crazy life with my mom and grandparents, driving home was the most peace my world got. Could only get better if I was getting a massage while driving. Then again, the first, last, and only time I ever got a massage was an experience that filled me with anxiety to this day just thinking about it.

I was in my sophomore year of college. I had a crazy final that morning. I had stayed up all night for it. Numbers. So many numbers. All the numbers! Anyway, a buddy and I went for tacos after the tests because tacos are amazing and who needs an excuse to have tacos? We were walking around not far from campus, fueled by energy shots and commercialized Mexican food, when we bumped into these two beautiful women, a blonde and a redhead. Technically, it was Matt that bumped into the blonde and knocked her coffee out of her hand and all over her redheaded friend standing next to her, but really, who's keeping track?

The blonde, whose name I would soon learn was Sara, woke from her daydream, looked up at everyone, and just started ballin'. Crying, I mean. She didn't just break out into a game of basketball or anything, though that would have been much better. But yeah, just broke down crying complete with a dramatic drop to her knees and a loud sob.

Matt was the one to break the awkward silence. "Yo, what's wrong with your friend?" he asked the not-crying redhead, Becca.

Becca clapped him. He deserved that. Hit him hard too! Soon he, too, was on the ground, on his knees, right in front of Sara. Ironic in a way.

Becca looked down at him then directly at me. Straight-faced, she asked me, "Yo, what's wrong with your friend?"

I smiled. If she wasn't already hot, she definitely had my attention now.

"Matt's a dick. That's his problem."

"Clearly!" Becca replied while staring daggers into the top of Matt's head. She kicked him for good measure. All the while, seemingly oblivious to all this, Sara is still crying, once more in her own world.

"So, why is she crying? This is clearly more than the coffee."

"She's a Massage Therapy student. The quarter ends today and she thought she was good but it turned out that she was short a body. Professor didn't tell her until today. The campus is a ghost town. No one goes to school on the last day."

"I'll do it. She can massage me!" Matt interjected, returning to his feet. Just as quickly as he winked at Becca, she kicked Matt in the nuts. Back down to his knees. Sara, without skipping a beat, punched him in the face.

As much as I thought this was bordering overkill, their timing was impressive. He stood. He spoke. He winked. She kicked. He fell. She punched. Really quite impressive.

In an attempt to save my buddy, I stepped up. "What if I helped? I've never had a massage before and after my final, I could use some relaxation."

Sara popped up. "Will you? Can you do this now?! Like, right now, now?"

"If you'll stop trying to kill my friend, yes," I replied, looking at Becca, trying not to laugh.

Becca kicked him once more in the shin. "Okay, now we'll stop. Let's go, I'm parked over here. Oh, but just you. He stays."

"Come on! You already beat his ass," I pleaded.

"Fine. Just tell him to shut up."

I looked over at Matt. He was about to speak and I just gave him a wide-eyed stare and slowly shook my head. It seems he learned how to take a hint.

"By the way..." I pointed my finger between the two women.

The redhead anticipated my question, "I'm Becca. This is Sara."

"Right. Becca. Where did you learn all that?" I asked. The look on Becca's face reminded me that it was my turn for introductions. "Oh, I'm Zack. This is Matt - what's left of Matt."

Becca smiled, "I'm a self-defense instructor."

"Oh. Well... that explains it."

They took us to campus and Sara started running full speed into the building. She caught her teacher just in time and there I went, to a little room with very little on. I got on the table, face down, and let Sara work her magic. She was pretty good too. After all the stress of the last 24 hours, this was exactly what I needed. Exactly what I didn't need, however, happened next.

I fell asleep. This isn't so bad by itself, but I went to sleep after cheap tacos. Lots of cheap tacos. Lots of refried beans in said cheap tacos. I woke up to the sounds of Sara laughing and her teacher gagging. It would appear that I turned that room into a small gas chamber. After about 20 seconds I cleared out what few people were left in the building. Becca and Matt were laughing with Sara and I was about as embarrassed as a guy who just farted so badly that a massage student passed her class out of pity and fear that I might return.

Ah. Memories. Sidenote: Sara graduated and got a job at a spa a few towns over. She found me online, got my address, and mailed me a couple of free massage coupons in case I was ever in town. I had to promise not to have tacos beforehand. Matt and I still hang out on occasion, and he's learned to think before he speaks. As for Becca, she's popped into Waterman's a few times, usually picking on me, pretending to approach with caution.

At this point, I'm almost home. This is when my peacetime would end and I would walk into the warzone of weirdness. I love my mom and I'm used to her at this point, but wow, sometimes she's made me sit back and wonder.

A perfect example of my mom's quirkiess was the time I saw her washing a car in the rain. Is that not weird enough for you? Well, it wasn't her car nor did she know who owned it nor did she bother to use soap. She did, however, use a 'cloth' and when I say she used a 'cloth' I mean she used the shirt she had on as a cleaning cloth. Imagine for a moment, me getting that phone call from the police. Now, instead, imagine me getting that message from my buddy who saw your topless mother soaplessly washing a stranger's car in the rain outside your school. When I got the message, I immediately ran outside to do whatever it was I was going to do when I got there because, to be honest, I was clueless as to the best course of action. When I found her in the parking lot, I asked her, very matter-of-factly, "Mom, what the hell are you doing?!"

Mom heard my voice and turned toward me. "Oh hi, Zack!" she said as she scrubbed a headlight, "I thought it'd be a fun surprise if you came out of class and your car was washed! What do ya think?"

Momentarily stunned, I managed to gather my thoughts enough to continue the conversation. "Okay, Mom, first question: How did you get here? You don't drive."

"I caught an Uber."

"Okay, I'll buy that answer. Question two, are you aware that this isn't my car?"

She looks down at the car in front of her. Shooting a long glance down both sides of the car, she looks back to me, bewildered, and says, "Ya sure?!"

I removed my keys from out of my pocket and hit the red panic button on my key fob. My car alarm sounded in the next lot.

We stared at each other.

"Oh," she said after a long moment, "I guess this isn't your car. Sure looks like it, though."

I glanced down at the car and back to my mother, "This car is red. Mine is black."

Again, her expression was stuck on bewilderment. Mom looked behind me at my car in the next lot, the siren still sounding, and looked back at me, "Well, that's an easy mistake to make," she said defensively.

I was still trying to make sense of the situation when I noticed something, more so, a lack of something. I noticed that there was no bucket in sight nor soap suds on the ground. "Mom, are you even using soap! Did you bring a bucket?"

"Oh no, I didn't," she replied. "See, I was on my way to the store and I was talking to the Uber driver and I said, 'You know, I should surprise my son' and so, after an extra 20 bucks, he dropped me off here. I didn't think about washing your car until I got here."

"But that's not my car."

"Well, I know that now."

"So, if you're not using soap, what were you washing the car with? Air?"

"Well, yeah. We have very clean air in Kingston. Means clean clouds. Means clean rain. This method is very cost-effective."

Stranger than my mother's explanation, it appeared that some of the people in the gathered crowd were starting to agree with her. Stranger still, one of the most respected teachers on campus agreed that her method was indeed cost-effective and helped the environment. It was at this moment I realized that the bewilderment face setting was genetic and I indeed had this gene.

"All I'm saying, " my mom continued, "is I thought of a way to be nice to not only my son but my only planet as well." She looked back at the not-my-car she was cleaning, "...and now a complete stranger too! See, the Universe smiles and I smile too!"

As if on cue, the slightly-heavier-than-light rain started to let up and the sun began to peek through the clouds. Kings Community College, as nearly the entire school was outside circling us and whoever's car this was, saw this as a sign that the Universe was smiling and my mother saw this as validation. The entire crowd, that being nearly the entirety of the KCC student body, started cheering and clapping. My mom started cheering and clapping too.

Did I mention she's still topless throughout this entire exchange?

The male half of the crowd cheered much louder.

As if this wasn't awkward enough, the day only got more awkward from here. Armed with a kind of cosmic certification, my mom led a charge of newly inspired college girls to take off their tops and dry-wash the entire Red Lot. I would have loved this too if it wasn't my mother directing traffic.

For the record, my car, in Green Lot, was never touched.

Pulling into the driveway at home, I see my grandmother sitting on the front porch knitting, listening to her iPod. It was my iPod until I realized how much I hated iPods. She didn't notice me coming up the steps, but Grandpa sure did as he met me at the door.

Closing the front door behind him, Grandpa said, "Hey Zack, let's go for a ride." Grandpa took me by the shoulder, turned me around, and hurried me back down the porch steps to my car. With his jacket half on and his shoes still untied, Grandpa made it to my driver's side door. I met him there. He pointed to the door as if to say 'Open the Door'.

"My car."

Grandpa rolled his eyes at himself. "Your car. Right."

Grandpa ran around to the passenger's side as I retrieved my keys from my pocket to unlock the doors. He tugged on the handle, desperately trying to get in the car. I got out my keys, unlocked the doors. Grandpa got his door opened just as my mom came running out of the house.

"Here I am! Here I come! Daddy, wait up!" My mom looked up and saw me in the driveway and came to a complete stop. Her eyes widened and her smile extended from ear to ear. "ZACK!", she exclaimed and came at me in a full sprint, crushing me against my car.

Although I couldn't breathe, I somehow managed to muster, "Hey Mom! Good to see you too!" in my least obvious yet naturally sarcastic tone.

She squeezed tighter.

I looked over at Grandpa, who himself looked rather defeated, and tried to motion for some kind of assistance. I got nothing.

After a few seconds, he either felt sorry for me or noticed I was turning blue. He finally came to my rescue. "Ashley! Let the boy go!"

Mom gave me one more good squeeze and let me go. As she started fixing and straightening my clothes, I grabbed Mom's hand, held them together, and kissed her forehead.

She smiled.

I smiled.

Grandpa rolled his eyes.

Mom pulled away, got into the back seat of my car, and fastened the seat belt. Still annoyed, Grandpa got into the passenger's seat and fastened his seat belt. Still confused, I got into the driver's seat, fastened my seat belt, started the car, backed out of the driveway, and just drove.

"Where are you going, Zack?" Grandpa asked after about a block or so.

"No clue, Grandpa. I just got home. You guys ran out to the car and got in. I just figured someone would tell me something eventually."

I could see Mom's eyes widen in the rearview mirror. "COFFEE!!!!"

"I like coffee. Let's do coffee. Grandpa? Coffee?"

"Eh."

"That's a yes to me!"

We got to the coffee shop, placed our orders, got our drinks, and took a seat at one of the tables. I don't typically sit inside anymore, but I could tell Grandpa could probably benefit from getting something off his chest.

"So, Grandpa, what was all that about anyway?" I asked.

There was a pause. He stared at his cup of Earl Grey tea as if he was psychically answering me through the cup. If he was trying to, it wasn't working. After about a minute, he looked across the table to me, glanced to his left where Mom had drifted off to her place in CoffeeLand, looked back at me, and with a really deep sigh answered, "Nothing, Son. Nothing."

I looked over to Mom, who I was sure was lost to this dimension for the remainder of her mocha decaf latte, looked across to Grandpa, and just stared at him. My face successfully conveyed the expression 'Are you kidding me?' to which Grandpa's face replied with another half glance at Mom. For my next message, I felt that verbal communication was necessary.

"What did she do?" I asked.

He hesitated to answer me and just looked at Mom. It was obvious that he doesn't want to say anything about it around her, likely in fear of hurting her feelings.

"Seriously, she's not here. Like, at all. You got until the coffee is gone." I sipped on my coffee and held the cup barely an inch from Mom's face. No reaction. I smiled at Grandpa and said, "Mom, your hair's on fire!" to which, again, there was no reaction.

Finally convinced, Grandpa shared his thoughts. "Your mother's been back and forth all day. Earlier, she was all excited about painting the back rooms of the house. She was moving furniture, laying drop cloths and everything." He paused to take a sip of tea. "I was bringing her more cloths and when I walked into the room, she was just staring out the window. She had spaced out, kinda like she is now." He glanced over to Mom, a concerned look washing over his face. "I worry about her."

I could feel his heart sinking as he looked at her. She was definitely in her own little world, but she always was. I knew this. I knew he knew this. I don't know why he was suddenly so worried about it.

"You know, she does that a lot, Grandpa. She'll be here, then not, then back and she's still the same ol'..."

"More Coffee!!!" Mom exclaimed to the entire coffee shop. She got up from the table, high-fived a few patrons on the way to the trash can to throw away her cup, and high-fived some more en route to the counter to order another. The clerk looked over at me and I nodded. They've learned never to give my mom what she orders and to just give her a mocha decaf latte. She didn't need a triple espresso with extra sugar but she wasn't aware of just how much she didn't need it.

I looked back at Grandpa. "See, she's fine. What's there to worry ab—"

"Your dad, Zack. She's thinking about your father. Your real father."

I paused. He continued.

"Yeah. She's been pretty good about not showing it around you, but she's always felt super guilty about not knowing who your father is."

I turned in my seat to find Mom. She was still giving high-fives to everyone in the coffee shop as she waited on her drink. She looked over at me and waved. I waved back and smiled at her. She gave me a big grin back and walked back to the counter.

"Now listen Zack. Don't mention any of this to your mom. You've done just fine without him and we're all really proud of you."

"I know, Grandpa. Thanks. I won't say anything. I just wish I could comfort her."

"You can. Keep being you. Sometimes it seems to be her only peace."

Mom rejoined us at the table. "You boys ready to go?" she asked.

Grandpa and I nodded, got up from the table, and made our way back to the car. Mom got back in the back seat. Grandpa is standing by the driver's side door pulling on the door. I held the keys up and gave them a jingle.

"Your car," he said.

I tossed him my keys, smiled, and said, "Your car today."

He tossed them back, "Get your ass in the car, boy!"

We laughed, got in the car, and drove home.

We pulled into the driveway and as we all got out of the car, Mom suddenly remembered something. "Oh Zack, your friend Venus called before we left. She wanted to know when you were planning on going to that party tonight."

Wow. She's persistent.

"Didn't you want my help with something tonight?" I asked.

She smiled and answered back, "Go, Zack. Be young. Have fun. I love you."

I hugged her and got back in the car. I pulled my phone out of my pocket to text Venus only to find a text from her with the address. She's good. Really good. I texted her back with an 'On my way' and headed her way.