

Sic Transit
By
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Characters:

CLAIRE - 45. A middle management clerk who loves her job with a fervor approaching the religious.

STEPHEN - early 20s, white. Recently graduated with an Environmental Studies/ African American Studies double major. Totally freaked out.

Setting:

A faceless, nameless office in a warren of infinite bureaucracy.

A desk sits precisely center stage with two chairs on either side. Stacks of paper, all scrupulously labeled and organized. A full, but neatly stacked inbox. A full, but neatly stacked outbox. A small leather jar containing two dice. A tape dispenser. A trash can filled with discarded questionnaires. A telephone.

A sign on the wall reads "Sic Transit Gloria Mundi"

LIGHTS pop up on CLAIRE as she refers to a densely spaced 25-page questionnaire to tick off a few checkboxes on a very simple one page form.

STEPHEN sits across, watching her every move, his leg jiggling.

CLAIRE signs her name on the form, places it neatly in the outbox, then smiles over at STEPHEN.

CLAIRE

That will be all.

STEPHEN

That's it?

CLAIRE

That's it.

STEPHEN

What happens next?

CLAIRE

It gets processed.

She looks at him brightly.

CLAIRE

(cont)

You'll be notified in a few months. Thank you.

STEPHEN

Hang on. Do you know why my oncologist would send me over here to get a visa?

CLAIRE

It means you need a visa.

STEPHEN

But I don't need a visa.

She smiles gently.

CLAIRE

You shouldn't worry. You're young.

STEPHEN

What do you mean by that?

CLAIRE

You'll be OK. Don't worry.

STEPHEN

The more you say don't worry, the more I'm getting worried. Why do I need a visa? I'm not going anywhere.

CLAIRE

(gently)

It's not where you're going, dear. It's how long you are staying. Do you understand?

STEPHEN

Are you kidding? I need a visa to stay?

CLAIRE

Yes.

STEPHEN

Like... here? On this... planet?

CLAIRE

The visa determines how long you will be able to continue your visit.

STEPHEN

Are you fucking kidding me?

CLAIRE

Language, dear.

STEPHEN

Sorry. Let me rephrase: what the ACTUAL FUCK ARE WE TALKING ABOUT HERE?

CLAIRE

Your life. That's all.

He stares at her.

STEPHEN

(finally)

There are so many things wrong with what you just said.

CLAIRE

It takes some getting used to.

He picks up his questionnaire, still puzzling this through.

STEPHEN

I answered three hundred and twelve questions, but you only looked at three.

CLAIRE

You did a very thorough job.

STEPHEN

But why? Why couldn't I just answer the three questions?

CLAIRE

Those change.

STEPHEN

So I had to answer everything but only three count? And those three change?

CLAIRE

Every day.

STEPHEN

This makes no sense.

CLAIRE

Our understanding is just so limited, isn't it?

STEPHEN

So... what were they? What were the questions that mattered?

CLAIRE

We're really not supposed to...

STEPHEN

Look. I have this thing. They sent me over here. I filled out three hundred and twelve questions. And now I want only one lousy fucking god damn answer! What three aspects of my life actually god damn matter?

CLAIRE

Today.

STEPHEN

What?

CLAIRE

Actually matter... today.

STEPHEN

Yes! Right! OK! What three pieces of my incredibly nuanced 26 years of existence actually count? TODAY.

She picks out the single sheet she just filled out from her inbox, shaking her head.

CLAIRE

Fine. Question 21... Have you ever personally changed a tire?

STEPHEN

Are you kidding me? The length of my life is going to be affected because I never changed a tire?

CLAIRE

Oh darling... the algorithm is much more complex than that. Let's see what's next... question 105...Do you eat pancreas?

STEPHEN

Fried up in some butter, a touch of garlic... yeah, sure. I fucking love pancreas. Blame Ferris Bueller. And in what way is that possibly pertinent to anything?

CLAIRE

And finally, question 216... the Pythagorean Theorem.

STEPHEN

Seriously.

CLAIRE

I don't make up the rules.

STEPHEN

LISTEN TO ME!

He flips through the full questionnaire frantically, pointing out examples.

STEPHEN

I give to charities, I eat organic, I exercise a minimum of 230 minutes per week. I eat 40 grams of fiber daily.

CLAIRE

All very commendable.

STEPHEN

(ramping up)

My girlfriend's mom adores me. My
boyfriend's mom adores me! I pick up trash
on my walks with my rescue dog and deposit
it in its proper receptacle. I can whistle
all the airs from that infernal nonsense
Pinafore. It's all here. Doesn't any of that
count for anything?

CLAIRE

I don't determine which questions matter.
And you need to take a breath.

The phone rings.

STEPHEN

Stop! Don't answer that! You need to listen
to me! It's. All. Here!

He blocks her, waving the questionnaire defiantly. She evades
him, warding him off with her hand as she answers the phone.

CLAIRE

(into phone)

Yes? Uh huh.

He throws the papers at her.

CLAIRE

(covering the phone and hissing at him)

Pick those up.

He flips her off with both hands. She glares back.

CLAIRE

(into phone)

Thank you. I'll be right over.

Hangs up.

CLAIRE

You need to settle down.

She moves towards him and he evades her, grabbing his crotch in
an obscene gesture. She manages to grab him, and puts him in an
amazingly effective arm lock.

STEPHEN collapses, sliding out of her grasp. He gasps and tears at the collar of his shirt.

STEPHEN

Oh my god... I can't... breathe...

He frantically unbuttons his shirt, gasping erratically.

CLAIRE

I'm going to call security.

STEPHEN

Water... please... This happens.. my condition.
I just need... water...

She looks at him nervously. He tries to sit up.

STEPHEN

I'm not kidding. This isn't your fault.
Please... water...

CLAIRE

Back in a second.. and no funny stuff. I
really do need to get back to work.

He lays back down on the floor, exhausted.

STEPHEN

Thank you.

She leaves.

He waits a beat, listens, then sits up stealthily.

First he takes his form from the outbox, rips it into little pieces, and then buries it deep in the trash can.

He glances behind him to see if she's coming back. Silence.

He then starts rifling through the forms in the inbox when he sees the jar. He struggles to open it and the top comes off: two dice clatter onto the desk and fall on the floor.

CLAIRE comes in, and he wheels around holding the empty jar. Their eyes lock as she slowly hands him the glass of water and he tries to put the jar back behind him.

CLAIRE

I don't remember you answering yes to
Question 179. Proclivity to snoop.

STEPHEN

Very funny.

CLAIRE

Or Question 264, propensity for sarcasm.

STEPHEN

So shoot me.

CLAIRE

Or...

STEPHEN

YES! I know. Question 34, tendency towards hyperbole. Got it. You've got quite a little sense of humor, don't you?

CLAIRE

Where is it?

She rummages through the trash and pulls out pieces of his ripped up form. She glares at him, then smugly pulls out the tape dispenser. Starts to piece the form back together.

CLAIRE

(cont)

The process works. Whether you agree with it or not.

STEPHEN

The process?

He picks up the dice and rolls them. Looks at her defiantly.

CLAIRE

It's a lot more sophisticated than it looks.

STEPHEN

It's easy when you have, like, zero stakes in the outcome.

CLAIRE

What does that mean?

STEPHEN

You don't have the faintest idea what it's like to be on this side of the table.

CLAIRE

Well, you're wrong.

STEPHEN

I seriously doubt it.

CLAIRE

I had to apply once. Four months short of my 32nd birthday. It could have gone either way.

He takes a moment to digest this.

STEPHEN

But you got a good number.

CLAIRE

Yes. I did.

STEPHEN

Which is why you think the process works so well? Because obviously you're a good person and it worked for you.

CLAIRE

Look, I'm busy here.

STEPHEN

Fine. So am I. And apparently my time is potentially limited. So let's go. Let's process this fucker. Roll your little dice and let's see what I get.

CLAIRE

Oh no. I can't process an application when the applic-ee is in the room.

STEPHEN

Well you'll have to drag the applic-ee out. I'm not leaving until I find out what my fate is.

CLAIRE

You're young. The numbers will work out.

STEPHEN

How do you know that?

CLAIRE

It's what I believe.

STEPHEN

It makes no sense!

CLAIRE

No, the right people... I can't explain it.

STEPHEN

You can't explain it because it's RANDOM.
R-A-N-D-O-M. Three questions out of 312. A
roll of the dice. It means NOTHING. Do you
get it? *You* got LUCKY. But that doesn't mean
I will.

CLAIRE

I believe everything happens for a reason.

STEPHEN

Like... there's a man upstairs who sits around
figuring out every single person's entire
life plan? I can't believe we're even
having this conversation.

He puts his head between his knees and starts hyperventilating.

CLAIRE

Where... where did they find it?

Without looking up he points to his head.

CLAIRE

Brain?

STEPHEN nods.

CLAIRE

Do they know if it's...?

STEPHEN shakes his head, no.

CLAIRE

Listen. You'll be fine. I have a good
feeling about you.

STEPHEN raises his head.

STEPHEN

I want to watch.

CLAIRE

I'm sorry... It's...

STEPHEN stands up violently.

STEPHEN

I want to WATCH. It's my fucking LIFE! I want to see if I live five more days. Or five thousand!

CLAIRE

Five days? Five thousand? What's the difference?

STEPHEN

Look, if you're right, and there's some secret hidden logic behind all this... then it shouldn't matter if I'm here or not.

She hesitates.

CLAIRE

This is highly irregular.

STEPHEN

Sic transit Gloria mundi.

He points to the sign on the wall.

STEPHEN

(cont)

All worldly things are fleeting.

CLAIRE

Yes.

She picks up the dice.

STEPHEN

But let's not let them be too fleeting... OK?

They stare at each other a moment; fellow survivors for now. He nods that it's OK to go.

She looks at him and rolls. She pauses, staring at the dice. It's not a good number.

She looks up at him sadly... then, as he starts to sink down into the chair... she picks up the dice... and rolls again. He looks up.

She looks at the dice... they are still not very good.

She rolls again, this time because she's now personally invested. He stands up, putting his hand gently on her shoulder.

She rolls again... and again... as the lights slowly FADE TO BLACK.