

I'm Gonna Keep You Alive

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Northside Community Garden

PART 1: MAY

SOFIA comes in, backpack and bike helmet in hand. She swings her backpack onto the deck area and pulls out a pair of gardening gloves. She looks at the audience.

SOFIA

It's May.

She puts on the gloves.

BRIAN

Did you just say something?

SOFIA

(She does not want him to talk to her. And she is not nice.)

No.

BRIAN

Sorry. I thought you said something.

SOFIA

I didn't.

Beat.

BRAIN

(Holding up a trash bag)

I picked up all this garbage--

SOFIA

Great.

BRIAN

Drunk dudes really don't understand the concept of trash cans. I actually saw this guy throw his pizza crust at a cat this morning. Right there. *(He points at the gate.)*

SOFIA

That's terrible.

BRIAN

There's actually 17 trash cans that I can see from here. I counted. Those four. That one. The three across the street. The one on the corner. The row next to that building. Then I saw the guy go into his apartment building. Where he probably had some trash cans. Unbelievable. Not that I like cats. I find them suspicious.

SOFIA

I have a cat.

BRIAN

Oh. Cool.

(SOFIA goes over to the mulberry tree and starts looking closely at it.)

That tree, right? I just moved here from California, so... Or not just. I mean I've been here for two and a half years. Not here, here. I was living in Manhattan, but I just sort of started caving in on myself, you know? It's just - you go to work, you go home, you take your dog outside, you don't walk him, you just take the dog outside and wait for him to do his...I don't even have a dog, but if I had a dog, that dog is going to be happier outside! And one day I biked to Brooklyn and just realized how much I need trees. Do you know what I mean?

SOFIA

(dryly)

I like the quiet.

BRIAN

Me too! *(he realizes) Oh. (whispering) Sorry.*

Silence.

Wait. . . sorry. . . are you in charge?

SOFIA

No one's in charge. But there's a patch over there that could use some weeding. *(she points to a spot on the opposite side of the garden, trying to send him as far away from her as possible)*

BRIAN

Oh. Okay. Sure.

He starts to go.

SOFIA

I would put on some gloves if I were you. Thorns.

BRIAN

I'll be fine.

He gets a new trash bag, heads over to the patch and starts weeding. He pricks himself on a thorn.

BRIAN

OWW! Shit.

Sofia gives him an "I told you so" look and continues to prune.

PART 2: JUNE

BRIAN *emerges, heads over to the deck area. He puts on a pair of gardening gloves and looks at the audience.*

BRIAN

It's June.

SOFIA walks over to the deck area, grabs her water bottle and takes a long drink.

BRIAN

It's hot.

SOFIA

It is.

She closes her water bottle, crosses to another side of the garden, and starts a task. He follows, working beside her.

BRIAN

It's nice to see you here again.

SOFIA

(She still doesn't really want to talk to him)

Mhmm. I'm here every Saturday.

BRIAN

How was your week?

SOFIA

Oh, you know. Memorial Day made it. . . shorter.

BRIAN

Cool. Mine was fun. My neighbor had a barbecue. Mike. He's always working on his motorcycle when I leave the house in the morning, and I always leave a few minutes early to go down and say, "Hey Mike, how are you doing." Because his feelings could get hurt if I didn't. You know?

SOFIA

(working) Uh huh.

BRIAN

When I first moved to the city, into my building in the East Village, um, I was so excited, you know? I just moved to the city, and my neighbor was walking down the stairs, and I said "Hey, I just moved to New York today, and I live here!" and he was like, "that's so awesome!" and it felt like there was this mutual excitement, and the next day, I saw him and I said "Hey Josh" and it was like that conversation never happened. Then the whole rest of the year I was there, we just never made eye contact.

SOFIA

That actually sounds kind of nice.

BRIAN

What?

SOFIA

Not having anyone in your business.

BRIAN

It can be. I mean, It can also be a little lonely. *(Pause)* Anyway, how was your Memorial Day?

SOFIA

It was good. My niece had her confirmation, so we were celebrating that. LOTS of family.

BRIAN

Where does your family live?

SOFIA

Here. I'm from here.

BRIAN

Oh wow. Like, here here?

SOFIA

Yeah. Five blocks east.

BRIAN

I forgot that people can be *from* here. I grew up in the suburbs, and no one is really from there, you know? I mean, my family isn't from there, we're Irish, and then, I don't know, Ohio-an, but we moved to California when I was 3--

SOFIA

Everything's changed since I was a kid. There are hipsters and tourists everywhere. They built an *Apple Store* where King's Pharmacy used to be, and the bakery with the best pignoli cookies /closed last year

BRIAN

(Excitedly talking over her.)

That's where I live! On North 3rd. between Bedford and Berry./

(He hears her.)

Oh. How long has your family been here?

SOFIA

When my grandparents first came from Italy my grandpa got a job at a corner store. The owner didn't have any family, so he left it to my grandparents, who bought the whole

building 30 years ago. A lot of Italians left-- their rent went up, or they couldn't deal with the noise-- too many drunk-pizza-crust guys, you know? They went to Dyker Heights or Bensonhurst or Long Island. But most of my family stayed, and we all still live in the building. Like 3 generations of aunts and uncles and cousins and cousins cousins, and everyone in each other's business all the time. And my parents still run the store. Or they're trying to. But look around. Now there's like, Whole Foods.

BRIAN

I bet you get great meatballs.

SOFIA

Huh?

Oh. Yup.

BRIAN

My mom makes the best meatballs.

It's weird because my mom-- she has all kinds of different plants, and I didn't know how impressive her garden was until I first moved here - I saw this really cool plant store and bought two plants. I named them Wallace and Gromit. They're kinda struggling.

I guess that's why I wanted to come here. To see if I can learn a few things.

Anyway, you should be proud that so many cool people want to live here. It's a really great neighborhood.

SOFIA

Yeah, it is.

(looking at the tree)

They were right. The caterpillars are killing it.

PART 3: JULY

SOFIA

(To audience) It's July.

(To BRIAN. She has been waiting for him, and she is annoyed.) Where were you?!

BRIAN

Sorry I'm late. I just got off the phone with AT&T.

SOFIA

Phone problems?

BRIAN

No, I just like to call them every once in a while and threaten to switch to Verizon. They give me a discount.

SOFIA

How often is...? Nevermind, I don't want to know.

They walk over to the tree.

BRIAN

How's it doing?

SOFIA

They've eaten almost all the foliage off of it and it doesn't look like they're done. Webworms. The group is taking a vote tomorrow, and I think we need to organize. Here's a list of people we should contact who seem to be on the fence, and a few salient bullet points to mention.

BRIAN

I don't like talking on the phone.

SOFIA

Seriously?! What about AT&T?

BRIAN

That's different.

SOFIA

I can't get you to shut up. How can this not be your thing?

BRIAN

I'm shy.

SOFIA

Really? God, you're weird. Ok, I'll make the calls. But you have to show your solidarity at the meeting tomorrow.

BRIAN

I heard they're gonna try spraying it next week. Dolores said it was the only way to get rid of the webworms.

SOFIA

You can't trust her, she's a liberatarian.

Listen, this garden is herbicide and pesticide-free. We agreed not to use chemicals.

BRIAN

I didn't agree.

SOFIA

We talked about this. We could introduce natural predators like praying mantises. Just buy some eggs from Crest Hardware, and they'll even take care of other pests besides caterpillars. I once saw a praying mantis in a webworm colony holding a webworm in each forearm and eating both of them.

BRIAN

Cool!

But I still think we should consider spraying. Don't you want to save the tree?

SOFIA

Yes! But what about the cats?

BRIAN

What cats?

SOFIA

You know, those two cats that always wander in and gnaw on the plants. They've been around since I was like, 12. The pesticides could kill them.

BRIAN

Ok, then we won't use pesticides, but how do you know the praying mantises will actually work?

SOFIA

They have to work.

BRIAN

Well, they might not.

SOFIA

They have to. You don't understand.

BRIAN

Maybe we should just plant a new tree.

SOFIA

NO! God, Brian!

BRIAN

Jeez. Okay.

What is it about this tree, Sofia?

SOFIA

She planted it.

BRIAN

Who?

SOFIA

My grandma.

BRIAN

Whoa.

SOFIA

Yeah. There was a bench where my grandpa liked to sit and read the paper. But his nose kept getting sunburnt. Like, peely messy sunburnt. My grandma said she couldn't stand looking at it any longer, that it gave her nightmares, so she planted a tree. For the shade. It took 6 years for it to get big enough.

BRIAN

Why didn't he just use sunscreen?

SOFIA

Stubborn Italian.

BRIAN

Smart lady.

SOFIA

The smartest. When he couldn't finish the crossword puzzle, he'd ask her for help.

BRIAN

Would she sit with him?

SOFIA

She preferred to tend to the flowers. She didn't like to sit still. They'd be here in silence for a while, her weeding or pruning or planting, and him squinting over the paper. Occasionally, he'd yell out: (*imitating his voice*) "Roberta, flightless bird, three letters?"

BRIAN

Emu.

SOFIA

(*Somewhat impressed.*)

Yeah. After they died a few years ago, I started coming here to help out.

BRIAN takes a deep breath.

BRIAN

Do you want to go see Jurassic Park? It's playing at Transmitter Park next Saturday night.

SOFIA

Uhh. . .

BRIAN

The original. Not the new one.

SOFIA

Obviously.

BRIAN

Ok, well it starts at sundown. Do you want to meet me there at 7:30? We can bring food and stuff.

SOFIA

I actually love that movie. . . but I can't. Saturdays are date night with my boyfriend.

BRIAN

Oh. That's great. How'd you meet?

SOFIA

What?

BRIAN

How'd you meet your boyfriend? I tried Bumble and Tinder and Hinge, but . . . anyway, I did end up making a bunch of friends.

SOFIA

We grew up together.

BRIAN

Cool. I'd love to meet him. Maybe we could all go to the park some other time. We could get a group together. I'll invite my roommates.

SOFIA

Oh, um, I don't think my boyfriend would be into it.

BRIAN

Oh.

SOFIA

He's not really the outdoorsy type. Picnics, sunsets, stars-- not really his thing.

BRIAN

What is his thing?

SOFIA

Baseball...

BRIAN

That's outdoors.

SOFIA

No, like watching it on TV.

BRIAN

Oh. Cool.

SOFIA

You don't have to lie to me. I know you think that's lame.

BRIAN

It's not... I mean it *is* lame. But he can't be *that* lame.

SOFIA

He's not. He's cool.

BRIAN

Anyway, can't you go without him?

SOFIA

Yeah, maybe.

(Awkward pause.)

I'd better go make those calls.

BRIAN

Ok, see you tomorrow.

(a praying mantis-like gesture) Go mantises!

She exits.

PART 4: AUGUST

BRIAN enters with headphones in, singing or dancing along to his music. He looks at us.

BRIAN

It's August.

He looks around, sees that no one else is there, and continues with gusto. SOFIA comes in, but BRIAN is immersed in the music and can't hear her through his headphones.

SOFIA

Brian.

BRIAN keeps dancing.

BRIAN.

Still dancing.

BRIAN!!

BRIAN is startled, steps on a plant. Takes an earbud out, embarrassed.

BRIAN

Oh. SOFIA. Hey.

SOFIA

You just crushed that (plant name)!

BRIAN

I know, it was an accident. You startled--

SOFIA

It's like you don't even care.

BRIAN

What?

SOFIA

This is a garden. You have to be careful. About crushing things.

BRIAN

Okay, whoa.

SOFIA

There's enough *crushing* in the world, you know?

BRIAN

What? I mean, uh, yeah, I know. I know that. I'm . . . sorry? Are . . . is everything okay with you? You seem especially--

SOFIA

What? High-strung? Uptight? Like I'm *bossy* or something? Do you feel *bossed around*?

BRIAN

What? No. I mean, sometimes. I mean, not in a bad way! Sorry. Sorry, you just seem stressed out.

SOFIA

GOD. Everything is terrible. The store is out of Passionfruit Le Croix and the dryer ate 3 of my socks this morning and my cat is gone and I think maybe, I think MAYBE this is the worst, most CRUSHING week ever in the history of all time.

BRIAN

Whole Foods always has Passionfruit Le Croix.

SOFIA

UGH.

BRIAN

I'm sorry you lost Mr. Peanut. Do you need me to help you look for him?

SOFIA

(becoming hysterical) NO! Mr. Peanut, who I rescued when he was a wee kitten, who clung to my sweaters with his baby claws without me even holding him, who loved to lick the mayonnaise jar, who slept on my face, on my actual FACE--

BRIAN

HEY. I can help you look--

SOFIA

NO YOU CAN'T, YOU CAN'T HELP ME LOOK BECAUSE HE ISN'T LOST HE'S GONE.

BRIAN

He's dead?

SOFIA

NO! HOW CAN YOU SAY THAT?

BRIAN

What? I thought--

SOFIA

HE TOOK MR. PEANUT.

BRIAN

Who--

SOFIA

My boyfriend. My EX-boyfriend. I mean, yeah, technically, he's the one who adopted him from the ACC, but he was *my* cat. He got him for *me*. And he didn't even like cats, and now, all of the sudden, because Mr. Peanut is perfect in everyway, and, adorable and disarmingly intelligent, he loves him.

He really did used to be sweet. I guess I just thought since we grew up together, and we've been dating practically since childhood and our parents are friends and we went to the same school and we've been sharing an apartment for five years, that eventually we'd just get married and that would be that.

But you know what? Sometimes I just want him to come outside and watch a sunset with me. And maybe ask me to do something, or make a plan, or I dunno, suprise me some time. And I HATE having to ask him to do things all the time. But he knew we were supposed to go up to my parents place for dinner, and we all live in the same building, for God's sake, but he was dragging his heels, and I needed him to hurry up, and he called me BOSSY. That is not BOSSY. I AM NOT BOSSY. And so I told him that I didn't want to be with someone who thought about me that way. And then he told me that he actually wanted to break up with me six months ago.

And then he left. With Mr. Peanut.

She throws her arms around him, and he awkwardly pats her back while she cries. Then she sees the mulberry tree. She knows something is wrong.

Oh my god. It's dead.

BRIAN

Breakups are hard.

SOFIA

No, the tree. It's dead.

She walks toward it. He gives her a moment alone. She stands there, silently, for a long time.

BRIAN

He steps toward her.

Do you want to hear a song?

SOFIA

NO... OK.

He takes a second to find the song on his phone. We hear "Que Sera, Sera."

BRIAN

My mom always played this one, when I was feeling sad. I guess it was a big hit in Ohio in the 60s.

They listen for a while. Maybe they dance a silly dance.

SOFIA

Thank you. I feel better.

BRIAN

I'm glad.

It's not your fault, you know.

SOFIA

Mr. Peanut? I know.

BRIAN

No, the tree.

SOFIA

I know it's not my fault.

BRIAN

I mean, because we didn't use pesticides--

SOFIA

Thanks, Brian. Really, thank you so much for pointing out that the praying mantises didn't work and I single-handedly killed this tree.

BRIAN

That's actually not what I said. I said it wasn't your fault. Webworms are really hard to curtail. We were fighting an uphill battle.

SOFIA

Oh, so you're a horticultural expert now? Because the first day you were here, you sliced your hand on that rosebush trying to impress me.

BRIAN

I've learned some things. Is that so bad? You know, you don't always have to be--

SOFIA

What?

BRIAN

You can just be sad. It's okay to be sad. It's okay to let someone make you feel better. No one is attacking you. I'm just trying to be your friend.

SOFIA

My friend? We barely know each other.

BRIAN

What are you talking about?

SOFIA

Just because we've had a few conversations, that doesn't make us friends.

BRIAN

Are you serious?

SOFIA

I don't need any more friends, Brian.

BRIAN

You know what, Sofia? It's okay to be sad about your boyfriend and your cat and this tree. But don't take it out on me. It's not just your tree. I'm sad about it, too. Don't act like you're the only one who cares.

I'm just gonna go.

He exits.

PART 5: SEPTEMBER

SOFIA

It's September.

SOFIA looks reflectively around the garden. BRIAN enters. He pretends not to notice her, and begins weeding.

SOFIA

Brian.

BRIAN

Oh. Hey.

SOFIA

Hey.

BRIAN

Hey.

SOFIA

It's been awhile.

BRIAN

Yup.

SOFIA

I haven't been back in awhile.

An awkward beat.

How's it going?

BRIAN

Fine thank you.

SOFIA

Cool.

Silence.

Are you starting to plant the bulbs? Like the daffodils and tulips? Fall is always my favorite time of year.

BRIAN

Yeah.

Silence.

SOFIA

Hey. I'm really sorry about/

BRIAN

It's okay./

SOFIA

No, I didn't mean to/

BRIAN

It's okay.

SOFIA

Is it?

BRIAN

I think so.

Is it? A beat.

SOFIA

I have news.

BRIAN

You're back together with/

SOFIA

I just signed a new lease.

BRIAN

Cool, where are you guys living?

SOFIA

Oh! No. Alone. With roommates. Who are not from my family.

BRIAN

Wow. Where?

SOFIA

Bed Stuy. Still Brooklyn, but it was time for a change, you know?

BRIAN

I do know.

SOFIA

Of course, you know. You know what it's like.

Beat.

BRIAN

I hear all the cool people live in Bed Stuy.

SOFIA

Yeah. Ugh. . . I guess I'm one of "those" people now.

Beat.

BRIAN

Sofia, I really am sorry about the tree. I know it meant a lot to you.

SOFIA

I'm sorry, too. For everything.

Beat. They take in the garden.

BRIAN

It looks weird. Since the tree died.

SOFIA

Yeah.

Beat.

So, have you taken over? You must be captain of the Pruning Brigade by now?

BRIAN

(Sheepish) Nah. But I got a bunch of my neighbors to volunteer. Even Mike with the motorbike.

SOFIA

Look at you!

BRIAN

Yup, these thumbs are greeeeen.

SOFIA

Speaking of which, how are Wallace and Gromit doing?

BRIAN

I killed Gromit.

But Wallace - after Gromit died, I had this determination: "I'm gonna keep you alive."

I decided that Wallace was going to be my New York--if I can keep him alive--I can survive here. How I treat him is how I'm going to treat myself.

I took some clippings and Wallace is now 15 plants. I've named them all. Wallace Junior, Wally, Wallabee. . . I won't tell you all of them. But I've been collecting more plants, too. I started picking them up on Craigslist. People are so happy that I can take them.

SOFIA

Well, I think you're a natural.

BRIAN

Thank you.

SOFIA

Um, my new place has a backyard.

BRIAN

Really? That's awesome.

SOFIA

I'm totally gonna have to have some sweet parties. Maybe even some *dance* parties, which I know is kind of your thing.

BRIAN

I've got some moves.

SOFIA

Yeah, you do. So. . . would you want to come over? To help me with the garden, I mean. Since, you know, your horticultural skills have seriously improved over the past 4 months. I mean, we can also have food and stuff.

BRIAN

(Teasingly)

You know, I own gloves now.

SOFIA

I'm so proud of you.

So...is that a yes?

BRIAN picks up a shovel, as if to say "let's go.." They exit the garden together.

END OF PLAY