

Crouching Dragon, Hidden Lizard

Morty wasn't listening to his mother and now he's found himself in a sticky situation involving Barbie, Fluffy the Lizard and a constipated old lady. Will fake romance win the day?

His mother's voice sounded like the ghost of Donald Duck. The actual words went unheeded from the third or fourth time she had brought up someone else's wedding, or a friend's new grandchild, and given her long-suffering sigh.

Morty was focused on work. Mr Palmer had left him in charge today. Fully stocked shelves of haemorrhoid and thrush cream would impress the boss. All his mother needed was an occasional 'Yes,' or 'Uhuh' and she'd keep going for hours.

'I need laxatives,' Morty thought. But why had it gone silent? A black hole of expectation was emanating from his phone. Morty turned to stare at it, searching his memory for what she might have just asked: Nothing.

'Mordecai! Tell me I can!'

Morty's hands clenched and he shuffled his feet, debating an answer. Was it better to admit he hadn't been listening now, or deal with Mother's disappointment later?

'Of course. That sounds *great!*'

His mother made an unfamiliar noise. Morty's brow furrowed briefly before he realised what it was: Happiness.

'Ah, I'm so excited! I can't wait!'

The call ended. Pushing his glasses up his nose, Morty swallowed bile. Not good. Not good at all.

Slicking back his hair, he shelved that problem until later. Laxatives. Mrs Oberlauf would be in soon, if he gave them to her immediately she might not mention her 'blockages' again.

Slipping into the stock room, Morty scanned the shelves for the box. Instead of the comforting cuboid cardboard he found something less familiar.

The soft curves of a denim-clad female rear-end were sticking out from the shelf. Morty froze, cheeks flaring with colour. Not trusting his voice, he cleared his throat.

There was a clang as the head of the owner of the behind hit the shelf. Then she shuffled backwards saying something that sounded furious in a Slavic language.

*Her.* Morty didn't need *her* messing everything up, today of all days.

'Sneaking up on me?' the girl asked as she rubbed her head and glowered accusingly at Morty.

'Sneak? I didn't sneak! What are you doing here?'

'Stock take. Palmer asked me.'

'He didn't tell me...'

'You're not the boss, Morty. Palmer is.'

Morty pulled in his paunch and straightened his shoulders. 'Palmer told me I was solo today.'

The girl's eyes darted from side to side. Morty's narrowed.

'You're not supposed to be here, are you. That's why you snuck in.'

'Sneak! I didn't sneak. I was just quiet. I left something here yesterday, that's all.'

'What did you leave?'

Snatching up her purse, the girl narrowed her eyes and tilted her head back.

'Nothing for boys to know.'

A faint rattling sound on the shelves got the girl's attention. Everything fell into place in Morty's mind, 'You brought your lizard in again!'

For a moment, it looked like she'd deny it, then her shoulder's slumped and she glanced up through her lashes at Morty in a way that made his stomach flip flop.

‘Fluffy gets lonely at home alone. You won’t tell Palmer? I’ll get Fluffy, and go?’

‘Palmer said he’d fire you if you brought it in again!’

‘But *we’re* friends, Morty, yes? You cover for me?’

Morty was finding it difficult to think. His jaw flapped like a landed fish. The jangling of the store door came to his rescue.

‘Wait here,’ Morty said, trying to mimic Palmer’s decisiveness.

Stepping back into the shop he froze in horror. He’d expected Mrs Oberlauf but instead found his mother wearing the expression of a 5-year-old on Christmas morning.

‘Morty!’ Why was mother wearing her best hat? ‘Where is she?’

‘She?’

‘The girl! The girl you met! The *one*.’

Clarity arrived like a wet noodle to the face. His mother’s voice droning on. His ill-timed ‘yes’ when she asked if he’d met someone. Was it serious? She was coming *right* over.

Morty’s grin was a streak of white against waxy skin. He held up a finger, wordlessly asking his mother to wait as he swivelled on his heel and went back into the stock room.

‘I go?’ *she* asked.

‘No. But I’ll cover for you, if you cover for me?’

‘What?’

Morty reached for her arm and pulled her back the way he’d come.

‘Mother, this is...’ Lost for words, Morty realised he couldn’t remember the girl’s name. It was a long string of consonants, an angry sounding tongue-twister. He’d always thought of her as *her*.

‘Barbie!’ the girl finished. ‘Hello Mother! Is so lovely to meet you.’

His mother looked like she might explode with happiness. Opening her arms, she enveloped Barbie in a solid hug.

‘Does Morty take good care of you?’ his mother asked, just as the door jangled again. Mrs Oberlauf; from the crease in her forehead, Morty knew the world ‘blockage’ was just moments away.

Barbie smiled easily, flapping a hand towards Morty, ‘You go to work, big man. I’ll talk to mother.’

Morty grabbed a pack of laxatives and placed them on the counter in front of the constipated customer. Barely looking at Mrs Oberlauf, Morty rang her order up and took her money.

Occasional words floated across from the other conversation. Romance, engagement, then: Grandchildren.

Rushing back to join them, leaving a disappointed Mrs Oberlauf to waddle out, Morty found his mother kissing Barbie’s cheeks.

‘Well, goodbye, dear. It was wonderful to meet you! I’ll see you tonight for dinner.’ His mother gave him a rare look of approval before she disappeared out the door.

‘Wh...What did you do?’

‘Your mother likes me. We go for dinner.’

‘But...’ Morty’s arms flapped, penguin-like.

‘Relax, Morty. Having girlfriend is not so bad. Even pretend one. I cover for you, you cover for me, yes?’

Morty was out-manoeuvred. He nodded.

‘Good. You’re not so bad, Morty.’ She walked towards the stock room door, and Morty found himself hypnotised by the weave of her hips. He swallowed.

Yes, maybe having a pretend girlfriend was a good place to start.