

Mealworms

written by

Rob Herzog

Chicago, Illinois
robherzog@hotmail.com

FADE IN:

INT. APARTMENT KITCHEN - NIGHT

Three mealworms writhe in a plastic container.

A sweet-faced girl in pajamas, KIMBERLY, 8, drops two apple slices and some oatmeal flakes into their path.

A frayed superhero cape hangs from Kimberly's shoulders.

Her mother DAWN, 40, supervises with tired eyes. Her uncombed hair points in all directions.

KIMBERLY

Dinner time, you little cuties.

Dawn runs a finger along a cracked wall tile.

KIMBERLY

Squishy, King Oscar, Wonder Worm--
come an' eat.

Dawn and Kimberly watch the mealworms creep and crawl amid the oatmeal.

KIMBERLY

Do you think they're happy, mama?

DAWN

Happy enough, but no room to
explore.

She wiggles some loose grout near the backsplash.

DAWN

Let's practice your report. What
are you going to say to your
science teacher tomorrow?

KIMBERLY

These mealworms are in the larva
stage.

Dawn nods and fidgets with the leaky faucet.

KIMBERLY

They're going to turn into beetles.

DAWN

Great.

KIMBERLY

Before that they're going to molt
and become a pupa.

Thumbs up from Dawn.

KIMBERLY

Mealworms eat oats and fruit.
Scientists found out they eat
Styrofoam, too. Nobody knew that.

Dawn sticks out her tongue in mock disgust.

DAWN

Make sure to pack your poster
board, your sketchbook, and your
observations.

KIMBERLY

I already did.

DAWN

Smart kid. I'm proud of you,
Kimberly. I want you to know that.
This is the coolest project ever.

Kimberly nods. They watch the worms crawl.

DAWN

I never told you this, but I ate a
mealworm in fifth grade.

Kimberly's eyes widen with surprise.

DAWN

We got extra credit if we ate one.
My teacher cooked it in batter.

KIMBERLY

Did you get ten thousand extra
points?

DAWN

Should've.

KIMBERLY

Please don't eat my mealworms, Mom.

DAWN

No way, Jose. I'd never eat Squishy
or Ishy or Uncle Ben. My bug eating
career is over.

KIMBERLY

Their names are Squishy, Wonder
Worm, and King Oscar.

DAWN

Yeah, I know. I'm messin' with you.
Now let's get ready for bed. You've
got a big day tomorrow.

Dawn takes Kimberly's hand and sings playfully.

DAWN

Good night. Good night. Don't let
the bed bugs bite.

INT. KITCHEN - LATER

The lights are out as Dawn shuffles into the room.

A digital clock on the oven registers the time at 3 a.m.

Eyes half-closed, Dawn opens the refrigerator/grabs a milk
jug. The interior light casts a strange glow over her face.

She pulls off the cap/empties half the milk onto the floor.

Her socks get soaked in the milk puddle.

Dawn doesn't react--her eyes stay dazed. She's sleepwalking.

She moves absentmindedly to the kitchen counter and snatches
the plastic container of mealworms.

She snaps off the lid, plucks one out, pops it into her
mouth, and chews. Goodbye Squishy.

She does it again, devouring Wonder Worm.

One more. Crunch-crunch. Down her gullet goes King Oscar.

Then she lies next to the milk puddle and sleeps.

INT. KITCHEN - LATER

Dawn awakens--disoriented. She tries to make sense of the
spilled milk.

Realization sets in.

DAWN

Oh, no. Not again.

She sees the empty mealworm container. Instant panic.

On hands and knees, she searches for the missing worms.

She brings her hand to her lip. A tiny piece of Squishy hangs there.

Her eyes widen when she sees the remains.

DAWN

Ah, no. Ah, crap. No. No. No.

Kimberly plods into the room. She still wears her hero cape.

KIMBERLY

Mama, are you okay?

Dawn tries her best to conceal her panic.

DAWN

Yep. A-okay. All good.

KIMBERLY

Did you sleepwalk again?

DAWN

(thinks carefully)

Yeah. Maybe a little.

She stands.

DAWN

But I'm okay, baby. I just spilled some milk. Let's get back to bed.

Dawn guides her daughter away from the scene of the crime.

INT. KITCHEN - LATER

Dawn scrolls through the internet and makes a call. A recorded message sounds from the other side of the line.

PET SHOP MESSENGER (O.S.)

You've reached Scott's Pet Shop.
Our hours are 10 a.m. to 9 p.m.
each and every day. We have a
special this week on fish...

Dawn groans and smacks her forehead in frustration.

The recorded message ends with a "leave a message" beep. Dawn speaks with desperation, but keeps her voice low.

DAWN

(leaves phone message)

Hey. I need to get my hands on some mealworms--right now. It can't wait 'til morning.

She swallows.

DAWN

My daughter has a science project due tomorrow...and I ate it. If there's anybody in the shop right now that can help me, please pick up. Please answer right now.

She waits. No response.

Dawn dials another number. It rings several times...

DAWN

Polly. It's me, Dawn. Sorry to wake you, but I'm flipping out here. I need three mealworms, and I know that doesn't make sense to you. Just answer this: Is there anyone in our building that owns a snake or a big lizard or something?

Dawn's eyes widen.

DAWN

Do you think you could come over and watch Kimberly while I knock on his door?

INT. HALLWAY - NIGHT

Dawn knocks on an apartment door. Strange music thumps from the other side. After several knocks, someone opens up.

RAVE WOMAN 1, 21, sways in the doorway.

DAWN

Hey. Sorry. I live upstairs and need a little help...

Rave Woman 1 doesn't bother to listen to the rest. She waves Dawn inside.

INT. APARTMENT LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

The place is like Shangri la. Black light bulbs shine from above, making light-colored items glow. A smoke machine pumps fog. Strange, experimental techno music thumps. Christmas lights blink randomly.

Rave Woman 1 joins RAVE WOMAN 2 in a dance. They waver like ectoplasms in the purple light.

DAWN

(shouts above music)

I was told that someone in this apartment owns a really big lizard.

The women say nothing. They sway. One of them eventually points to a closed bedroom door.

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

A dark, messy room. A large reptile terrarium sits along one wall. An large iguana basks in the light.

Dawn stands before two scraggly young dudes: T. SHARK and ELBOW, both in their 20s. They vape/blow smoke into the air.

They regard Dawn with spacey, wordless wonder. T. Shark holds a five-inch steel needle in his left hand. Ultra sharp.

DAWN

I'm your neighbor from upstairs.
Sorry. I heard you might have...

T. SHARK

You heard wrong. Ain't got no drugs here, ma'am.

He waves his frightening needle in Dawn's direction.

DAWN

I don't want drugs. I want mealworms.

(wiggles her fingers)

You know. Mealworms.

She points to the lizard.

DAWN

Pet food.

T. Shark and Elbow gaze for a long time.

DAWN
I need to borrow three mealworms
from you. Just three.

They don't comprehend. Dawn explains in broken chunks.

DAWN
My daughter...science
project...mealworms...Squishy...I
ate them...sleepwalking.

ELBOW
That's stone cold, baby. How could
you eat up them worms?

T. SHARK
What kind of mama does that?

DAWN
I don't know. Maybe there's
something wrong with me.

Her voice catches.

DAWN
The stress makes me sleepwalk. It's
not easy being a single mom. I try,
but I'm constantly failing her.

She searches the room. A tear falls and she blurts...

DAWN
What if I ate Kimberly's mealworms
because I subconsciously want to
sabotage our relationship? What if
I'm really messed up deep down?

T. SHARK
(interrupts)
I've got mealworms.

DAWN
You do?

T. SHARK
Got a whole bowl of 'em.

He searches around the room and finds a bowl in the corner.

T. SHARK
You can have 'em for fifty bucks.

DAWN
I don't need them all. Just three.

T. SHARK

Yeah. Fifty bucks for three. You can have four if you want.

ELBOW

That's damn expensive, bro.

T. SHARK

Times is tough, baby.

DAWN

(hesitates)

Okay. Fine. Can I write you a check? I'll have to run upstairs.

ELBOW

Hold on now. I got another idea.

Elbow leans and whispers something to T. Shark. They consult in low voices, inaudible to Dawn.

T. SHARK

Okay. We've got a proposal for you.

Dawn's eyes widen.

T. SHARK

Elbow here says I should give you the mealworms for free if...

Dawn braces herself for the worst.

T. SHARK

...if you hold his hand and hum him a lullaby.

DAWN

Hum a what?

T. SHARK

You caught us at a weird time 'cause we were just about to pierce Elbow's tongue.

T. Shark lifts the large steel piercing needle that he's been holding.

T. SHARK

He ain't too excited 'bout the pain, but he thinks a little hand-holding will help get him through.

DAWN

So I hold his hand and hum a lullaby while you poke a hole through his tongue?

T. SHARK

Yes. And then you get four mealworms.

DAWN

I only need three.

T. SHARK

Three. Four. Do we have a deal?

DAWN

(no hesitation)

Yes. Let's do it now.

INT. BEDROOM - LATER

Dawn holds Elbow's hand and hums a sporadic tune.

Elbow sticks out his tongue. T. Shark brings his giant needle close. A bottle of antiseptic sits nearby.

T. Shark turns to Dawn.

T. SHARK

I just wanna say that you're a good mama. I love my mama, but she never helped me with no science project.

ELBOW

Mine neither.

T. SHARK

Can't beat yourself up for your mistakes. We all make um.

ELBOW

You're doing the best that you can.

T. SHARK

You're a hero. Straight-up.

Dawn nods in appreciation. She grips Elbow hand tightly.

T. SHARK

Now let's poke a hole through his nasty-ass tongue.

He jams the needle. Elbow kicks. Dawn squeezes and hums...

INT. APARTMENT KITCHEN - DAY

Kimberly rushes right to her mealworm container. Her superhero cape whooshes behind her.

All the mealworms are there, just as they were when she went to sleep--perfect replacements for Squishy and his pals.

KIMBERLY

I'm taking you guys to school.

Fatigued Dawn strolls into the room and sighs with relief at Kimberly's acceptance of the stand-in mealworms.

DAWN

Okay, let's get some breakfast and get you to school.

Kimberly peers into the plastic container. Her jaw drops.

KIMBERLY

Hey, something's wrong. There are four mealworms in here instead of three. Why are there four?

Dawn cringes/knocks herself lightly on the head.

DAWN

Grabbed one too many.

KIMBERLY

What?

DAWN

(scrambles for an answer)

Uh. Um. Well, honey. Maybe there was an egg in there that we missed.

Kimberly frowns skeptically.

DAWN

Or maybe Wonder Worm rescued the new guy from danger. That's what superheroes do, after all. And now Squishy has a new friend. She really needed one, I think.

Kimberly looks up at Dawn.

DAWN

Or maybe it's just a damn miracle.

KIMBERLY

Wow. A miracle.

DAWN

That's what I think, baby. That's
what I'm calling it. Let's go with
that.

She hugs Kimberly close and peeks at the plastic container.

The mealworms crawl over a bed of oatmeal. Somehow they have
all ended up in a good place.

FADE OUT:

THE END