

Johnny's Day Off

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"What are you doing on your day off, Johnny?"

Five men from Station 51's A-shift gathered in the locker room, changing into their street clothes. Roy sat on the bench in front of his locker tying his sneakers, while his partner sat inside his own locker buttoning his denim shirt.

"Chores. I've done so much overtime lately that everything's a mess at home."

"Could you use some help?" Roy offered.

"Really? Yeah, that'd be great."

Marco peeked from behind his locker door. "He should. You've helped him out enough with *his* house, Johnny."

"Yeah," Chet added. "Besides, somebody has to be there to keep you from killing yourself."

"Shut up, Chet," Roy and Johnny intoned simultaneously.

Johnny lay comfortably in his bed, snoring softly, when he was suddenly startled awake by the phone ringing right next to his bed.

"Damn! Who the hell's calling me at the crack of dawn?" He grabbed the phone and practically screamed into it, "Who the hell's calling at the crack of dawn?"

"Um...it's me." Johnny recognized Roy's surprised voice and his face reddened.

"Oh, sorry Roy."

"I'm calling because I forgot about Jen's soccer practice this morning, so I'll be out sometime this afternoon. Is that okay?"

"Sure. That's no problem. Come when you can."

"Oh, and Johnny," Johnny could hear the amusement in his partner's voice. "It's not the crack of dawn. It's ten o'clock."

"What! I've missed half the morning!" And without saying good-bye he slammed the phone down and jumped out of bed.

Johnny ran to the bathroom and turned on the shower. Nothing happened.

"What the hell?"

He turned on the sink and again, nothing happened.

"Damn!"

He flushed the toilet and was rewarded when the water went down with a satisfying gulp. But then the bowl remained empty.

"Damn! I have to pee!"

In desperation he ran out into the backyard and relieved himself in one of the bushes. *Thank God I don't have any close neighbors!*

Going back into the kitchen he looked into the refrigerator for something to eat. He was met with one slice of a two-week-old pizza that had thoroughly petrified, three beers, half a loaf of bread that had started growing a bluish-gray fuzz, and something in a Tupperware container he hadn't had the courage to open in well over a month.

"Damn! I'm starving!"

A search through his cabinets netted some popcorn and half a bag of M&M's. "It'll have to do."

He listened to the news on the radio as he popped the popcorn, throwing handfuls of M&M's into his mouth as he shook the pot over the stove. The shaking stopped when the news announced a broken water main in his area.

"No water until 3:00. Wouldn't you just know it!" By the time he remembered the popcorn, most of it had burnt black.

After his breakfast of M&M's and burnt popcorn, Johnny went out to the barn to clean out the stalls. He stopped at the water trough pump and washed his hands and face. He was so thirsty that he cupped his hands and took several gulps of the metallic-tasting water.

"Yuck! That's gross. How can you guys drink this stuff?" Johnny asked the two horses, while pumping the water into their trough. The horses, however, had no complaint with the water and slurped it up.

Johnny got the pitchfork and started pitching dirty hay from the horse's stalls onto a large pile just outside the back door of the barn. As he was pitching the last forkful onto the pile, he slipped and fell face-first into the rancid, manure-encrusted heap.

"Aaaaaaaaah!" he screamed in frustration. Then he screamed again when he realized that he couldn't even take a hot shower! He ran to the pump and quickly washed the filth from his face. Then, looking down at his body, he realized that his face wasn't the only part of him that needed washing. So, with a resigned sigh, he stripped down to nothing, grabbed the horse shampoo off a shelf and slipped into the trough.

The water was freezing and he shivered uncontrollably as he scrubbed. After 15 minutes of roughly scouring his entire body, he stepped out of the trough. He glanced over at the horses sarcastically. "What are you looking out?"

The horses stood innocently, and Johnny could imagine them adjusting the haloes above their heads. It was then that he remembered he'd forgotten to lay down new hay for them. Forgetting about his clothes and

dripping wet, he climbed the ladder into the hay loft and started pitching fresh hay down into the horse's stalls. When he was finished, he looked down at himself and shook his head. Hay had stuck to every part of his wet body and hair.

"If I don't get out of this damn barn soon nobody's gonna want to get within ten feet of me." So saying, he retreated back to the house, leaving his soiled clothing on the barn floor next to the trough.

Johnny stood in line at the checkout of the small family-owned grocery store. The woman in front of him kept looking back at him curiously, making Johnny decidedly nervous. Then when the man behind him also began eyeing him, he knew what the problem was.

He stunk.

Even after scrubbing in the trough and changing his clothes, he still reeked of manure.

The woman in front of him took pity on him when she noticed him blushing furiously. Out of kindness, she turned away. The man behind him wasn't as tactful and suddenly remembered something he'd forgotten to get.

After an eternity, Johnny paid for his food and hurried out the door. As soon as he walked out, he felt a hand grab his upper arm. He looked over at a scrawny, dirty-faced teenager with stringy blond hair. Glancing down, he saw the gun half hidden inside the kid's leather vest.

"Gimme your money, sucker, or I'll blow you away."

"Hey, man. Calm down." The youth's eyes were bloodshot and Johnny noticed the needle marks running along one vein in his arm. With the day he was having, he definitely didn't want to tangle with a kid with a gun who was messed up on drugs. He reached into his pocket and slowly removed his wallet.

As soon as the kid saw the wallet, he grabbed it, pulled out the \$33 dollars resting inside. Then, throwing the wallet over Johnny's head, he took off running.

Ten minutes later a police car pulled into the parking lot. Vince Howard stepped out of the car and spotted Johnny sitting forlornly on the curb in front of the market, a crowd of people standing well away from him.

Seeing Vince, Johnny shook his head. "It had to be you."

Vince smiled at his friend, but the smile faded as he got closer to him. "Geez, Johnny, you stink. What'd you do?"

"Don't even ask."

The first thing Johnny noticed when he pulled into his driveway was a brown and black horse nibbling happily in his vegetable garden. "Guido! How'd you get out?"

In exasperation he jumped out of his car and raced around to the garden. Spooked by the man coming at him full-force, the horse took off, and Johnny ran after him, trying to herd him back into the barn.

After thirty minutes of chasing, a scraped knee and a bruised cheek from falling over a lawn chair, Johnny finally managed to get the horse back into the barn. He was walking back to the house when the sky suddenly opened up and let down a deluge of rain on him.

Johnny stood in the yard, looking up to heaven. "Why me?"

Then he remembered the window. "Damn! I left the window open in the living room!"

Running in the back door, sopping wet, he raced into the living room and tried to close the window.

It wouldn't close.

Banging on the sides, he tried again as the rain poured in on him.

It wouldn't budge.

Slamming down on the top of it, the window finally yielded and slammed shut with such force that it shattered into several large pieces.

As it slammed shut, Johnny's hand slipped down with it and his wrist landed hard on the jagged edge of broken glass.

Johnny stared down at his hand as blood spurted out of the artery.

"Son of a BITCH!"

He quickly yanked off his wet shirt and pressed it hard against the wound, trying to stop the bleeding.

Three minutes later Roy finally arrived to help Johnny with his chores. He found Johnny sitting on the floor in front of the broken window, holding his bloody wrist as the rain poured in on him.

"What the hell?!" Roy dragged Johnny away from the window into the middle of the room. "What happened to you?"

Johnny made no reply but stared up at Roy, his lower lip beginning to quiver.

Roy had seen the same look on his daughter's face enough to know what was coming. "Hey, c'mon. It's no big deal. You're gonna be just fine."

But the soothing comments made no impression and Johnny suddenly burst into tears.

Roy was at a loss. Joanne usually handled the emotional crises at home. Now his own partner, a grown man, was sitting there sobbing. "Hey, c'mon, Johnny. You're gonna be alright."

"It's...it's not that." Johnny looked up at Roy. He looked so pitiful. He was wet and bedraggled. His hair was plastered to his head, a large bruise was forming on his cheek, and what was that awful smell?

"I've been having a really bad day," Johnny sobbed.

Roy self-consciously put his arm around his friend. "C'mon, you can tell me all about it on the way to the

hospital."

Roy helped Johnny stand and walk. Halfway to the car Johnny stumbled. Realizing that he'd probably lost more blood than he'd originally thought, Roy picked him up and carried him to the car.

He laid him down on the front seat and covered him with an overcoat. "Just keep pressure on that wound, Johnny. We'll get there as fast as we can."

Getting in the driver's seat, Roy lifted up Johnny's head and placed it in his lap. "Sorry about the cramped quarters, but I need to keep an eye on you."

Roy glanced down at his friend, trying to figure out if his cheeks were wet because of the rain or if he was still crying. "So tell me about your day."

Johnny sniffled. The sound reminded Roy so much of one of Jennifer's crises that he had to laugh.

"It's not funny, Roy."

"I'm sorry. Go ahead."

"Well, I got up late and then there was no water and I had to pee in the yard and I ate burnt popcorn for breakfast. Then I had to drink well water and I slipped in the manure pile..."

"That explains the smell."

"...Then I had to wash it off in the water trough and the water was freezing and I STILL smelled! Then I got hay all over me and I had to go to the store and people kept looking at me because I smelled so bad."

By this time Johnny was sobbing again, and Roy was beginning to understand why.

"Then...then, when I came out of the store, some drugged-out kid with a gun robs me..."

"You were robbed?" Now Roy was becoming worried.

"Yeah, and of course it has to be Vince who makes the report, but he doesn't want to get near me because I still stink. Then, when I get home, Guido's in my garden and I have to chase him all over and I slipped and scraped my knee..."

"Looks like you bruised your face, too."

"Yeah, and...and then it starts pouring and I can't get the window closed, and then it breaks and I cut myself..."

"And then I found you." Roy shook his head. "I'd be crying, too, if all that had happened to me." Roy patted Johnny's forehead and noticed how cold it was. *He's going into shock.* "We're almost there."

Johnny lay in his bed, happy as a clam. *I never thought I'd be happy lying in a hospital bed.* After waking up from the surgery to repair the artery, he'd thoroughly enjoyed taking a hot shower, even though Dix had to help him. He didn't even mind the smell of the disinfectant soap they'd made him use. It was better than

the manure smell. He also thoroughly enjoyed being lazy and doing absolutely nothing...for a little while anyway.

Roy showed up a little later with Joanne. "We brought you a snack," Joanne announced. She produced a small Tupperware container and laid it on the bedside table.

Johnny eyed it suspiciously. "That's not from my refrigerator, is it?"

"No," Joanne said, confusion in her dark eyes.

"Well, okay then." He opened the container and found a bowl full of popcorn...all of it white.

"Great. Just in time for breakfast."

Roy sat down in the chair next to Johnny's bed. "Johnny, next time you have chores to do at your house, don't start until I get there, okay?"

"You have my word on it."

The end

Author's note: This story is based, loosely, on my own experience. One time in college I'd had a really lousy day and it ended up sort of the way it did in this story. It started raining and, while trying to close the window, I ended up breaking the glass and cutting my wrist. It just seemed like something that would happen to Johnny.