

STILL LIVES

EPISODE TWO: THE TRAVELER

[piano music]

[wind moans]

Soldier: Who are you?

Scientist: Where did you come from?

Archivist: Oh, my goodness—

Soldier: Have you been watching us?

Scientist: Have you been living nearby?

Archivist: Making tracks in the woods!

Kid: I told you.

Soldier: How long have you been watching us?

Scientist: I can't imagine there's much shelter nearby—

Archivist: But that must be why they came here!

Soldier: Answer me!

Traveler: I... um... uh—could you repeat that? It's just, there was a lot of it, and I didn't quite catch what you were...

Soldier: I said, have you been watching us.

Traveler: Oh, uh, yes!

Soldier: Wh—

Archivist: Oh, not in a creepy way, obviously. I'm sure we're kind of hard to miss, it's—

Soldier: Let me ask the questions, I know what I—

Archivist: Could we at least have this conversation inside? We're letting the cold in.

Soldier: We don't know if we can trust—

Traveler: Oh, what's that smell? It's like, like, squash but, uh, um...

Kid: Pumpkin?

Soldier: Kid, get behind me.

Traveler: Oh, yeah! Wow, we never had pumpkins... I, I've never had pumpkins before.

Scientist: And where was it you said you were from again?

Traveler: I, um, listen – would it be okay if I came inside for just a, just a tiny minute? It's just that there are holes in the back of my sweater and the wind's— really killer.

Soldier: No. I'm sorry, we don't let random strangers run in from the woods into our house.

Archivist: You say that like it's our policy.

Soldier: It is!

Archivist: We didn't agree that that was our policy, Sarge. Why can't we be a culture of hospitality? Where we welcome guests into our homes?

Soldier: What are you talking about? Doc, back me up here.

Scientist: Oh, I don't – I suppose if it's just for dinner.

Kid: We have more than enough soup tonight.

Soldier: That we will eat tomorrow! And the next –

Kid: Why don't we ask Cook? Cook will know if we have enough food to share. Cook?

[silence]

Kid: Okay, it's settled then. Just for dinner.

[footsteps]

[door closes, shuts out the wind]

[soup bubbles]

Archivist: Well... welcome!

[chairs scrape]

Traveler: Oh wow, this is great in here. It's like a, a whole pot of soup – I, oops, I'm being rude. I do that sometimes, I don't mean to. Um. Let me introduce myself, my name is—

Scientist: We don't do that here.

Traveler: Oh. Okay.

[pause]

Archivist: Um... you can call me the Archivist. It's because, well – I could show you, actually –

Soldier: Our guest is just staying for dinner, remember?

Archivist: That's the Soldier. We call him Sarge.

Traveler: Oh, wow, you're like a character in Stratego.

Archivist: Straw tee go?

Scientist: You've played Stratego? I used to play with... Cook, did you ever play that game?

Kid: What is it?

Soldier: A game for children.

Archivist: Somehow it's hard to imagine Doc was ever a kid.

Scientist: Well, good for you, Sarge, I think the Sergeant was a pretty good piece. I mean, it wasn't any Spy, but—

Soldier: I earned that title. In combat. Well before some of the people in this room were even born. So don't give me—

Scientist: Okay, okay. And I'm the Scientist, they call me Doc. Here is the Cook—

[silverware clinks]

Scientist: And that's the Kid.

Kid: Hey.

Scientist: Kid, could you make sure the latch on the window—

Kid: Sure!

[footsteps]

Archivist: Hey! We should give you a name.

Traveler: Me?

Soldier: I don't think that's really—

Archivist: The Apparition!

Kid: What – like the ghost from a *Short & Shivery* story?

Archivist: No, uh, you're right. That one's silly.

Scientist: The Guest?

Archivist: Yeah, but that implies – oh! I know –The Traveler! Because you were wandering around in the woods and then you came in here! Well, what do you think?

Traveler (through a mouthful of food): Mm-oooh, yeah. Vat's great!

[pause]

Kid: Cook asked if you were enjoying the meal.

Traveler: What? Oh. *Oh*.

Soldier: Something to say?

Traveler: No?

Soldier: Cook asked you a question.

Traveler: Oh – sorry, I mean, uh, yes?

Scientist: Sarge, lay off.

Traveler: What was the question again?

Archivist: ... how do you like the food?

Traveler: Oh! It's incredible. I don't think I've ever had food so good in my life—it's like, it's like – I don't even know how to describe it, it's creamy, and flavorful. And, and it's like sweet but also – is that salt? Wow, I don't know when's the last time I had salt.

Scientist: I think Cook's turning red. Keep going, maybe she'll start steaming from her ears.

Kid: Look at the snow! It's really coming down.

Soldier: Should have gotten the roofing fixed this afternoon.

Traveler: Oh boy, it's gonna be cold out there tonight.

[pause. silverware clinks]

Archivist: I think, even though I understand this is an unprecedented situation, but I personally think it would be cruel and unusual to let the Traveler spend the night outside in weather like this.

Soldier: Well, he did just fine last night, and the night before, and who knows how many—

Archivist: It wasn't snowing last night.

Traveler: Though I'll tell you, that hoarfrost nearly got—

Soldier: There are lots of ways to make shelter in the snow—

Archivist: For you, maybe! I can't imagine where I would be if I had to—

Soldier: If you paid attention to anything I have ever said—

Scientist: She has a point, Sarge. It's going to be brutal tonight.

Kid: You could share my room. I don't mind, there's space.

Traveler: Wow, really?—

Soldier: ABSOLUTELY NOT. End of story.

Archivist: Well, what do you suggest? I'd share my room, but it's a little cramped—

Soldier: If he's staying anywhere tonight, it's out in the corner shed.

[spoon clatters on a pot]

Scientist: Cook seems to think it's not a good place... not warm enough.

Soldier: He can stay in the corner shed, or he can go back into the woods.

Traveler: Oh, I'll sleep there. I'm fine sleeping in the shed.

Scientist: Mmm, Cook's not sure, but it would probably—

Archivist: I think it's reasonably insulated in there. I mean, not as well as the Archive, but. And it's completely empty, I don't see why not.

Scientist: All right. I'll bring you out there.

[rustling of cloth]

Scientist: Yes, of course on the floor, where else? You can follow me, Traveler.

[music]

[feet crunching on snow. high wind]

Traveler: Do you think the Sarge hates me?

Scientist: Don't worry about it. We're just not used to strangers, that's all.

[door creaks open]

Traveler: Ooh, it's so dark in here.

Scientist: Uh, yes, one second.

[cloth rustles, match strikes]

Scientist: Okay, let me just move this—

Traveler: What's that on the floor?

Scientist: Um, not sure. Looks like it used to be a trapdoor of some kind.

Traveler: What do you think's underneath it?

Scientist: Nothing, probably. If it was used for storage, it was raided long before we got here.

Traveler: But you mean you've never checked?

Scientist: There have been more pressing things to do around here, if you would believe it. Here, help me with—

Traveler: But we should check now! I mean, there could be canned goods—

Scientist: The likelihood of that is less than one percent.

Traveler: But there's nothing to lose from looking.

Scientist: I'm not looking to get tetanus from some rusty trapdoor. That would be a very stupid way to die, and at this point, the worst thing I could do is die from sheer stupidity.

[bedding rustles]

Now, can you please help me with this—

Traveler: Sure, sure! Why don't we put it over on this side, though?

[pause]

Scientist: You're just going to open it once I leave, aren't you?

[pause. Scientist sighs.]

Scientist: You're worse than the Kid. All right, I'm putting on my gloves and I'm going to open it very carefully and you are going to stand over in the corner until I tell you it is safe.

Traveler: Okay! Okay! I'm in my corner! Oh, wow, what if there's canned beans. Or honey! Honey stays good forever, you can always eat honey.

[lock slides, trapdoor creaks open]

[pause. the trapdoor slams]

Traveler: What was it? What was in there?

Scientist: Nothing.

Traveler: Can I see?

Scientist: It's an empty cellar, there's nothing to see. There's probably asbestos.

Traveler: Oh... But—

Scientist: I don't think we have enough blankets. Can you run back to the house? The Archivist can find something for you. Uh, you can find your way back to the house, I take it?

Traveler: Oh, yeah... I think so.

Scientist: Well, if you get lost there's always, you know, the footprints we made on our way over.

Traveler: Oh, right! You're so smart.

[door opens, footsteps fade, door shuts]

Scientist (muttered): What the hell have you gotten us into?

[music]

[running footsteps approach, door bangs open]

Traveler: I think there's a wolf out there!

Scientist: Just the wind. Probably. I doubt we'd still have any chickens left if there were actual wolves nearby. Your bed's ready.

Traveler: But I'll be... safe? In here?

Scientist: Safer than you were last night, anyway.

[pause]

Scientist: It's no Fort Knox, but no amount of huffing and puffing is gonna blow this thing down.

Traveler: Right.

Scientist: You'll be fine. I'll see you in the morning, and maybe we can put you to good use. Goodnight.

Traveler: Goodnight.

[door opens and shuts. pause]

[rustle of bedding dragged across the floor. trapdoor squeaks open]

[Traveler gasps]

[music]

[birds chirping in the distance. a knock on the door.]

[blankets rustling, the Traveler yawns]

Traveler: Mmmnnn?

[another knock at the door. blankets rustle again]

Traveler: I'm – I'm coming. Uh... who is it?

Soldier (from outside): It's the Soldier. Just checking to see if you were still alive.

Traveler: Oh, er, yep, still here.... Thank you?

Soldier: And the Scientist wanted to let you... let you know that we could ... we could use some help in the ... can I ...?

[door opens]

Soldier: What the hell did you do? Your blankets are all—

Traveler: I didn't look anywhere!

Soldier: ...where did you look?

Traveler: Nowhere. I didn't look anywhere. That's what I said.

Soldier: Um ... sure, we appreciate that. Look, the Scientist wanted me to "enlist your help on a useful..." mm, can't remember the exact phrase.

[rapid footsteps approach]

Archivist (out of breath): There you are! Perfect timing. I have something spectacular to show you. Come with me!

Soldier: He's already been enlisted on a...

Archivist: Oh no, I cleared with it with the powers that be. The Traveler's coming with me this morning.

Soldier: Well. Mm. It's your funeral.

[footsteps retreat]

Traveler: I think he hates me.

Archivist: Don't worry about it. Being morose is just part of his charm. Follow me.

[footsteps into music]

[door squeaks open]

Archivist: This ... is my masterpiece.

Traveler: What ... what is all of this stuff?

Archivist: The Archive. It's where I keep records of, well, everything! About Before. About all of the knowledge humans on this planet have collected and ... it's my mission to preserve it. To make sure someone, when they need it, has access to this information.

Traveler: So you... hoard stuff?

Archivist: Well, I preserve, yeah. It's – I mean, it's everything, though. Novels, the World Book – I mean, Ci through Cz. But it's a great part of the alphabet! You get crustaceans in there.

Traveler: Oh yeah, and chanterelles.

Archivist: Uh... just miss those, actually. But only just.

[pause]

Archivist: You like ... mushrooms, then?

Traveler: That's my — I mean. Can I tell you a secret?

Archivist: Please!

Traveler: I'm on a ... quest of sorts. All about mushrooms.

Archivist: ... a mushroom quest?

Traveler: Yeah, you know for what kind of food is out there. What's in the forest that we can be eating? It's gathering – well, it's like you. Information for if somebody needs it.

Archivist: For the future. Yeah.

[click and whirr of the recorder]

Archivist: So, tell me about the mushrooms.

Traveler: What is that? What are you doing?

Archivist: Oh, sorry. Terrible journalistic procedure. This is a recording device.... It will capture what you're saying so we can listen to it again. Is it all right if I record you?

Traveler: You guys have so much technology here. I, I can't even – it's like you're really living the way people used to.

Archivist: Really? I mean, this technology is pretty outdated, it just survived better than what they were using right Before. Mostly stuff in the Archive. Plus the gun, I suppose, but we keep it locked up. You know, I wouldn't put it past Doc or Sarge to have some secret doomsday stuff hidden around. Like they're still

waiting for the apocalypse or something. They can be kind of old fashioned like that.

[footsteps approach, door opens]

Kid: I knew I'd find you here.

Archivist: I finished cleaning the eggs an hour ago!

Kid: Hey, don't tell me. I'm just here to get the Traveler. The Cook has requested your presence in the kitchen. The Scientist says you uh, what was the – "massaged her ego" at dinner last night. I think she just likes the idea of you doing something useful. Which would give the Soldier less to gripe about, anyway.

Archivist: Ooh, "gripe." Where'd you get that?

Kid: It was in TIME Magazine. March 2020.

Archivist: I – wait, how did you have access –

Kid: Traveler, you better come with me, Cook's waiting!

[music]

[kitchen sounds: chopping, slicing, stirring, a fire crackling under a pot]

[the Cook coughs loudly]

Kid: Ah, Cook, not near the soup!

[utensils clang]

Kid: I do not sound just like Doc.

[a spoon tapping against a pot rim]

Traveler: What did that one mean? I thought I was getting the hang of slicing potatoes.

Kid: No – Cook was asking where you were. Where you came from.

Traveler: You mean ... Before ...

Kid: No, I mean, just where you were before you came here. I guess... you could talk about Before before, if you wanted to. But Cook just wanted to know about where you were before you showed up at our door.

[pause]

Traveler: Spent a long time in the woods, I'll tell you that. Have you ever been alone so long you start talking to yourself?

Kid: Sounds like the Archivist.

[a short tsk]

Kid: I ... no, I didn't mean ... yes. I guess I know what you mean.

[knives slicing]

Kid: Cook says you have to keep chopping, or we'll never finish before dinnertime.

[music]

[a crackling fire, the clink of utensils]

Soldier: The Cook has an announcement... that she wanted *me* to make... for some reason. Provided everyone agrees. The Traveler can stay here, for the time being.

Archivist: I agree! I wholeheartedly agree!

Kid: Me too. I agree.

Scientist: It will help to have an extra pair of hands. For the time being.

Traveler: Oh! I don't... (getting emotional) I don't really know what to say.

Soldier: Please don't say anything.

Archivist: We're all so happy you're here! Really. It's only been us for so long.

Kid: Hey! Cook, are you alright?

Scientist: You look pale as a ghost.

[a raspy cough]

Scientist: Yes, I think lying down seems like a good idea.

Archivist: You were coughing earlier – how long have you been coughing for? Does anyone remember how long Cook's been coughing?

Kid: Not long. I don't remember her coughing yesterday.

[the clatter of spilled silverware.]

[a collective gasp]

Kid: Cook!

Scientist: I got her, I got her. Sarge, could you—

Archivist: Here, I can help—

Traveler: I'm closer here.

Soldier: Hey – hey, hey! Chaos isn't gonna help anyone. Kid, you let us handle it. Archivist, get Cook's elbow, I'll support her from the back. And, one, two, three—

[grunts of exertion]

[footsteps]

Scientist: Onto the couch, quick!

Soldier: All right, step back. Step back! We don't know what's going on here.

Scientist: Cook, can you still hear me?

Kid: Cook?

Archivist: Was it something we ate? Traveler, you helped with the cooking – everything was clean, right? Should we be worried about our own food?

Kid: I feel fine. Do you feel fine?

Soldier: All right, everyone. Let's clear off, crowding isn't going to help anything.

[footsteps. the Cook's wheezing fades]

Archivist: Do you think it was the mushrooms? You know mushrooms – were those deadly mushrooms? What do you think the reaction is when there are deadly mushrooms?

Traveler: It can't be. I've eaten those before, and... fit as a fiddle! I'd bet you it was the pumpkins. I've never trusted pumpkins.

Archivist: Do pumpkins have poisonous properties?

Soldier: Oh, would you both just shut up?

[fireside noise fades into the rasp of Cook's breathing]

Scientist: Kid, you can't stay in here. We don't know for sure what this is. There's a good chance it is something contagious.

Kid: I don't care.

Scientist: Kid.

[burst of coughing transforms into retching, long gasp]

Kid: Is that... ?

Scientist: Kid, you get out of this room. NOW.

[footsteps running, retreating]

[the Cook wheezes]

Scientist: This might not be the time ... did you think you were going to be able to keep it hidden forever?

[fireside talk fades up]

Traveler: ... hacking cough, she certainly can't stand up. Could be an allergy. I make all sorts of noises around flowers... an allergy to frost?

[Kid's footsteps rush in]

Soldier: What's going on in there?

Traveler: Oh, maybe it's the radiation poisoning? From all this technology around the farm?

Kid: Cook... just started coughing up blood. It was like she was trying to clear her throat, and it sprayed all down her front. Look, some of it got on my sweater.

Soldier: Take that off! Take that off now – we're getting rid of it.

Kid: What?

Soldier: It's The Illness. It has to be.

Archivist: THE Illness? Do you think it really...

Soldier: Put it in the fire.

Kid: My sweater?

Soldier: You don't understand. This is *The Sickness* – we can't, you cannot get sick, Kid.

[footsteps approach]

Scientist: Do as he says.

Traveler: I didn't know coughing up blood was one of the signs of The Sickness.

Scientist: And I'm sorry, but I think you need to leave.

Archivist: What? We just decided the Traveler was going to stay.

Soldier: It was him. HE brought The Illness into our house!

Archivist: We don't know that! We don't even know that this is The Illness—

Scientist: We can't risk having him here.

Soldier: Look, you said, we just said the Cook was fine until this... intruder came.

Archivist: Traveler. He's called the Traveler, and he would never do anything to hurt anyone—

Soldier: I don't care how it started. The Illness doesn't pay attention to anyone's good intentions. It infects everyone without discrimination, and you're smart enough to know what it does to those infected.

Archivist: It's been years since we've known of anyone with The Illness! Stop and think for a second—

Soldier: None of us would be alive if we second-guessed, if we took chances. That's how people die. And you, Traveler, are leaving now.

Traveler: You mean I have to sleep out in the snow?

Soldier: You brought a deadly disease into this home. I'm sorry, I cannot be concerned about where you sleep tonight when the lives of this family are at stake!

Archivist: What if he refuses to leave?

Scientist: I'm going to check on the Cook. Sarge ... I trust you to handle this. It's on the mantel.

[her footsteps retreat]

Traveler: I'd much rather stay.

Soldier: I don't want to chase you out of here with a shotgun, but I'll do it if I have to do.

Kid: Sarge.

Soldier: Go upstairs, Kid.

Kid: Sarge, why don't we at least talk—

Soldier: You heard what the Doc said. Go upstairs.

[footsteps retreat up the steps]

Archivist: I didn't think you were the sort of person who would threaten a guest, Sarge.

Soldier: I'm the sort of person who protects their family. And I've learned that you can never expect folks to be grateful for saving their lives, but that doesn't stop a person from doing the right thing.

[footsteps. several locks are released. a box opens]

Soldier: The door's behind you, Traveler.

Traveler: That's a gun.

Archivist: Sarge.

Traveler: Wow, I've never seen a gun before.

Soldier: And do you know what it does?

Traveler: Er. Yeah.

[door opens, wind howls outside]

Soldier: Do I have to count to three?

Archivist: It's frigid out there, Sarge.

Traveler: Any chance you'll reconsider?

[the shotgun's action pumps]

Traveler: Okay. I'm gone. I'm gone.

[footsteps retreat, door shuts]

[fire crackles]

[piano music]