

**Clownfish.**

by

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FADE IN:

INT. FOOD PAVILION - DAY

A shiny name-tag: 'Bernie, Meerkats. Ask me I don't bite.'

BERNARD FRIENDLY, mid 20s, wide-eyed and innocent. He sinks his teeth into a sandwich.

He sits alone, away from the crowd. Name-tag pinned to a crisp khaki shirt. An apple on the table before him.

A large sign above the entrance: 'Cribble's Wildlife Park. Touching Wild!'

Below, a face scans the hall: HUXLEY SCOONE, mid 40s. Unshaven, his khaki shirt creased and untucked. Brown bag in hand. He spots Bernard, gives a nervous glance around.

Bernard, still with the sandwich as Huxley seats himself at an adjacent table. Their backs to one another, yet such as both can see the entrance.

Huxley's tag: 'Huxley, Owls'. The 'Ask me...' line crossed out with a marker. He performs a guarded sweep of the room.

HUXLEY

Don't turn around. Act like we're not talking.

Bernard looks up from his lunch confused.

Huxley pulls a box of cereal from the brown bag.

HUXLEY

You like it here Meerkat guy?

Preempting Bernard's frown.

HUXLEY

Not here the food court -- here, touching wild.

BERNARD

It's my first day, I'm on a break  
from orientation.

A travel spork locks in place, Huxley digs into the cereal.

HUXLEY

Uh huh. The good people of Cribble  
recruitment chose you, I can get  
with that.

Bernard levels the sandwich for a bite.

HUXLEY

(mouth full)

What's the story Bernie?

BERNARD

What?

HUXLEY

Why them?

BERNARD

Why who?

Huxley rocks back in his chair, cuts Bernard a knowing  
glance, shovels a spoonful of cereal into his mouth.

BERNARD

Well, I read an article once--

HUXLEY

--Where?

BERNARD

National Geographic.

HUXLEY

Qualifications?

BERNARD

Life sciences.

HUXLEY

See a movie Bernie?

Bernard thinks...

BERNARD

No. I admire their complex social behaviors --

-- Huxley raises a hand, he's heard enough.

HUXLEY

Listen to me, any moment a guy's gonna walk through that door. He didn't read journals, or take courses -- he watches movies. Now he's gonna come at you hard. Whatever you do, you don't give up on those Meerkats. You understand?

BERNARD

Can I still eat my sandwich?

Huxley ponders this a beat. Nods towards the BUFFET.

HUXLEY

See that older guy?

An OLD GUY waits in line, late 50s, Cribble's uniform.

BERNARD (O.S.)

That Old Guy?

HUXLEY (O.S.)

Not him. The older guy.

Behind him: OLDER GUY. Stooped, khaki shirt, looks to be in his late 60s. A face that almost pleads for a swift death.

HUXLEY

Clownfish...

Bernard squirms, more questions than answers.

HUXLEY

...He saw a movie. Been a slave to that tank ten years -- it's not even A.Z.A accredited. Look at him Bernie, take a good look.

Tray in hand, Older Guy shuffles to a table.

HUXLEY  
He's only forty-five.

Bernard, incredulous.

BERNARD  
What about you?

HUXLEY  
It's not about me!

Bernard freezes -- the penny drops.

Huxley shifts awkwardly.

BERNARD  
Owls?

Huxley's silence confirms. His hand, almost subconsciously reaches for his name-tag.

BERNARD  
Which ones?

HUXLEY  
All of them. There's an intern,  
helps out on weekends. We make it  
work.

Riled up, he starts to turn... stops himself.

HUXLEY  
I'm in this for them. Pinot, he's a  
glory hunter, a pin-deep photo op.  
with cute critter of the moment.

Huxley flicks a look to the entrance:

PINOT, late 50s, mustachioed, khaki shirt bedazzled in penguin regalia. A bucket tucked under his arm.

He studies the room from behind his glasses. Eyes alight on Bernard, a big plastic smile curls into place.

Huxley keeps his head down. Bernard's on his own.

Bernard, about to take another bite:

PINOT (O.S.)  
So you're the Meerkat guy.

He looks up to find Pinot before him, hands on hips. Name-tag: 'Pinot, Penguins. Ask me I don't bite.'

BERNARD  
With some Pocket Gopher crossover.

Pinot waves him off.

PINOT  
You like it here?

BERNARD  
Still my first day.

PINOT  
I fell in love my first day.

Bernard, lost for a reply. Pinot swings himself into a chair opposite.

PINOT  
Alpacas.

Huxley rolls his eyes: "please".

PINOT  
We all move on.

BERNARD  
...Penguins.

PINOT  
(terse)  
I worked for it.

He softens, leans in with a wink:

PINOT

Everybody loves Penguins. Family favourite. But really, Meerkats, Penguins, the reward is here --

-- Gives a little heart bump.

A sound, like CEREAL spilling over a table...

Huxley fumbles to right the cereal box. Brushes the flakes into his hand, crams them into his mouth.

PINOT

Even Owls.

Huxley coils. Sheds flakes as he mouths: "Son of a Bitch."

PINOT

I'm sure a photogenic young man such as yourself would find the Penguins just as delightful, who knows, there could be an opportunity. You like fish Bernie?

He gives the bucket a tap.

BERNARD

Clownfish?

Pinot levels him a look, like a fighter sizing an opponent.

Bernard pulls his apple closer.

BERNARD

I like Meerkats. They're installing a viewing bubble.

Pinot chokes back his envy.

PINOT

The world through their eyes...

Pinot rises to his feet, eyes on Bernard, unwavering.

PINOT

Enjoy your apple Meerkat guy.

A thin smile of satisfaction finds Huxley's lips as Pinot shoots the back of his head a withering look.

Pinot takes up the bucket and leaves.

BERNARD

He's all about those Penguins.

HUXLEY

The world turns Bernie, the people want Meerkats now. He knows that.

BERNARD'S POV:

In an act of morose defiance, Older Guy smokes a cigarette, much to the dismay of families around him.

BERNARD

And then?

HUXLEY

Raccoons, my guess.

Bernard mulls this... needs a little more. He turns to find Huxley's empty chair.

HUXLEY (O.S.)

It's the hands.

Bernard looks back --

-- Huxley forms little 'claws' with his hands as he weaves his way toward the exit. Deftly plucks the cigarette from Older Guy as he takes a bite of Bernard's apple.

BERNARD

(to himself)

Of course.

FADE OUT