

University of Mississippi

eGrove

---

Honors Theses

Honors College (Sally McDonnell Barksdale  
Honors College)

---

Spring 5-4-2022

## Lessons from the Aisles: A Collection of Short Stories

Drew Jones

Follow this and additional works at: [https://egrove.olemiss.edu/hon\\_thesis](https://egrove.olemiss.edu/hon_thesis)



Part of the [Fiction Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Jones, Drew, "Lessons from the Aisles: A Collection of Short Stories" (2022). *Honors Theses*. 2725.  
[https://egrove.olemiss.edu/hon\\_thesis/2725](https://egrove.olemiss.edu/hon_thesis/2725)

This Undergraduate Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Honors College (Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College) at eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of eGrove. For more information, please contact [egrove@olemiss.edu](mailto:egrove@olemiss.edu).

LESSONS FROM THE AISLES: A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES

By  
Drew Hastin Jones

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford, MS

May 2022

Approved By

---

Advisor: Vivian B Hobbs

---

Reader: Doctor Sovent Taylor

---

Reader: Doctor John Samonds

© 2022

Drew Hastin Jones

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

## DEDICATION

*To my parents and all my last minute Walmart runs because they forgot  
something on the shopping list*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my advisor and the inspiration behind this collection, Professor Vivian B Hobbs. I would also like to thank Sovent Taylor and John Samonds, second and third reader, for taking the time to read my collection of work.

I would also like to thank my friends for listening to me complain about my thesis. Many nights as we studied or did our homework, they found the time to always ask me how my thesis was coming along, or if I had even started the thesis. No matter my answer, I was always met with words of encouragement and excitement for my final draft.

I want to thank the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College for introducing me to these friends and for giving me a college experience unlike any other. The Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College allowed me to take courses that spark my interest and creativity. If not for the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College, I would have just been another Student ID number lost in classes of hundreds. Instead, I was a student who took smaller, more personal courses that I found interesting and enjoyed, not courses I would suffer through just to graduate.

Most importantly, I would like to thank my parents for always being there for me, whether it be reading my work, listening to my worries, or just Facetiming me to see my face. If it weren't for you two, I would not be the man I am today. I hope I've made you proud, and I hope to keep making you proud.

## ABSTRACT

This thesis is a collection of short stories, each set in a separate aisle of Walmart. By exploring the relationships and conflicts of these characters, I hope to illustrate that life's complexity can be shown in a place as simple and mundane as Walmart.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	7
DENTED CANS	9
GREEN HAIR, DON'T CARE	13
GROWING INTO IT	17
HOOK, LINE, AND SINKER	22
MAN OF THE HOUSE	26
MAXI DAD	31
MONDAYS	37
SWEET RELIEF	42
YELLOW ROSES	47

## Introduction

From a very young age, I was always a big reader. I believe it was all the reading that inspired my creativity. I soon would write make-believe stories of superheroes, monsters, and anything a young boy could imagine. I would begin to talk my parents' ears off with tales of things I may or may not have really done at school, but what is story telling if not lying?

Over the years, my stories and creativity were limited to analysis of my high school reading list and discussions of historical events and the effect they have on us today. One of the last times I truly found myself thinking creatively and writing from the heart was for my Sally McDonell Barksdale Honors College application, where we were tasked to write a fake interview for whoever we deemed interview worthy. I went on to write and discuss why Bruce Wayne chooses to be Batman in a world full of superpowered heroes and villains.

Soon, my college experience became very science-driven, with little to no room for creative writing. Then again, I didn't expect me, a student pursuing his Bachelor of Arts in Biochemistry, to be writing a lot of stories. Before I knew it, I had written more lab reports about protein synthesis than I had tales from my imagination.

In the spring of my junior year, a graduation requirement changed my whole view on life and I realized I could express both my knowledge of science and my creativity. I was enrolled in English 199: Introduction to Creative Writing with Professor Hobbs. We

would discuss poetry and short stories as a class. Soon, I found myself working and writing poems during my breaks from studying or doing homework.

Our final assignment in English 199 was to create a short story, the catch being that it was set in an aisle of Walmart. Now, no offense to research labs, but I found myself drawn to this assignment, and I knew there were more aisles to explore and stories to discover. This led me to declaring a Minor in Creative Writing and asking Professor Hobbs to guide me throughout this whole process.

So these following stories were inspired by the assignment that inspired me to write again. A few of the stories come from the prompt of my original English 199 assignment, while a few are from my imagination alone.

Before people think I have the whole Walmart layout memorized, I will say I have been to Walmart more in this past year than I ever have in my entire life. Plenty of times I would draw inspiration from the shoppers around me. I would see a mother and her daughter arguing, or a concerned man staring at the shelves, or even a Walmart worker slacking off. The thing that was so beautiful about these experiences was I got to choose why they were behaving the way they were. I got to mold and tell the stories of these people I had never seen or met.

## Dented Cans

Bang! Bang! Bang! The loud crashes entered the ears of Bryson “Brother” Jenkins, as he turned down aisle A Thirteen. Mr. Jenkins was no stranger to loud noise, for the laughs and screams of the barbershop still occupy his memory. For the past forty years, Mr. Jenkins had worked at a small, old, rundown barber shop off of the square in Oxford, MS. It was in this barbershop where he was given his nickname “Brother.” Just like an older brother, Mr. Jenkins would interrogate his clients in the chair the second he knew something was on their minds.

“What the heck do you think you are doing,” Mr. Jenkins muffled through his mask.

A young man no more than thirty years old, can in hand, turned around revealing a grocery cart full of dented cans of all types: soup, beans, tuna, and more. Even though the majority of the face was hidden behind a mask, and the body was covered in tattoos, both the eyes and haircut created a sense of familiarity in Mr. Jenkins’ mind.

“Brother? Is that you,” asked the familiar stranger.

With those few words, the stout dark man in front of Mr. Jenkins transformed back into the jittery young man unable to sit still in the barber chair.

“Joseph Williams! Is that you?” gasped Mr. Jenkins

“Yes sir! It has been a while since I’ve seen you or got a quality haircut,” replied Joseph.

“Well someone must be giving them to you because it sure doesn’t look like it has been too long since your last cut,” countered Mr. Jenkins.

A long quiet overcame the two in aisle A Thirteen. Joseph began to stare at the floor as if looking into Mr. Jenkins’ eyes would turn him into stone. The Walmart intercom now broke the awkward silence, as a worker reminded all shoppers to keep their masks over their noses.

“Well, actually, Brother,” Joseph choked on his own voice, “ the barbers at Parchman Prison don’t do such a bad job.”

Mr. Jenkins judgmentally sighed, “ I guess you never did learn to stay out of trouble and take responsibility for your actions.”

Before Joseph was an ex-convict, he was an employee for Mr. Jenkins. Trying to instill some values, his parents had asked Brother if there was any work around the shop. However, instead of coming to the shop and sweeping hair, as he was told to do, it was more important to hang out with his friends. Sadly, hanging out meant replacing the HotWheels for joy rides with his own mother’s car. The only one who was shocked that a joyride ended in an accident was Joseph. Like many of the young folk Brother had seen in his life, Joseph believed he was invincible and that he would never be caught. Mr. Jenkins can still remember the day his mother came into the shop and let him know Joseph had been arrested and wouldn’t be returning to the shop any time soon.

“Let me guess, those so-called friends of yours were also your cellmates, “ scolded Mr. Jenkins.

“No sir, they actually left me on my own, and I was the only one convicted, but I no longer call them friends. To be honest with you Brother, I don’t think they were ever really my friends,” assured Joseph.

“Just because they aren’t your friends doesn’t mean you’ve changed! I see you are still breaking things,” harped Mr. Jenkins.

“Brother, this isn’t what it looks like,” cried Joseph.

“Don’t call me Brother! I’m not related to criminals who cannot learn from their past,” yelled Mr. Jenkins.

Now, tears falling from his eyes into the mask keeping him safe, Joseph turned around making his way out of the aisle. A dark brown leather wallet contrasted the bright white tiles, Mr. Jenkins slowly bent over and picked the wallet up. The wallet was home to only a few crinkled dollars and spare coins. Hidden behind the Washingtons was a photo of a young girl. The closer Mr. Jenkins looked at the photo the more the young girl resembled Patty Schmidt. Patty Schmidt was unlike any girl Mr. Jenkins knew. She had the courage to surround herself with old men of the barbershop, just to visit Joseph. At that moment, Mr. Jenkins' thoughts began to ring louder than any can Joseph had thrown on the ground. The man that stood in front of him today, was no longer that young boy who swept the floors of the barber shop. Just like the cans stashed in his cart, Joseph had been judged for his appearance and not his internal motive. This was a man who was struggling to right his wrongs, and a man who wanted to provide for his loved ones.

“Joseph, wait!”

“What, Mr. Jenkins, did you come to judge me more and tell me how much of a hoodlum I am? Well I don’t need that, I got enough judgment from the guards the three years I was there, and I sure as hell get enough judgment from my daughter’s mother!”

“No, son, I’m done judging, and I wanted to apologize.”

“I appreciate it, Mr. Jenkins,” Joseph softly smiled.

“Besides, how you gonna pay for them cans without this,” laughed Mr. Jenkins as he held up the brown leather wallet.

Joseph shook his head, and for a second, Mr. Jenkins could swear he had begun to turn just as red as the tomato soup that occupied his shopping cart.

“So, what’s her name?” asked Mr. Jenkins.

“Her name is Sophia, and I’m trying to be the best father I can for her. I have made mistakes in the past, and I am not having the best luck getting back on my feet. No matter how hard it gets I can’t give up and I have to keep trying for her,” promised Joseph.

“Well, I know an old barbershop that can use a new barber,” said Mr. Jenkins, “plus you can get some of the best teachings around.”

“Mr. Jenkins, I couldn’t ask you to do that,” responded Joseph.

“Don’t worry, it’ll give Sophia more time to meet her Uncle Brother,” reassured Mr. Jenkins.

“Thanks, Brother,” smiles Joseph as he and an old familiar stranger, now nearly a family member, made their way to the checkout.

## **Green Hair, Don't Care**

How could she be jealous of a woman on a box? She was not confined to the silver metallic square label, she was a real human being with real human emotions and relationships. Yet, she couldn't help but find herself wanting to be this woman. Who wouldn't want to have the perfect luscious strawberry blonde locks? Darlin's hair was a glaring contrast to the woman of her dreams. Where there should have been a light shade of red, with accents of blonde, there was only a disgusting abnormal green. The only way a person could describe it was a shade somewhere between a booger and seaweed.

"Sweetie, stop, you are only making yourself feel worse," pleaded Leon, Darlin's fiancé.

"Well, that's easy for you to say," Darlin cried with jealousy, "we aren't all as lucky to have the perfect shade of gold as you and your whole family."

"We've been over this; I don't care, I love you for you, not because of some stupid hair color," Leon answered familiarly. This was not the first time Leon and Darlin had this conversation. Darlin couldn't help but compare herself to Leon. In her eyes, he was perfect down to his last sun freckle.

“Well, your mom doesn’t look at you as the person who ruins her family portrait year after year,” sighed Darlin, “this year I wanted it to be different, I didn’t want my flaming red hair to be the center of attention.”

“What are you talking about? You don’t ruin the family portrait!”

“Oh really! Remember last summer, when your Mom made me wear that ridiculous Uncle Sam costume.”

“That was funny, and she did that because she loves you and the Fourth of July!”

“No, she did that because she would have rather had Uncle Sam in the family photo than her ginger step daughter.”

In Darlin’s mind, the woman on the box had now been replaced with Leon’s mother, with her perfect blonde hair. She stared right at Darlin. Her smile was now not one of beauty, but of mockery. She saw Darlin for what she was, a green-haired freak. In a fit of rage, Darlin threw the metallic box to the floor, stomping it repeatedly.

“I just wanted to be beautiful, and finally be viewed as a part of the family, not some stranger,” sobbed Darlin.

“Darlin, you aren’t like my family, you are better,” consoled Leon, wrapping his arms around his fiancée “you don’t judge others on their physical attributes, you see the good in people, for who they truly are. So, what if your hair is green? You are still the woman I fell in love with, and the woman I keep falling in love with every day.”

“Leon, I can’t take this Christmas card photo, I just can’t, they already judged my red hair, what are they going to say when we show up with this monstrosity,” asked Darlin.

Leon stormed out of the aisle, and left his fiancée with the mess of the smushed hair dye box. Despite all of his choices, Leon grabbed the first electric razor he could get his hands on. As he ripped the razor free of its plastic casket, he knew what needed to be done. Darlin sat there and tried to clean up the mess she had made. The quietness of the aisle was soon replaced with a steady and familiar buzzing sound. The puddle of dye Darlin had created in her anger was now accompanied by golden locks of hair. Looking up, Darlin saw Leon in the security camera display, but where his perfect hair used to be, there was a long-shaven streak right down the middle.

“They told me I was cleaning up an aisle, not dealing with two mental breakdowns.”

The Walmart worker reached for his radio. He could not believe what he had just stumbled upon.

“Well, I’d love to see you try and distract people from this landing strip,” laughed Leon.

“Leon, what the heck are you doing?”

“Babe, I will do whatever it takes to make sure you know how much you mean to me,” Leon explained, “even if it means going a little bit bald.”

“Honey, I can’t believe you,” admired Darlin as she hugged Leon, not sparing his shirt of any dye.

“Besides, who knows, this could be a good look for me,” smiled Leon.

“What the hell happened here,” asked the confused Walmart worker.

“We were just getting ready for our family portraits.”

Darlin smiled at her future husband, and the two’s laughter filled the aisle. Darlin and Leon replaced their laughter with a sweet and thoughtful kiss in the aisle. They had a family photo to take and couldn't be late. As they made their way out of the aisle, they were replaced with a friendly voice over the sound system.

“Clean up on aisle G Twenty-one please, I repeat clean up on aisle G Twenty-one.”

## **Growing Into It**

*This can't be my son surrounded by diapers and shopping in the baby section. How could this have happened? It feels like just yesterday I couldn't keep him still long enough in the cart to think, let alone buy groceries. Now I can't see my little bleach blonde baby anywhere, instead all I see is a handsome young man hidden behind an untamed five o'clock shadow and bags, bigger than the ones at self checkout, beneath his eyes. He is about to start a new job, in a new state, with a new baby whom I am going to miss. Who am I to complain? This is the first time I think I've seen him since he took Lenora home. Besides, he would be back in six months, but you know a lot can change in six months. Hopefully by then, he will have adjusted to sleeping on parent time, and not look so groggy.*

“Barret, are you sure this formula won't work, this is what we used for your brother and--”

“Mom, I already told you we can't use that, the doctor already prescribed us a special formula for Lenora, it's bad enough we have a fridge full of breast milk that is

going to go to waste, we sure don't need to add that to the list of things to dump down the drain."

*I know he means well, and I am proud of him for being so careful and listening to all the doctors, but does he not understand we went through the same thing. Does he not think I know a thing or two about parenting? No matter, I don't want to ruin the little time I am getting to spend with him.*

"Oh, you're right, I forgot about her last visit. So what are we looking for anyway?"

"Lenora hasn't been eating as much since we put her on formula, so Lola and I found these bottle nipples that are supposed to mimic the feel and everything of an actual human breast."

"Oh wow those must be expensive, have you actually tried this trick—"

"Yes, Mom, we have tried all the tricks, now are you going to help me look for them or not?"

"How about I just see if I can find a worker and they can point us in the right direction."

*You know, I am getting really sick and tired of him cutting me off like that. As I walk towards the front of the store, I can't help but notice all the small adorable clothes. People always tell me if I get rid of everything in my closet, I could clothe all the homeless on the Gulf Coast. I can never argue because what can I say, a sale brings a smile to my face. What they don't know is buying for your granddaughter is much more fun than buying for yourself. My little Lenora can never have enough. There are so many options: baby bibs with the saying "spit happens", cute little cheetah print onesies,*

*the fluffy pink skirts with flamingos, the headbands so small I could wear them as a bracelet, and so much more. Oh my goodness, I don't even know how they can make tennis shoes so small that they fit in the palm of my hand. They have the laces and everything! My Lenora will look so cute in all of this.*

"Excuse me ma'am, would you like a cart?"

Through the pile of outfits spewing out of my arms, I saw a familiar blue vest.

"Oh that would be amazing, thank you---"

I couldn't make out his name tag from behind the safari of animal print baby bodysuits I had added to Lenora's new collection.

"Derek. Is there anything else I could help you with?"

"As a matter of fact, you can. I was wondering, do you have the bottle nipples that are supposed to feel, you know, like the real thing?"

*Did I really just point at my boobs to this Wal-Mart worker?*

"No ma'am, but have you tried putting the tip of your pinkie in with the bottle? It worked wonders for my wife and me."

"That's exactly what I was trying to tell my son earlier!"

"Well, if there is anything else, ask one of our workers and we will be glad to help."

*See, even Derek knows and used the trick, but no, Barret can't use the trick, the trick is too stupid for him. Mom can't be right, she just cuts hair, what would she know about raising a child. I only raised him and his older brother for the past twenty six years! Hell, they are both adults, and I'm still looking after them like when they were just kids.*

“Sweetie, they said they don’t sell them here, you are just going to have to try something else.”

“Mom, why do you have a cart full of baby clothes?”

“Oh I just thought I would buy—”

“ I asked you to help me with this, not buy the whole baby clothes rack!”

“You know what Barret, I’m done. I don’t even know why you asked me to come with you, did you want me to buy the formula for you or something? Is that all I was today? A wallet?”

“Mom, it isn’t like that.”

“Oh really, then what is it like? Because every time I tried to open my mouth or give a suggestion today, you’ve only cut me off or told me how wrong I was before actually listening.”

“Mom, I’m just nervous, okay? It’s bad enough having to pack up the house and move for work, but you throw being a parent into it and things go from crazy to hectic.”

“When you and Lola told us you were trying to get pregnant not even one whole year after your wedding we didn’t fight. You have been dating this girl since you fell in love with her in the tenth grade. So, your father and I thought you could handle this.

Barret, what did you think it was going to be, fun and easy?”

“No, it’s not that. It’s just I don’t know how you and Dad made it look so easy.”

“Barret, look at me, it wasn’t easy, nothing about being a parent is easy. Being a parent is the hardest job you will ever have.”

“Then why did you and Dad want kids?”

“The same reason you and Lola had kids, if I had to guess. You love someone so much and you want to share that love with something that is yours, something that you made. Then that something grows up, and if you do your job right, they grow up to make you proud and surprise you with a granddaughter or grandson you get to spoil and help raise all over again. Because the secret to any good parent is an even better grandparent. They're the ones who lighten the workload when you've got no energy left.”

“I love you, momma, and I don't know what I would do without you. I'm so tired I can barely read these labels, and if I change one more dirty diaper I think I will cry. Please come help me, I don't care what those stupid 'Parenting for Dummies' books say, I need and want my Mom's help. ”

“Hey don't get me crying in Wal-Mart. My baby girl has some clothes to try on and they don't need Lolli's tears on them. Or even worse, her daddy's tears.”

“I am not crying! So what did you even bring me?”

“Well, you could see it if you wipe away those tears.

“Mom!”

“I'm just picking.”

“Mom, half of these clothes are for babies six months or older.”

“Well, she will just have to grow into them, and her Lolli can see how good she looks in them when she gets back from Texas.”

“I like the sound of that, Mom, so please tell me about this bottle trick.”

## **Hook, Line, and Sinker**

As Moby Bass excitedly passed the multiple aisles, his wife Edna could only trail looking down and wondered what could have been. As two young children shot a basketball back into the storage bin in front of the aisle, Edna wondered how much work she could get done if Moby was out playing pick-up basketball with his friends. Another young man walked past them with a handful of refurbished golf balls. As he passed, Edna wondered how much sleep she would save if Moby picked up golf instead of fishing. Moby didn't even need to be good at golf, he could get the best of both worlds. Moby could spend his weekend fishing for golf balls out of water hazards instead of dragging her along to Sardis every Saturday. No matter who or what passed them nothing could distract Moby from his goal and destination, aisle I Twenty-five.

Edna Bass never thought her life would revolve so much around fish. As she stood there surrounded by the bright neon bobbers, the hooks of all shapes and sizes, and the rods covered in superheroes and princesses, she only wondered how much of her seventy years on this world had dealt with fish. Hell, her own last name was a fish! The moment her Moby, now husband, told her that he was named after the fabled Moby Dick, she should have reeled in the line and called it quits. Yet, she let Moby bait her in with all the romantic picnics and sunrises out on the boat. Once for her eighteenth

birthday, Moby had prepared a candle-lit, four course dinner on the water under the stars. All that Edna had left from those moments were love handles, and this dark tan skin that resembled the leather rod storage rack for sale in front of her.

“Hey honey, do you think we should get live bait again or just stick to the lures,” Moby asked, staring at the live bait fridge, as if these refrigerated slimers held the key to finally catching THE big one.

“Whatever you think will work best, sweetie,” begrudged Edna, as she knew that no matter if it was a worm, a cricket, or a piece of plastic on the end of that hook, Moby was not going to catch anything.

For a man who loved to fish so much, Moby Bass sure was the worst at it. If his parents had sat out on that boat with him for the past fifty years like Edna, they would have known to name him Ahab. For just like the captain, Moby Bass was always looking, always searching for that one fish. That one fish that would make sense of the countless hours on a boat, the countless amount of money he had spent, that one fish he could proudly show off on Facebook to his friends.

No matter, Moby and Edna always finished with fish whether any were caught or not. Like clockwork, Moby would put the boat on the trailer, kiss Edna in the passenger seat, look her in the eyes, and let her know they would get them next week. Moby would then drive to Captain D’s and order a Deluxe Seafood Platter for the two of them to split at home.

“Honey, you think the fish will bite at this,” pondered Moby as he stuck a plastic container right into Edna’s face.

As the revolting stench of dead worms, mud, and whatever the hell they put into that stuff engulfed Edna's nose, all the frustrations with fishing engulfed her memory.

"Honey, I hate fishing," blurted out Edna, " I hate waking up so early, I hate the constant sunburns, I hate sitting in the boat bored out of my mind, and I hate not catching any fish!"

Moby stared at her, dumbfounded, as if he were a fish out of water gasping for the right thing to say.

"Edna, I had no idea, I thought you always enjoyed our weekly fishing trip to Sardis," Moby muttered sadly, placing the lid back on the bait.

As she stared at the sad shadow of what used to be her excited husband, Edna began to look around the aisle. Her outburst had grabbed the attention of many fellow fishermen shopping for their trip necessities. It was there she realized she was the only woman in the aisle, hell probably the only woman remotely near this section of Walmart. Edna realized she had caught the best fish of all, a husband who actually wanted her around. Fishing was an escape for these men, but for her Moby, it was just more time to spend with the wife he loved, doing what he loved.

"Moby, I am so sorry," apologized Edna, "I don't hate fishing, baby. I just think that the time we spend together doesn't always have to be out on that boat. I know you love fishing, but sometimes I want to do what I like."

"Edna, I always assumed you just loved being out there just as much as I did," replied Moby.

"I did and I do, but, sweetie, I'm not out there for the fish, I'm out there for you," explained Edna.

Moby placed the bait back into the Walmart bait fridge, and with a large smile on his wrinkly tan face, he embraced his wife. He knew there was no other fish in the sea compared to his wife. She was his greatest catch, and would always be his greatest catch.

“Let’s get out of here, baby, I have all I need at the house, besides I’m starting to get hungry. What were you thinking for dinner?”

“Why not Popeyes? I sure am in the mood for chicken.”

## Man of the House

Meat has a ton more protein in it than any vegetable does. Or, at least that was Louis' sole belief in his diet. After his friends started going to the gym, he decided to muscle up, and turn his diet to solely protein. If there was a form of protein, Louis had it—Muscle Milk protein powder, Premier Protein shakes, peanut butter and chocolate chip protein bars, he even had those disgusting protein pancakes. But this was his most favorite aisle, the meat section.

There they were in all of their blood-oozing, raw-glory beauty. Walmart's meat section was no butcher shop, but it never disappointed. They had beef, they had chicken, they had fish, Louis would even choke up at the packed sandwich meat. To Louis this was no aisle, but rather a stunning art gallery of shades of red and pink. Where artists differ in brush stroke, Louis' works were judged on their cut: ribeye, tenderloin, and the Mona Lisa of meat, the filet.

“Can you quit drooling? Hurry up and grab what you need, it's bad enough knowing how many animals you eat in a week. The last thing I want to do is stand here surrounded by all this carnage, it makes me sick.”

Lucy. What could someone say about Lucy? Oh, that she was the exact and total opposite of her brother, Louis. Lucy had always been and always will be an animal lover, whether it be her cat, her dog, her hamster, or even Nemo, her goldfish, she showed them and any animal love. So, needless to say, when Lucy put two and two together about family hamburger nights, her life took a turn for the more vegan side. Not

only did she go vegan, but she had to make a podcast to inspire others and teach people vegan recipes.

“Oh shut up, just because you and all those ‘Lucy Lemon’ fans want to cry about eating animals, doesn’t mean I have to.”

“Whatever, animal killer.”

Finally, he could get back to his options. What should he have tonight? Louis did say he was trying to bulk up. Chicken breast, can’t go wrong with chicken breasts? Wait, what is she doing? Is she grabbing something from the meat section, had Lucy finally come to her senses?

“What the hell is that?”

A green box was in Lucy’s hands. Lucy turned it over to reveal a disgusting gray-like patty.

“It’s Beyond Meat hamburger patties!”

Beyond Meat? How could anything be beyond meat? The only thing it looked beyond was the expiration date, thought Louis.

“I’ve seen these all over social media, they are supposed to taste just like hamburgers, but they are completely vegan.”

“Yeah, I’m not eating that. Go ahead and put it up now.”

“Oh whatever, afraid that you might actually like them, carnivore?”

“No I just know the last time I checked they were called HAMburgers, not that Beyond crap.”

“Oh wow, sorry genius, but it’s not like they are made of ham, so what does it matter anyway.”

“That’s beside the point. Like I said, I’m not eating it.”

“Mom!”

Oh great, Lucy had to get Mom involved. It didn’t take twenty-twenty vision to see the anger on their mother’s face as she stormed out of the condiment aisle. It’s a miracle there was no one in front of her, and thank goodness, because at the speed she was pushing that cart our local shoppers would have been run over before they could even turn their shopping cart an inch. Ever since Louis and Lucy’s father had passed away, even the simplest things could send her into a frenzy. So, Louis could only imagine what lecture he was about to get for a public fight in Walmart.

“I leave you two together for five minutes and you are yelling across the store! What is so important that you have to cause a scene?”

“ I saw these new vegan burgers and I want us to try them, but Mister Muscle over here won’t let me put them in the cart!”

“Mom, I—”

“No, I don’t want to hear it. You know your sister is trying this new lifestyle, and we as a family should be open to new things.”

“But, Mom!”

“No buts! Louis, you are eighteen years old, you need to grow up. How bad could they even be? Who knows, you might even like them.”

“That’s what I said!”

“Now, I am going back to get that bottle of ketchup, and when I get back, I want the two of you to be behaving.”

Their Mom then turned the shopping cart with such vigor, the remaining groceries flung to the opposite side of the cart.

“You ever notice how I’m always the one getting the lecture?”

“Well you usually are the one in the wrong.”

“Oh, shut up, Lucy, you know I can’t be too terrible, we came from the same egg, ya know.”

“Just because we are twins, that doesn’t mean we are the same person.”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you! Lucy, do you know why I go to the gym so much?”

“I mean I can only imagine it’s the same reason as all your other meathead friends, to get ready to pull babes in college.”

“No, it has absolutely nothing to do with college.”

“Well, then it’s for some girl, why does it matter?”

“I go for two girls and it means everything.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about you and Mom. When Dad died I became the man of the house, and the man of the house is supposed to be strong. The man of the house is the one who gets the lectures, not his sister.”

“I had no idea.”

“It’s fine, just get your vegan stuff. I don’t need any more lectures from Mom today.”

“Are you serious?”

“Being the man of the house doesn’t just mean being strong enough to lift, but being strong enough to know when I need to cave. Now, grab your stuff and let Mom know I’m in the bathroom.”

As Louis walked away, Lucy sat there and stared at her brother. How long had he been pushing himself for us? When did her twin brother become an adult?

“Where is your brother?”

“Oh, he just went to the bathroom.”

“Well, did you two get your act together?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Lucy placed the Beyond Burgers at the bottom of the cart. Lucy then grabbed a filet mignon, and placed it into the upper part of the cart.

“He doesn’t have to try them if he doesn’t want to, besides I think he could use a good steak.”

Their mother stared at the filet confused. She had no clue what took place when she left. Whatever it was, all that filet could do was put a smile on her face.

## Maxi Dad

The pastel colors of the boxes in front of him only left Matthew more and more confused. How could his baby girl already be a young woman? It was only yesterday Matthew and Sara Mitchell brought their seven pound nine ounce Maggie home from the hospital. Now, where there once was a baby needing to be held, there is a young woman suffering from cramps and mood swings.

“ God, I have no idea what I am doing,” expressed Matthew as he put his face into his hands.

Looking up, the blue boxes might as well have been a tsunami heading straight towards him.

“How the hell are there so many of these things? Pads, sport, super absorbent, where do I even start?”

Looking up and down the aisle, Matthew began to imagine and feel the bewildered stares of multiple men shopping, as they passed the unfamiliar aisle.

“What the hell am I even doing in this aisle? This is not where Dad's belong,” sighed Matthew, “ I should be buying razor blades and shaving cream teaching the son I wanted to know how to shave. Or explaining to him that body wash and shampoo are NOT the same thing. Instead, I'm standing here awkwardly in front of a wall of tampons.”

“You know they can only be so intimidating if you give them the power to be.”

Matthew couldn't believe what he was seeing. No it couldn't be, was this another man? No, it had to be another woman. This woman just had the deepest voice he had ever heard, sporting the long beard to go with the image.

"I'm sorry I tend to think a lot louder than I wish I did."

"It's understandable, I remember my first freakout when I had to make my first visit to this aisle."

"Oh God, you heard me complaining about my daughter. I love her and there isn't anything I wouldn't do for her."

"I don't doubt it, I mean look at where you are. Besides, you wouldn't be a real Dad if you didn't think about having a son instead every now and then."

"I guess you're right. So you come to this aisle often?"

"You know how it goes, I stop by once a month."

The bearded stranger began to laugh loud and obnoxiously confirming this was no bearded lady. The deep howl echoed through the store. Matthew wouldn't have been surprised if you told him that the workers in the bakery across the store heard this man's cackle.

"Sorry, just a little single dad period joke. If you can't laugh about it, who can?"

"Oh you are a single father?"

"Well aren't you? I mean those tampons aren't for you are they?"

"Oh gosh no, I'm getting them for my daughter. Besides, I'm not divorced or single."

"So what's a married man doing at Walmart grabbing tampons? Your wife convinced you to spend your day off buying these?"

“As a matter of fact, I’ve been off work for a long time. I’m a stay at home dad for right now. ”

This was the first time Matthew had spoken about his being unemployed. Why was he opening up to this stranger? Covid had not only turned the world upside down, but it flipped the Mitchell family as well. Sara was a nurse practitioner at the local emergency clinic. Her twelve hour days began to feel more like twenty with a constant flow of covid patients.

All the while, Matthew’s bistro began to lose more and more, until he had to replace his commercial kitchen for the one at home. Many days he wished he could replace the PB&Js with his crepes. His wife’s complaints were always welcomed, but they didn’t bring nearly as much satisfaction as a server bringing back clean plates to the kitchen. Plus, the thrill of having multiple orders was lost when you were only cooking for three mouths, five if his parents would muster the courage to come over.

“I’m sorry, but there’s nothing wrong with being a stay at home dad.”

“Oh really? Well, are you the one who is constantly being reminded by his wife how hard she is working? Or are you the one who is the butt of all his brother's jokes? Or are you the guy who lost his dream job of owning his own bistro? No, that would be me, the guy standing here not knowing what the hell he is doing!”

Behind the scraggly mask of brown facial hair, the giggling man’s smile faded into a frown.

“Well at least your wife comes home.”

Wow. Just wow. Matthew was soon reminded of every momma brings home the bacon joke, every who wears the pants in the family joke, and all the other lack of

masculinity jokes he could think of being told. Yet, any and all of those made him feel no worse than he did right now at this moment. Here Matthew was complaining about his life that he shared with a woman he loved and a beautiful daughter, to a man who was doing this all on his own. Hell, Matthew didn't even know this bearded man's name.

"Now that's a look I know too well. This is the part where you start feeling sorry for me."

"No, I just want to say I'm sorry, I must sound like such a whiner..."

"Alright that is where I'm gonna stop you right now. We are Dads, we get to whine and complain to each other. We can't look weak to our family, to our employers, and especially to our children. So, for once, let it all out. I sure as hell am not going to judge."

Who the hell was this guy? Have years of shopping for tampons bestowed some all-knowing power upon him? If Matthew knew that he would have come and bought these for his wife years ago.

"So now that you got all that off of your chest, let's start this over again. Where were you when I walked up?"

Was this guy some shrink? Was he licensed to understand the emotions and behavior of all his fellow shoppers? Or, was he just a father who knew the struggle that Matthew was facing?

"Ummmm, I was just saying how I can't believe I am here buying tampons for my daughter?"

"Well I'm Chase Myers, single father, and you are?"

"Matthew Mitchell?"

“Well Matthew, you are in luck because I’ve kind of got this whole awkward lady business shopping thing down to a science.”

“Chase, why are you doing this?”

“Like I said, if it isn’t our families, it’s society knocking us down. So when a Dad needs help, I think other Dads should step in and have each others’ back.”

Chase Myers was the exact polar opposite of Matthew Mitchell. Chase stood proud with confidence, while Matthew would rather be anywhere in the world. Matthew wanted this confidence, Matthew wanted to not care what other people thought when he told them his situation. Matthew wanted to be the best father he could possibly be.

“ So, Chase, when your daughter was going through her first, you know, what did you get her?”

“How the hell would I know, I’m just her Dad.”

The loud bellowing laugh had made its triumphant return, echoing louder than the one before.

“Just some more Dad humor, Matthew. I just did what anybody would do, I Googled it.”

How the hell had Matthew not thought of this. The answer was in his pocket this whole time. All of this embarrassment could have been avoided with the simple touch of a screen and search button.

“I’m such an idiot.”

“No you are just a Dad who was overwhelmed. To save you the trouble, your best bet is these.”

Chase reached across and grabbed a light green box of Always Maxi Pads off the shelf.

“These should do the job, and in a few months, if she is ready she can make the leap to tampons.”

“Well, I think I’ll save that for another day and for her mother.”

“Nah, Matthew, you can handle it, trust me. Also, when the bistro opens up again, I’ll stop by and put your cooking where my mouth is.”

“Thank you, Chase. I’ll make sure to save you a seat.”

Chase Myers slowly pushed his cart past Matthew’s, shockingly towards the razor blade aisle. Turning around with what a person could only assume was a smile underneath the bushy jungle he called a beard.

“Matthew, I don’t know if you can make it yourself, but stopping by the ice cream before you check out isn’t the worst idea either.”

## Mondays

Mondays, I hate them with a burning passion. Mondays are the end of my weekends. Saturday and Sunday, I get to escape from the office and have a drink with my friends, or play a round of golf, or go see the new movie everyone is talking about, or just stay in bed all day binging my favorite show for the third time in a row. Then, Monday has to come around and take that all away from me. As if they couldn't get any worse, this year February 14<sup>th</sup> fell on a Monday.

Valentine's Day, one of the most heartwarming and heartbreaking holidays. I miss the old school days when everyone in your class would surprise each other with candy and cards with an array of cartoon characters. Or I just think about those days because it makes what I am doing a little less pathetic. How many other twenty-four year olds are in the front aisle of Walmart buying half off candy for Valentine's Day.

Hell, I couldn't think of the last time I really celebrated Valentine's Day. I don't even think I have. I mean I only had one girlfriend, it wasn't my fault we broke up. I can't help that we broke up the day before the holiday. No matter what those were, a pretty good four months, besides it saved me the money I would have spent on any gift.

"Your kid forgot to buy Valentines for his class too?"

As I turned around, I was expecting to find your stereotypical stay at home mom, but where there should have been a Karen, was a short brunette girl. This girl had no idea who I was, but her smile was affectionate. This girl must have been my age, hell

she could have even been younger, but she was a mother? And she thought I had a kid?

“No, I was just kind of going down memory lane I guess.”

“Memory lane? I could have sworn you had your eyes on those Fortnite cards, but if you aren’t going to take them can you pass them my way?”

“Sure thing.”

I had absolutely no idea what a Fortnite was, but if this girl had asked for my right arm I would have given it to her. I couldn’t explain it, I felt like I knew nothing about this girl, but at the same time, I knew everything about her, or at least I wanted to.

“You have no clue which one I’m talking about, do you?”

“Is it that obvious?”

“Yep, then I was completely wrong because if you had kids you could spot those damn characters from a mile away.”

She then reached past me, and grabbed a pack of thirty valentines with cartoon characters varying in costumes from army men to superheroes, all the way to a walking fish.

“Well damn how many kids do you have?”

“Oh I have twenty-three.”

Twenty-three kids! What? How the hell was that even possible? How the hell did she still look so great?

“Oh my gosh if you could see the look on your face right now!”

Oh no, how shocked do I actually look? God I hope she doesn't think I think low of her. Wait a minute, why am I stressing out so much? I don't know this girl, if she has twenty three kids she sure as hell isn't single, and it isn't like I'm going to see her again.

"Sorry I know it's a lame joke, but I'm a first grade teacher. Admit it though, I got you good!"

"Okay okay, I'll admit I was wondering how someone could pop out twenty-three babies and look as good as you do."

Holy crap did I just say that out loud? What was I thinking? She probably thinks I'm such a weirdo.

"Oh so you think I look good? Won't your girlfriend be upset?"

"What makes you think I have a girlfriend?"

"Well normally, if you are in these three front aisles you are trying to find a last minute gift for your girlfriend, because you completely forgot it was Valentine's Day."

"Well, if that's the case, are you trying to tell me your boyfriend wants the Fortnite candies?"

"Of course not, he's more of an oversized teddy bear fan. The Fortnite candies are for my class."

Well isn't this just perfect! The moment I think I have a chance, I just get reminded how much Valentine's day sucks. I mean come on, God, why introduce me to this amazing girl if she isn't even single. I mean maybe I am supposed to be that lonely hopeless romantic who doesn't get to celebrate Valentine's day and be gifted the big ass teddy bear.

“So wait a minute, the school day is already over? Why do you want or need Valentine's day candies now?”

“Oh come on you can't tell me you don't know the trick.”

“There's a trick?”

“Well it's the oldest teacher trick in the book. When the holiday is over, the candy prices go down a lot and now I have enough treats to reward my kiddos.”

“Well that's pretty smart of you....”

“Allison, but my students call me Ms. Blake.”

“Well, Ms. Blake, I'm Tyler. Also, not to burst your bubble, but I'm actually here because of your trick.”

Wait a minute did I really just admit to coming to Walmart and buying cheap Valentine's day candy? How pathetic can I sound? I guess it's a good thing Allison is dating someone because I sure as hell don't have a shot with her now.

“See now you're speaking my language, I can respect a man with a candy side hustle. So what's your go-to candy?”

“Well the heart-shaped box full of chocolates is a classic, but I've actually got my eyes on a pack of all pink starburst.”

“You think you can point me in the direction of those?”

“Your students big fans of Starburst?”

“Heck no, those are for me!”

“Well I hate to break it to you, but there was actually only one bag left.”

“Oh wow, you aren't going to let the teacher have them?”

“I thought you just said they were for you?”

“Well it’s hard to teach your students to share, if you don’t practice what you preach.”

This is just my luck. I don’t get the girl, and now I can’t even get the pathetic lower priced candy I want. If I don’t give it to her, I’m a jerk. If I do give it to her, I’m stuck with the those stupid Blow Pops that get stuck all in your teeth.

“Sure, I mean what kind of a guy would steal candy from kids.”

“Well, Tyler, I won’t leave you empty handed.”

She handed me one of the old Fortnite valentines from her cart. She pulled out a pen and began to write something.

“Happy Valentine’s Day, Tyler”

Just like that Allison Blake walked out of the aisle, and just like for the past six Valentine’s days, I was alone. I was doing my best not to freak out and read the valentine right away. I can’t be that guy who looks desperate, besides it’s probably just a generic ‘Happy Valentines Day.’ Only one way to find out. Surrounded by cartoon characters was the tiniest message.

“Didn’t your mother ever teach you it was rude to cuss in front of a lady? Maybe that’s why you don’t have a Valentine.”

Wow, what the hell would she know? Who does she think she is, my mother? She wasn’t any supermodel, besides I can do way better than her. All I know is, I can’t tell you how much I hate Mondays!

## Sweet Relief

Ella begrudgingly pushed the Walmart cart down aisle A Nine. She used to light up at the sight of candy, but now there was only a young woman who wondered, on top of a locked cartwheel, what else could go wrong in her life.

“Sweetie, do you think you and the girls would rather have the Skittles or M&Ms,” her mother, Dot, asked, holding a big bag of each in each hand. “You know I’ve always been a chocolate girl myself, but it’s y’all’s night unless you want this old lady partying it up too,” laughed Dot.

“It doesn’t matter, get either one I don’t care,” Ella answered not even looking at her mother but instead opening her phone to see what was going on in the real world.

Her phone was her only means of knowing what was staying in touch with the real world. Through that screen, she could see everything that she was missing. No matter what app she opened she would only see the things that she could not have. Homecoming pep rallies, the Friday night lights, even the homecoming dance itself. This was all taken from her, not only from a pandemic, but also by her mother.

Ella used to be a normal teenage girl who worried about normal teenage girl things. Would she make the homecoming court? Did she even have a chance to win?

Would the cute boy in her third-period history class ask her to homecoming? What would she wear? These questions were all left unanswered because of her mother.

“Ella, I don’t want to ruin the fun of tonight’s sleepover, but we need to talk about your school work. I was talking to Mr. Rodriguez about your essay, he said that your work seemed somewhat lackluster.”

“Well that’s what happens when you aren’t in the actual classroom.”

“Hey I think I’ve done a pretty good job being an at home teacher. Besides, we get all the notes and work from the school.”

“Whatever.”

“Even if Mrs. Mom can’t help you figure it out, you have all those recordings of the actual class to watch.”

“Yeah because those are so helpful and I just love watching them in my free time.”

“Okay I get it. So did you finally decide on our M&MS vs Skittles debate?”

“Mom, I don’t care about the stupid candy!”

“Ella, what has got into you?”

“It’s nothing, Mom, I just don’t care about the candy,” Ella answered annoyed.

“Well, we don’t even have to have the sleepover, I’m doing this for you.”

This was the final straw. She was doing this for her? She was the reason this was happening. She was the reason Ella hadn’t seen her friends, she was the reason Ella was out of the loop, she was the reason for all of it.

“Some stupid sleepover isn’t going to make everything normal. Hell, you made my friends send you their vaccination cards before I could even invite them,” snapped

Ella, "So I'm sorry if I don't care what bag of candy we get because it's not going to make things back to normal. Did you know the boy I've had a crush on for a long time took Sam to homecoming? No, I didn't think you would, but I had to find out by seeing them kiss and dance all over my phone! So don't tell me this is for me when you're the one who took this from me" cried Ella.

Dot stood still, her jaw touching the bright white tiles of the Walmart floor. How could she have done this to someone she would have given anything to, even her life. How could she not have seen the pain she had caused her daughter. Was she really that blind?

"Sweetie, I had no clue," Dot choked on her words.

"How would you know, you are always so focused on that stupid television. Percent decrease here, percent increase there, new variants, new vaccines, this whole damn disease has taken over your life, and you don't even have it!"

"Don't have it right now."

"Oh my God, Mom, you aren't going to get Covid, you are one of the most paranoid people I know! You even wear a stupid mask in the car!"

"Had, sweetie. I had Covid."

"What?"

"You remember that first month away from school once it broke out?"

"Yeah, why?"

"Well, I wasn't staying in my bedroom catching up on the DVR, I was in my room stressed out and staying as far away from you as I could."

"Mom you had Covid, why didn't you go to the hospital? Why didn't you tell me?"

“I was asymptomatic, but that didn’t mean you would be, and I couldn’t take that risk of you getting sick.”

“Mom, are you crazy? You could have died!”

“But I didn’t, you know why?”

“Because you’re insane and got really lucky.”

“No, because I had the right motivation,” explained Dot as she rubbed Ella’s cheek, “I stayed in quarantine like you are supposed to, and I didn’t let my pride and joy get sick.”

“Mom, I love you, but you can’t keep me from the world.”

“I don’t want to keep you from the world, I just want to keep you safe.”

“I know that. Mom, but sometimes I am going to fail, I am going to get sick, and I am going to mess up. When those times come, I know I will have my Mom there to help me.”

“Oh, Ella, I am so sorry. I can’t believe that I have totally ruined your sleepover.”

“Actually, I think I’m going to call them and let them know the sleepover got moved to next week.”

“What?”

“I don’t know, I just think I’d rather catch up on the DVR with my Mom. Besides, I know she loves M&Ms, but I am a sucker for Skittles. So, maybe we should just get both bags.”

“Ella, do you really mean that?”

“Yeah, you know I’ve been at home this whole time, but I can’t remember the last time we just hung out together.”

“It would be nice to have you out of your room for once. Plus, both bags aren't a terrible idea. It can give me something to snack on while I go over the school board's safety protocols, and I might just consider letting you go back.

“Mom, I'm going back to school?”

“No, I didn't say that, but I will CONSIDER letting you go back to school.”

“Oh thank you, thank you, thank you, Mom.’

There she was, Dot hadn't seen her in a long time. Jumping for joy was Dot's baby girl who used to get excited in the candy aisle.

## Yellow Roses

You know a lot of people don't even think about taking the Writing section of the ACT, but, of course, you know who requires it, Harvard. It's not like it helped any; their entrance exams were terrible. However, all the studying for the ACT did give me a stronger and more refined vocabulary. So, instead of using a word like boring to describe this experience, I would call shopping with Meemaw monotonous, or mundane, or bromidic.

"Marshall, sweetie, could you find somebody and ask if they have yellow roses?"

"Yes, Meemaw."

How long could someone stay in the garden section of Wal-Mart? Being stuck here is already bad enough having to see what characters this place brings in, now she has us out in the cold with the excuse of heat, the garden section calls A/C. Plus, doesn't she know that roses are supposed to be red, why would we want yellow roses?

"Hey, excuse me, I was wondering y'all sell any yellow roses by chance?"

The Wal-Mart worker adjusted his headphones out of his ears. I doubt he even heard what I asked.

"Sorry man, I don't work in the garden section. I can radio or make an announcement over the intercom if you want."

“Nah man, don’t worry about it.”

What was I thinking? Of course they don’t have yellow roses, and neither did the store before it, and neither did the store before that. Doesn’t Meemaw know I’m only here for the weekend? Columbus Day is no Christmas break, but it isn’t like it makes a difference anyway, a break at Harvard is never really a break. I’m sitting here thinking of a million other assignments I could be getting ahead of, but no, I’m at Wal-Mart looking for these stupid yellow roses with my wrinkly, back aching, flower-loving Meemaw.

“Meemaw, they said they didn’t have any.”

“Oh dear, that’s unfortunate.”

“So, does that mean I can take you home?”

“No, I know of just one more shop in town, Chloe’s Carnations surely has to have them.”

“Meemaw, what is the deal with these yellow flowers, heck you used to own a flower shop; do you not have seeds laying around your own house?”

“As a matter of fact, I don’t and Marshall these yellow flowers mean a lot.”

“Why, it’s just a flower!”

Oh God, what was I thinking? Did I just call a flower just a flower to Meemaw? I knew I had upset her the moment I heard her cane thud against the floor and I could only see the back of her light yellow cardigan. Why won’t she turn around? Is she crying? I can’t stand this anymore, I can’t believe I said that to her. I didn’t mean it, but I said it. How could I have said that?

“Marshall, there’s a reason I always have yellow roses on my nightstand.”

Meemaw keeps them on her nightstand? I can't believe I never noticed. I always go straight to the pantry, or the fridge. How was I supposed to know she had them on her nightstand?

"No, ma'am."

"They were your Papaw's favorite. He would come into the old shop at his lunch break, and even though I was surrounded by flowers, he never stopped."

"Stopped what?"

"Bringing me yellow roses. He told me time and time again, no matter how many I had, I could never have enough to show how much he loved me."

I would have never thought my Papaw could do something so thoughtful. I was always convinced he only ever worked and griped about things. If he wasn't at the electric plant, he was in his chair yelling at the Saints. It didn't really matter how long or how loud he yelled, Papaw never made it to the end of a game. Around halftime, he would always get up, walk to his bedroom, and go to bed to wait for that four o'clock alarm.

"I'm sorry Meemaw, I had no idea. I can't believe Papaw did that."

"Yeah your Papaw could be sweet when he wanted to."

"Wish I had the chance to really know him. Heck he doesn't even know I got into Harvard."

"Oh, child, he knows, trust me he knows."

"What?"

"Marshall, the moment you showed interest in the school, your Papaw knew you were going there. He knew once you made your mind up, you weren't going to stop."

“What makes you say that Meemaw,” I asked, as the mist of Walmart’s garden center fell softly.

“Because you got your dedication from him. Why else you think he took all those extra shifts at the plant at his age? Cleaning pipes, replacing outlets, and feeding wires through cramped tunnels wasn’t fun as a young man, and it sure wasn’t fun as an old man. Harvard was your dream school, but being able to go to Harvard was HIS dream.”

I never knew. I always thought he didn’t want to be around me or people. I thought he just enjoyed the solitude. I always thought the plant was his real home, his fortress of solitude. I never realized how much work my Papaw was putting in for all of us, for me. All those Saints games he missed, all those times he was too tired to go for a swim, all those times, he went to bed early. He wasn’t waiting to get back to the plant, he was dreading that four o’clock alarm. Yet, no matter how long the drive to and from the plant, he found the roses for my Meemaw.

“Marshall, where are you going?”

“I’m going to go see if I can find anyone else who works in the garden section, we are going to need help finding these yellow roses.”

“Baby, we done looked up and down this garden, they don’t have them.”

“Well then we better hurry up.”

“Hurry up?”

“We need to get going if we are going to make it to Chloe’s Carnations before they close.”

## Take the Cake

How clean could this stupid floor be? Chris contemplated with each stroke of the mop against the, now new, gray floors. What was it that made it so hard for customers to grab flour without getting it all over the floor? Or perhaps this was Chris' fate? It only seemed fair that God, or the Universe, or whatever the hell you choose to believe in, made Chris clean up for others when he couldn't even clean up his own messes in life. In fact, maybe Chris was meant to stay in this cycle of cleaning up after shoppers, never-ending figure eights with the mop in his hands. It's not like anyone else thought he would amount to anything, not his parents, not his teachers, hell not even himself. So, here he would be, in this blue vest, with this stupid mop in his hands until the day he died. Chris then put in his head phones to distract him from his minimum-wage life.

The sounds of beating drums and the heavy metal guitar solo of Iron Maiden's "Powerslave" was interrupted by the tap of a shoulder. Chris took out his headphones to find an older and rather plump looking woman, who smiled so big her face had to be hurting.

"Excuse me, sugar, I was wondering if you could grab me that corn starch behind you?"

Chris, still confused about how a woman could be so happy, begrudgingly grabbed the corn starch from the shelf and placed it into the oversized and overzealous woman's cart.

"Thank you so much, sugar, this was the last thing I needed for my cake!"

"Whatever, besides I don't know what kind of cake you are making but it can't be too good."

"Well what makes you say something like that?"

"Nothing, it's just last time I checked you make cake with flour, not that stuff my Dad puts on his thighs when he's chafing."

Chris couldn't tell you how many times his Dad would call him downstairs from the bathroom, just so he could run to the pantry and grab the corn starch for his Dad. This, along with taking out the garbage and grabbing the mail, were a few of the responsibilities for a hometown loser who didn't go to college like himself.

"Oh no, sweetie, for a Pavlova cake you use corn starch, that way you get a fluffier texture."

"Well, fluffy texture or not, I sure as heck am not going to eat a cake with that in it," responded Chris, as he pointed at the large clear tub surrounded by the numerous colored fruits.

"I've stocked those more than enough times to know that vinegar smells awful, and I can only imagine how much worse it tastes!"

A laugh then bellowed from the plump woman's rather large belly as she wiped away tears from her annoyingly perfect blue eyes.

“Sweetie, I’m sure you can tell by this physique of mine, I’m not making no cakes that taste like vinegar. All it does is help my pavlova from collapsing on me.”

Chris didn’t know why, but something about this woman piqued his interest. It could have been her positivity, it could have been the ingredients in her cart, it could have just been the fact this was the longest conversation he had ever had with a customer. Whatever was the reason, Chris found himself wanting to know more.

This was new to him, he was never drawn to anything in high school. Some people understood math and science, some people were good with words, a few were lucky and have a grasp on both, but for Chris, none of it excites him. That’s why it was a surprise to everyone else, except Chris, when the college admission deadlines kept passing and passing without being filled out.

Chris’ parents couldn’t believe that he hadn’t filled out one single application. Chris thought his parents would be over the moon. Why waste thousands of their dollars just to go to a school, when he had no clue what he wanted to do or to be in the future? Yet, his penny-counting father and coupon-loving mother couldn’t have been more upset.

“So where did you even learn to make that Pav- whatever thing it is?”

“Well first things first, Chris, my name is Anna Johnson.”

“Uhm, how did you know my name?”

Anna smiled and pointed at the white and yellow name tag pressed against his blue Walmart vest.

“And I learned all of this at culinary school. These ingredients are actually for a Zoom class I am teaching.”

“Wait, you teach people how to cook?”

“Why? Is somebody interested?”

“No, besides I would probably just burn down the kitchen or make a fool of myself.”

Chris then readjusted himself and awkwardly messed with his mop bucket.

“Well, like my momma always said, anyone can cook, heck even my daddy knew how to make a mean apple pie.”

“It doesn’t matter, cooking is expensive and I don’t have the time or the money.”

“Well, if you ever change your mind give me a call and who knows maybe I can teach in person again by the time you come around,” joked Anna as she handed Chris a pink business card.

As Anna made her way out the aisle, Chris couldn’t help but stare at the business card. Staring back at him was a cartoon version of Anna in a chef’s uniform, with a ridiculously large hat. Chris slipped the business card in his vest pocket and returned to cleaning the floor. Instead of his lazy and endless figure eights— there was a new energy within him— Chris pushed his mop in rapid circles like stirring batter.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

[this thesis contains no citations]