

Part the First

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16 JULY 2020

Before the interview, Georgia couldn't remember the last time she had visited the Super Value Foods on the corner of Lexington and Fifth, three blocks from her family's home. For the past few years—ever since the virus became worse and her sister became confined to the second-floor bedroom—she and her family had utilized the home delivery option. The minimal monthly delivery fee allowed the four of them to reduce contact with the outside world, and Georgia had hardly given a second thought to the Super Value bags that appeared on the front doorstep like magic every Monday: paper on sunny days, plastic when rain was predicted. She and her mother would rifle through the bags and place the cans and boxes in the cupboard; the two of them would gripe about the half-melted carton of ice cream, the lack of on-brand laundry detergent, and the inevitable apology notes taped to the various canned and boxed goods. *We have substituted your request of Organic Valley Fresh Mushrooms for Sunrise Farms Canned Mushrooms in Water this week. We apologize for any inconvenience and will do our best to have your item back in stock shortly.*

Georgia hadn't fully settled in the chair across from the

associate manager's desk before her interview was practically over. "Do you want to drive or stock?" Janet—the nametag on her right lapel displayed, albeit slightly crookedly—asked, pushing a slip of paper toward Georgia. It was the first and only question Georgia was asked; the hour she'd spent preparing for the interview with her mother scanning down a list of potential interview questions had been useless. Janet was not interested in how she dealt with conflict, whether she demonstrated leadership skills, or how she incorporated constructive criticism into her daily life.

"Drive," Georgia responded, glancing at the form Janet had slid across the desk. *Super Value Foods: New Hire* monochromatically adorned the top.

Janet nodded toward the form. "Fill that out. Sam drives number five, but his route's gotten busier and he could use an extra set of hands. You good to lift up to forty pounds?"

Georgia nodded mutely.

"Great," Janet said, sliding a set of keys across her desk. "You can start Monday. Sam'll meet you outside by the van."

The walkie-talkie holstered on her side suddenly crackled to life, and Janet winced, turning down the volume. "You can see yourself out?" she asked Georgia, distracted. "I have to go help unload the truck. I'll see you next week."

Now, Georgia tugged self-consciously at the bottom of her bright blue store-issued t-shirt and glanced at the fleet of vans, their engines running in the dedicated parking spots right outside the sliding doors of the grocery store. She twisted the keys around her first finger and adjusted her store-issued surgical mask, trying her best to look like she knew what she was doing. Every few seconds, she tried to surreptitiously scan for anyone who could possibly be Sam, but so far, every Super Value employee had walked right past her. The name didn't give her much to go off of, not even a hint to gender, so Georgia waited silently as every other van besides number five pulled out of the parking lot.

Just as she was about to give up and search for Janet—the only person she could identify here—inside the refrigerated expanse of the store, a voice came from out of nowhere. "Georgia, right?" She jumped around quickly to see her copilot, his dark eyes and tuft of black hair barely visible behind the stack of insulated tubs balanced in his arms.

"That's me!" Georgia said, jumping up too quickly. She reached to help lift the tub at the

top of his stack, but he turned away from her and motioned toward the automatic doors with his head.

"I've got it," Sam said. "You go inside and help with the rest of the order. We've got ten minutes before the Jefferson order is late."

"I don't... I'm not sure where the rest of the order would be. It's my first day." Georgia offered weakly.

The words made no difference in the cadence of his work, but he nodded slightly. "Got it. Janet likes to sort of throw the new hires into the mix," he said, setting the last of his boxes down in the back of the van with emphasis. He straightened, brushed at the condensation which had collected across the front of his shirt, and extended his hand. "Sam," he said. "I'll show you the storeroom and explain the job while we go. Last week Janet had to give Mrs. Jefferson twenty dollars off her order because she claimed her fish had gone rancid in the heat."

Georgia did her best to keep up with Sam and take mental notes on the organization of the pick-up and delivery of grocery goods. Between the two of them, the van filled quickly, and Sam seemed impressed at her ability to keep up with him.

"You're working full time?" he asked when the two of them settled into the van—Sam in the driver's seat, Georgia to his right. She was attempting to type

addresses into the maps app on her phone, but Sam waved her hand away. “Don’t worry about it. I do this route every week.”

Georgia tucked her phone under her leg and shrugged. “Full time for now,” she said.

“School?”

“Not anymore.”

“Yeah, I don’t know anyone who goes either.” Sam said. “I got a year of college in before all this shit went down.” Sam turned the van sharply to the left and braked abruptly in front of a large Victorian-style house. “Jefferson,” he said, grinning. He nodded toward the clock. “Two minutes to go. Grab the shelf stables – ah, non-refrigerated stuff – and follow me.”

The food was successfully delivered to a waiting Mrs. Jefferson, who inspected each of the bags thoroughly before huffing into her house and returning with a crisp five-dollar bill.

“Take care of yourselves,” she said, handing the bill to Georgia and holding eye contact for a second too long before disappearing back into the large foyer of her house.

Georgia stared at the five-dollar bill in her hand. “We get tipped?” She tried to remember if her mother had ever offered money to any of their delivery drivers; she was relatively certain it had never happened.

Sam shrugged, yanking open the back of the van and piling the empty containers to the side. “Some of them feel bad for us because our deliveries mean they don’t have to go out. Lots of drivers

get sick. Mrs. Jefferson is probably surprised to see I’m still running the route every week.”

Georgia sank back into her seat, lost in thought as Sam joined her at the front of the van. What had seemed generous at first glance now felt dangerous, like bribe money. She knew the turnover at the grocery store had been high—Janet had mentioned something in the midst of the brief interview—but Georgia had thought the reason for the turnover had been the job. Unskilled labor, she had rationalized, often has a high turnover as people move on and look for bigger and better things. She hadn’t considered any other reason that Janet would be struggling to fill client-facing positions like delivery.

“How should we split it?” Georgia asked.

Sam shrugged, eyes trained to the road. “She gave it to you,” he said.

“Right, but it was meant for both of us,” Georgia said. “Could we change it out for singles when we’re back at the store?”

“If you want,” Sam said.

Georgia turned the bill over in her hand. “Does she always give you a five?” she asked.

“She’s never tipped me before.”

“Oh, that’s strange,” Georgia mused. “I wonder why she decided to today?” The question was posed quietly, more to herself than anyone, but Sam turned to her anyway.

“Most of the clients don’t like to talk to me. The higher up the

hill you go, the more expensive the houses, the more anxious people get about people who don’t look like them. They see me and their minds make connections before they even realize it— black means poor, poor means sick, and suddenly it doesn’t matter that I’m risking my life to bring them food because they’re all about self-protection. Potential threat.” His voice was level, quiet, like he’d had the same conversation with ten people that day.

“I mean,” Georgia said, trying to gather her thoughts. “I’m just as likely to carry the virus as you are. We’re not really... I mean, it’s not like my family can afford to live in one of those gated communities anymore.”

Her mother—once a renowned professor of American History at the university Georgia used to attend—had been working at the post office for the past two years trying to make ends meet. Meanwhile, Georgia had stubbornly continued with her effort to finish her bachelor’s degree. When her university shut down due to lack of funding and a sharply decreasing number of enrolled students, Georgia transferred to another online university to attempt to finish out her freshman year. The incompatibility between the two schools had been frustrating, but she’d sent an endless barrage of emails to both registrars and finally had her plan for the next three years settled when she’d received an email from the second university: they, too, were shutting down their online system at the end of the year.

Georgia transferred six times before finishing her second year of college, and when her sister became sick, she took it as a sign that it was time to give up on her education.

That was what brought her here: to Super Value, to the van, and to Sam’s nauseating driving across back roads that he assured Georgia were a “shortcut” to the next address on their long list.

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