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BEST BY

IT WAS JULIE'S FIRST DAY ON THE JOB. She took off her winter coat, and the lingering snowflakes that had settled in her hood fell onto the red linoleum floor like salt shaking onto a rare steak. She surveyed the staff room and saw all the typical staff room things: weathered tables, plastic chairs, and a small kitchenette with a laminated sign hanging above the sink that read "Your Mother Does Not Work Here. Pick Up After Yourself!" As a mother, Julie wasn't exactly sure how to interpret this message, and as a new employee, she wasn't exactly sure what to do about the wet floor. A row of lockers filled the remaining space along with a bulletin board and a large calendar filled with handwritten birthday reminders. Julie read the big loopy cursive from where she stood: "Steven's Birthday!" on February 19th, "Aaliyah B-Day!" on February 27th, and "Bella turns 22!" on February 24th. She imagined her own name and "turns 40!" written on the calendar in September and cringed.

She wiped up the puddle with the soles of her shoes and pulled open an unclaimed locker. The previous owner had stuck a purple plastic mirror on the inside of the door with a Sharpied motivational message on the frame that read "You got this!" She looked at her reflection, smoothed out the back of her shortly cropped hair, and tucked a few loose strands behind her heavily pierced ears. The silver rings and studs jutted out between her auburn hair like youthful landmarks: one from the tattoo shop in the strip mall next to her old high school, one from her friend's 30th in Las Vegas, and one after her divorce.

"You made it!" Drew called behind her. He wore a baggy grey hoodie and worn-out skate shoes with stripes. Dark blond hair fell just above his shoulders and flipped out at the ends in the shape of the letter U. Julie gave him an uncomfortable quick wave.

When Drew first told her about the job, he had been sitting at her kitchen table, his spindly 18-year-old legs draped over her daughter Fiona's lap

and a fork full of spaghetti in his hand. Fiona had mentioned during dinner (despite Julie's various side-eyed glances) that the grocery store where Julie worked as a clerk was closing soon and that she was looking for a new job.

"No way," Drew chimed in.

Julie narrowed her eyes. She couldn't tell if Drew was genuinely surprised or angry on her behalf that she was soon to be unemployed, but either way she hated how his expression lingered expectantly, waiting for her to fill the lull in the conversation. She eventually surrendered and said, "Way."

He went on to tell her that the big box electronics store where he worked was understaffed and desperate to hire new people, and he offered to put in a good word for her. Fiona beamed and kissed him on the cheek while Julie sat by silently. That night, after he had gone home, Julie leafed through a university brochure Fiona had left out on the coffee table. She looked at the glossy pages of smiling faces and tallied up the dollars left on her remaining paychecks. The walls of their co-op townhouse were due for a fresh coat of paint, and the faux hardwood floors showed the markings of Fiona's feet over the years, each scuff or scrape growing in size as she transitioned from walking to running to sprinting out the door.

She phoned Drew about the job the next day.

"I was supposed to give this to you on the weekend, but I forgot," he said, pulling out a bright blue collared shirt with an embossed store logo on the right breast from his backpack. He handed it to her and then shoved his bag in an empty locker. "Our manager was going to give it to you today, but I told him I could drop it off for you early 'cause I'm at your place all the time," he added, as if this was a fact she should have readily accepted by now.

"Oh, thanks," Julie replied. She could tell at a glance that the shirt was going to be too small for her.

"I had to guess your size, but I think it'll look good," he said, flashing a smile and taking off his jacket to reveal an exact replica of the uniform she was holding. He tossed his jacket into the locker and smoothed out the shirt over his lean torso and slim waist. She relaxed a little when she realized that he would have no idea what age to put on the calendar when it was her birthday. To him, they both wore the same shirt.

The manager, Ravi, began the staff meeting at the front of the store with a summary of the previous day's sales. He recited numbers off a memo pinned to a clipboard with a Liverpool Football Club sticker on the back, his accent blending the long vowels of Canada with the punctuated humour

and rhythm of Britain and India. When he was done, he motioned towards Julie. “We have a new team member joining us today. Would you like to tell us about yourself?”

Julie’s uniform was, as she had guessed, too tight, and the polyester fabric rubbed uncomfortably under her armpits as she waved to everyone and nodded. The group around her must have been no older than twenty years at most, and their blank stares waited for more. “Hi, I’m Julie. I used to work at a grocery store, so all of this,” she waved her hands in the direction of a nearby display case stocked with the latest laptops and phones, “is new to me. But I’m excited to be here. I have a daughter, and I live nearby.” Four sentences. That was it.

“Welcome, Julie,” Ravi said as he handed her a walkie-talkie headset that was resting on a nearby cash register. “You can shadow Drew for the first couple of hours today. He’ll set up your walkie and show you the ropes. You’ll be in the Computers, Tablets, and Accessories section.” Julie took the headset as the crowd dispersed from the front of the store and walked to their assigned areas.

“Ready?” Drew asked, coming up beside her.

“Sure,” she said.

The Computers, Tablets, and Accessories section took up almost a third of the store, with rows snaking into each other to form a particle board shelving maze. Drew explained how the computers were organized by price and brand. He effortlessly ran through the functions and features of the top sellers: bandwidth, memory, operating system, processor, battery life. As he explained each function, she pulled on a pair of reading glasses that hung on the neck of her shirt and took note of the new lexicon with a pencil and a small, coiled notebook that fit in her palm.

“Where did you get that?” he asked.

“Oh, I brought it with me. I used it to write down produce codes at the grocery store when I first started. It helped me remember,” she said.

“Codes?” he asked.

“Yeah, the numbers for things like bananas or carrots. They all had a different code that you had to punch into the register.”

“That’s wild,” he said. She laughed under her breath and noticed that his eyes were the same shade of blue as their uniform shirts. Crisp and bright, they were the kind of eyes that could pick out the best computer and choose the most efficient processor but didn’t yet know what aisle the cereal was in

or the best value for toilet paper. She wondered what her eyes looked like right now.

"You must be pretty smart to keep track of all those numbers and everything," he said. "Fiona is really smart too—like, crazy smart." His eyes drifted toward the floor, the brightness gone.

"Yeah, she is," Julie said. "I'm glad you think so too." He smiled, and the brightness was back. His eyes and shirt matched again.

"How did it go?" Fiona asked. She was sitting on her bed with her laptop open and music blasting from the speakers. She had inherited Julie's sharp chin and auburn hair, but her eyes were dark brown and soft like her dad's. Julie used to tell her that meant her dad was always there with her, even when he wasn't or even when he forgot to show up, but over time the pretenses faded away, and Fiona's eyes became only Fiona's.

"Can you turn that down?" Julie asked. Fiona tapped the volume button, and the music faded to a low beat. "It was . . . okay," Julie said and smiled bigger than she wanted to.

"Was Drew there?" Fiona asked.

"Yeah, he was really helpful. I have to learn about all these product features, so I'm kind of glad he was around."

"That's good," Fiona said. "He's worked there for, like, three years."

"He's good at it," Julie said.

"I guess so. Three years is kind of a long time, though." Fiona shrugged and started scrolling on her computer. Julie couldn't remember sticking to anything for three years at Drew's age, but time was different for high school seniors.

"How's your application going?" Julie asked.

Fiona shrugged again. "It's okay, I'm almost done." She continued scrolling, and Julie watched as the bright white light from the screen reflected onto her face like a blank page.

"Well, let me know if you need any help?" she asked. She didn't know why it came out like a question instead of an offering. Maybe it was because she didn't know how to apply for college, having not gone herself, let alone how to apply for a pre-med scholarship at a school across the country. She couldn't quite grasp her daughter's dreams.

"I will," Fiona said. Julie nodded and walked down the hall towards the bathroom as the music returned to its original volume.

The snow stopped during the first week of April. The white banks that had formed over the winter melted into brown, wet annoyances, and then one day—without even realizing it—they were gone. Julie’s commute to work quickened, spurred on by a lightness to her step without snow boots and the prospect of sunny days ahead. She had gotten the hang of the product lingo and floated between the TV section and the Computers, Tablets, and Accessories section, where she was often paired with Drew. One day, when she was updating “Spring into Sales” price stickers for a row of PCs, a customer asked her to match a price he had found in a competitor’s store flyer.

“It should be \$399.99,” he said, waving the flyer under her nose like a smelling salt that was meant to make her respond faster.

“Okay, maybe the price was displayed wrong. Let me check the system.” She reached into her back pocket and pulled out a work phone that was connected to their inventory. Out of habit, she also went to grab her glasses from their usual resting place on the neck of her shirt, but they weren’t there. She looked around on the floor and then up at the man, hoping he could somehow materialize the thin-framed drugstore reading glasses, but he only stared.

“Well?” he asked.

“Sorry, I . . .” she looked down at the phone again and pressed an icon on the screen that she thought most closely resembled the pricing function. The screen jumped to a new page, and she squinted as the letters bled into themselves.

“I just need the price,” the customer said. He rolled the flyer into a tight roll and grasped it in a closed fist. Julie felt her cheeks go hot, and she envisioned the man, in his oversized sweatshirt and black jeans, swatting her on the nose with the paper like a disobedient dog.

“I know, I’m sorry,” she said, her hot face morphing from embarrassment to anger at his impatience. Then she spotted Drew walking across another aisle and raised her hand to beckon him over. Her face turned back to a shade of embarrassment.

Drew came over. “What’s up?” He grinned at the man.

“Can you look up this price to see if we can match it?” she asked.

“Sure, no problem,” he said and took Julie’s phone, easily navigating the screen. “Do you want to watch me to see how to do it?”

“No,” she said quickly and stared past Drew’s confused look to the automatic doors at the store’s entrance. They opened and closed as people

walked through and a streak of sun slid in over the large, non-slip mat at the entrance. Drew talked to the man as the sun crept across the mat, and she wondered how warm it was outside, away from here.

At the end of their shifts, Drew found Julie in the staff room and handed her her glasses. "A customer found them near checkout," he said. She sighed in thanks and took the frames. She was about to explain that she was sorry for being short with him earlier when Ravi walked in and called the group to attention.

"I just wanted to take a minute before you all left to congratulate and recognize Drew for his efforts this month. Everyone, please give a big hand for our Superstar of the Store!" Ravi said, handing a certificate of appreciation to Drew as a weak round of applause broke out around him. He looked down at the paper, and Julie watched as his gaze travelled to Ravi's managerial signature in the bottom left corner. She thought his face grimaced briefly at the sight, and she wondered how many times he had received the familiar accolade.

"Congrats," she said after the group dispersed and they were the only two left.

"Thanks," he replied. "Thank god they don't hang my picture up anywhere."

"Well, I think it's great. Really. You're good at your job, you know? And Fiona will be impressed." She smiled and tucked her glasses into her shirt before turning towards her locker. When she turned around again, he was gone. She noticed a piece of paper sticking out of the garbage bin by the staff room door and walked over. With her glasses on, she could read Drew's name clearly. Superstar of the Store.

Julie had only spoken to her coworker Jade a few times since she had started. They joked about how crappy the fridge in the staff room was, and a few months ago they carried a sound system to a customer's car. When Jade invited her to her birthday barbeque, Julie had said no. But now, after her friend had cancelled their dinner plans and Fiona had taken over the living room with colour-coded cue cards and a dizzying array of loose-leaf paper, she decided to go. Julie stood in front of the foyer's closet and surveyed her options. "Take this one," Fiona said, holding her jean jacket. "It's too hot for all of your stuff."

"Thanks," Julie said. She took Fiona's jacket and emptied the pockets

of her daughter's things: a gum wrapper, lip balm, a receipt from the mall. Fiona had been conditionally accepted to university, scholarship pending, and her first tuition payment was due imminently. With each item Julie removed she felt like she was creating more space for her daughter to leave.

"Are you doing anything tonight?"

"Just studying," Fiona said.

"You should take a break," Julie said.

"Maybe," Fiona replied, but Julie knew she wouldn't.

"Call if you need anything?" Julie offered, even though she knew she wouldn't. Fiona nodded all the same, and Julie headed out the door.

Jade's house was not like anything Julie remembered having at twenty-one. The modern apartment had a gas range stove and a 64-inch 4K TV, the model number of which Julie knew just by looking at it. There were about 30 people in the open-concept kitchen and living space, but Julie didn't recognize any of them. There was a girl with purple hair, a guy wearing a beanie, and a person rolling a joint on the couch. Julie stood on the outskirts of the crowd and wondered if she could leave without anyone noticing.

"You made it!" Jade yelled as she walked in from the patio across the room. Drew followed closely behind her, smiling.

"I did," Julie said, trying to remember if Jade was usually this outgoing until she got close enough to smell the tequila coming off her breath and noticed the cigarette smoke drifting off her black dress.

"That's so great. You can put your stuff in my bedroom, if you want, and then come get a drink!"

Julie decided she should stay for one drink before sneaking out. She put her jacket and purse on top of a pile of other coats and bags on the bed, and this one familiar act made her feel immensely better.

"Jade's parents are loaded, and she only works so she can buy stuff her parents won't," Drew said to Julie when she emerged from the bedroom. "Did you see the TV?" Julie laughed. Four months ago, she wouldn't have noticed it, but now it was like an inside joke, like all the TVs in the world reminded her of a career she never planned on having and an unexpected bond that was forming with Drew.

"Here you go," Jade said as she handed Julie a cup with a cherry-red liquid inside. "My specialty." Julie took a sip, and the burning tequila dropped into her stomach followed quickly behind by a cinnamon taste.

"What is this?" Julie asked. She couldn't remember the last time she had drunk anything other than her favourite Merlot from the liquor store near her house.

"Fruit punch, seltzer, tequila, and a splash of Fireball whisky. I call it a Jade Fade," she explained.

After three more Jade Fades, Julie could feel the drinks reaching her head, and she wavered in the warm living room. Her eyelids felt heavy, and the noise of everyone laughing in the kitchen made her stomach lurch. She excused herself from no one in particular and walked out onto the patio with her drink. The fresh air made everything shift into a momentary focus and then settle back into a tolerable haze as she glanced around the small space. There was a barbecue on one end that had finished grilling for the night and a patio swing on the other end that was empty. She walked over to it, sat down on the paisley cushions, breathed in the unseasonably warm air, and listened to the muted conversations from inside spilling out around her. It had been a long time since she had been at a house party, and she revelled in the feeling of possibility that spending the night in a different place could bring.

Drew poked his head onto the patio, and Julie waved him over. "Come sit," she said and patted the space next to her. Drew walked over and sat down beside her. The swing jerked suddenly under his weight, and her drink sloshed against the plastic cup. "Easy there."

"I'll be careful," he laughed. "I'm glad you decided to come."

"Oh, yeah?" Julie asked.

"Yeah, you're cool to work with," he said.

Julie rolled her eyes. "Thanks," she said. "I'll pretend that's true." She grabbed the metal frame that held up the patio swing and reached for the ground with her toes, pushing off with her feet. The swing swayed back and forth, and Drew threw his hands over his head, mimicking a rollercoaster ride and mouthing woaaa! Julie mimicked his feigned excitement and reached for the metal frame to push off again.

"What does that mean?" he asked, pointing at the tattoo on her inner wrist as she stretched toward the swing's frame.

"It's a sun," she said and rolled her eyes slightly. "A rising sun, to be specific. I got it when I was younger and was really into the concept of new beginnings, but I don't know if I believe in that stuff anymore."

"You should," he said and looked at her with the kind of sincerity she

once possessed—before her pregnancy, her wedding, her divorce, her streak of dead-end jobs, and everything else in between. His irises caught the spark of the twinkling lights on the patio and reflected back the hope she had been missing.

“Thanks,” she said as she put a hand on his.

Drew leaned forward, and their lips met. His breath was sweet and salty, like Dr. Pepper and all-dressed chips, and when he reached a hand behind her neck, she let his lips move over hers. She kissed him back until his saliva started to mix with hers, turning warm and sour. Then she pulled back and pushed him away, her body vibrating with anger, passion, or disgust.

“I have to go,” she said as she stood up, not hearing what he was saying. All the blood rushed from her head. Bright, white spots blurred her vision, and a pounding rung in her ears. She walked away without acknowledging him and hurried into the crowded apartment. She grabbed her purse and Fiona’s jacket from the bedroom and ran towards the elevator, but it was too slow, so she hurried down the fire escape until she reached the sidewalk out front. She felt like she was going to vomit and steadied herself with a hand on the building. A dry heave wrenched in her throat, but nothing came out. She pulled the jacket tight around her chest and felt even sicker.

When she finally got the house key to turn in the lock, the glow of the living room TV lit up the front entrance. “Mom?” Fiona called from the couch. Julie closed her eyes, wondered if her stillness could undo things, but knew that she couldn’t be quiet for too long. Fiona was waiting. She dropped the house keys in a little jar Fiona had painted purple in kindergarten that sat on a shelf near the door and walked into the room.

“Hi, honey,” she said. Fiona was sprawled out in sweatpants with an open textbook, a bag of chocolates, and an episode of *Grey’s Anatomy* on the screen.

“How was it?” Fiona asked.

Julie sat down and searched for the right words, but nothing came out. “Here,” Julie said and took off her jacket, folding it neatly. “This belongs to you.”

“Thanks,” Fiona replied. Her phone vibrated on the table, and the blue light illuminated the room as she read the incoming text. “Is it okay if I meet up with some friends for a couple of hours? Drew might join us after he finishes up at Jade’s party.”

Julie tried to keep a straight face, but she could feel her mouth twitch impulsively, wanting the truth to tumble out. Her brain kept it in check just long enough to reply. "Sure, that's fine," she said.

The next morning Fiona reached for a bowl of cereal, and Fiona watched with hesitant eyes as her daughter dipped the spoon into the milk and scooped frosty O's into her mouth. Her lips smacked with each bite, wet and sugary, and Julie felt dizzy. She knew what she had to do.

"I just can't work with him," she explained to Ravi in his office. Ravi scrunched up his nose and looked at the now problematic shift schedule behind Julie's head.

"I understand," he said, nodding his head.

Summer passed in heatwaves, one record-breaking day followed by another. Julie thought about Drew sometimes. She wondered how his shifts were going and thought about the twinkling lights on the patio and his hands holding her blue uniform. The thoughts emerged out of nowhere, like the unexpected spike in the summer temperature, and dissipated in much the same way—with an initial shock and then a slow simmer.

Mostly, though, she thought about Fiona leaving soon and what it would feel like to be left. On nights when she arrived home to an empty house, she stripped off her tired uniform at the front entrance and stood in her bra and underwear, her back pressed up against the crack in the front door where a jet of cool night air leaked through. She listened to the silent house, imagining the muted fall that was to come and worrying about how those future nights would feel, knowing the house would remain empty in the morning. In those moments, she contemplated calling a friend but ultimately decided that silence was better. She held her arms out to the side so the air could move under them and stood in the self-inflicted quiet without complaint.

At the end of August, Fiona hovered in the doorway of Julie's room. She was wearing her favourite summer dress—a white and blue spiral print that cut across her thighs—and a bracelet Drew had given her for their one-year anniversary earlier that year.

"Mom?" she said.

"Yeah?" Julie replied. She was vacuuming under the bed and had to shout over the volume of the machine. When Fiona didn't reply, she looked up and noticed that she was still lingering in the doorway, her head resting on the wooden frame, her feet on the precipice of the room. Julie stopped

the vacuum.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“Yes,” Fiona said.

“You sure?”

“It’s just . . .” Fiona trailed off. She reached for her bracelet and fumbled with the clasp until it came undone. “Can you get rid of this?”

Julie looked at the bracelet and searched Fiona’s face for an answer. She was sad and maybe a bit afraid but not hurt or angry. This was her decision. “Sure,” Julie said and took the bracelet. She folded her hand around it and pulled Fiona into a hug. They stood like that for a while, arms wrapped around each other, matching moles above their elbows and an inherited strength between them. Fiona pulled away after a final squeeze, murmured a thanks, and walked to her room.

Julie thumbed the bracelet in her palm, the imitation gold leaving an imprint on her skin. Then she walked over to her dresser and dropped it carefully into the top drawer, hiding another memory from her daughter.

When Julie arrived for her shift the next day, Drew was just finishing his. They saw each other in the staff room, and Drew turned back to his locker as Julie walked towards him. He pulled on his backpack and grabbed his blue uniform without looking up.

“Laundry day?” Julie motioned to the shirt in his hands.

“Not exactly,” he said. Julie noticed that his hair was shorter, cropped just below his ears so his shoulders were exposed. He had a tan on his arms, which Julie realized matched the same shade as Fiona’s legs. One last summer spent together, as evident on their skin.

“I’m sorry it didn’t work out with you two,” she said. He looked away.

“I knew,” he said. “That’s why—well, I guess I always kind of knew she was too good for me.”

Julie hadn’t seen it until now, but she knew it too. Fiona was going to leave soon and do all the things Julie couldn’t comprehend. The notes she scribbled and the far-off dreams she had would someday become true. Drew and Julie would be a part of them, but they would be a part of her life that had already happened rather than a part that was going to happen.

Ravi entered the staff room, called for everyone to gather, and announced that he was there to congratulate the next Superstar of the Store—someone who had been working hard and showing amazing progress.

“Julie,” he said, “this is for you.” Julie took the certificate to a smattering of meek applause and ran her hand over the dimensions of the printer paper, smiling to herself.

“Congrats,” Drew said.

“Thanks,” she replied and saw that he was still holding his uniform in his hand, but it had been neatly folded.

“I have to return it Ravi,” he said. “I applied for an Assistant Manager role at another branch and got it, so I start there in a couple of weeks.” She imagined him wearing a lanyard with a manager tag in another store, skillfully navigating the aisles. “I’ll be fine,” he said, and she believed it.

At home, Julie pulled the certificate from her purse and smoothed the thin paper against her leg. She moved Fiona’s grad photo and a list of garbage pick-up dates on the fridge and stuck the certificate on the door with a magnet. Her name, typed in an 18-point Times New Roman font, stared back at her.

“Mom,” Fiona called from her room. “Can you help me pack?”

Julie nodded. Yes, she was ready.