

What are your Qualifications?

At the end of his freshman year, Matt's parents told him it would be important for him to get a summer job. "It'll teach you responsibility," Matt's dad had said when he proposed the idea. "Plus, it'll be good to have some experience before entering the working world!"

Matt almost had a panic attack in the car before he walked into the grocery store for his first-ever interview. He introduced himself to one of the employees at the customer service desk and idly looked over the various toothpastes in the aisle nearest him.

"Matt Brand?" a heavyset man with wispy, blond hair asked. "Good to meet ya. I'm Jake. Let's talk in my office."

Matt smiled a little and shook Jake's offered hand. In between rows of plastic-wrapped cereal boxes and sealed packs of canned soup, Matt adjusted the top button on his shirt that was digging into his throat. Jake's office was a cramped closet in the windowless stockroom at the rear of the store. It was basically a concrete box with a desk lamp arranged on a folding table with a few binders and a laptop that made bricks look sleek. Jake offered Matt a folding chair and looked over Matt's application on his desk.

"So, Hedgefield High? I was class of '85. Is, uh...Mrs. Jefferson still teaching history there?"

"I think I'm gonna have her junior year. She doesn't teach freshmen anymore."

"Just as well," Jake said. He set Matt's application aside and grunted to get more comfortable. "So, you're looking for a summer gig?"

"Yes, sir," Matt nodded, trying to sit up straighter. "I'm a hard worker and reliable. I'm organized and—"

"Matt, you had me at reliable," Jake laughed. "I can teach a kid your age a lot of things, but being where you're supposed to be is nothing I'll turn my nose up at. The schedule is gonna be weekends and a few nights. Minimum wage and we can't give you any benefits, but you should still be on your parents' insurance for all that."

"Yeah, I can make that work."

"Perfect!" Jake said. "Let's get you an apron and put you in the schedule."

"I just need to make sure that I can go back to school in the fall."

“I don’t see a reason why that wouldn’t work. If you like, I can help you pick up some more hours over the summer and we could talk about weekends when we get to the school year.”

“I’d happily take any extra shifts,” Matt said, eager. “Just want to be part of the team.”

###

“They’re declaring a state of emergency,” Matt’s mom said, fussing in the kitchen. “People are starting to panic already. You wouldn’t believe how hard it is to find toilet paper!”

“All the offices are scrambling to turn remote,” Matt’s dad said, shaking his head at the newspaper. “Unfortunately, the planes won’t find themselves. Guess I’ll still have to put on real pants when I’m back to work on Monday.”

“They shouldn’t be letting people travel at all!”

“Audrey, there’s no point in panicking ourselves. We got plenty of food and we can bust out the Parcheesi to pass the time. It’ll just be for a few weeks. We gotta trust people will be smart.”

“You overestimate people...”

“It’s positive thinking.”

“I’m with Mom,” Matt said. “I watched a guy body check an old lady for the last can of beans. Positivity doesn’t always override the animal instinct to survive.”

Matt’s phone rang and Jake’s number flashed across the screen. Matt walked into his room and answered the call. “Hello?”

“Matt? It’s Jake. Listen, I need you to come in tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow? I’m not on the schedule until Saturday.”

“I know, but Willy tested positive for Covid. And Ginny said she can’t get sick cause her mom’s pregnant. This is an emergency situation, so I need all hands on deck. Think you can step up?”

“I guess,” Matt shrugged.

“Reliable!” Jake cheered. “You’re a lifesaver, Matt.”

Matt was about to say more, but only exhaled when Jake hung up on him. He walked back out into the living room and looked up at his dad. “Looks like you’re down one for Parcheesi, Pops. I got called in for tomorrow.”

“What?” Mrs. Brand scoffed. “The store is staying open?”

“People need food,” Matt shrugged. “Jake had to rearrange the schedule, but it should only be for a little bit.”

“Everyone has to come together,” Mr. Brand said. “The only way we’re gonna get through this is if we work as a team...all of us.”

###

“I’m not wearing a damn mask!”

“It’s for everyone’s safety,” Ben said. Matt had no idea how he could be so calm dealing with door security. Between mask duty and crowd control, Ben took the brunt of the anger from customers. Matt felt that Ben would have made a better manager than Jake, patient and understanding. He was a slender man in his thirties with shaggy hair and dark brown eyes. While he was a senior staff member, Ben didn’t want to be a true supervisor, preferring to spend his nights playing in a rock band.

“I’ll just take my business elsewhere!”

“Alright then,” Ben sighed and the man stormed off. “Have a good day...”

“I don’t know how you do it,” Matt said, pausing in arranging apples by the door. “I would have lost my temper a while ago.”

“Bah,” Ben shrugged, waving his hand. “He’s just mad about the situation, ya know? He’s not angry at me, just coping with the new normal.”

“Still, the guy didn’t have to be such a dick about it.”

“The perils of customer service,” Ben said. He waved at a couple of people heading out the exit. “It’s a tough time for everyone. Someone’s gotta be the reasonable one.”

“I guess so.”

“Don’t let them get you down,” Ben said. “I go back home at the end of the day and just play whatever I’m feeling. A lot of times I’ll just noodle around with whatever emotions I’m feeling on my guitar and it becomes something useful.”

“That works?”

“Take what you’re feeling and put it somewhere. Make your pain into art...even if that’s just someone being a pain in your ass. You got something you put your anger in?”

“I write stories sometimes,” Matt shrugged. “My English teacher says it’s not serious writing, just fantasy stories.”

“What’s not serious about fantasy?” Ben asked. “Not to call your teacher an idiot, but that’s pretty narrow-minded.”

“He calls it escapist drivel.”

“There are very few subjects they cover in ‘serious literature’ that aren’t covered somehow in fantasy. And so what if it’s escapist? You know what else is escapism? Novels about english professors with an alcohol problem who somehow keep their jobs despite numerous affairs with students.”

Matt chuckled and nodded his head. “Yeah, I guess that’s pretty fantastical.”

“You got that teacher again?”

“No, I have a different one this year. Ms. Poel is supposed to be one of the better teachers.”

“Good,” Ben nodded, waving to another family on their way out of the store. “You’re too smart to get let down.”

“Thanks, Ben,” Matt said. “Honestly, getting back to school sounds pretty good right now.”

###

“Alright, everyone,” Ms. Poel said, her voice scratching through the speaker. “That’s it for today. I’ll be sending out your essay grades tonight. Have a good weekend!”

The class quickly logged off in a mad dash to escape the virtual classroom. Matt was in no hurry, slowly logging out of his last class of the day. He’d had to argue for a few nights off, but Jake still needed bodies in the store. Jake had wanted Matt on the overnight shift, but Mrs. Brand told Matt he needed to put school first. In exchange, Matt took the evening shift for a few hours on weeknights.

After doing his homework with a handful of crackers for dinner, Matt rushed down to his car on the curb. The streets were empty, but Matt still saw signs of life in the late fall evening. Mr. Carver was outside on his porch across the street, filling the neighborhood with the music from a ukulele he’d dug out of storage. A young couple was sharing dinner on their balcony above him with their cat working its way onto the young woman’s lap. A family next door to Matt sat around their dinner table with the windows open to enjoy the last bit of fresh air before it got too

cold to do anything. Matt knew this was hardly paradise for everyone, but he felt like his neighborhood was starting to come together. Sadly, he climbed into his car and drove.

The further he got from the suburbs, the more the effects of the pandemic could be felt. Matt remembered a time when he'd have to fight traffic for forty minutes. That same drive now took him fifteen. Pulling up behind the grocery store, Matt parked his car and pulled his mask over his face. Stepping out of his car, Matt put his apron on while walking into the building. Jake gave him a nod without pausing in his phone conversation. Before the pandemic, Jake had roamed the store to micromanage. Now, Matt rarely saw him venture outside his office.

Matt didn't waste any time, grabbing one of the stocking carts and heading out into the store. The people inside the store were mostly following the yellow arrows that Jake had ordered the night crew to set up overnight. Matt sectioned off the cereal aisle while he stocked the barren shelves with boxes. An employee Matt didn't recognize behind her mask went through collecting items for a delivery order and nearly ran over his ankle in her stupor. Matt couldn't get mad. Once the cereal was shelved, Matt went back to the stock room and loaded his cart.

The routine kept Matt going for four hours. After the store closed at ten, Matt went into the break room to grab one of the free candy bars someone had told him about. They were only fun-sized, but Matt felt that free chocolate was free chocolate.

"Damn," a cashier named Eddie cursed when he came into the break room. "Eight hours on door duty. When Ben comes back from the hospital, I'm gonna kill him."

"Ben's in the hospital?" Matt asked.

"Oh, right," Eddie sighed. "Yeah, he got Covid...probably from door duty."

"And that put him in the hospital?"

"Most folks could shake it off in a few days, but Ben had that cancer scare a few years back before you started here. He's already got a pretty weak immune system and his lungs are kind of a shit show, so Covid is a one-two punch."

"Is he gonna be OK?"

"Ben? He's a tough guy. I mean, he beat cancer. He can beat a chest cold."

Matt played with the wrapper of his candy bar, running his finger along the plastic and frowning. Eddie reached over and grabbed a candy bar before tossing it to Matt.

“That one was for Ben. He’d want you to have it. He talked about you a lot. Said you were a smart kid.”

“Thanks,” Matt said. He let out a deep breath and left for his car. Once he closed the door behind him, he pulled his mask off and dropped his head back on the headrest. It took everything in him not to scream before starting his car and heading home.

###

Outside of school and work, Matt felt that there was very little he could do to pass the time. One Saturday, he woke up late and looked outside at the snow-covered trees and a thick layer of frost on his window. With the world so still, his sleep-deprived brain was convinced that time outside had stopped. It certainly felt that way. Days of the week blended together and it was impossible to tell how fast the school year was going. After a while, Matt decided he needed something to mark the passage of time.

On a whim, he called Ben one day.

“The folks at the hospital were nice,” Ben said when Matt asked how he was doing. “But I kinda ‘graduated’ from what they can do.”

“What does that mean?”

“They gave me some meds for the cough and something to keep the fever down,” Ben said. “It just means I’m on my own when it comes to the rest. It’s just as well, since our corporate overlords couldn’t bother to get us half-decent insurance.”

“Jake’s been on everyone’s ass,” Matt said. “Seriously, ever since you had to leave, his ‘sick policy’ is more like policing. You need a doctor’s note, and anything after three days is grounds for a write-up.”

“Yeah, Jake has been threatening to fire me...”

“Can he do that?”

“Technically, I was in the hospital prior to the policy change, but he would eagerly accept my resignation. I don’t want to talk about Jake, though. I’m already sick to my stomach and thinking about him only makes me feel worse. How’s school going for you?”

“Midterms are coming up, but it feels like a joke. It’s practically open book since they can’t look over our shoulders.”

“Yeah, that’s the trouble with this. You have to rely on folks to be good people.”

“I don’t know, man. It all feels kinda pointless.”

“Hey, you know what? When shit’s pointless, you get to make up your own point.”

“Unfailing optimism wasn’t covered in any of my classes this year.”

“I want you to write something for me.”

“What?”

“Anything,” Ben said. “Write a story you want to write. Make it about dragons or talking swords or werewolves or whatever. But make it yours. I wanna read it.”

“Why?”

“Because you need a point,” Ben said. He paused to cough, the sound scratching the receiver and crackling in Matt’s ear. “And frankly, it’d be nice to have something to look forward to. If you won’t do it as a favor to yourself, do it for me?”

“Why, though? There’s gotta be something better for you to do with your time.”

“Because you’re too smart not to have someone in your corner. And if all I can do is help you write a story, I think that’s a good way to spend my sabbatical. Besides, I can’t really play much anymore. So maybe inspiring you will get me playing again.”

After their conversation, Matt went to work on a story. It was about dragons and a lost stone, a hero with a wisecracking sword and a horse with wings. It was garbage, but Matt felt he owed Ben some joy. He had expected to email Ben the results and never think about it again.

Ben’s review the next day was harsh, but fair. It was more than grammar and spelling. Ben was able to point out what felt incongruous with the setting and offered reading and research to make his story more realistic. If Matt had gotten the critique from anyone else, he might have quit. Ben, however, believed in him. So Matt took his edits into consideration.

The story became more focused and gradually became the thing Matt was truly excited to do. School was fine, but as exams came to a close, Matt started looking forward to working on his writing. He was doing it for Ben to an extent, but he was also doing it for his own good. He had written silly stories for himself for years. Now, it felt more important to write for a person.

The tedium of work and school took a toll on him throughout the pandemic. Ben gave him somewhere to escape to, building a fantastic world. The dragon became more nuanced. The

sword's quips become more appropriate to the time period. The flying horse's wings were clipped in favor of more challenges and obstacles for the hero to overcome. Ben read a lot while he tried to recover and offered Matt more help. After the school year ended, Matt built his schedule around Ben's deadlines.

For the first time since the pandemic, Matt felt a glimmer of hope.

###

Matt learned Ben had died when a card was being passed around for his family. He knew it had been peaceful, but it wasn't what Matt wanted for his friend. He deserved to have a long life and make a living with his music. The worst part was that Matt didn't know he had missed the funeral. All the mourning he got to do was with his coworkers between runs to the shelves. The store continued to be open despite their grief and customers were blissfully unaware of their loss.

"Everyone has had a lot of loss," Jake told everyone in a socially distanced staff meeting in the stock room on Wednesday, "but we gotta keep doing our best. It's what Ben would want."

Bullshit. Matt thought. Ben wouldn't want us wasting time here. He'd want us to do what we love.

While he wanted to storm out, Matt kept his silence. It was about being responsible, according to his parents, but his dad was out west for work, and his mom didn't know about Ben's death. He held his tongue, but reluctantly.

On his lunch break, Matt reviewed the email Ben had sent him a few days before he died. The Final Edits were more positive, but Matt felt uncomfortable calling the story finished. Ending it felt like saying goodbye and he wasn't ready for that yet.

He'd start fresh. Matt concluded that a new story was in order with everything Ben had taught him, intentionally or not. The last story had been for the end of Ben's tale, but Matt had to start one of his own. In time, Matt thought he'd go back to it, but for now, he needed to keep moving on. For Ben, but not for Jake.

The next few weeks, Matt let his mind wander while he stocked the shelves. Dragons had been fun, but Matt wanted to write something different. He wanted to tell his own story. Filling a shelf with cans, Matt's monotony was broken by a blonde girl in a yellow raincoat.

"Can you come clean up aisle 16?"