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The Grocery Store

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HCOM 434-01
Professor LaFollette
In Depth Piece:
Mental Health and Money
Dauphine Parks

The Grocery Store

I hated going to the grocery store, but mama dragged me along anyway, telling me to push the metal cart along the shiny vinyl floors. The squeal of the wheels seemed to target my ears, like tiny archers launching arrows of sound at my head. They would puncture my ear drum, grate against my teeth and pinch my eyelids. I managed to bare it though, mama needed my help. We hauled along three gallon jugs. The smell of old water that had been left to warm inside their hollow bodies, would soak the air. When we unscrewed the caps I held my breath against the fabric that covered my mouth, and I helped to rinse them out before pumping them full again. They were heavy, and it was my job to make sure the cart didn't move when mama hauled them from the water station into the big metal basket. The tap water in the city tasted like chemicals and steel, and mama proclaimed every week that she would not let her kids ingest "that damn poison". So we paid for our drinking water, paid for the taste of nothing, paid for new jugs every time I dropped one and it would crack, water spilling across concrete trying to escape the heat of the summer sun. It was always hot here, and we were perpetually dehydrated. The mask didn't help, my sweat soaked through and it clung to my face, it felt icky.

"Can I have a popsicle?" sometimes I convinced myself her answer would be different.

"Can't afford it baby, water comes first." She sighed, and an anxious beast tore through my chest. I could hear the wailing but I knew it was silent to everyone else. My muscles contracted around my abdomen and my insides cramped. I suddenly couldn't stand the feeling of my socks

in my shoes, slipping down centimeter by centimeter, and the tiny tag mom had left on the back of my shirt. It was silky, and she thought I wouldn't notice but I did. I noticed everything. I scratched my arm and stared at the red marks as the dead skin flaked off. I didn't want to have skin, I didn't want to be here, I didn't LIKE it. I felt like I might explode. Mama could see it on my face, she saw me struggling to communicate, to breathe.

"I promise it's just a few more items ok? We'll be done soon." She took the cart from my sweaty palms and I followed her as she passed through the seafood and meat department.

"I'm making lemon chicken for dinner, that's nice isn't it?" She grabbed a sack of free range thighs and chatted to me over her shoulder. I knew she was trying to distract me. That made me angrier, it made me sadder. But I didn't know why, and that bugged me so I just rubbed at my eyes and pulled my hair. Having a head hurt.

"Don't touch your face!" Mama grabbed one of my hands and held it as we walked. We got a can of beans, corn tortillas and tomatoes and lemons. She dropped a block of cheese and butter into the cart, only the grass-fed ones though because we were good people. I scuffed my shoe against the wall next to the dairy case and tried to focus on breathing like the doctor said, but everything bothered me and made it hard. The music bouncing off the ceiling was too noisy, a kid screamed an aisle over and I pulled on the mask strings that hooked around my ears, my bones were sore and hurt. I let out a blend of something like a moan and shriek. Mama grabbed my hand again and led me through to the frozen section, and I knew I was hurting her. It wasn't fun being my mom, especially when everyone was sick and scared of germs. I wished I could tell

her I was sorry and I would take it back if I could. I would take myself back to wherever I came from, from before I was me. But shame wrapped its pointy vines around me, like a snake keeping my arms to my sides and my throat closed. I couldn't speak.

"Want a mac n cheese?" she was hurrying now, and a tear snuck out my left eyeball. I didn't bother wiping it, the fabric soaked it up. The chill from the freezers raised my arm hair which I hated. I pushed them back down, frowning at my bumpy skin. They looked gross. I hated bumps.

"Yes," I mumbled. Mama threw a few boxes in the cart, and as we passed the popsicles I bit my tongue, I knew I shouldn't have asked earlier, it was dumb and I felt queasy. Suddenly we were at the register, and I sucked in a breath as the cashier started unloading our groceries. With every barcode scanned my toes cramped more and more. My back felt like wood and the waistband of my pants dragged against my skin.

"I don't feel good," I hit mama's leg, I wanted to leave really badly.

"We're almost done, calm down please," she looked at me, I could tell she was frowning cause her eyes told me so.

"I can't mommy please," I started to blubber and more tears escaped, my cheeks felt hotter under the mask and I wanted to rip it off. As I struggled to drag in breaths, I avoided eye contact with the man behind the counter. I knew he was looking at me funny. Another beep signaled another item being added to the bill, another penny spent on feeding me and my family— I cried in

earnest then. I cried for all my weight that brought my mama down. It felt like there was a hummingbird in my chest and a rock in my tummy. There were bees in my hands and feet but my legs felt stiff and were itchy as a sunburn. “I can’t I can’t I can’t.”

“Okay, go wait outside,” mama pushed me towards the double doors and I felt so scared. Big people were walking past me, I couldn't see all their faces and some of them had weird plastic walls around their heads, they had gloves on; they were scary and they were looking at me. I ran outside and leaned against the concrete wall.

“Idiot idiot you embarrassed her,” I covered my eyes with my palms and crouched down. A sob escaped me, and a pretty lady stopped by to ask if I was doing alright. I could tell she wanted to come closer, but she kept a yard stick away. I looked at her, my eyes were puffy and my lips felt numb but I mumbled “uh huh.” Mama came out then with a few paper bags and laid a hand on my head.

“She’s fine, just a little panicked,” she smiled at the pretty lady as she pulled out a tube of the stinky sanitizer. As I blubbered she poured some in my hands then helped me up, and I clung to her as snot started to drip down my chin. Now my face was wet and so were my hands. There was a papercut on my pinky and it burned. I shook my hand and wiped it on my pants, I hated the sanitizer.

“Feel better,” the woman waved at me as we walked back to the car. I tried to smile at her but she probably couldn't tell.

I'm such a bad person. I did everything bad. I don't like it. I don't like it.

“I’m sorry mommy,” I pulled the mask off my head and sobbed as I curled up inside the car. She just told me to remember my breathing as she shut the door and got into the driver's seat. I scratched my arms again, and kept apologizing.

“At least we have water now,” she said quietly as she shoved her mask and mine into the car’s glovebox. She sounded really tired, and as she turned the key in the ignition and the car sputtered to life, I knew it would be a while before she brought me with her to the grocery store again.