

The Greeter

“The Missing Sweet Potato”

Chapter 1

The clanging of shopping carts hitting together in the cart corral could be heard at least a half mile away from the parking lot. It was on a hot Saturday morning in April. He really didn't mind gathering up the carts from the parking lot — especially on such a gorgeous spring day.

Everybody has to start somewhere and this was his somewhere. He did wonder why there were so many carts for such a small community. More than that, he wondered how all those carts get into the parking lot and where all the shoppers came from.

Why do they call the place where the carts are to be returned to a cart corral? To him, it sounded like an old Western.

He had an inquisitive mind full of wonderings, but few answers. It was a new day, a new start, a beautiful Saturday morning in the small, rural Southern town — Evanston, Georgia. As it has done all over the country, The Store breathed new life and hope into this little community. Wal-Mart is the life's blood of Cumberland Woods.

His thoughts were interrupted by the roar of a car engine passing by.

“Hey Jazz,” Mr. Johnston yelled as he drove by in his silver Ford Expedition.

Mr. Johnston was the manager on duty. The Store must pay him pretty good to be driving that vehicle. Everyone seems to like him alright, at least to his face. He goes by the book on everything. Jazz guesses that makes it OK. The best part about Mr. Johnston is you know where you stand. Everyone gets treated with respect, all the workers at the Evanston store are treated the same. For him, a rule is a rule never to be broken or bent, no matter what the circumstance.

Mr. Johnston sat in his car adjusting his rear view mirror and then he checked his black thinning hair followed by combing his mustache. He had entered that time in his life when he looked in the mirror and didn't always know who was looking back – he was in his early 40s. His hair showed a few gray hairs. He is highly efficient and very organized. Slowly getting out of his beautiful sports utility vehicle, Mr. Johnston waved at him. Jazz remembered everybody waved at everybody else in the South – whether you knew them or not. He had been told that by his daddy this was a Southern thing. He wondered why folks in other places did not wave.

Jazz was a seventeen-year-old, light skinned young man who worked at The Store. He lived in this sleepy, little Southern town outside of Augusta, Georgia, in a community known as

Cumberland Woods or — as the locals called it — The Woods. The town had a caution light and one local restaurant — Home Café. Everybody knew everybody.

Ever heard of the Augusta National Golf Course? Well ... they play a little golf down there. Although Jazz and nobody he knew had ever been inside the Augusta National Golf Course, he hears the grounds are beautiful.

Jazz was too busy in his own world to think much about the National or golf in general for that matter. He has his own problems. Jazz is tall – about six feet two inches – and thin – about 160 pounds – with tanned skinned, because he spends some time outside gathering up shopping carts. His brown hair is streaked with natural blonde highlights most girls would pay good money to have.

His self-concept is rather low, mainly due to the few spots of acne on his face and the inexperience of youth. He seems to notice the flaws on his face more than others do. The acne seems to be slowly fading as Jazz knocks on the door of adulthood. His circumstances in life forced him to grow-up and take on adult responsibilities.

Jazz is about as Southern as they come. His daddy would laugh and say, “Well, boy ... you so Southern that if they ever cut you open, you gonna bleed collard greens and pan-fried cornbread.” Then, his dad would let out a hardy laugh.

Collard greens are big, leafy vegetables that you grow or buy in a store. Take the greens home, wash and *look* at each leaf to check for bugs and/or fungus. Once you tear off the leaves, you put the leaves in a pot with some water and let them cook on the stove. When it's done, you add some hot pepper sauce. Pan-fried cornbread or some folks call it hoecakes, are collard greens sidekick. If you got any juice left in the bowl when you are finished with your greens, you can use the cornbread to sop up what is called the potlicker. Yummy...delicious, Southern home-cooking!

Many a day Jazz could recall coming home and seeing his mother standing at the kitchen sink with her glasses on singing an old hymn like *I'll fly away!* and looking collard greens. She did not talk much, but she loved to cook and sing. Sarah did both very well. Those home cooked meals for Jazz from his mother were all gone.

Jazz has a great memory and often thought about the past. As far as his future is concerned, well... he is supposed to graduate from high school this spring. At least he hopes he will. There is still that incidence that has to be cleared up.

“Good Morning Jazz. How is that English class coming along?” said Vera, a short, slightly overweight 40-something-year-old woman who works in the Bakery department. Jazz’s mother, Sarah, always told him never to trust a skinny cook – so he respected the fact Vera was kind and a little on the plump side. They had known each other a long time – she used to work over in the elementary school lunchroom until The Store came to town.

Vera is always nice to Jazz so when she asked him to stay late sometimes and help her clean up or straighten up he did not mind. Jazz has a good heart, even though most people do not know he is there. Sometimes he feels like he is invisible.

“Fair to midland, Miss Vera. Thanks for asking.” Jazz replied shyly. Fair to midland was a term used to describe the weather, but some old time, deep Southerners still use it to refer to how they were feeling when they are doing fine. Vera likes to read and often writes a poem or two for a special occasion. At Jazz’s mother’s funeral, Vera recited a poem she had written.

She usually asks Jazz specifically about English class so he thought she wanted to know about his latest school paper. However, he was still waiting on it to be returned and graded. It’s entitled “Why I Like to Work at Wal-Mart.” Jazz felt he would at least get a grade of C since Mr. Johnston’s wife, Mrs. Clara Johnston, is his teacher.

He might not be too much on book learning, but in common sense he faired out pretty good. He knew who to be nice to in this town, then again seemed like most folks were nice to each other in general he thought. It wasn’t that Jazz was slow, he just questioned everything. For instance, why do so many vehicles Ford puts out start with the letter E? His folks said he was analytical and took after his grandfather on his mother’s side, but in any other family they might have thought differently.

“Have you seen Mr. Johnston this morning? I *really* need to talk to him.” said Vera as her voice suddenly turned with a slightly anxious tone. She is a real lady. Some say Mr. Johnston really liked Vera a long time ago when they were in high school together. So there were a few rumors here and there about perhaps Mr. Johnston and Vera still might like one another, but you couldn’t prove it by Jazz. He had never seen anything going on between them.

Everyone at The Store called him Mr. Johnston. Southerners call each other mister or miss out of respect, even if the person is only a year older than you. You call them by a courtesy title or your parents just might take you out back behind the wood shed for a serious discussion with your behind.

“Yes Ma’am. Mr. Johnston is here. There’s his S...U...V... over there.” Jazz pointed to the shiny new Ford and said the letters of the vehicle very slowly with emphasis.

Jazz often noticed things others had that he did not. He had heard that SUV, meant Sport Utility Vehicle, but he liked to say SUV.

The sun was sparkling on Mr. Johnston’s SUV like a brand new penny. Jazz takes pride in showing off the silver vehicle as if somehow it partially belongs to him. He took pleasure in thinking perhaps someday he too might own a car he could be proud of – even if it did start with an E. Hopes and dreams were all Jazz really has.

“Vera, I was wondering...” Jazz’s voice trailed off into the distance. Vera was already walking away with a quick step. He could usually tell when the conversation was over and people were no longer listening to him, which was most of the time. He heard the snack bar was bought out and a *McDonald’s* was moving in. A store bought hamburger every now and then with a milkshake to wash it down sounds really good to Jazz. Vera usually knew the truth from rumor so he wanted to check with her to see if it was real before he got his mouth all watered up. She would know something like that, especially when it had something to do with food.

Oh well, he had a lot to do and he really needed to be thinking about getting it done. He was almost finished with getting all the carts back into The Store through what Jazz called the short door. These doors were on the left side of the main entrance, a wide door where Jazz could easily push the carts into The Store.

He worked the previous night – Friday evening. That night it was raining as they say down South like cats and dogs. Well, not really but let’s just say it was a real trash mover of a storm. Georgia gets a whole heap of rain in the spring time.

Jazz’s main job was to collect the shopping carts from the parking lot and push all the carts back into The Store. Although most folks around here referred to carts as buggies, his official job title is cart pusher. Since it was raining so hard the night before, Mr. Johnston told Jazz to go ahead and leave so that he could spend some time with his girlfriend, Marsha Jean.

She is really not his girlfriend. Wow, he could only dream about that. Mr. Johnston was only teasing Jazz about Marsha Jean, but Jazz really appreciated the thought. Marsha Jean is the prettiest girl in the whole county and she is smart, too. She has a 4.0 average in school *and* she works in the jewelry department. You have to be real smart, honest and responsible to work in that department.

Jazz came in early so he could have all the shopping carts back in The Store before the crowd started coming in. Saturday was always a busy day here. Both of his parents said Saturday is traditionally the day to get dressed up and go into town to do your shopping and bartering with other folks in the city and other nearby counties. They both felt Wal-Mart brought back that old, familiar feeling of Saturday shopping. No matter what the reason, Jazz knows people are constantly coming and going, especially on Saturday. Everyone in town and several counties around seem to come in because they know they can find whatever they need at The Store. But this is not just any Wal-Mart; this is Jazz's Wal-Mart. Jazz noticed other folks also felt ownership about The Store. When folks would travel away from The Woods, they would return and talk about how glad they are to be home back at *their* Wal-Mart.

Suddenly, Jazz felt a light tap on his shoulder and could smell the most wonderful, light flowery fragrance. He quickly turned around, but he could not see at first who it was because the bright, morning sun was shining directly into his light blue eyes. Slowly, he raised one of his young, thin hands over his eyes so that he could see who was talking to him. Jazz was shy and did not know what to say at first. Then, he heard a soft, yet slow Southern drawl call his real name.

"Jes-abe, Cat's got ya tongue?" then he heard a giggle. He was slightly shocked Marsha Jean was standing in front of him looking like an angel sent straight down from heaven. Every time he looks at her she just has a special glow about her, but he does not know what to say to her.

The community refers to Marsha Jean as its local Brittany Spears, but only in looks. She has long naturally blonde hair the slight breeze was blowing and the most beautiful blue eyes Jazz has ever seen. They both have blue eye color, just different shades of blue. Her figure is perfect – models would have envied her slender form. She only wears a little make-up on her white, yet perfectly tanned skin, because she does not need any more.

The management at The Store was very smart to have put Marsha Jean in the jewelry department. Women liked to talk to her and men loved for their wives' to look at jewelry because while the women were looking at jewelry the men were looking at Marsha Jean. Often women would wonder why their boyfriends or husbands were looking at jewelry instead of visiting the other departments – like sporting goods or lawn and garden. One look at Marsha Jean and you wanted to stay in her department all day.

Everybody likes Marsha Jean, the all-around girl-next-door, cheerleader type. She would do you proud if you are with her anywhere. Any teenage boy would be proud to take her home to meet his Mama. Marsha Jean and Jazz were seniors at Cumberland High School. They had known each other since the day they were born. She always speaks to Jazz, but then again she always speaks to everyone.

Jazz stumbled over his words as if someone had placed pebbles in his mouth.

“Goo morning, Ma-ma-Marsha Jean!” Oh, Jazz felt his heart fall past his stomach on down into his shoes. His face turned blood red from pure embarrassment.

“I mean God morning....” Jazz continued to mumble.

By now Marsha Jean, the Wal-Mart Jewelry Goddess – as she was called – was beginning to back up and walk away. “That’s OK Jes-abe. I have to go. Mr. Johnston called me into work early today. Said he wanted to see me *and* Vera about something and that it was important. Stop by my department today when you go on break...there’s *something* real important I want to talk to you about, OK?”

Jazz could not answer her. He felt like the dumbest person in the universe. He did manage to whisper: “Good Morning” correctly as Marsha Jean went into The Store. Jazz wondered what was so important that Mr. Johnston needed to talk with Vera and Marsha Jean about. But more interesting still Jazz really wondered what Marsha Jean wanted to chew the fat about with him.

Author’s Note: Hope you enjoyed this excerpt from *The Greeter*.

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