

Word Count: 784

### The Status of Rigatoni

The old man looked up at me from beneath the brim of his light blue newsboy cap. With one hand on the cart and the other gesturing at the shelf behind him, he asked “Where’s the rigatoni? You’re all out of that, too?”

His voice held a defiant edge like I was hiding pasta in the backroom.

Brushing—*damp?*—hair from my eyes, I turned and stepped down the ladder. “You don’t see any on the shelf?”

*Am I sweating?* I subtly sniffed my armpit.

The man pushed aside a few boxes. “I don’t see anything.”

Stepping to the floor, I quickly put the safety latch on the ladder and my best Walmart smile on my face. “Here, let me help you look.”

After almost a full week’s work, I was ready for spring break to end so I could get back to online teaching and be finished with all these extra hours I’d picked up at my part-time job. My body hurt from lifting heavy boxes all week while unpacking product and racing around the store to restock shelves.

Taking a few steps, my eyes quickly scanned the shelves.

“See. That’s it?” His I-told-you-so rose at the end, like a question.

Between the blue and green boxes of pasta, empty spaces gaped like missing teeth. I searched for rigatoni but kept coming up with the same type of noodles: lasagna, shells, and angel hair pasta. *Never mind the rigatoni. Where did all the regular spaghetti go?*

Crouching to reach the bottom shelves, I looked for randomly misplaced product that sometimes sat behind other product and found two boxes of penne pasta, all the way in the back and turned sideways.

As I reached for them, a single idea pinged around like a pinball hitting the bumpers of my brain. Stored information about current events in China formed one bumper; our own closed U.S. borders formed another. The pinball bounced off what I’d seen in Walmart all week.

I’d watched the pitch of customer intensity rise since Monday. With each passing day, shoppers masked their fear with laughter and spoke disparagingly about the preppers and horders, while they themselves quickly grabbed bags of rice and beans. “I don’t know why anyone’s worried,” some said.

“It’s all just a big media scare. They have us where they want us.” Others said, “Just use common sense and wash your hands.”

With both boxes in hand, I took a deep breath and looked down the aisle as I felt the crinkle in my knees while getting up.

The white glare from overhead LEDs bounced off the floor between customers and carts.

It was only two in the afternoon.

There were never this many people out shopping at two o’clock on a Thursday afternoon.

The words flashed in my mind: *Corona Panic*.

The old man cleared his throat. “So, what’s the status of the rigatoni?” His blue eyes pierced like light from a lighthouse set amid wrinkled skin, brown age spots, and sagging eyes. He looked defeated beneath his light blue cap.

“Scuse me?” I asked.

“What do I tell my wife?” His eyes wobbled back and forth unsteadily as he searched my eyes for an answer.

I cleared my throat, lifting the damp hair off my neck with one hand and holding out the two boxes of penne with the other, “I would tell her we are out right now. I don’t know when we are getting any more. But, we do have this. Penne is a great pasta. It’ll probably work with her recipe.”

He took the boxes from my hands and warily eyed the contents through the film on the front of each package. “If that’s all you’ve got...” His voice trailed off as he put one box in his cart and handed the other back to me.

I set the remaining box randomly on the shelf. At this point, I didn’t even care which spot I set it in or whether the price label information matched the product. That last box of penne would be gone before I could even get my scanner to find its proper location. Of that, I was certain.

I turned back to my ladder-cart and unlatched the safety pin.

“Excuse me, miss?”

I turned around.

A heavy-set Hispanic woman stepped toward me, looking at a piece of paper in one hand while waving a pen in the other. “Miss?” she asked, her purse slipping off her shoulder and tangling in her long black hair. She struggled for a moment to get it untangled and then asked with a heavy sigh, “Is this all the pasta you have left? And what about tomato sauce? I can’t find *any* tomato sauce.”