Forgetting the Diet Pepsi

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Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"As I pushed my cart into checkout 4, I realized I had forgotten to pick up my wife's Diet Pepsi. I almost said 'the hell with it,' but then a picture of her realizing I had forgotten it flashed before my eyes."

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Forgetting the Diet Pepsi

As I pushed my cart into checkout 4, I realized I had forgotten to pick up my wife's Diet Pepsi. I almost said "the hell with it," but then a picture of her realizing I had forgotten flashed before my eyes.

It wasn't that she would get mad. Sharon rarely got mad; it was more the look in her eyes. Then the sigh. Then the "No, honey, it's no big deal. I wanted to start drinking more water anyway."

I pulled the cart out of the checkout aisle, left it next to a rack of magazines, and started in on a slow jog to get the soda. In less than a minute I was back, again pushing the cart into checkout 4, this time with a 12 pack of Diet Pepsi in hand.

As I contemplated whether to add an Almond Joy to my grocery pile, I reached into the cart and began unloading. As I set a can of Star-Kist tuna on the checkout, I glanced into the cart, blinked, and glanced again, and discovered that the cart I was unloading was not filled with my groceries.

At first, I thought I may have just been confused. Maybe the steel reflection of the cart under the florescent grocery lights was making me see things. But the initial moment of confusion passed and I realized that I had in fact grabbed the wrong cart somehow.

"Paper or plastic?"
"Sir?"
I slowly moved my head in the direction of the cashier, just noticing that she was speaking to me. "Huh?"
"Paper or plastic?"
"Oh, plastic will be fine."

I know I should have again backed the cart out of the checkout and looked for my missing groceries. The ones on my wife's neatly written alphabetized list. But I didn't. Thinking back on it, I don't know if it was because my face was already red with the embarrassment of knowing I had done something this stupid, or because the cashier was already scanning the mystery groceries at top speed, or because I just didn't care. Whatever the reason, I continued unloading the groceries that a few minutes ago belonged to someone else, but now belonged to me.

As I piled the counter with tuna fish, strawberries, spinach, two kinds of mushrooms, a lime, bottled water, whole-wheat bread, and a six pack of Corona, I thought about, with the exception of the Star-Kist, how different the contents of my original cart were from this fluke cart. The majority of the items in my cart were of the canned or boxed variety.

Spaghetti-Os for my son Mike, canned corn, beans, and peas, mixed fruit in heavy syrup. On the boxed side: instant potatoes, Frosted Flakes, Robitussin, granola bars, a couple of frozen pizzas, Cheez-its, and a box of dog treats.

Since Mike started playing football and Sharon went back to school, we either ate out or had what Sharon referred to as "quickie meals." As I continued unloading peaches, shrimp, a box of brie, onions, two steaks, a carton of Ben & Jerry's Chunky Monkey, I wondered whether the person now pissed off and wandering the store in search of their cart was a man or a woman.
By the bottom of the cart, I had deduced that these items belonged to a man, a single man (due to the fact that the cart held nothing labeled “family style”) with a life. A man I wish I could be. A life I wish I could have. My whole basis for the man thing came from the fact that lying in the far right corner of the cart, wedged between the Corona and the steak, was a box of condoms. I realize that women buy condoms (my wife, an exception) but they seem more honest about it and so much less likely to sandwich them between beer and steak.

I pushed the condoms on the counter, so they remained comfortably hidden, and pushed the cart forward so the cashier could start putting my newfound groceries in the cart. I looked at her for the first time and noticed, thanks to her plastic laminated nametag, that she was Becky and had been happily serving me for 1 year. She looked to be about 15, Mike’s age. She was a pretty girl, athletic-looking with long brown hair that she kept pushing out of her eyes. She was the type of girl who would have not even known my name in high school, but would have my son’s scrawled in a heart on her math folder.

“How are you today sir?”
“Fine, thank you.”

“Will this be cash or charge?” I had brought enough cash to pay for my Betty Crocker/Red Baron groceries, but this new gourmet set would cost more than the two twenties I had in my wallet. These were the groceries of engineers or architects, not of middle managers at Builder’s Square.

“Charge.”

I felt good just taking these groceries out of the cart. To be the man putting these groceries in the cart would be like watching a football game with no interruptions. Choosing the fresh fruit, buying beer in bottles, nonchalantly tossing steak in your cart when it’s not on sale. Unloading them into your non-minivan and then unloading them again into your one bedroom, boxer shorts on the floor, childless, wifeless apartment.

“Sir, did you want that soda?” I looked up at her and then at the Diet Pepsi still in my hands.
“Yeah, I guess so.”
“Okay, that will be $58.62. Just sign on the X.”

As I shoved the receipt in my back pocket, I pushed the cart out of checkout 4, said “Have a nice day” to Becky the cashier, looking at the familiar Diet Pepsi crushing my other groceries, and heading for my minivan.

-Stacy Wittmeyer