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about 2,300 words

Bull in the Grocery

Best Value grocery's parking lot is a bit more crowded than usual for a Tuesday afternoon. I knew I should have left earlier. Sometimes I find it difficult to get myself up off the couch in the middle of my eighth run of the Office. I mean, who could leave without finding out who the Scranton Strangler was? And feel complete? Not me. So I was late.

I searched the parking lot for an empty space. Here's a handy tip for you readers out there: you want one not too far away from the front, so you're not doing all that walking. But not too close because you'll end up being hated when you leave. Someone always sees you as you're about to pull out and decides it must be their lucky day. They always stop right in the middle

of traffic. Holding up everyone behind them waiting for you to leave. And the ones that get held up act like it's your fault so they give you the stink eye when you pass. Now you have to live with that thought for the rest of your life.

Also, try finding a spot next to a cart carrel. That way you're not dodging cars trying to put the cart back. Who knows what you look like doing that. Don't need that image in my head.

I parked in a spot that I'm happy with but will inevitably complain about later, grab my reusable bags, and double lock the doors pushing my key fob over and over. I look both ways before crossing and note the Redbox sitting at the entrance. I scold myself because I pay for so many streaming services, but there's always that one movie you can't quite put your finger on but if you had a movie poster to look at...

The entry doors separate and I'm hit with a fist full of conditioned air. It always has a strange scent to it, I've never been able to place it. Probably just unfiltered CO2 they regurgitate back into the air.

The greeter notices me, and I smile as I slip on my mask. She gives me a knowing nod. No words exchange. I grab the closest cart and give it a customary, sanitary wipe down and throw the wipe in the garbage. The pre-grocery shopping ritual is complete. With the shopping list in hand, I push through the gates and under the fluorescent.

The trick, I've learned, is to write the list according to the layout of the store. They design the floor plan for you to move in a cohesive way. If you have to go back to another section because you missed something, you are looked upon with fury from the others. You have disrupted the flow of shopping traffic and will be sacrificed in the steak aisle to the gods of low prices.

I move to the right, rushing past the freshly baked bread to the deli. Opposite the counter, I pick up the cheapest red wine. I'm just trying to get drunk, let's be real. I don't need to be fancy drunk. I plan on passing out on my couch and then waking up at 3 a.m. wondering where I am and regretting yet another poor decision past me has made.

There's a small crowd gathering at the deli counter and I finally slip my way to the ticket taker and pull number 23. The digital counter clicks over to 19.

I survey the group that I've added myself to: single mothers, blue hairs, the self-made businessman who tells people that he deals with high end real estate but really just sells weed to high school kids. You can pick them out by how tight his athletic shorts are and how far his socks come up.

There's some vague pop song playing on the overhead speakers in between the constant advertisement interruptions.

Are you a member? Hopefully, you're a member. I am. Non-members will be shot on sight. Are you a member? Better hope so.

My number is called, and I act surprised. Everyone always does. I mean, I was looking at my social feed listening haphazardly, but you got to give the worker a chance to call your number a few times before you acknowledge that it's you. Everyone will look down at their scraps of paper with that small shred of hope that it's them and they can finally get their cold cuts and artisan cheeses sliced by a professional. But it's me who steps forward.

"Half a pound of colby sandwich cut, please," I say.

"You want the Bore's? It's on special." The deli manager points to the sign behind her head. I nod and smile with my eyes. She goes to task with my approval.

I step away from the counter because I get that feeling that I will fall forward and completely take out the glass causing all sorts of twelve dollar by the pound ham and pickle loaf go flying hitting everyone behind me. Maybe I should take another step back.

I take my packaged "on special" deli cheese, toss in the child's seat of the cart, and push on down to fruits and vegetables. The water sprays the backing mirrors just as I enter like it's a parade in my honor. I blush and imagine a wave. You shouldn't have, I sulk.

As I'm turning over a palm-sized watermelon in my hand, knocking it with my index finger to judge the hollowness (wondering what the hell I'm even doing), there's some commotion coming from the front of the store. I do that thing where you act like you're not listening, but you are totally listening and seeing how far your peripheral vision can stretch. The sound goes away then, I think, and— ooh, carrots are on sale. I cross another item off my list and confidently stride to the next aisle.

I breathe deep and am suddenly transported back to a childhood memory that isn't mine. It's manufactured from tv commercials or being invited over to friends' houses for dinner: the smell of freshly baked bread. Perfectly shaped loaves packed tightly in plastic bags line the aisle.

From here, I see straight to the front of the store. The commotion hasn't subsided, apparently, and is seemingly growing louder with every passing minute. There's sharp, loud shrieks followed by humble murmuring.

I twist over one loaf for inspection. You gotta check the color of the crust. That's how you know what day it was baked on. And then from there you just -- I'm not really sure.

Satisfied, I put it in the child's seat on top of the deli cheese. Can't risk the bread getting smooshed before I even check out.

Down a ways is an open air cooler sporting a wide range of small batch breweries. Every label was more colorful and stranger than the last. Some shouted "triple IPA" and "blonde" and I can't think of anything more that screams "sock hat wearing, bearded bro" yet still feel a pang of jealousy. I pick my basic-bitch American pilsner until I can find time to research what it all means. No reason to waste \$16 on a six-pack of beer that might taste like my week old socks. Don't ask.

The cries grow louder in the next aisle over and a shockwave is sent through the chip shelves, forcing helpless bags of tortillas and twice-baked potatoes crashing to the floor. More ruckus. Dang, my cart was already starting to fill up.

I've been flirting with the Paleo diet recently, so I move past the chips and onto frozen foods.

The store just renovated and went "green" so now, when you walk down the frozen aisles, each door will light in succession giving you a grand entrance like you're about to receive a medal from Princess Leia. You feel like royalty.

I search through the glass doors, trying to find the knockoff pizza I clipped a coupon for and am now thinking I may have forgotten said coupon at home.

Then I see it: a giant brown bull. He stalks at the end of the aisle. The flecks of blonde in his mane, the tail whipping

back and forth. He sees me, but doesn't break his stride. That was the noise from earlier. There's a damned bull in the grocery. Oh, Red Baron; that's what the coupon was for.

The back left corner of the grocery was for your staples: milk, cheese, eggs. They do this on purpose, you know. They make you walk all the way to the back for the things everyone needs and try to entice you to buy things you don't using fancy displays and appealing price cuts. And sometimes it is distracting.

Today, that distraction was added to by the bull standing at the seafood counter. His snout fogging up the glass, every once and while nudging his head, pushing the display back. Where are all the workers? All I see are people with their phones out, Instagram Live. I turn to the milk and reach all the way into the back to grab a jug.

That's another thing they don't tell you. Sometimes when someone goes to check out, they decide they don't want certain things like milk or chicken. So, the cashier takes it and puts it under the counter. There it sits, until their shift is over, and then they take it back to whatever department it's meant for.

How long did it sit there?

I was thinking the same thing. But they just put it back on the shelf. That's why, if you bring chicken home, it will

sometimes go bad before the date on it. It's already been sitting out. You gotta grab the ones from the middle. That's your safe bet.

I see one shopper get too close to the bull and he turns on his heel towards them. You can tell he's fired up, snorting heavy out his nose, bellowing loud, making all sorts of noise. The watchers just step back, arms out, phones armed. He turns and approaches another. I drop the milk into my cart and go on the hunt for eggs.

The trick to finding a good carton of eggs is to check for damaged ones. Not just cracked on top, but underneath too. I've fallen for "not truly checking" before and it's no fun paying for a baker's dozen and only getting pieces of eight.

I pick up the top carton, slowly lift the lid, and do my thorough investigation. There's more stomping and bellowing coming from the aisle opposite from me; cleaning supplies. The bull travels down the aisle, up to the front of the grocery, all the while being pursued by our shoppers turned amateur journalists for the afternoon.

I push my cart cautiously to the front, hoping all the noise would distract enough that I can slide right up to the checkout.

By the exit, the bull is taking his last stand; kicking over carts, spilling out their contents. A ring is surrounding

him now, shoppers and employees alike, push the bull back out the front. I step up to an empty check out line and start emptying my cart. The cashier and I exchange greetings.

"Crazy stuff, right?" I say. She tries to not look like she's distracted.

"Do you have a rewards card?" she asks as I pull my keys out and flash the keychain. She scans it through the register and hands them back to me. I imagine her taking her hand off a shotgun that was pointed towards me hanging underneath the counter out of sight. Got to be a member.

I wonder if the other cashiers talk about how much crap people put on their keys? We forget that our keys are a way to express ourselves; show off where we've been and what we've done. Sometimes it's a vacation or pictures of your family. What is on your keyring says a lot about a person.

By the time the check out is done, the bull is outside, and the store seems to go back to business as usual. I pay credit and push my bagged groceries out of the store.

The bull, I see, is circling the parking lot. There are a few patrons that are standing by watching, fewer phones than before. Some murmurs float about the condition of the cars out in the parking lot the bull passes by. I hear them discussing various bull facts all crowdsourced from one or another. All

contradicts itself. It's all bullshit, I know, but it's better to mind my business.

I check traffic and push my cart out onto the road. I press the key fob and unlock the doors. With the groceries in the back of the car, I push the cart one lane over into the cart corral. See? Easy.

I step into the driver's side and close the door behind me. I push the ignition key in and pause. The bull is still bellowing at the onlookers, but then decides to just turn and run. Bulls today, I swear. Just when you think things can't get any worse, these guys are running around.

Then I think, I've never seen one in the wild before. Sure, crazy portrait videos on Twitter, but never up close enough to see the true rage of a bull in a grocery store.

Should be a law against it or something.

Oh, shoot. I forgot onions. Ah, next time.