

SUPERMARKET TROLLEYS

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Saturdays, it seemed to Catherine, came round with monotonous regularity. It wasn't that she didn't heave a sigh of relief as she left the office on a Friday, but it seemed no time had passed than she found herself, once again, doing the weekly shopping. And it wasn't as if she didn't like shopping. She did, and often used it as a panacea for bleak moods. Nothing large, her tastes and pocket were modest. But buying a new sieve or some slinky undies could revive spirits immensely. And yet, you could have just so many sieves and, apart from the tactile aspect, was the underwear appreciated anyway?

But it was the dull routine, the same old products on the shelves and above all the thinking of what to provide for the following week, which irked. At times she wished they would invent another animal as she juggled among chicken, pork, beef or lamb. Fish, would have added another dimension, but it was not a favorite of her husband's. His tastes were definitely conservative and she would sigh wistfully as she watched others nonchalantly tossing herbs, spices, and exotic vegetables into their trolleys. Even the dog would only eat one brand.

The greatest dilemma, however, was timing. If she sacrificed the Saturday morning linger over breakfast, freshly baked items were not ready. Waiting until later meant people. People who dithered. People who needed a course in the Highway Code of trolleys. People on an extended family stroll. And why was it that shelf packers were at their busiest at this peak period? And not just in one department, but in detergents, fruit, cans, cereals, all seemingly in need of replenishing at the same time.

Eventually, having wrestled mind and body to the accompaniment of strident music, there were the checkout lines to endure, and it was here that she had unconsciously developed a safety valve. While others leafed through magazines so thoughtfully supplied by the management (did anyone buy those dog-eared, sticky, numbers?), she would study trolley contents. Regular weekly trolley contents. Regular weekly trolleys did not interest her. Nor particularly those specializing in say a party or a Spring cleaning binge. No, it was the ones that contained unusual combinations which fascinated. How did a hair net, three cans of peas and a bottle of ketchup go together? What was the story behind a kilo of grapes and an aerosol spray? She knew, of course, that it was normal. People ran out of odd things. But this did not stop her speculations on the lives and characters of those in front of her.

At some stage it occurred to her that if she were doing this, so too might others and this had made her acutely aware of her own trolley contents. From then on she would periodically add red herrings. One day she found herself walking out of the store having bought food and accessories for dogs, cats, canaries, and tropical fish and had had to make hurried donations to a local animal welfare center before getting home. Another occasion, a trolley piled high enough for a family of eight had led to an impromptu party.

Nevertheless, her musings continued until one day her eyes lit, positively sparkled, on the trolley of the man in front of her. This was a gem. Definitely one to ponder on. Forty two bars of soap and a fluffy toy rabbit. What lay behind this one? Did he have a

cleanliness fetish? Was he the father of an enormous brood? And then it happened. A brainstorm.

Hurriedly paying for her own couple of items (a story for someone else there) she found herself following him. It wasn't too difficult. He had a slow, ponderous gait and steadfastly made his way to the shopping center exit. And, as if by an act of providence, their cars were parked in the same vicinity. Unaccustomed to following someone, she was quite prepared to lose him in the traffic. But his driving, like his walking, was unhurried. She soon found herself driving along unfamiliar streets, but so intent was she on her mission, neither time nor distance registered.

And then, after endless meandering, he began to slow down and turn into the gateway of a large building set in leafy grounds. She quickly found a parking spot and took a closer look. It was then that she saw the sign. Hillgrove Psychiatric Hospital. She watched as he showed a pass to the security man. He was let through and the gates clanged behind him. Was he a warden? Was the rabbit a daughter's birthday present, or perhaps, a comforter for some lost soul

regressed in childhood? Was he a patient adjusting to uncertainty in the outside world? She would never know.

It was then she realized she was in an unknown part of the city and the enormity of what she had done sank in. How was she going to explain away the hours and a fourth of a tank of gas? Could she indeed find her way back on her own? She shrank from asking for directions as if this might somehow reveal her impetuous, possibly even irrational behavior.

In panic, she started working her way through a labyrinth of small residential streets, all seemingly the same. Where was the sign? A landmark? A 52 bus to follow? After a few false starts, she eventually got to the freeway and thankfully recognized the route, which headed for home. She tried to relax, but the euphoria at finding her way was short-lived, as her tangled thoughts flitted between her actions, explanations to come, and the enigma of the man she had followed.

At long last, she turned into her street. It was then that she was jolted by the thought that she might soon learn more than she wanted to know about the man, the soap and the rabbit.