

Columnists

ESTHER BAIRD: Adventures in grocery shopping

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BEVERLY, MASS. - "That will be ten million dollars." The grocery store clerk said to me as she began bagging my gold plated box of oatmeal and diamond encrusted grapes.

"Wonderful," I said with a sigh and opened up my wallet, while absentmindedly taking the king sized bag of M&Ms out of my two-year-old's hand. "Leave the candy on the shelf please." My older daughter handed me a pack of gum that had been swiped earlier in the checkout lane. She gave me a knowing, four year old, roll of the eyes. She'd never swipe candy. That was sooo, two years old.

"Thanks honey," I said as I handed the clerk my card. Nope, that was my insurance card. Hmmm. I scraped around in my purse . . .debit card, debit card, where was my debit card!? I opened my purse wider. It wasn't there. Nor, was my credit card, nor for that rather illegal matter, was my driver's license. And with a deep breath I realized exactly where they were. I put on a happy yet contrite face. "I'm so sorry but it seems that I left my debit and credit cards (I left out the license bit) in my other purse. You see," I stared at her wistfully, "I went out last night."

So close. I'd been so close to the perfect, child-toting, grocery trip. While clearly not preferred, sometimes you must bring your children with you. And since they don't hand out wine coolers at the door, you have to bring your own plan to remain calm.

I had a three-pronged approach. The first, and most obvious step, was to only shop at a grocery store that had a Bean car available. Regular readers may recall my sheer delight when I first discovered those riding cars attached to grocery carts three years ago. I was a new parent and the Bean simply made my entire errand-running existence magical. After I wrote the column about the Bean, I discovered that the manufacturer, The McCue Company, was located in Salem. I took a tour, saw some future Bean designs, and walked away with even more love for their product. Now three years later I remain a fan. If I must bring my children to the grocery store, it, in turn, must provide Beans.

Secondly, of course, and by that I mean, OF COURSE, I bring a flat-bed of snacks.

Thirdly, if they behave, I will allow them to each get a sheet of stickers from the check-out clerk if offered. It's hit or miss, but every now and then the Stop-N-Shop on Enon Street gives out some great, big, grocery-themed stickers.

"Ok girls, keep your hands, arms and heads inside the car. I will not be held responsible for any fingers that get squished beneath the wheels, or limbs that get knocked off." My daughters nodded dutifully and a lady browsing the citrus section laughed.

"I haven't heard that one before!" She chuckled.

I laughed merrily along with her until we were out of sight and then I stared at my girls. "I mean it."

They knew it.

Off we rolled. And except for a mid-store, animal-cracker raid, and the fact that the whole frozen food and dairy section was treated to a rousing rendition of, "Here Comes Jesus Riding on a Donkey," it was a successful shop.

Until I couldn't pay.

In one second I had wiped out the whole trip; I'd undermined my entire three-part strategy. All because I went to dinner the night before.

I can count on one hand - and we can even go with my left hand and exclude my thumb and newly non-functional pointer finger - the number of times I've been out this year without our girls. So, when I do go out I prefer to not lug my bright, pink, floral diaper bag with me. Instead I carry a small, black, leather purse that could not possibly hold a box of raisins or a baggie of goldfish.

But because it's not a habit, because I don't go out enough to remember to switch it all back, I found myself in this awkward and possibly day-ruining situation. I stared at the clerk and rambled on about purses and going out and getting babysitters and motherhood and grocery shopping and the theory of chaos.

"It's OK, hon." She interrupted. "We'll just save your order. Can you come right back?"

Yes. Yes, I could do that. Whew. The heroic clerk had saved the day and quite possibly my sanity. For my part, I had come to the obvious conclusion that I needed to go out more . . . to practice switching purses of course.

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