Man in grocery line ages overnight Col. #40

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Drawing up a short list of helpful hints for seniors came to me recently when I spent two days behind a very sweet elderly lady at the checkout counter at my local Food Basics. I remember once seeing a tabloid newspaper headline: "Sisters Reunited After 18 Years in Supermarket Checkout Line." At the time I thought this was a funny foul-up; now I understand how this could happen.

First of all, when you're checking out, it's not absolutely necessary to read every headline on the tabloid rack out loud and follow up with a personal commentary of your own. Everybody agrees these Hollywood stars are all a bunch of freaks, so really one "tch, tch, tch" for each headline is sufficient. And “That Clooney kid can rattle my cage anytime” is entirely inappropriate.

I've learned one thing in all the years I've been doing my own grocery shopping, it's that when you show up at the checkout counter with items you have removed from their shelves, the store expects payment. That's why being presented with an itemized receipt should come as no surprise to you. That's why you may want to start breaking into that portable vault affectionately referred to as a purse well before you’re asked to pony up.

So the first tip is: grocery shopping requires payment and lettuce can wilt and die in the time it takes some people (and no, I’m not naming names here Lydia Procter) to produce legal tender at the cash register.

This brings me to another curious habit women practise: spending hours rummaging through their purses and never actually finding anything. You must remember that purses with multiple compartments, snaps, zippers and button-down leather latches were designed by a disgraced accountant who hated his mother. In the time it takes you to open the purse and dump three pounds of loonies onto the counter, you could have paid with the $20 bill that fell on the floor. You did thank me for picking the $20 bill up and handing it to you, but really my motives were purely selfish. *I was hoping to get home for Thanksgiving*! Sorry, I know that was a cheap shot, but really, would it kill supermarkets to have aisles for people in a hurry and a couple of other aisles for people who appear to be taking a slow-motion, line-dancing lesson while they're making their merry way through the checkout?

And while we're on the subject of purses, not unlike garages, it's always good to clean them out once in a while. My mother once went to the hospital for a routine scan and she produced so many health cards, she was suspected of being the ringleader in an elaborate black market scheme selling gallstone operations to illegal immigrants.

Please, trust me, the quality of health care in this country does not improve just because you can produce enough expired cards to play a game of euchre. Tip: any health card bearing your maiden name comes out of the wallet and goes into the family album.

Meanwhile, back at the checkout counter - which now looks like a line to buy bread in the old Soviet Union - you have paid, you have received your change and you're cramming those coins into that elusive little change purse when a really bad idea comes to mind. No, no, please. No matter how close your money compartment is to the photos of your grandchildren do not, I repeat, do not take them out to show the cashier.

I know you think of the cashier as your friend, but if you'd look behind you at the sea of faces flushed with anger, you'd realize that to the rest of us, she's a potentially dangerous witness and the last thing standing between you and the mob. Sure, she's still smiling pleasantly at you. That's because she's matured a lot as a person since your first arrived! We're all smiling at you because you're cuddly and cute as a button, but please, not photos of the kids at camp last summer.

Okay, if you've already got the photos out then you gotta promise: just names, ages, grades, recent accomplishments and brief testimonials from teachers and coaches. And that's it. If you get into their plans for the future, I'm tossing a large bill down on the counter and I'm going over you with my groceries like OJ Simpson in that vintage airport ad for Hertz.

And finally, let's remember: old age is that stage of life when your conversations get longer but your body gets shorter. When you senior men are driving out there on the roads, or almost on the roads, it's not enough for the driver behind you to see knuckles on the steering wheel to confirm the presence of a person in that car. Wave every so often, so we know for sure you're in there. It's a safety precaution that’s also good for circulation.

P.S. And that ain't the worst thing about being an old man. No, the worst thing is I became one almost overnight and sooner than you can say "Regularity Rules!" So many cheap shots - so little time left!

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