

Checkmate at Check-out

By: Sheila S. Hudson

“I need to stop at the grocery store. I’m out of paper towel.”

Shug grimaced but maneuvered his way into a parking space.

“I knew there’d be a crowd,” he muttered as the cart made a clippity cloppity sound on the tile.

“Fridays before a home game are always this way,” I retrieved my “list” but I do the football snack shopping.

Before I could say “half time,” the shopping cart groaned under the weight of soft drinks, pork chops, BBQ sauce, popcorn, onion dip, guacamole, and chips. Shug, envisioning himself as Professor Gadget, steered the cart into the lane equipped with the new state of the art do-it-yourself checkout system.

“But Shug,” I began.

He shushed me with a sweep of the hand and a look only old married could interpret. I acquiesced and stood calmly by. I clenched the lemon meringue pie I had purchased at Chic-Fil-A.

"How hard can this be?" Shug smugly swiped his store plus card and began.

If machines can throw down a gauntlet, this one did. Shug’s comment signaled its microprocessors to a duel to the death. Shug pushed the button labeled “begin purchase,” inserted the American Express card, and the “scan first item” banner popped up. So far, so good.

A computer-generated Voice instructed: "Scan the product and place it in the bag."

The Voice was so familiar that I was sure Luke Skywalker and his pals were hiding somewhere.

"This is a cinch," Shug announced with his "even YOU could do this" look. He scanned the six-pack of soft drinks once and proceeded to scan it 3 more times just like the professionals do. But the Voice would have none of it.

"Scan the product and place it in the bag," the Voice restated firmly. Beads of sweat appeared on Shug's brow as he scanned the six-pack again. A store manager approximately the age of our grandson appeared out of nowhere.

"Sir, you cannot scan a product more than once. Each item must be scanned separately and placed in the bag on the other side of the scanner." Shug nodded.

"A minor glitch," my husband commented. He happily continued scanning but his pace had slowed. Glee was replaced by panic when 10 pounds of pork loin refused to be scanned. Glaring onlookers stared.

"Pleeeeeeease scan the product and place it in the bag," the Star Wars Vader Voice informed us. I waited for the "or else" clause. My heart pounded. I desperately wanted to sweep up my pie and escape. The God Voice stopped and another one was addressing me, "Ma'am. Ma'am."

With one turn the entire population was staring in MY direction. A college person lately turned cashier approached. When I inadvertently placed my pie on the counter to assist Shug, I transgressed the international code of item scanning. It seems that I insulted the scanner and it blatantly refused to perform until this alien item was removed. Lucky for me, Shug was too busy struggling with salad in a sack, charcoal briquettes, and liquid detergent to notice.

"Excuse me, Sir. Scan an item only once," the human warned again.

Eyes bored large holes and I was thankful the store didn't sell ammo. The person behind us wiped sticky fingers on his T-shirt as Rocky Road ice cream dripped from its carton. I turned

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away to avoid visual gridlock and prayed my gadget loving spouse couldn't hear the collective grumbling and groups scurrying to other available registers. I also prayed no one in the store recognized us.

"You have over 15 items," the Omnipotent God-Voice informed the world according to Kroger. An amber spotlight flashed above us. I cringed. They were correct. Everyone knows technology is always correct.

"Place your produce on the scale. Select the produce button. Wait for the Cashier," the Voice-I-had-come-to-hate informed.

"This is ridiculous. We are at the mercy of a disembodied Voice." I wanted to yell it from the rafters but only said it to myself. Normal store activity hushed as the cashier approached again.

"What kind of produce do you have?" she demanded.

"Peaches," Shug sheepishly replied and shot me a look that said 'we never buy produce and tonight of all nights you buy peaches.'

Without further delay, Shug and I are weighed, paid, and out. We didn't look at each other all the way home.

I stopped shopping at the store with the Voice. Mama always said, "Some things are really a blessing in disguise." A disguise is what I could have used for my picture on the Wanted Poster.