



Just Another Day at the Local Grocery

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Warm air puffed against our cheeks as we walked through the sliding glass doors of our local grocery store. It was a usual day. Shoppers hustled and bustled about the aisles, selecting the necessities of life. An elderly woman stood in produce. She gently squeezed plump, ripe oranges in her leathery, arthritic hands. I watched momentarily, as she gently placed the juiciest ones in a plastic bag. Two men visited energetically by the Deli, and a brown-haired woman strode past. I felt the woosh of air as she went by. The sight overwhelmed me, but public places usually did.

We originally moved in like one large creature. Everyone was connected to me or to the cart.

Emma-baby sat shotgun. Her chubby cheeks vibrated, and her soft, shiny brown hair shone in the fluorescent lights. One of her squishy hands was gripped tightly around mine.

My other hand was intertwined with the sticky fingers of my mischievous toddler, Hunter. His small blond head bounced up and down beside my hip as he merrily skipped along. He held on tightly. His honey brown eyes were bright with energy. His grubby little face seemed to be looking everywhere. It was like he was excitedly looking for a new game.

Grace, calm and steady, held firmly to the cart. She was only six years old, but her spirit felt much older. It was like she was created for another time. She held her head high when she walked, and she looked straight ahead; never deviating. I quickly glanced down at her. Her hair was like spun gold. It swished gently back and forth with every step.

Then there was Jacob; he was the oldest. He held loosely to the handle with damp, infirm fingers. He lolloped along as we went: hop-step, hop-step. His mahogany hair was long and unkept and it curled around his ears. It contrasted against his pale white skin. His face looked eager and excited. His eyes seemed to dance under his heavy-set eyebrows. The black sweatpants he wore were two sizes too small, and his wrinkled, red shirt was two sizes too big. This did not bother him: he was happy that he dressed himself. He, like Hunter, was full of energy. He giggled and shrieked with happiness. This boy had something up his sleeve.

A quick shop would not be so bad if I could leave Jacob at home, but finding a sitter was impossible. "In and out," I whispered under my breath. I quickened my stride, but it was hard to do. My children's legs could not walk as fast as mine did. Jacob, though, had no problem picking up speed. He let go of the cart and galloped ahead. I kept him in my laser focus as he rushed excitedly towards the crowd.

People stopped and stared distastefully as he hop-stepped around them. Shiny, wet drool oozed down his chin, and yellow teeth peaked out from behind his upturned lips. A man jerked

away. Jacob reached his clammy, underdeveloped hand towards the man to balance himself. He was not good on his feet. Jacob stumbled momentarily and shrieked with glee as he continued onward. The man did not look happy.

“Sorry,” I said. My chest tightened. All I wanted to do today was get groceries! This was not going to be easy. I tried to grab whatever I could from off the shelves. I snatched up a box of Ritz Handi-Snacks for my kid’s lunches. I hoped that they were on sale. There was no time to check price tags today. I could feel my palms sweating against the handle of my shopping cart.

Jacob disappeared. I picked up Hunter. His little legs wriggled. “Ger-off me” he said, and I sat him next to the baby. I quickened my stride, and I took off after Jacob with Grace in tow. My heart pounded in my ears. Where did he go?

My head jerked frantically, this way and that, as I looked up each aisle. Emma, unconcerned, blew spit bubbles, and jabbered “da-da-da-da-da.” Finally, I found him. He was sitting on the dirty floor with a Fisher Price barn in his lap. He rocked back and forth and flicked his hands in a jerking motion. Jacob’s eyes glazed over. He was overcome by the music that emanated from the baby toy. To him it was the sweetest sound. He was satisfied. The toy section was his favorite place. “Hey buddy,” I said, “we’ve got a few other places to go still.” I helped him on his feet. Jacob thrust the toy into the cart. “I wanna toy too!” Hunter shouted. “You have lots of toys” Grace told him firmly. My budget could only cover basic groceries. I would have to delay the storm until later.

I quickly grabbed the things that we needed: eggs, milk, cheese, and bread. Then, set off for the checkout. Jacob thought that he had won. He stomp-danced and sidestepped beside the cart.

Sometimes he would stop to grab a bag of Doritos, or crackers from a shelf, or he would press a button on the toy. My back tightened. I knew what was coming.

We stood together in the lengthy line. The baby jabbered, and Hunter picked his nose with a grubby, sticky finger. Every so often, people turned and glanced at Jacob. They could not resist. He was not someone that you saw every day. Besides, he was pungent. His sweats wafted the smell of urinal. From time to time, I stroked the baby, or told my toddler to “please not touch that.” All the while keeping my eyes on Jacob. He was known to bolt, but, thankfully, the toy held his focus. “Don’t worry, we will be home soon” I said more to myself than to Grace. She was typically quiet and still, but the long wait made her restless.

Eventually, we checked out our items. “Can I have-a chocolate bar?” Hunter asked. “You don’t need candy every time that we come to the store,” Grace replied before I could respond.

“Not today, Hunter, but you can have some cookies when we get home,” I said. That satisfied him. I strategically placed the toy last on the conveyor belt. I could feel the pressure building in my chest. When the groceries were all bagged, and before the toy reached the scanner, I whispered to the teller that we would not buy the toy. Jacob did not notice. He was trying to open a bag of chips. I sighed. The teller gave me the total, and I quickly paid for my items.

As we started to move away from the till, Jacob realized what was missing. He was agitated. He tried to turn back several times. I wrapped my arm around him, and silently pressed forward. How far could we go before it started? We were at the exit when his feelings of loss finally sank in. Jacob threw himself on the floor kicking, screaming, and banging his head. He was blocking the doors. His shoes flew in the air.

The hustle and bustle of shoppers stopped. My children went silent. Time seemed to move in slow motion. Bystanders whispered. I could feel their eyes. I could feel their judgement. I caught sight of the elderly doorman as he slowly shook his head. My muscles tightened and my teeth clenched. My heart began to beat faster. What was I going to do?

Something inside of me switched on. I kicked into action. Strategically, I pushed our cart out of the way. Grace could keep an eye on things. Life in our home had made her mature. I picked up Jacob's shoes, and slowly walked over to him. I bent down and placed them quietly on the floor. I sat with my legs straddled on each side of him. He continued to scream and kick. He smacked himself repeatedly in the face with his fists. I heard a woman behind me gasp. The crowd stood frozen, captivated by the scene. I gently rubbed Jacob's back, and I sang softly into his ear. Gradually he quieted, the kicking stopped, and his body relaxed. He looked at me with wet eyes. "Are you done now?" I asked. His little hand signed "yes" in sign language. "I love you," I said, and I kissed his cheek. "I am sorry that you had those big emotions today. I am sorry that things did not go your way. The world can be hard for all of us sometimes." Then I put on his shoes, gave him a hug, and our family left the store.

