



'Cost of Living'

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Mark Gorham

like how a trolley rams into another trolley in the line of trolleys outside, its cagey nose – no it's a headbutt through the other trolley's backside and all the trolleys look like this when they're lined up covered from rain awaiting the next customer trolley smacked into the queue. Nick says he once saw an angry guy still carrying his satsumas do a run up and dive through the rear trolley flap and make it through perhaps like three clanking trolleys' arses before his momentum died. And trolleys take breaths when they're not bunched together like that, when they're being pushed around the supermarket, wonky-wheeled, sticky handlebar the kid in the seat based on the mousetrap design unwrapped that before mum'd paid for it. Nick and the boys once put cheese on one of those seats (don't tell their manager, he's called Tim, been here since 2005, it was shop cheese, unexpired) they left it overnight to see if there'd be a nibbler in the morning and if there was I guess their laughter and jostling would dampen as the lads considered while communicating without communicating, if you know what I mean, if they really were gonna slam the seat against the frame. But when they got in the people who restock overnight had put it all away even though they said on the group chat (Tim isn't in it) not to.

There was the time I put a carrier bag over my head and ran down the aisle with the freezers feeling for my head as if I'd really lost it shouting I've lost my head, I've lost my head but I'm unsure if I could be heard because all I could hear was rustling and every time I breathed in a sucked tent of plastic brushed the back of my throat, lips wrapped, it's called poison. After two or three laps, I felt probably a man's hands grab my shoulders and I was forcibly led yes *inside* one of the freezers and I contorted my body to fit between the boxes I couldn't even see, everything was a dull white light colour. Inside the boxes, it turned out, upon my release, when I could see again, security took the bag off me: chicken breasts. This was a vertical freezer I wasn't lying down. My overwhelming memory was of how not very cold it was in there, and I remember brushing my fingertips against the frosty tops of the chicken breast boxes. I picked up a box, rattled it, a block knocked about inside. Who'd led me inside the freezer? my first question to the new security guard, started last weekend. Maybe he'd been drunk on power, or maybe he was just joking – you can joke with me, if I ask why you can make a joke of it. But I don't know him very well yet. *I led you inside.*

Ah, the charity box. There's that charity box thing by the exit that when you put your penny in, it spirals down into the hole mouth. Or this was a thing when I was growing up. I haven't seen it in years. Chained to the wall. Rotund. A cloudy glass dome that had the little slot for the coin. Normally a bright yellow or green colour. Red on occasion. A mix of colours, actually. You'd insert the coin and watch as physics took control and it (coin) remained vertical (somehow) and yes spiralled lower and lower getting faster and faster as it approached the mouth and it'd basically hurl itself into the mouth as physics became too much and entertainment became donation. The sound it made as well – a great sound. Customers brushing by as your eyes track the penny and your smile is faint. You were the height of this thing back then. You'd press your peachy hands against the dome (so that's why it was cloudy) as you watched. When I was a little boy I poured the entire contents of a till inside. Here's how I did it: when the cashier wasn't looking I opened the register and tipped everything into the coin slot and then the most amazing thing ever happened – the

coins went as expected but the notes spun the *opposite* way as if the mouth was spitting them out or blowing on them to keep them up in the donation box's upper atmosphere. A storm was brewing in there; the shop's lights catching the coins as they spiralled coulda caused this but I'd swear lightning was flashing as the notes blew wildly. I gripped the emptied till extra tight for a weight in case I was sucked into this – well it was a different planet at this point.

I'm used to when the team go on their breaks. Pete goes at midday, Evan at half past twelve, Becky at two. I know all of them. Was it Sue that told me they get a staff discount on the food? For Christmas I got the whole shop a clock with their bodies and faces painted on to act as the hands and they were pointed at the times they eat.

Tomorrow it's Monday, I'll bump into Amy. Tomorrow I'm planning on picking up an egg or a tin if they don't have one and going to one end of the supermarket where the toiletries are and overarm throwing it over the rows of aisles and running to the other end where the veg is to catch it before it lands. I'll obviously stop to ask Amy how she is but I'll be fidgety like I need the toilet because I know the egg is in orbit meaning time is of the essence. I'll ask her how her violent sons are. I've met her violent sons before; I caught Fin I think stealing a videogame but I told nobody until I saw Amy and I told her confidentially. I could tell she appreciated it. She was with her other violent son at the time, he tugged at her arm and laughed, she hissed at him, I bent down to give him a cookie from the bakery section. He thanked me so can't be all bad. I don't know if they knew I hadn't paid for the cookie, but they walked out with it. Amy reckons her sons are violent due to what they see online, we've had brief chats about this. To try to reassure her I've said to her, but Amy, the internet wasn't here for either world war. She smiled, put something in the trolley; true. I joined her as she put other things in her trolley she was texting with the other hand; I guess I mean they're on the internet all day and it's impossible to get them out the house, which was why I recommended she tell them about our supermarket. *Crack.*

I've done my duty on plenty of occasions, of course. If I see an empty basket I'll put it back on the rack. I once saw a stray dog sniffing the biscuits so took it through to the staff room. It was hilarious they all jumped – Becky, Janine, Pat – Pat almost choked on her sandwich. Pat asked the really weird question of how I knew the code and I looked to Becky and Janine as if to say, well duh... is she really asking that?

I have a running joke at the booth where they sell the scratch cards. I always buy one and I always say: I'll take the winning one, please. They always laugh, but I don't laugh with them I'm already scratching I can sense in my peripheral any queue behind me has dispersed the cashier too backs off giving me elbow room. I have no coin: I use my nail. You'll draw blood if you're not careful Elaine has said to me before I peered up at her *scratch scratch scratch*. She recoiled and continued restocking gum at the other side of the counter. They leave me to it these days.

I like to give people a thumbs up when they step out of the changing room to show their boyfriend or whoever what they look like in it. My supermarket sells clothes and has a changing room it's a bit tatty though. I've tried on socks in there before; I poked my feet out from under the curtain and wiggled my toes.

How long have I been a customer? Ok, I'll tell you how it all started – at the bookshop. I'm going there now actually, it's eleven I always leave the supermarket at eleven. Today's schedule? Supermarket, bookshop, café I go to four of them between midday and one; normally I'll pop into an electronics shop, ask if they sell VHS players anymore. Probably a couple of the clothes shops. Pretty much home time after that. Oh, I must tell you, I was inspired the other day by something I read in here. Come, come in, I'll show you

Moveable Type 15 (2023-24)

the history section, there's a book there about merc-an-til-ism, about how, you know, the 'buccaneers' as they were called used to sail the seven seas from one port to another, buying and selling stuff. 'Goods' is a word I learned from this book. Not that I sell anything. Apologies for the dog-ears; oh, there's Sharon, hello! That's the manager waving at me there. She'd wave if she had her lenses in. Here, page eight, you see, they'd sail all over the globe, like I said, from port to port, buying and selling, as it says here, 'goods'. I don't think I have anything people would want to buy, but you know... come here I'll whisper it to you... sometimes I wonder if they put the heating on in this shop just for me.