

People These Days

by Dale Lerner

My wife was cooking roasted potatoes with garlic sauce when she uprooted me off the couch and ordered me to the mall to pick up a gift for her sister—who had just called to say she could make it, after all, to our house the next day for Christmas dinner.

Needless to say, I lacked enthusiasm, but I found my jacket and headed for the door. On the way out, my wife said to also stop at the grocery store and get some milk and a bottle of vanilla extract.

“And get my sister at least a twenty-five-dollar Hickory Farms box,” she added from the front door as I got in the car.

I narrowly avoided three accidents but made it to the mall parking lot and parked a quarter-of-a-mile away. The sky was overcast, and a stiff wind chilled my face as I hiked toward the entrance. I zipped up my thin jacket and wondered what kind of weather this was for Florida.

My nose and ears were beginning to sting from the cold, but a warm blast thawed them as I pushed through the mall doors. I held the door for a woman in a fake fur. She marched out happily with her hands full and didn't say a word. I entered the mall mumbling.

Stopping at the main thoroughfare, I looked left. Off in the distance a mass of children surrounded a little house covered in thick layers of white cotton. I could just make out the red sleeve of Santa's coat. I decided to try the other way, and I merged in with the other shoppers.

High above, Bing Crosby crooned “Let it Snow,” but closer by, noisy shoppers chattered and scuffled along. The crowd thickened around a countertop under a hut that was lined with tiny plastic cups of free eggnog. A lady in an apron with a cow on it filled the little cups. She was trying to hold a smile in place, but the corners of her mouth were beginning to weaken.

I snatched up one of the cups, flashed a smile at the lady, downed it like a shot of whiskey, and tossed the cup at a nearby trashcan. It hit the edge, and a thin line of pale droplets streaked across the back of a large man's black leather jacket. The eggnog lady saw this, but she only gave me a tired look and continued to pour eggnog.

I darted back into the moving crowd and found myself trapped within a group of slower moving shoppers. To my left, two chubby little girls gnawed ice cream cones that dripped down their hands. To my right, a haggard mother pushed a stroller. I glanced down to see her baby. It looked up and smiled and wiggled its arms, and its blanket shifted and uncovered its large bare feet. They were the size of an eighth-grader's. I winced and lifted my wrist to check the time—only thirty-minutes before the mall closed. If I could find Hickory Farms soon, then I might have time to get a Chick-fil-A sandwich on the way out.

When I lowered my arm, I felt a wet hand take hold of my fingers. I looked down at a little boy who had a thumb in his mouth and waited for him to realize I wasn't his father. He looked up. His eyes widened and his face twisted, and he instantly began to cry. A man in front of me, who wore a similar blue jacket, turned and picked up the child.

"Did that man touch you, William?" he said, and gave me a hard look. "What did you do to him?"

"Nothing," I said, and shrugged.

He cut in front of the chubby girls and crossed over to the other side. The chubby girls looked down their messy ice cream cones at me, and I sighed.

A young couple was now in front of me holding hands and whispering. The girl gave the guy's hand a squeeze, and in lock step, like a prisoner handcuffed to a sheriff, they turned suddenly and stopped in front of a glass display of sparkling diamond rings. I lunged to the side

to miss them and felt the sharp edge of a dress shoe scrape down the back of my heel and push my shoe down under my foot. I took another step. My foot was suddenly cold, and I looked down to see my exposed black sock. A man talking on a cell phone mouthed, “Sorry,” as he strolled by.

My sneaker lay on its side like a fish on the beach. The shoppers gave it room as they slowed and gawked at it, as if they expected to see a dead body nearby. I scooped up the shoe and took uneven steps over to the jewelry store, where I leaned against a spiraled column and slid the shoe back on. I straightened up and could make out my quirky group rounding the escalators. Then, right across from me, Hickory Farms.

A lady in an apron stood at the entrance with a plate of cheese and smoked beef samples. She looked very similar to the eggnog lady. I lifted a few samples off the plate by their toothpicks and chewed them as I looked for the first fifteen-dollar box I could find. My sister-in-law didn't rate any more than that, especially since we also had to feed her a Christmas dinner, but I also figured my wife wouldn't know the difference. I found one with a jar of spicy mustard included, bought it, and took a few more pieces of beef samples on my way out.

I had ten minutes to get up to the food court. I dodged and darted between oncoming shoppers to get to the escalators. As I rode up, I saw the young couple coming out of the jewelry store below. The girl's face beamed as she fanned out her hand, but the guy looked pale.

Stepping off the escalator, I circled around to the bustling food court and stood in one of the Chic-fil-A lines. I could smell freshly made waffle fries and wondered if I should get some. Suddenly, I felt a solid blow to the back of my neck. I turned to see a tall woman saunter by with bulky packages in one hand and a large slice of greasy pizza in the other. She scowled and took a bite of the pizza and glided out into the mall.

I rubbed the back of my neck. It felt greasy. I noticed a small glob resting on my shoulder. It looked like pizza cheese. I gave it a flick, and it whizzed in the direction of the passing shoppers. A frail old lady got in the way, and it landed in her curly white hair. She looked familiar, like the nice lady from work who delivers office mail, but I wasn't sure. She felt the back of her head but missed it. I watched her and the cheese stroll along until the crowd swallowed them up.

A man with a large potbelly sneezed into his hands, and I turned to face forward. Something had changed. I *was* behind a girl with a cast on her arm, but now I was behind a mousy little man with a mousy little mustache. I didn't want to make a scene, so I just stepped closer and stared down at his bald head. He turned around.

"Oh, I'm sorry," he said sheepishly. "Were you in line?"

He stepped aside, but I stopped him.

"No, it's okay, Fella," I heard myself say. "I just walked up."

By the time I got my sandwich and waffle fries, a cleaning crew was scooting chairs around and customers were fleeing, so I decided to eat mine in the car, and I headed for the exit. Just before the doors, the frail old lady with white hair came out of a coffee shop. It *was* the nice lady from work. She looked over and greeted me like an old friend. I opened the door for her and saw the cheese. I told her there was something in her hair and asked her to hold my Hickory Farms package while I dug out the hardened cheese and tossed it in a flowerbed. She thanked me and wished me a Merry Christmas.

It was colder outside, so I jogged to my car. Once inside, I wolfed down the warm chicken sandwich and waffle fries.

Traffic was thick on the way home, and as I pulled into the driveway, I realized I had forgotten to get the milk and vanilla extract, and when I reached for the Hickory Farms package, I realized I didn't have that either. My wife didn't understand.
