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Robert Ramsay
College of DuPage

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WELL, USE IT OR LOSE IT

Robert Ramsay

It's a trite old statement that some of the strangest events occur in the most unlikely places, but nevertheless it is the fact, and I recently experienced something quite unique in the checkout line of a local supermarket.

In front of me, in the "express" line (which always becomes localized by an unpriced item which has to be verified through a series of endlessly unanswered pages, like, "grocery manager, price needed at checkout eleven," or by some malingerer, pretending she wasn't aware that she had stuffed her cart with twenty-seven products more than the maximum of ten) was this woman of perhaps forty-five years.

She was clad in a kind of calico jumper, which I am certain was at least twelve years old, faded from a thousand launderings, and over which she wore a brown cardigan sweater that definitely came from some army issue (probably WWI) and may well have been a custom design for a general officer, perhaps for even John J. Pershing, himself.

The most startling feature about this female was not her size, which I am positive amounted to at least two-hundred and eighty pounds - though, the Lord knows - that was startling enough, but what really fascinated me, as well as a goodly number of other shoppers, into a state of quasi-hypnotism, was her handbag, if one could afford it such a demeaning identity.

As an amateur gemologist, I made a hasty but accurate appraisal of the purse, having been given time to do so by the usual futile paging by the checkout person, who, I think, wanted to know if the price of a particular can of tomato sauce was thirty-three cents or three for a dollar.

In any case, the purse, the handbag, or whatever one might call it, was undoubtedly designed to be an evening clutch bag. It was studded with at least thirty diamonds, twenty-five emeralds and ten rubies, framed by eighteen-carat struts on all four sides, and laced up and down between the rows of precious stones with pure gold lame,

over a base of the richest black four-ply satin I have ever seen. The value of this gaudy treasure - something which should have been carried by Liz Taylor or Joan Collins to the Academy Awards extravaganza - I guessed to be about fifty-five thousand dollars.

At last the checker received the information that the tomato sauce up front was indeed three-for-a-dollar, dispatched the shopper concerned and turned her attention to the fat lady with the dazzling clutch bag, and quickly checked through a pitiful assortment of some seven items, among which, I well remember, were a box of generic cereal, a one-pound carton of lard (I didn't even know they made that stuff anymore) and two cans of hominy. From her regal purse, to pay for her groceries, the fat lady extracted food stamps!

That was too much for me and, while ten or twelve other startled shoppers stood gawking, I blurted out:

"Excuse me, Madam, but that is the most magnificent handbag I have ever seen. May I ask where you got it?"

"Oh, thank you," she cheerily replied. "I won this bag on The Wheel of Fortune. Isn't it beautiful?"

"Yes, Madam, it is much more than beautiful," I said, "and it goes perfectly with your paisley sneakers."

