

30 Pounds of What?

Herbert R. Reaver, DC

You don't ever want to get behind me in the check-out line at the supermarket. If you do you'll be late getting home because something always happens in my line to slow it down.

I don't do anything to slow down the line, it just slows down when I get in it. Negative thinking, perhaps. Or bad karma, punishment for some past sin. It might even have something to do with voting for Dan Quayle.

Frequently, someone in front of me has forgotten to have their produce weighed and the cashier takes it with her on a walkabout. When she finally gets back she looks different, like she has had some meaningful experience on her journey. I guess I look different too. Older.

It's always my line where the cashier gets on the PA and says, "Someone from cheese for a price check." The guy from cheese takes a long time, then shows up wearing no-confidence clothes: a plaid shirt, striped tie, jeans, and high-top sneakers without socks. His facial expression matches his outfit and I know right off that he won't know anything about the price of cheese. He'll have to saunter back to the cheddar section and browse around awhile before he gets it figured out. Meanwhile, I stand in the check-out line and jiggle my car keys.

It's a mistake to change lines. Invariably something worse happens when I do.

It happened a week ago. The cash register in my line ran out of tape and I ducked over to the next one. Tape changes take from eight to 13 minutes. I've timed them. The new line went okay until the guy in front of me handed the cashier his check. Her eyes got big. It was an out-of-state check and brought the entire food service industry to a dead stop.

My spirits rose as I watched the assistant manager come over. He was a young fellow with a white shirt, black tie, and an assured, square-shouldered walk. I thought, for a moment, that he would be up to the challenge.

No such luck. He looked at the check and shook his head. His smile turned to a frown and his shoulders slumped. He was obviously in over his head, and I was obviously in the wrong line again. When he carried the check back to the manager's station he held it between his thumb and forefinger like a dead rat.

The guy behind me mumbled something. I couldn't make out the words but I agreed with him. The man who had written the check turned and looked at me, shrugging his shoulders apologetically. I agreed with him too.

The manager was on the phone in the glass-partitioned office. When he hung up, the assistant manager showed him the check. As soon as he saw it he sat down and put his hand over his brow.

I stared at the Lifesavers and Duracells for a while, shifted my weight back and forth, then looked at the magazines. I was trying not to look at the magazines but I looked at them anyway, and the headlines irritated me like they always do: "Woman Gives Birth to Alligator," "Flying Saucers Land at White House Lawn," "Elvis Alive in Peoria."

Those headlines didn't bother me too much. The one that got to me was, "New Miracle Diet." Under that it said, "Lose 30 Pounds in 30 days." Thirty pounds of what? I wondered -- blood plasma, muscle tissues, brain cells? Lose enough brain cells and you might start believing those other stories.

There ought to be a law against publishing those miracle diets. At least an added message from the Surgeon General: Warning: Quick fix diets can be dangerous to your health.

The manager left his booth and came walking toward us. He had on a suit and tie and wore a hairpiece that sat on his head like a piece of wilted lettuce from produce. He looked like a good fellow who didn't know anything and never changed his mind.

I wondered about the people who write miracle diet articles. How do they live with themselves? They have to know that folks who follow those diets and lose 30 pounds in 30 days will gain it all back before long. Usually, they will gain back more than they lost in the first place and be ready to buy another sucker magazine, never stopping to think that if those miracle diets worked, there wouldn't be a new one out each month. One thing crash diets do very well: make it easier to gain weight.

The fellow from out of state was showing the manager his ID. He had Visa, Mastercard, Exxon, and was a member of his local library and PTA. He looked trustworthy to me. The manager scrutinized the driver's license picture and said, "Hmmm." The cashier was filing her nails. The guy behind me said a filthy word, the one my wife hates so much.

Those magazine publishers know exactly what they're doing. They know that those no-brain articles will sell magazines and that's all they care about. I said the filthy word to myself and the cashier looked up from her nails and smiled at me.

We Americans are always looking for a quick fix. A truthful article, "Lose 30 Pounds in a Year Through Regular Exercise and Proper Diet" wouldn't sell a single magazine at the check-out counter.

The manager finally okayed the stranger's check and the cashier began ringing up my groceries. I handed her a \$20 and glanced behind me. The guy in back of me was looking at the magazines. Behind him a fat girl picked up the magazine with the "Lose 30 Pounds" article and put it in her cart. I said that filthy word again.

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Editor's note: Chap Reaver, whose articles you've had the pleasure to read on occasion in "DC," was the 1991 recipient of the Edgar Allan Poe award in the Best Young Adult Mystery category for his first published novel, *Mote* (see February 15 and June 7, 1991 issues of "DC").

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