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The original Trader Joe's grocery store in Pasadena, Calif.

COMMENTARY

When you start to notice certain things are true

By Howard Sann

Ever waste time looking for your glasses only to discover they're on top of your head?

When we're young, they call it "absent-minded," but when age is one of your few accomplishments, it's the dreaded "senior moment."

You know those plastic packs of cheese with the self-sealing wrapper? After I tear the strip off, I can't pull the top edges apart. My wife hands me a jar and I can't twist it open. Emasculated trying to open pickles. Once, I was a jar-opening hero.

Oh, I just brushed my hair and found my glasses! A good sign? But no —

The last two times at Trader Joe's two men collapsed: the first, in his 80s, near the Italian breads, the second, in his 90s, in the aisle where the flame-broiled zesty meatballs reside. Ambulances were called. As shoppers voyeuristically rubber-necked as if at a highway accident, I thought, "Thank God, it's not me," and then, looking at frozen salmon, wondered my fate: not in public, please, and, definitely, not in retail.

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It's all so fragile, and then another person is fighting for their life. The constant reminder. It puts a damper on the experience, especially as we continue shopping knowing he's still lying there, sirens rising, and I can't find the kosher pickles. "They've moved the pickles!" Am I callous or just pickle obsessed?

If the FBI kept a shopping dossier on me, it would say:

- ▶ precocious organizer
- ▶ prefers to bag
- ▶ pays with wife's credit card

As I'm bagging at the register closest to the exit, my wife strikes up a conversation with the checkout girl, unfocused, scanning items randomly instead of in like batches. Rushed, I'm flummoxed, my wife obli-

ous to my frenzied state. I pack poorly, the cart overflowing: on the left in the baby seat, a plastic pot inhabited by an unwieldy flower; on the right, a haphazardly stuffed reusable bag.

The sale completed, I rush away, push the cart over the automatic sliding door's threshold and then, glancing down — to my utter disbelief — I see a bottle of red pasta sauce rising out of the reusable bag as if a spring-loaded hand were pushing it up. This is all in slow motion, like great athletes describe when taking the last-second shot: time stops, the moment becomes eternity; only for me in the reverse — I'm in the Stephen King horror zone watching the pasta bottle (organic, no less) falling and hitting the ground with ear-splitting impact — making a loud, glass-shattering noise that reverberates even louder, crescendoed by the echo chamber created between the front store doors and the sliding exit doors. Yikes!

I never lost a step. I just kept going — my Red Badge of Courage.

"You're not going to stop?" my wife said, stepping over the red glass sauce mess as I moved even faster, bursting onto the sidewalk.

"I don't know where that bottle came from," I said. "Never going back there."

"You're kidding?" my wife said.

"No, and I don't want anyone to know about this."

"It happens all the time," she said.

"Not in my family."

"It's embarrassing," my wife said. "I know."

"You *don't* know," I said. "I *wasn't* embarrassed. Embarrassed is arriving in a car and leaving in an ambulance. No, this is one of those indelible moments where you remember where you were, what you were doing when it happened, like when the Kennedys got shot."

"You're being overly dramatic," she said.

"Promise me you won't tell anyone," I said. She said nothing. "Go on!"

"OK, I promise," she said, begrudgingly. "Satisfied?"

In the car, I looked into my wife's eyes. "You really want to know what it is?"

"Of course," she said.

"It just makes me wonder. Maybe it means I'm getting old."

"Come on."

"Well, *who* drops things?" I said, backing out: "Old people, that's who."

"Everyone does," she said. "It's not the end of the world."

"Close," I said, driving off. "It feels like an epic line of demarcation."

In quiet resignation, over the din of heavy traffic, I silently struggled to figure out what happened. The fact is, when anybody goes out, nobody knows if they'll ever make it home again.

"You're *not* old," my wife said.

"What'd you say?"

She turned, yelled again, loudly, "You're not that old!"

"Why are you yelling at me?"

"Because you're hard of hearing. I have to say everything twice."

"That's one out of two. Since when was 50 percent a lousy average?" I said, jerking the car onto the fast-moving main drag — tires screeching and horns honking everywhere.

Someone yelled, "Moron!"

"You say something?" I asked my wife.

Howard Sann is a writer and editor living in Bridgeport.