

Real Life

by Todd Maupin

Emily arrived at the parking lot of the shopping center. There were no free spaces available. She blinked her eyes a few times, but nothing changed. Next, she shifted the vehicle to park, and turned it off.

Inspired, she started it back up using another key and checked the parking lot in front of her again. Still no spaces. She looked out of one of the other windows in her vehicle. Nope. She climbed into the back seat and peered through those windows. Still nowhere to park.

Emily returned to the front seat, turned off the vehicle, and went for a snack. She also popped into the restroom while she was away. When she returned to the vehicle, it was as she left it, in the middle of a row. She started it back up and noticed a spot almost directly in front of her. She pulled into it and parked.

Walking towards the stores, she noticed a local television news crew was filming a spot on the scene. A crowd had gathered to watch. Intrigued, Emily joined them.

A man yelled out, "This is stupid!"

Another man screamed out too. "This is what happens when the other party is in power!"

A woman's shrill voice broke through the din. "You guys don't know what you are talking about."

"I am selling Nikes and Rolexes at cost. Follow me and I'll show you," another man beckoned.

“Procter & Gamble, Ford, Geico, Comcast, Disney,” someone else chanted.

“... in theatres and streaming on Friday.” A different voice concluded.

“You're stupid,” the first man clarified.

A woman pulled Emily aside. “Would you like to save an extra 10%? Just give me your name.” Emily brushed the woman aside. In response, the woman brought her insistence to someone else.

“I have a Groupon for Pizza Hut,” someone else announced.

“Taylors Nissan is here to serve you,” a new voice promised.

“Oh my god! They all die at the end of the last episode,” someone gushed.

“Procter & Gamble, Ford, Geico, Comcast, Disney.”

‘Pizza Hut.’

"At cost!"

Emily was bored. She left the news crew and the crowd behind and started to walk away.

“Are you sure you want to leave this place?” A little boy was tugging on her sleeve.

A little girl appeared on Emily's other side. “The place is asking you to confirm that you want to leave... do you want to leave or stay?” the little girl asked warily. Her sad little eyes were more expressive than her words.

Emily was not phased. She shrugged them off and persevered in the direction of retail.

A man appeared almost out of nowhere. He opened his mouth as to say something epic and monumental, but then paused and scrutinized Emily closely. He frowned and wrote something on a sticky note. He handed it to her and walked off.

Emily read the note. "Your Flash player is out of date." She crumpled up the note and placed it in her purse amidst many other similar notes.

Almost at the store, Emily was blocked by another woman who stepped in front of her. The woman's smile was a neutrally unnerving.

"Do you like us?" She asked.

"I guess so," Emily replied.

"No, I mean, do you like us? Won't you like us? Do you follow me?" The woman's questions were pushy in a positive way.

"I suppose so. I understand you," Emily responded.

"If you follow us, we will tell you extra things, secret things others may not know. Unless they follow us too or know how to read," the woman coaxed.

Emily smiled and continued walking. The woman did not follow her. Emily was able to enter the store without further interruptions. Perhaps she had reached the colorful character limit.

Inside the store, Emily was immediately accosted by a clerk. "Would you like to chat?" Emily tried to ignore the clerk and resume walking but the clerk stepped in front of her. "Would you like to chat?"

"No," Emily said firmly and tried to navigate past the clerk. She almost collided with a second clerk.

"How likely are you to recommend this store to a friend?" The second clerk probed, in a suave voice.

"Well..." Emily began, but this clerk interrupted her.

"1 to 10. 1 to 10, please."

Emily pretended to consider the question for a moment. "4," she decided finally.

The clerk frowned. "What could we do to improve your experience?"

"8," Emily replied.

The clerk beamed. "Oh, goody!" She walked off, no longer interested in improvement.

Another clerk slide adeptly into the other's place. "What are you looking for today?" He asked.

"I came for a few things actually," Emily stated evasively.

"Did you mean fusilli?" The clerk asked.

"No, I am just browsing."

"Did you mean blouses?"

Emily contemplated a further attempt to explain herself, but just turned and left. The clerk stood there, blinking faintly.

Emily encountered various shopping carts left full of objects. These were scattered around the store. The contents were random, except that each contained some type of cookies. She was curious about the purpose of the cookies. She had probably read somewhere why this was. Who can keep track of these things?

“Procter & Gamble, Ford, Geico, Comcast, Disney,” someone intoned as he maneuvered past Emily.

In another aisle, a woman was intently moving the same objects back and forth, in and out of her shopping cart. She noticed Emily staring at her quizzically and paused. “If I put these into my cart in a particular order, the prize changes. I'm trying to maximize the discount and qualify for free delivery.”

“But you are already here. Wouldn't you just take them home yourself?” Emily asked, feeling naive as she spoke.

“And pay tax? Goodness, no, my dear! Of all things.” She was still chuckling to herself as Emily moved onward.

Emily stopped to study a product on display at the end of an aisle. Another customer quickly approached and confided to her, “This is the best set of spatulas ever!”

A different customer overheard and joined them. “I bought those spatulas last year as a gift.”

Another customer stepped over. “I have had this set of spatulas for years. I LOVE THEM!”

A fourth customer was not as ecstatic. "I ordered these last month. Delivery took 3 weeks and then the package was damaged. One star."

Three additional customers walked nearby and just held up four, five and three and a half fingers for Emily to see. She returned the spatulas to the shelf and carried on with her advancement.

In the next aisle, two sets of parents were investigating the products on the shelves while they asked their children questions.

"Sarah, how much toilet paper do we have at home?" A father asked his daughter.

"We have two full packages. Last time, you bought Quilted Southern and rated it 4 out of 5 stars. Would you like me to read you some other customers' reviews?" She replied.

"No, not now. Sarah, what is the name of that movie we watched last night?"

"It was A Jungle Left Unkempt."

"Sarah, what is this song playing in the store right now?"

Sarah concentrated for a few seconds before answering. "It is Creep, originally by Radiohead but this is a cover by Adele."

"Sarah, play something by Elton John. Goodbye Yellow Brick Road."

Their voices faded into the background as the Rocket Man took over. Emily neared a mother and her son. "Alex, can you turn up the air conditioning so it will not be so cold when we go home?"

Alex smiled and nodded. "I will set it to 78 degrees."

“Good. Alex, what was that book I wanted to buy?”

“At the top of your wishlist is Graceful Tendencies,” Alex answered.

“No, no that one. What is next?” Alex started to answer but his mother cut him off. “Oh! The title has something about bread in it, I think.”

“Baker's Dozen.” Alex recited.

“Yes, that's it. What was the price again?”

Emily did not wait for this revelation. She proceeded to the main aisle.

A group of people were gathering around a woman who looked anguished and forlorn. Aware of this growing contingent around her, she said, “Why does this always happen to me?”

“What happened?” Someone asked.

“Oh my gosh! What is going on?” A concerned bystander implored.

“Are you okay?!” A passerby's worry was palpable.

“Hang in there. It will get better,” another person promised.

“Like,” someone else chimed in.

“Like,” another person agreed.

“Procter & Gamble, Ford, Geico, Comcast, Disney,” someone chanted as they walked by.

"Pizza Hut," a distant voice bellowed.

"I am at my wit's end with her. I just can't," a man at the edge of the crowd said with a heavy sigh. The gathering of people shifted to him.

"What did she do this time?" Someone wanted to know.

"I'm sorry. I hope everything is okay," another person wished.

"Like," a third decided.

"Like," a fourth determined.

Emily finally collected the items she needed and headed for the checkout area.

Most of the lanes were busy. A clerk functioning as a concierge was directing shoppers to the next available lane. Emily peered at one lane that differed conspicuously from the others and asked the clerk about it.

"Oh, that is our application lane..." He started to describe it.

Emily interrupted him. "Why do they call it that?"

"I'm not sure exactly. The word origin must be Greek. Most are you know. Program, calculus, baguette, kindergarten, yogurt," the clerk rattled off some more words before Emily halted him again.

"Ok, how does it work?" Emily was curious now.

"Well, it's smaller. It does not work as well. It's really for people who do not care about their own privacy. It's a gold mine for us. These customers are succumbing to legal mind control or mind reading."

“Oh, I see,” Emily pondered for a moment. “What if they make inept purchases?”

“No, we call them in-app purchases.”

“Application... Wouldn't another word be more appropriate or applicable?” Emily wondered.

“I'll make a note of that for the developers. Thank you for your feedback.”

Emily patiently waited her turn for one of the main checkout lanes. Her items chugged along on the conveyor belt. The clerk gazed at her knowingly and held up a few items.

“Others who have bought what you have also bought these,” he pointed out.

Emily stared back at him expectantly, but unimpressed.

“They are frequently bought together,” he added, trying again.

Emily shook her head and paid. She retrieved her items and ambled for the exit. Her route was barred, however.

“Before you go, would you mind completing a survey?” A clerk asked.

Emily hesitated. The clerk tried again. “We'll enter your name in a drawing and you may win \$500.”

Emily's eyes lit up. “Really?”

“No, not really, but you would really help our marketing. I promise that we will not use your information for our own purposes. Well, maybe we would. We will absolutely sell it to someone who will. All we will do is contact you more often.”

“No, thank you,” Emily said.

“It's okay. We'll still use your shopping history anyway. It's in the fine print. We just like to give customers the opportunity to disqualify themselves from eventual lawsuits. It's how we give back to the community,” the clerk explained before she turned her attention to another customer.

Emily was out in the parking lot again. The crowd had dissipated. Another topic was trending on the other side of the lot. As she walked to her car, she overheard a mantra featuring Geico, Disney, and Procter & Gamble.

Driving home, Emily's mind wandered. She started to think about a new movie she wanted to see. Eerily, she noticed a billboard advertising that very film a few blocks later. The same phenomenon repeated with her favorite energy drink.

At home, her parents were nowhere to be seen. She climbed the stairs and directed toward her room, a sanctuary of Swift and Eyelash posters.

When Emily entered her room, there was another girl standing at her desk. There was an air of challenge and defiance in her eyes. “I am Emilia,” this other girl announced as Emily studied her.

Emilia resembled Emily but was slightly taller, a little bit more slender, and her glasses were bigger, enhancing her already more expressive eyes. “I am faster too, can do more than you, and - let's face it - have better features.”

Emily was too aghast to respond. Emilia continued in rising superciliousness. “Your parents wanted more memory and better resolution, so I am resolved to fill that need. I will remind them of this if necessary.”

Emily should have expected that this would happen to her someday. Her parents had already been replaced a few times each. Their most recent version was more versatile but they were busybodies, always in need of updates.

Emily's parents set her out on the curb that night. “We wanted to trade you in but they would give us nothing for you. It's just easier this way,” they explained almost frowning.

Emily hugged the blanket her parents had left for her as they walked back to the house and locked the door. Sometime around midnight, Emily's father came back outside and collected the blanket. “It turns out that this is compatible with Emilia,” he shrugged, as he wrestled it away from her.

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