

Bing Cherries

No sooner do I enter the Cub Foods store with a red shopping cart than I see a big display in the produce section: BING CHERRIES \$1.49 LB. A dozen people are milling around a mountain of cherries, separating the dark hard good ones from the lighter and mooshy ones.

One forty nine -- that's a pretty good deal. So I park my cart by the apples, grab a plastic bag, and begin filling it, taking care not to be as picky as everyone else seemed to be. I imagine the looks on my family's faces when I set a bowl of beautiful cherries on the table after supper. Oh, wow, they'll say, cherries! It's going to be a good day.

I return to the cart, set my cherries in it, and step away again, to examine some apples from Chile. I return to my cart, and push it idly out of the produce area, round the bend at the whole foods section, and am making my way past the fish and smoked sausage showcases when I notice something.

There is something in my cart besides bing cherries. Leaning up against the inner wall of the cart is an aluminum walking cane, with a curved gray handle.

My first thought is embarrassment. I have taken someone else's cart! Cripes, I can't let anyone know I've done this. Maybe I can sneak out the back way, and start over again at Rainbow Foods, just down the road.

But then my better self speaks up. Michael, you can't just ditch the cart. A cane is a prosthetic device. Someone back in the produce section needs it in order to ambulate. No matter how embarrassing, you owe it to that person to go back and return the cane.

I exhale dramatically and push the cart back to the produce section. I want to get it back as soon as possible, so I hold the cane over my head, to attract attention. I scan the area with my eyes, my mouth open as if to ask, Did anyone lose a cane?

"There it is!" a mean voice announces. I turn, and a very capable-looking frizzy-haired woman of about 75 is frowning at me.

"Was this yours?" I ask miserably. She looks like she will club me with it when I hand it over.

"Shame on you!" she says. "My friend is going out of her mind, thanks to you. Why would you do such a thing?"

I hand the cane over, apologetically. "It was an accident. I had a cart with just cherries in it, and she must have had a cart with just cherries in it, too -- and the cane. I didn't see it until just now."

"Well, you scared a poor old woman half to death. I hope you're proud of yourself," she says, and wheels away from me.

That seemed a little unfair, but rather than plead my case I simply withdraw, hoping to get my day's worth of groceries and get the hell out of the store. I push my cart down the same route I have already traveled twice -- produce, whole foods, fish and smoked meats -- and a voice comes on the PA system:

"Will whoever took a cart containing a cane in it, please return it to the customer service desk. We have someone here who is very upset about losing her cane."

My heart sinks. I don't have to do this again, do I? Surely not. I toss a loaf of bread next to my bag of cherries, and push the cart down through the deli section. When I round the corner, I see the mean frizzy woman bending over a stooped figure.

It is an older woman, perhaps 86 or 88, and she can't be five feet tall, and she is staring into space and visibly trembling. The woman with her is rubbing her back and comforting her. She is saying something like, "It's all right, dear. We can come back later when you're up to it." The cane is in her cart.

Oh, rats, I say to myself, stepping back into the fray.

"Ma'am," I say lightly, perhaps a foot from her face. "I'm the man who took your cane by mistake. I had cherries in my cart, just like you did. I just want to tell you I was very dumb to do it, and I surely did not mean to frighten you."

The little woman lifted her face to me, and in less than a second I saw the most remarkable transformation, from a woman who has suffered many losses and reverses, and is reeling from this latest episode, to someone who knows it is her turn to Do the Right Thing.

"Oh, that's all right, sugar," she says, a bent smile wrinkling her face. "I make mistakes all the time," she says, to comfort me.

I begin wheeling away, a bit blissful from my moment of reprieve, when I hear the other woman clear her throat. I turn to see what she has to add to the scenario.

Her weight on one foot, she glares at me with unforgiving eyes. "What about the cherries?" she wants to know.