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One Orange Plastic Folder, Three-Hole Punched, No Brads

I hate back-to-school time. Not because I will miss the daily “I’m bored” declarations from my eight and ten year old sons. And not because I will have to enforce a daily schedule for going to bed and waking up. And not because I am wishing that I, too, could be going back to school to see all of my friends.

I hate back-to-school time because of the dreaded school supply list. That’s right. A 50-item list causes grief and frustration in my life every August. The length of the list seems to dare me to start shopping in mid-June, right after the kids start their summer vacation. And somehow, I think I will escape the tedious nature of it all by waiting and waiting, until the August panic sets in. Multiple trips to Target, Wal-Mart, and Office Max are no guarantee that I will be successful in completing the educator’s version of a cruel scavenger hunt.

There are some parents who choose to avoid the hunt altogether. They are willing to pay the \$100 for a pre-packaged set of supplies offered by the school. Somehow, this feels like cheating to me. Write a check at the end of summer and be done with it? No, I’d rather feel the joy of actually finding that orange plastic folder, three-hole punched, no brads.

And so it was this August. I had already made multiple trips to superstores, grocery stores, and office supply stores. It was time to finish this list off. I went to Wal-Mart, hoping beyond all hope that my list of desired objects would be there. I had forty minutes before I needed to pick up my sons at a karate lesson. I am confident that Sam Walton will not let me down. I head directly to the signs proclaiming “Back to School Shop.” I try to contain the fringe of disappointment starting to surround me—the first aisle appears to be picked over, cramped, disorganized, and filled with stuff I don’t need. How can this be? It’s still a full week before school starts. I put a package of paper clips for my home office into the cart and go to the next aisle.

Things are picking up. I see folders in different colors that will suffice for my fifth grader. And at six cents a piece, he’ll be pleased that he won’t have to reuse any from last year.

My eyes spy shiny folders that might pass for the plastic folders that are on my third grader’s list. They are three-hole punched with no brads. But at 68 cents a piece, they are more than I expected to pay. I decide to pay a little extra in order to be done with it all. I find one in red, green, yellow, orange, purple, and blue and put them in my cart. I move on to the next aisle. But before I move on, a mother with four children and a cart piled with school supplies comes down the aisle. She bemoans the fact that she is not yet done and already, she has spent hundreds of dollars. One of her kids delightfully talks about the joy of getting “stuff”, even if it means going back to school. Another asks for a special pen and the mother states, “You are SO ready for spending your own money on pens.” And then gives her son a dirty look. I realize that another casualty of the school supply story is the general goodwill in families.

I look for the low odor, dry erase markers, bullet-tipped (not chisel-tipped, as specified in the fifth grader's supply list). I find them and move on. And so it goes for the $\frac{3}{4}$ " rolls of invisible tape. I am still having trouble finding the 12-pack of thick washable markers. Will an 11-pack, with an extra room in the box for a twelfth marker suffice? At this point, I am willing to cheat. There is a section marked "Gluesticks" yet there are no gluesticks to be found. Only washable school glue in bottles. Can I disguise a bottle for one "large UHU gluestick". I don't see why not.

At the next aisle, I hit the mother load. No one else has yet found this aisle. It is slightly outside of the Back-to-School section. I try to contain my excitement. There in front of me are REAL plastic folders, three-hole punched, no brads. There is no disputing this is real plastic, not something made to look like plastic. The gods are smiling down at me. And then as I look for each color, I realize that Zeus has decided to play one last trick on me. There is no orange plastic folder. Surely it must be behind the 54th box of folders on the shelf. But it appears, the manufacturer does not make it in orange.

It's time to pick up the kids at the karate studio. I decide that it's better to have five folders in hand than six on the shelf. I proceed to the checkout, crossing off multiple items on my list with satisfaction. I look at the tape register and realize that my precious plastic folders are only a quarter a piece.

If I hurry, there might be time to stop at the Target on the way to the karate studio.....

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