

The Church of Walmart

It's Sunday morning late and I'm headed to the Church of Walmart. That's what Jeff always calls it in that smart-ass mocking way of his. 'Heading for the Church of Walmart?' he'll say, while he's still scratching himself and reading the sports page. But who's he to mock? He hasn't been in any church since the day we got married, and at least I go to the bingo at St. Rose's on Tuesday night. He could get off his butt and help me – that'd be different. But I don't know. He's schlepping packages for U.P.S. all week in those stupid brown shorts – you have to buy 'em yourself – and on Saturday he's got the kids since I've gotta be at the JiffyQuick. Maybe layin' around on Sunday's what he needs to be doing.

Walmart *is* about as regular as church used to be. Sunday morning's the only time it's not completely nuts in there, and it seems like there's always something we need. This week, for example, I need to get one of those little scrubby sponges for the kitchen, you know, the kind that are rough on one side. And little Bill needs jeans because he kneed out another pair on the playground last week doing what I don't know but tearing up both his jeans and his knee. And Katie's backpack, which you could put a backhoe in for Chrissake, isn't big enough. Now they make 'em like you see in airports with little wheels? Only with

Barbie or Brittany on the outside? Why they need these big books, I don't know. Don't seem to be learning any more than anyone else ever did but there it is. And we're almost out of laundry soap which if you buy it at the grocery costs more than cocaine. Not that I'd know. And I couldn't find a sixty-watt light bulb in the utility room even though I know I just bought some last month. I don't know why everyone thinks Edison was so smart unless it's that he invented planned obsolescence or whatever it's called. And I've got a top to return, a teal tank kind of thing that made me look fat. And there'll be a couple of other things, too – there always are, you know? Stuff you didn't think of or that's on sale? Anyway, I try to keep it down to just once a week. Dotto, who's one of my counter ladies at the JQ? She's out there every other day at least. That's way more church than anyone needs, I say.

So I actually get thinking about this when I turn off the highway onto the access road, right there across from Chucky Cheese? It's the sign. There's the big blue Wal*Mart, of course, but the slogans are up there, too. *We Sell For Less* and *Satisfaction Guaranteed*. You ever hear of a church that guaranteed anything? They just don't, you know? You think Jerry Falwell ever gave anybody a refund? And what would happen if St. Rose's hung out a banner that said *We Save For Less*? Betcha that'd get some attention from the pewbirds in town - except maybe the Episcopalians who don't think about money.

So that's what I'm thinking about when I turn into the parking lot, and it just about ends right there. I cruise down the center aisle like I always do, just to see

if there's a spot there, but there never is. It's like you got a better shot at winning Megabucks, you know? But not today. Today it looks like my number's coming in. Just as I'm getting up towards the store, a blue Dodge Neon starts backing out of the third space. The third space! The one right by the handicapped spots, you know? And I'm poised to swing right into it until I notice that coming up behind the Neon as it backs out is this ancient Oldsmobile with this tiny old lady behind the wheel. I mean literally behind the wheel. She's so small that about all you can see of her over its rim is her permed white hair. So I let the Dodge slide by and wave her in. And then the jerk behind me in a mammoth Ford 350 starts laying on the horn. What is with that? Anyway, I say to myself, ignore him, Patti, and swing on around and park about half way up the far aisle, the one closest to the river? But the thing is when I walk by, the cretin in the Ford has laid it across two of the wheelchair spaces and is just sitting there with the engine running, smoking a cigarette and pumping hydrocarbons into the air. It just makes you shake your head and hope that Jesus meant it when he talked about humbling those who exalt themselves. Which is judgmental, I know. I remind myself that I'm not perfect and that I don't know what the guy's deal is at all – maybe his handicapped plates haven't come in yet for all I know –but I still hit the automatic door half p.o.'d and shaking my head.

Loretta's there, as usual. She's the greeter most Sunday mornings, the one who'd say, "welcome to Walmart," only she has pretty bad Down's Syndrome and can't say much of anything so the greeting is taped to the front of her chair

and she just waves at you, kind of, when you go in. Me and Jeff argue about her. He says they're exploiting her but I don't see how. Seems to me it'd be worse to hide her in a home somewhere like she's some kind of leper or something. Why shouldn't Loretta be able to go home at the end of her shift and feel like she did something that someone else valued? Anyway, I say hi, get a smile from her, and grab a cart. Then it's a hard right into customer service – best to get that out of the way first.

Lucky for me, there's only one person ahead of me in line. There are days when it takes so long to get to the clerk you'd think you were at an airline counter. Not that even one person can't take long – today the woman in front of me, a tall, skinny, platinum blonde in snakeskin pants, is trying to return a box of *Honey Bunches of Oats* the size of a small suitcase. Next they'll have wheels on these.

"They're stale," she says.

The clerk looks skeptical as if this just could not be happening in this corner of Sam Walton country. She inspects the mammoth box carefully.

"It's not past the freshness date," she observes. Like that means something.

"Maybe not," the blonde says wearily. "But they *are* stale."

"But it's not past the date."

I have the sense of being caught on a carnival ride that will go round and round without stopping. Rather than screaming, I interject, "Why don't you taste them?"

Both women look at me curiously, as if I had just popped out of a UFO.
“Go ahead.” I try to sound encouraging. “Taste them.”

“I’m not going to reach into someone else’s cereal box!” the clerk says with a tone that suggests I might as well have asked her to eat worms.

“Okay, fine. I’ll do it. Give me the box.”

The blonde, still a little wide-eyed, takes the box from the clerk and hands it off to me. By now, we’ve gathered two or three spectators but who cares. I take the cereal, pop the top open, unroll the waxed paper innards, and scoop out a small handful of flakes. They bend a little in my mouth before they crunch.

“She’s right,” I say. “They’re stale.”

The clerk’s not happy but she surrenders, writes *stale* on her clipboard form, and processes the refund. The skinny blonde slithers off and the crowd disperses.

“And how may I help *you*.” The clerk, whose nametag labels her ‘Ann,’ is a big girl wearing thick, black-rimmed glasses but even through them I can see she’s giving me the evil eye.

“Well, Ann,” I say as sweetly as I can. “I’m returning this.” I put the teal top and its receipt on the counter.

“What’s wrong with it?”

Uh, uh. I am not going to tell this chick that some of my extra seven pounds protrude like bread dough from the bottom of this top when I put it on. I say, “Well, Ann, I just don’t like it.”

She gives me a phony smile. “I have to ask why not. Rules and procedures, you know.”

Who is this Pharisee? If I could overturn her table, I would. It looks pretty solid, though, so I just say, “Look, honey, your big ol’ sign says Satisfaction Guaranteed and I am not satisfied so why don’t you just write that down?”

Applause from the man behind me who has his right arm through a truck tire which rests on his shoulder. Other customers turn to look. Ann licks her lips, makes a note, scans the receipt and the top’s tag, and fishes seven eighty-eight out of a drawer for me.

“Thank you so much, Ann,” I say, wishing that people didn’t get into the petty aspects of their jobs. At the JQ, I tell my counter ladies to think about how they like to be treated but I guess no one ever said that to Ann. Too bad, that’s what I say. She’d probably be a helluva lot happier if someone had.

I roll out of customer service and over to the Dunkin’ Donuts café, thinking I’ll have a cup of coffee before I start playing bumper carts in the aisles. Six of the twelve tables are open, which may be some kind of record. Some weeks the place is so jammed you’d think it was the only donut shop in the state. I get my usual – small coffee, cream only - though for a moment I’m thinking coffee roll, a favorite, but not one that’s gonna help my tops fit any better. When I find a seat, though, I notice that the rest of the folks there are eating – donuts and breakfast sandwiches and fritters – and all of them are fat. I’m not talking a few extra pound here, I’m talking tonnage. And one lady has three kids with her and all

three of them are fat, too. And I'm asking myself what's with that but at the same time I kind of get it, too.

Folks are hungry, you know? They want something more. It's not about food. They're hungry to feel good about themselves and they don't know how to do that and they settle for something that will make them feel good even if it's only two glazed donuts and the feeling only lasts for twenty minutes. Half the time, that's all Walmart's about – people buying stuff they don't need, hoping that when they get it home, when they hang the matching coffee mugs on the wooden mug tree made in Indonesia, hoping then they'll be all right. Probably we'd all be better off if we just went and took a walk.

Which I do, heading from the café towards men's and boy's clothes, where it doesn't take me five minutes to find the jeans little Bill needs on sale for eight ninety-nine. Gotta hand it to Walmart there. Maybe there's a lot of junk in there but they have got the basics covered. I drop two pairs in my cart, steer around a rack of men's XXL tee shirts, and collide with Ray Hopkins, the town meter reader, who's an XXL himself. We make small talk about the weather before he hefts his gut up onto his cart handle. Ray hasn't passed up many glazed donuts over the years. "Did you hear," he wheezes, "that Mrs. Cushing isn't well?"

Mrs. Cushing lives around the corner from us on Winter Street. I keep thinking she must be a hundred but really she's seventy-eight. "No, who told you that?"

“She did. Was readin’ in the neighborhood the other day and she came to the door in a housecoat and told me she was feeling poorly”

She’d have to be feeling poorly if she was wearing a housecoat. Mrs. Cushing wears a dress and stockings to water her geraniums. “She been to the doctor?”

“Hadn’t been. Was going to, though. Yesterday, I think.”

I thank him as I’m heading for school supplies and begin thinking about what I have at home that’d go in a casserole for Mrs. Cushing. Walmart’s like the village well in this respect – you’re always bumping into someone who knows something that’s helpful to know. Except for the transfer station, there’s hardly any place else in town like that. I’m considering this and rolling past jewelry when the intercom comes on.

“Excuse me, lady, but that’s a one way aisle you’re in.”

Usually I don’t even hear the thing but this is different. I slow down and look up. Where else are you gonna look?

“That’s right lady, you in the blue shirt – I’m talking to you. This is God and I’m telling you to turn that cart around.”

God’s voice cracks and you can hear him trying not to laugh. Behind me I catch two grinning faces peaking around a corner, teen-aged boys, fourteen, maybe fifteen, who see me smiling and now step out and point. One of them holds up a palm-sized microphone, like you see at Radio Shack? The voice of God. Chuckling, I turn the corner into the detergent aisle.

And encounter a bald, red-faced manager with a WWJD bracelet and a nametag that says Bobby Horner hustling my way like a storm trooper. He snarls at me, “Did you see who did that?”

“Nope.” If the guy can’t take a joke without blowing a cork, I’m not going to help him. “Maybe it *was* God.”

He brushes past unsmiling, and I begin weighing the relative merits of Tide, Cheer, and Purex (with advanced stain removal). It occurs to me that it would be nice if all of life’s stains could be removed with a half cup of powder and some hot water. I know it’s not that simple but I put the Purex in my cart anyway and head into the food section.

This isn’t a SuperWally with two acres of groceries but it does have a couple of aisles of basics and I’m thinking that with a jar of button mushrooms, some sour cream, and some meatballs I have in the freezer I could put something together for Mrs. Cushing. Nothing special - but neither was five loaves and two dried fish. They have both – the mushrooms and cream, not the loaves and fish - so I collect them and head to housewares for my light bulbs and my sponge. Neither is hard to find but now I remember that I’ve skipped the backpack so I reverse course and steer for school supplies again.

En route, I encounter the boys again, huddled up in Greeting Cards, announcing a special sale on nail gun ammo in the hardware department. These two crack me up, and I laugh until I run into Bobby Horner again, this time reaming the cashier in electronics.

“That’s the fourth time I’ve had to clear this register today, Mary-Lou,” he’s growling. “If you’re too stupid to handle this, we’ll have to find someone who can.”

Mary-Lou looks completely beaten, and the whole thing just frosts me. Without really thinking about it, I know what I’m going to do. I park my cart by a stack of boxed Sanyo TVs, stomp back by Bobby, and go find the two boys in Greeting Cards. They look a little apprehensive when I approach but brighten right up when I ask to borrow the God-o-phone.

“Hey, Mr. Bobby Horner, this one’s for you.” There’s about a half second gap between when you say something and when the echo fades in the store. Which is kinda cool. “You’re wearing your WWJD bangle; you wanna know What Would Jesus Do? Let me tell you what Jesus *wouldn’t* do. He wouldn’t try to embarrass anyone who’s just trying to do her job like you just did. You should be ashamed of yourself!”

I give the boys the microphone back – both of them are looking at me a little wide-eyed – and know right away that I shouldn’t’ve done it, that it was really just the same thing that Bobby was doing himself. Woman, I hear my conscience saying, they’re gonna need a whole lot of cosmic Purex for you when the judgment comes. I forget about the backpack and head for the registers.

Up front, Bobby is now huddling with a covey of assistant managers. I’m thinking they can’t be up to any good but I’m outta here anyway so I just roll by and into checkout lane eight behind a big woman who’s got four twelve packs of

Coke up on the belt crowned with a super jumbo bag of potato chips. Should be a quick check out anyway.

It isn't. The woman's debit card won't work – apparently there's no money in the account. She seems to think this is the cashier's fault and makes her try it four times before she fishes a twenty out of a purse that's bigger than Rhode Island. They finally get that squared away and I'm unloading my items when the intercom – the real one, not the God-o-phone – comes on.

“Attention all associates. Time now for the Walmart cheer.”

My cashier, who's named Patricia just like me, just rolls her eyes.

“Give me a W!”

So this is Bobby's attempt to restore order to his universe. Patricia keeps her head down and her mouth shut. From elsewhere the response is a faint, “W.”

“Give me an A!”

There is an even fainter responding ‘A.’ I got news for you, Bobby. The universe is not orderly. There are surprises.

“Give me an L!” Only a few voices reply and Patricia's is still not among them. I notice she's wearing a tiny silver crucifix on a silver chain. A good answer, I think, to the question What Would Jesus Do?

“Not really into the Walmart cheer, huh?” I ask, just to let her know I see her.

Patricia looks at me evenly. “Walmart's fine. I got no problems working here. But when they make it into a golden calf or something, I count myself out.”

By now only the managers are cheering though not with any zeal:

“Walmart! Walmart! Walmart!”

I slide my credit card through the slot, sign the screen, and hit the Accept button. Patricia hands me my bags and I head out the exit, thinking I’m through with the Church of Walmart for another week.

But not quite. I pull off the access road onto 302 and see the big Ford 350 again in the next parking lot up the road. Sliding into my own cold pool of self-righteousness, I am ready to send the truck and its driver, and Walmart, and Bobby Horner, and Ann at the so-called service desk with her rules and procedures to some dark circle of hell. As I pass, though, I see the truck’s driver, another cigarette dangling, pushing Loretta and her wheelchair across the blacktop towards the door of the Asian Eden Hunan Restaurant which will be opening for lunch in about two minutes. *Welcome To Paradise* reads the banner over its door. *Plenty For Everyone*. Wouldn’t that be nice, I find myself thinking, and then for no reason I’m grinning like the boys with the God-o-phone and I say out loud, “Amen.”