

Wal-Mart Mama

By Michael Groetsch

“Hi kids, where’s Mom?” I ask as I enter our home following a lousy day at the office.

“She’s lying down in the bedroom,” Justin responds. “But you better be careful, Dad. Mom’s in a real bad mood. She’s not feeling well. She’s even been yelling at Weasel the cat for the last five minutes and he’s sound asleep. When I asked her about dinner, she told me to just sleep it off.”

Recognizing that I enter at my own risk, I walk into the bedroom to the sight of my wife stretched across the bed with an ice pack on her head and a wet towel across her throat. She still has her work shirt on from the school nursery in which she works. Her red hair looks frazzled as if she stuck her finger into an electrical socket.

“Hey, Barb, feeling okay?” I ask with an empathetic tone.

“Feeling okay! Does it look like I’m feeling okay?” she yells sarcastically. “I took care of fourteen crying babies today at the nursery. One of them bit me. Two of them puked on me and I changed a dozen dirty diapers. I have a bad migraine, a terrible backache, and the onset of PMS. How does that sound for starters?”

“Hey, don’t get flip with me,” I respond defensively. “I’m just trying to show a little concern. Justin was right. I guess I should have stayed in the other room.”

Looking intimidated, Weasel the cat wakes up and quickly walks into the den.

“Oh, by the way, Barb, the tenants that moved out on Delaware Street the other day stole most of the light bulbs. They took eighteen of them. I guess it could have been worse. They could have also stolen the light fixtures. I need to go buy a case of bulbs before we can show the apartment to anyone else. Want to take a ride with me?” I ask.

“What are you, crazy or something!” Barb screams. “Didn’t I just finish telling you that I feel like I’m dying a slow death? No! I don’t want to take a ride with you to get light bulbs! The only thing that I want to do is to be left alone! Now please get out of my face!”

After changing my shirt and brushing my teeth, I pick up the car keys while Barb continues to moan in the background. As I walk towards the front door, I tell her that I’m going to Super Wal-Mart and will be back in about thirty minutes.

“Wal-Mart!” she yells. “You didn’t tell me that you were going to Wal-Mart. Wait a few minutes while I change my clothes. Ain’t no way that you’re going to Wal-Mart without me,” she insists.

“Barb, are you losing your mind. A few minutes ago I thought I was going to have to bring you to the hospital emergency room. You looked like you were waiting to be transferred to the coroner’s office for an autopsy. What about your headache, backache and PMS?” I ask.

“That was before you told me you were going to Wal-Mart to get the light bulbs. Don’t you dare leave without me!”

Five minutes later, she walks smiling from the back bathroom. She has changed her clothes, fixed her hair, and put makeup on. She has rouge on her cheeks. She doesn’t even wear rouge. Looking as confused as the cat, I walk towards the front door as Barb follows.

“You didn’t tell me that you were going to Wal-Mart. Hurry up!” she says with a sense of urgency. “I don’t want to be late.”

As I drive around the parking lot of Super Wal-Mart while searching for a place to park, Barb becomes expressively uninhibited.

“Can I tell you the fantasy that I have when I’m home alone during the day?” she asks.

Wondering what fantasies have to do with buying light bulbs at Wal-Mart, I give her a nod realizing that she may tell me something that I need to know.

“When I lie in the bed by myself during the day Mike, I have a recurring fantasy. In my fantasy, you are making love to me while wearing a blue Wal-Mart vest over your bare chest. What a turn on, Mike. The vest is more of a turn on than a full body massage.”

Contemplating that my wife has gone completely mad, I continue to drive through the parking lot as a car occupied by two blue hairs speeds up in front of me and grabs one of the few spots left. If the term road rage qualifies for what you feel while trying to park at Wal-Mart, they should consider hiring an on-site psychologist.

“Barb, we’re been driving around the parking lot for nearly fifteen minutes looking for a spot. Perhaps we should go down the highway to that other department store to get the bulbs.”

Without provocation, she threatens to harm me if I drive away from Wal-Mart, citing her migraine and PMS again, as reasons for her sudden rage.

Following a game of *Chicken* with a guy in a big pickup truck who resembles Elvis, Barb and I finally win a spot about a half block away from the Wal-Mart entrance.

“You know, Mike, it wouldn’t be a bad idea if Wal-Mart would offer off-site parking like they do in Disney World. They could use trams to shuttle you to the front door.”

As I display inner strength not to respond to such a suggestion, a heavy evening shower begins to pelt us with rain. Without missing a beat, Barb continues to speak as if she’s running a high fever.

“Mike, when it rains like this, Wal-Mart should also consider selling yellow ponchos outside in the parking lot. You know, like the ones they sell at Disney World. But instead of Mickey Mouse on the back, they could use their own logo. What you think, Mike?”

“What do I think, Barb? I think that you have gone plum crazy! I also think that I caught your migraine! Hey, is that Elvis I see still driving around the parking lot? Hurry up, Barb, we better make a run for it before he decides that he wants to play *Chicken* again.

We enter Wal-Mart to the friendly welcome of two human props wearing blue vests and standing near the doorway. The first, an elderly man with what looks like Civil War medals pinned to his lapel, bids me a warm, “Welcome to Wal- Mart, sir.”

The second, a short stocky woman with big hair and gold-rimmed rhinestone glasses says, “Welcome back to Wal-Mart, Barbara. I see you got a haircut.”

“Just got a little off the top and the sides,” Barb responds, as if they are old friends.

“Barb, ask the associate with the Civil War medals if there is a blue light special tonight,” I suggest.

Looking horrified, Barb quickly responds, “You know that this is not the store where they have blue light specials. How dare you! You should never use that phrase in this place! Don’t you realize how sensitive the associates are about that kind of talk?”

“Sorry, Barb, just trying to chill out. Maybe you need to do the same.”

Realizing that she forgot to grab a shopping buggy on our way into the store, Barb panics and frantically scans the immediate area near the checkout counter. As I wonder why we need a buggy for eighteen light bulbs, Barb removes three items from a cart near the *Fifteen Items or Less* line and quickly high-jacks it as the owner bends over to grab a National Enquirer.

Embarrassed, but not surprised, I continue to wonder why she needs a shopping cart for eighteen light bulbs.

Within seconds of entering the shopping area, Barb, her migraine and PMS in apparent remission, slowly turns her head and gives me a radiant smile that I have not witnessed since our wedding day. I look around and notice that the other women pushing shopping carts have the same glowing smile as well. Could all the women in this place be on drugs, I wonder? Could Sam Walton be high above pumping oxygen through the Wal-Mart ventilation system, trying to induce euphoria into these consuming crazed beings? Whatever the reason for their intoxicated smiles, I continue to follow Barb like an obedient Pomeranian, fearing that questioning what's going on could be misperceived as anarchy.

Barb swiftly pushes the stolen cart down a main thoroughfare, but suddenly encounters a major traffic jam of shopping buggies near the intersections of Hardware and Sports Equipment.

"It wouldn't be a bad idea if Wal-Mart installed a faster lane on the side of the main aisles," she suggests.

"What do you mean, Barb, a kind of service road next to the Interstate?" I ask.

"Exactly," she responds, as a slow moving *frickett* (*frickett*: (N) anyone who drives a car or pushes a shopping buggy at a slow rate of speed and is ten years older than God) blocks her path and temporarily makes her lose her religion. For the moment, it is apparent that her PMS is still percolating just below the surface.

As Barb and I walk towards the area where the light bulbs are kept, one Wal-Mart associate after the other begins to acknowledge her presence.

"Hi, Barb, welcome back. Haven't seen you in a few hours," one says with a friendly tone.

“Hey, nice haircut. Don’t stay away so long next time,” another yells from across a counter.

A third associate, apparently not to be outdone by the other two, offers to escort Barb to a big sale on generic beer that is in the opposite direction of the light bulbs.

“Barb,” I assert, “no one in our family even likes beer.”

“Oh, be quiet, Mike. Didn’t you hear her say that it’s on sale? I’m sure that we can find someone to drink it. Maybe we can throw a party or something. ”

As she turns the buggy around and follows her associate friend to the beer aisle, I begin to realize that light bulbs are the very last thing on her mind. Although I should have recognized that the need to high-jack a shopping buggy was a red flag, it still isn’t too late for me to assert my authority.

“Look, Barb, I only came here to get eighteen light bulbs. If you’re going to make this into a major shopping spree, I’m getting the bulbs and heading back home.”

“That’s fine, Mike. I’ve got the keys to the car in my purse. Get the bulbs you need and walk home,” she responds, as I once again follow her like an obedient Pomeranian. So much for my assertiveness.

In an effort to make the best of a situation in which I have lost control, I begin to take in the sights. As we pass near the ladies clothing section, I can’t help but notice how close the lingerie is to the food and dessert aisles. While I am not implying that there is anything subliminal about food, dessert, and lingerie being so close together, I am certain that Freud would be proud. I also notice a beautiful young woman who looks like the poster girl for breast implants feeling the texture of what appears to be a *double E bra*. In an attempt to determine

whether it is a Bali or a Hanes, I deviate a little to my right. Barb, noticing that I have become distracted, rolls over my right foot with her buggy and scolds me for my roaming eyes.

“Why don’t you take a picture, Mike, it lasts longer!” she states defensively.

“I have no idea what you are talking about, Barb,” I respond as I try to look confused.

“The blonde that you were gawking at in the lingerie area is what I’m talking about,” she yells while elbowing me in my ribs.

“Oh THAT blonde,” I respond. “No, honey, she was ugly,” I state with firm conviction, as I continue to use my peripheral vision to see what lingerie the poster girl will pick up next. Barb reminds me that she has the keys to the car and that our home is at least five miles away. “But she was ugly,” I reiterate. “She was ugly.”

Seemingly provoked either by her migraine, PMS, or the blonde (who knows what goes on in the mind of a woman), Barb suddenly goes into a buying frenzy near the beer aisle. She begins to grab everything within arm’s reach and places the items into the stolen buggy: Gatorade, Cokes, Pepsi, two- for- one Seven-Up, three six-packs of generic beer, Doritos, Cheetos, and bottled water. Feeling intimidated and not saying a word, I continue to watch as she places four jars of Taco dip with jalepeno peppers into the cart. As she glares at her purchases and counts to fifteen, she suddenly high-jacks another almost empty buggy near aisle six and discards the two items inside. Ordering me to push the second stolen buggy, Barb begins to throw more expensive items into the cart. I have now become an accessory. In goes a toaster, a lamp, garden lights, a wall clock, two bras (*double D*), a makeup kit, a pant suit, leather sandals, and although it is late February, eight boxes of on- sale Christmas lights. As Barb and I make our way to the front of the store and approach the *Fifteen Items or Less* check- out line, she quickly scans the second buggy and realizes that it contains seventeen items.

“Hurry, Mike, grab two boxes of Christmas lights and throw them on the side near the magazine rack. Follow me with your buggy and pretend we don’t know each other.”

Although I am mortified, I follow her instructions without saying a word. As I look up apprehensively, I notice Elvis standing immediately behind us. He is holding a single item in his right hand.

I can’t help but wonder if violating the rules of an express line is considered a criminal offense. As a customer checks out in front of us, Barb begins rummaging through her purse for her checkbook, but realizes that she has left it at home. Kicking me in the shin while rubbing her fingers together to communicate in sign language that she needs money, I quickly pull out a hundred dollar bill and discreetly pass it to her while the cashier is not looking. Elvis, holding a can of Hormel hot tamales, witnesses our illegal maneuvers and stares at me as if he would like to play *Chicken* again when we reach the parking lot.

“Hi, Barb,” the cashier says as she begins to scan her fifteen items. “No kids today, huh? Came by yourself?”

“Yea, Linda. They were watching a movie at home and I thought that I’d get some space.”

“That will be \$42.95,” the cashier states as Barb hands her MY hundred dollar bill. With her fifteen purchases packed in five bags and placed back into the cart, Barb puts the change from MY hundred into her pocket and heads towards the front door.

“Welcome to Wal-Mart, sir. Check or cash?”

“Cash,” I respond, as the cashier begins to scan the items from the second buggy.

“That will be \$222.21,” she says, as I pull two one hundred- dollar bills from my pants pocket.

“Oh heck! I think I’m short about \$22.00. Please put the balance on my credit card,” I respond, as Elvis again appears to be getting agitated.

Walking into the parking lot, Barb waits immediately out the door with a silly grin on her face. I cautiously look over my shoulder to make certain that Elvis is not following me.

“Mike,” Barb speaks with a confident tone, “I’ve got a wonderful idea. Instead of taking the kids to Disney World next year, how about staying for a week at the hotel right across the street from Wal-Mart? We can all spend the week shopping for super-values. Just think of all the money that we can save.”

Responding in a rather sarcastic manner and in an attempt to insult her intelligence, I suggest that maybe we can even purchase a five- day pass like we get in Orlando. “After all, if we’re going to save money, let’s go all the way.”

“Now you’re talking like a woman,” she says in a cocky sort of way.

Realizing that the entire situation is somewhat hopeless, I discreetly ponder the thought of spending my entire summer vacation in the lingerie section of Wal-Mart.

“Hi Mom, where’s Dad?” Justin asks as Barb unpacks the goodies that she bought at Wal-Mart.

“He’s lying down in the bedroom,” she responds, “ but you better be careful. He’s in a very bad mood. He’s even yelling at Weasel whose sleeping in the corner of the room.”

Recognizing that he enters at his own risk, Justin walks into the bedroom to the sight of me lying stretched across the bed, with an icepack on my head and a wet towel across my neck.

“Hey, Dad. Feeling okay?” he asks.

“Feeling okay? Does it look like I’m feeling okay?” I respond defensively.

“Gee, I’m sorry, Dad, but Mom suggested that I tell you that you forgot to get the light bulbs at Wal-Mart. She wants to know if you would like to go back with her tomorrow to get them? Maybe I can go back with you and Mom,” Justin suggests, as Weasel instinctively runs and hides underneath the bed.

“Tell Mom that she can forget a return trip to Wal-Mart,” I yell assertively.

Feeling as if I am coming down with a case of PMS, I order both Justin and Weasel out of the room and scream irrationally, “Maybe I’ll just put candles in the tenant’s apartment. Better yet, they can just live in the dark.”