

4SHORTGRASS.DOC

Follow along, please. The scene and location is the number one aisle of a huge chain grocery store on Sherwood Way in San Angelo, Texas, after five p.m. on a Friday in September. The number one aisle carries such items as artificial jellies, simulated salad dressings, and bogus mustard on one side; on the other, camouflaged versions of breads, windowed boxes of fake jelly rolls, sugared doughnut replicas, and mock cinnamon rolls.

If the lady parked horizontally across from the pickle jugs pauses in her cell phone hookup long enough for a one-way, one-lane passage by ducking under her right elbow and hugging the shelf deep left, avoiding body contact against her right posterior, seven carts will break free to resume shopping.

Appreciate – the lady is Caucasian, yet in bulk profiles for a Japanese sumo wrestler. Her voice tone makes commands to a West Point drill team sound arbitrary. The other end of the aisle is impossible to see around her billowing sleeves on upraised arms. Once, just once, traffic moved on her down side. But she must be commanding a squadron out at the air base to strike such an officious pose.

Three carts to the rear of the line, a mother works to reverse the course of a rig loaded with twins. Behind her a man starts rocking his cart, lifting the front and dropping the rubber tires against the floor in a clonk, clonking of desperation.

Then! Then the break to shoot through by the monster and swerve right in time to miss a stalled cart on the left and head for recovery in baking supplies on aisle two – the best sanctuary in the whole store. The flour and baking powder section is the place to stop and reevaluate in privacy. On the busiest days, only a few señoras from Mexico, all visitors, or a freak of an Americana lapsing back into nostalgia for Granny's cupboard, so much as pause to read the label on Aunt Jemima Pancake Mix or find the blurred symbol of Gold Medal on a flour sack.

Also, the solitude gives time to recover. Buys time for the nervous system to stabilize in a quiet surrounding. The shelves holding 25-pound sacks of flour and 10-pound buckets of lard form a buffer that makes speed bumps in a school zone look like a change in the grain of the paving.

Before rejoining the throngs, front cart wheels undergo test runs to be sure they steer sharply enough to maneuver in tight challenges for right of way. Two practice laps leading the cart instead of pushing assure retreat or

reverse access from traffic jams. Strange, but tightening the belt one hole gives confidence to reenter the game.

Out on the track again, trying to reach the meat counter, I run into a couple from Mertzson stalled against a set of shelves holding about a ton of packaged tortillas—flour and corn meal tortillas pressed free of any nutrients. The mob of city shoppers pouring from the bread section blocks the straight-away; the same stream pins my friends to the side.

Mertzsonites are stoics. We face deep adversity, bad luck, bad calls, weather failure, market collapses, dry riverbeds, prairie fires, flooding streams, and prairie fires quenched by flooding of dry riverbeds so severe that economic calamities bothering other folks effect as much as the start and finish of a Little Bo-Peep story.

We lock front wheels to hold our ground. The proximity of being pressed in a small space is comfortable, as we have belonged to the same dance club for 20 years. Communication is difficult with other carts raking against the steel ribs of our carts' baskets. To be among allies, however, discounts the inconvenience, if your definition of inconvenience excludes metal grating against metal to the point of shooting sparks and tolerating city folks vying for your space.

In the melee, she says, "We still have to go to Wal-Mart to buy honey whole wheat bread." Just then a shopper riding a motorized cart grazes my left hind foot close enough to run over the edge of my shoe sole.

On the rebound from coming close to losing a toe, it takes three tries to communicate that I'd stop at Wal-Mart to pick up one loaf of honey whole wheat for \$1600 and deliver the bread to their ranch house east of Mertzon.

One of us says, "Ow," or maybe, "Wow." The fresh wave of shoppers forces us apart. I have to take too firm a hold on the push bar to wave goodbye.

The hombre who wrote the plea to shop at home sounds sacred this morning safe at the ranch. I wondered once outside the store if 1600 bucks was a fair price for shopping on a Friday in an Angelo supermarket of a chain store.