

EXCERPT from *STASHES* by PJ Colando

"Lordy, now I know why Charlene's always gushing about retail therapy!" I thought as I navigated my cart across the vast acreage of Wal-Mart. The aisles stacked with food packages and cans, toilet paper, clothing, and gadgets were like mini Grand Canyons. Each item seemed to puff out its chest and say, "Choose me, Jackie. I'm essential for your trip."

With all of that choosing, the cart became stacked as high as an Egyptian pyramid. My arms wrestled the cart along, the drudge of muscle power overwhelming the delight of purchase power. I flinched as I glanced at my watch: I'd been shopping in Wal-Mart two hours.

Just as I spied a short check out line, the Muzak switched to 'Jingle Bells' and I hummed along. As I unloaded my items onto the conveyer belt, my eyes locked on the cashier's flordid face. Her nametag framed 'Veronica' in smiley face decals to suggest a perky attitude, but she must have left it on her bathroom counter when she'd made-up for work this morning. She glowered with unseasonable humbug.

I decided to share my abundant holiday cheer, so in my best Ellen DeGeneres voice, I said, "Do you think that I have enough food? My husband and I are traveling around the USA in a Winnebago and you never know where a Wal-Mart is."

Veronica's gaze remained fixed on the cluster of cans she was marshaling in steady cadence across the price scanner. It's rhythmic 'boop' sounded like submarine diving bells.

I found myself picturing empty bubbles sifting up through water, then over the heads of cartoon characters. These images dissolved into the huge flakes sneaking out of Veronica's center-parted hair, so like the snowflakes hurling themselves at Wal-Mart's huge window panels. I heard myself blurt, "Do you recommend the store brand shampoo? I got it because of the price savings – and it was the same color as the Prell." *So lame - how am I going to meet new people when we travel?"*

I busied myself with swiping my Master Card through the countertop device, fumbling like a kindergartener, proud to scrawl my name with the stylus. My mouth crept into smile, but Veronica had already turned her back to me, so I saved it for the Salvation Army Santa outside. I paused to give him some coins and pushed on toward the van with the adroitly loaded cart, into emerging winter.

The bags were an easy swing into the van. Since I still had energy, I lumbered the cart to the return corral and gave it a shove, just like the cafeteria job I'd left just one week ago.