

Consumerism

Bright lights shine through the glass sliding doors of the Walmart, illuminating the dark sky around it; one could interpret it as the gates to heaven. Customers are entering and exiting like ants in a colony, jogging out with their bags strapped to their tired arms, dashing to their cars, while others rush to find a spot within the labyrinth. They run around the brilliant aisles, frantically searching for treasure amongst the shelves. It is believed the store possesses pieces of gold hidden in the kitchen appliances, diamond rings dug out from the culinary section, black pearls submerged in hair products—it's a scavenger's utopia.

There is a blind customer with dark sunglasses and a cane for assistance. He lifts items—like milk, plates, napkins, watches, and necklaces—with his cane and slides them into his cart, hauling them throughout. "Excuse me," he'd often say as he bumps into ignorant shoppers. One woman he crashed into stands tall; she peeks above the shelves, but, unfortunately, has to bend down to push her cart. When the blind man ran into her, she stumbled, causing a commotion, which drew a chorus of babies crying around them. Nonetheless, she has the advantage, particularly compared to a customer who is less than half her height, scrambling below the second shelf level to acquire items like a mouse rummaging for cheese. He feels dwarfed and intimidated by the massive, oppressive structures. This grand shopping center is home to numerous grand people. One, the shelves are just too small for him to fit, resulting in him having to squeeze through like a late baby being delivered. He shoves people to the side, trampling any unlucky soul who has to endure his wrath.

The blinding, unnatural glow of the store pulses; it's a beacon that enticed a hungry customer, whose stomach is deprived of salvation and who has a desire to endlessly shop. His craving isn't just for food but for the very act of consumption, drawn to the store like a rat to a maze. As he steps through the automatic doors, it feels like entering the mouth of a beast. The store's hum of refrigerators and freezers is not just sound; it is a famished breath—a cool, stale air that caresses down his neck as he breathlessly pants. He sprints down the radiant aisles; the ceiling appears to lower with each stride he takes. His legs are moving on their own, like a desperate last scramble for survival. The shelves, once just a display for goods, feel like open arms. He snatches all the produce he can and shoves it down his now-worn throat—the tastelessness of it makes his eyes water. He gasps for air as the barrage from the beeping scanners and constant announcements pierce into his ears. It becomes a cacophony that grinds into his sanity. He clutches his head with his hands, trembling as he stumbles around. The aisles whispered promises of endless satisfaction, a siren's song that drew him deeper into its depths.

Dozens of boxes of bread and thousands of Lego pieces do not satisfy his starving stomach. The plastic of the bricks scrapes his teeth, and the dry bread turns to dust in his mouth. The taste of objects, not food, is a new, terrible sensation. He is starving, not just for a meal, but for something else. Something warm. Something living. The store has twisted his hunger, and it wants more.

The small customer stares, dropping his shopping basket in shock as this disaster unfolds. He scurries under the shelves like a frightened rodent in an attempt to hide from the beast. But, like a lion is to its prey, the hunger takes control. He pounces with a speed that belies his size—his large hand sweeping the tiny man up in a single, inescapable grasp; his

malicious eyes are hard to look away from. The customer kicks and squirms, with a muffled squeak escaping his lips. With a wet, tearing sound, the ravenous man extends his jaw to an unnatural degree, revealing his crooked, monster-like teeth. With the creature's hands on the dwarf's waist, he presses him steadily into his cavernous mouth. There is no bite. Bones are crushed from the pressure inside his throat—the victim is swallowed whole. His body contorted and submerged—his final torment extinguished in absolute darkness.

The horror brings attention to the store's inhabitants; they all scream in terror while hopelessly searching for the exit. Pushing and grabbing each other, forcing others out of the way by any means—you might think it's Black Friday. Under the cries, the store speakers announce in a timid voice, "Attention customers. It appears we have an emergency. Please evacuate in an orderly fashion immediately. Remember to be mindful of others and stay safe."

The blind man, disoriented by the chaos, taps his cane frantically. "What's happening? Can someone please—" He can't get a final word out as the massive hand wraps around his head; the sunglasses crack against the pressure. He's pulled into the dark to be devoured—you can hear his flesh being ripped and torn, along with one last wretched screech.

Through the chaos, the tall woman notices the sliding glass doors. Freedom. She pushes a display of cookies aside; her long legs carry her with a passionate urgency. She bursts into the cold night air. Her lungs burn with the sweet taste of escape. The parking lot lights appear as halos. She is free. She takes two more steps before stopping.

My purse! I left it in the cart! My phone was left in there, too! My keys! My wallet! I couldn't just leave it. It would only take a second...

The beast's store is behind her while this call rang through her head. A dazed look glazes over her eyes—she turns back. The automatic doors slid open for her like a willing offering. She takes one step inside, and the nightmare's shadow falls over her. The doors hiss shut. A new cry, short and brief, was muffled by the store's hum.

Then, a roar. The bigger customer, that mountain of a man, charges. He drives his shoulder into the hungry monster's ribs, sending them both crashing into a pyramid of soup cans. He lands a heavy fist, then another. The beast grabs a can, rips it with his bare, worn hands, and scratches the larger man's left eye. In retaliation, he slams his forehead into the bridge of the monster's nose with a sickening crunch. The creature stumbles back, stunned—the store itself seemed to shudder in response. The PA system, which is giving its meek safety announcement, now emits a low, subsonic hum that vibrates in the teeth and agitates the ogre. It snarls and thrashes in a frenzy. The bigger man advances, but his boot comes down on a spilled bottle of vegetable oil. His feet shoot out from under him, and he lands hard on his back with the wind knocked out of him. The environment—the store—had betrayed him.

But he plants his feet, couches, and gets back up. He grabs a fire extinguisher from the wall and swings it like a club, connecting with the monster's knee; you can hear a crack followed by a pool of blood flooding from its leg. It howled and kneeled—the man was on it in an instant. He uses his weight, pinning the wrathful demon on the grimy tile. He raises the extinguisher above his head for a final blow. It looked up; its face is a mask of blood and greed. It offers a broad, bloody rictus grin, its twisted, grotesque teeth on display. The bigger man's stomach dropped. A strange, gnawing emptiness formed in his own gut. A void that the violent struggle had carved open. It wasn't a hunger for food, but a craving for the act itself. He looked at his

hands, slick with the monster's black blood and the greasy residue of a thousand consumer products.

The sound of sirens erupts outside. Red and blue lights strobe through the glass front, painting the carnage in fierce pulses. The larger man looks down at the dying monster, its face frozen in a hideous smile. Then, his eyes drift to the nearby shelf, untouched by the fight. Brightly colored candy bars mesmerize him, drawing him in. They promise quick and easy satisfaction. His body jolts uncontrollably. He drops the extinguisher and slowly reaches out, selects one, and tears the wrapper with his teeth. He begins to chew; his mouth almost moves mechanically. The chocolate was dust, the caramel was glue. It's tasteless, but he can't stop. He devours it with a desperate craving—his eyes widen with a terror he didn't understand. Police in tactical gear storm the aisle, their shouts and flashlight beams converging on the last consumer. They seize his arms and push him to move; he's taken away, but he looks back with the same hungry stare, clutching the candy bar wrapper.