

Avatar

Mary Harter

You see her in the supermarket every day. She wears size 14 stretch pants (that advertise plainly why she needs the stretch) and a matching print blouse. She wears them with tennis shoes. A chiffon scarf scarcely covers the neat rows of pink curlers clamped down the back of her head and clustered at the sides. With one hand she steers a grocery cart; with the other she holds a shopping list, a heavy purse, and a toddler's hand, each of which must be released whenever she needs to examine a product or yank another child back into her entourage. She moves at a snail's pace down each aisle, her darting eyes scanning every label with computer speed. Having inched her way with tedious caution down an entire aisle, she will, upon reaching the end, suddenly whip her cart around a semicircle in four seconds flat and proceed down the next aisle as slowly as before. Her vocabulary throughout this process consists of only two words: "No!" and "hmmm," but she can intonate the latter with a dozen inflections which render it appropriate for each expression that sweeps across her face. As her children conduct a circus around her, her eyes register alternate agitation and stupor, with occasional flashes of panic. Her face is haggard and harried, and she walks with a tired stoop that is suggestive of the first stages of collapse. To watch her plod wearily up and down the rows is to know that she has done this often enough to have worn grooves in the aisles and tracks across her forehead.