

How to Get Caught Shoplifting

by ANONYMOUS

The parking lot is empty save for the stolen car. Standing next to the vehicle, you are attempting to prepare yourself for following the law. As of late, it has become progressively more difficult to avoid acquiring objects that do not belong to you. This is just a quick shopping trip. There is no need to take anything without paying. You know you have enough money to get the ingredients. Just go in, find the vanilla, the bread, the eggs, and bring them to the cash register. No need to shoplift...though it would be so easy. No. That is a terrible excuse. You turn to walk across the lot. But it might be so interesting. Well...perhaps.

It is 2:07 a.m. and you are outside of a 24-hour grocery with a Volkswagen Beetle which is not yours. The car belongs to your mother and has a plastic, yellow daisy in the vase built into the dashboard. It was stolen a few hours ago with the purpose of visiting some friends and purchasing the comestibles. Home on Thanksgiving break from college, you have not seen your parents in several months, and you thought you might surprise them with some French toast when they wake up early in the morning to catch a plane. They are planning on leaving for Seattle to visit your brother, forgetting, once again, that you were coming home.

You are seventeen, a senior in high school, and you have not been home in several days. There are no search parties, no frantic telephoning to discover your location. There is merely a “Did you stay out past your curfew last night, Jon?” as you enter the house one morning in order to eat. Your mother is sitting at the table eating a bowl of cereal and reading the newspaper.

“I don’t have a curfew, mum.” There is no use correcting the misnomer she has applied to you. She almost always calls you by your older brother’s name. You are not entirely certain that she remembers yours.

“Oh.” She has not once glanced up from the paper.

You stand, waiting to see if she will say anything more. After about five minutes, you turn and leave the house. There is no purpose in going to that place of residence any longer. Somehow—because you are their youngest child, without a family of your own, without a partner and children—you have become invisible, a shadow of your older siblings. This is no longer your home; this is no longer a place where you grew up. You are a stranger, merely an odd face cropping up every now and again in old photographs.

You enter the store, wandering around as you find the ingredients, sidestepping the cardboard boxes of foods waiting to be placed on the shelves. The stocking is always done late at night in 24-hour stores, and when you are the sole customer in sight, the bleak fluorescent lighting and the food strewn about the floors make you feel more alone, as if something apocalyptic has occurred and you failed to get the message. Every now and again, a night employee pops up from placing cereal boxes on shelves to give you a frightened “Oh God, only crazy people shop this late” look.

The vanilla and bread you need are toward the front of the store, but the eggs are near the back, so you must make a trek up the barren aisles to the front. Your footsteps and the distant sounds of someone whistling are the only noises in the building. At last you reach the front counter intending to pay for your food, but the cashier seems to have evaporated. Standing there waiting in the grossly unnatural fluorescent lighting, your mind begins to buzz again. Just walk out. There isn't even any need to hide the food, just walk out. What are you waiting around here for? No one will notice that you were here, that you left. Those people stocking? They won't think anything of it.

An assistant manager appears in your field of vision, and you flag him down before you have any more time to think. He comes over to your checkout lane and scans the groceries in the mask of smiling efficiency and friendliness possessed by all managerial-types who work for their paycheck rather than for their company. You chat briefly in the sort of toned-down and cautious conversation that can only take place in a 24-hour store so late at night. Anyone who shops at this hour is surely up to something and automatically has a thin layer of suspicion shrouding him. This isn't a problem, so long as you aren't. Unfortunately, the assistant manager interrupts your criminal reverie.

“Did you find everything okay?” He doesn't bother making eye contact. It is not as if he cares whether you have found everything or not, just so long as you pay and leave without disrupting his shift.

“Well, I certainly hope so...but I left my shopping list in the car, so I guess we'll have to see.” Let's leave the option open to come back into the store...just in case.

The assistant manager rings up the total and you swipe your debit card. Soon you are out in the parking lot, groceries in the silver Volkswagen Beetle. You stand, head down, looking at the empty space of the passenger seat of the car. It would be easy; it would be so easy. Think of your friends, how impressed they would be if you pulled this off...I should go. I should get in the car and just go. You know if you re-enter the store to take something, it will be horribly suspicious, and you will almost certainly get caught. You know you ought to get back to your parents' house so you can wake up at 5:00 a.m. and make them breakfast, not because you have to, but because you hope that they will like that. Then you picture them waking up, each

wondering if the other has made the French toast. You, their youngest son, may as well be an obscure boarder or an odd odor emanating from Lord-knows-where, soon to disappear.

The employees won't think anything of it, of you going back in to take something. Your parents won't think anything of you stealing because they'll never know. No one thinks anything of it. No one thinks of you. Think of how they'll look at you, when you sit in the police station, hands bound and unusable. Maybe, for the first time since you were fifteen, they will actually look at you.

You turn to go back into the mart. It is time to try getting caught.

They'll look at you.

When you are nine, you move to a new city. The previous town you lived in had a population of about one thousand. The local landmark, the motel, a few blocks away from your home, burnt down about once every three years and was always rebuilt again with meth lab installed to ensure that the cycle continued. When you move, it is to a city of about two hundred thousand people and a much safer neighborhood. There is only one minor shooting across the road from your new home, an improvement on the double homicides of rural drug deals gone wrong.

Unused to so many roads and buildings and unfamiliar faces, you get lost on the first day of the fourth grade when you try to walk home alone. Your teacher has convinced you to cross a busy through-fare to an unfamiliar, though altogether nicer neighborhood on the other side, because she is convinced that you live there. You wander around the streets, desperately looking for landmarks. Perhaps you misread the sign saying "Essex" as "Sussex" in the morning? Perhaps they could be the same road? After about an hour and a half, you begin to cry.

It is around then that you encounter another student from your class, who takes you to his mother. She offers to walk you home, since she knows the street where you live. Along the way, a red van pulls up, and in it are your parents and siblings. They have been driving the neighborhoods, hoping to catch a glimpse of you before any of the registered sex offenders living nearby did. You have been missing for nearly two hours, and they have been getting more desperate. Your mother gets out of the van, and crying, holds you in her arms.

"Don't do that. Don't ever do that again."

Your father, face pale beneath his beard, blinks back tears and suggests that the family get ice cream to celebrate finding you.

Somehow, even in a mix of six children, they had known you were gone, and they went looking. Somehow, back then, they cared.

You enter the store boldly, no longer bothering to tread lightly. You confidently stride up and down the aisles, careening off of the cardboard boxes, making sure to be seen by several of the few employees working, including the

assistant manager. Wondering what it is you should take, your eyes alight on an entire cardboard box of purple and blue frosted wild berry Pop-Tarts. There are about 30 individual boxes for selling inside, and the best part is, you don't even like them, something you can only hope your parents will remember. You pick up the cardboard box and carry it to the front of the store, placing it next to the checkout lane nearest the door. You hope that someone's eyes are on you as you make your move.

Getting out of the main entrance is never the difficult part. Most of the time, security tags are for show and won't even cause the alarms to go off. Unfortunately, this seems to be the case with your Pop-Tarts. The automatic doors whoosh open, and you step into the chilled early morning air accompanied by silence. *What have I done? Oh God. No, keep going. Do you want to go home to that house again? Do you want to pretend along with your parents that you do not exist, to play a game of hide-but-don't-peek, to be perpetually out of their sight?* You force yourself to maintain a regular pace.

You are halfway across the parking lot, wondering why you have not been stopped. You are worried you may get away with it again. You may escape and return to your usual state of nonexistence. You are nearly to your car, when you hear a voice calling out. Finally.

"Hey! What do you think you're doing?"

Immediately you pale and turn, nearly falling down as you do. You are holding your container out as if it is dragging you, and not you carrying it. "Sorry?" Sorry? That's the best you could come up with? Sorry, question mark? And such a timid voice. What, you want them to continue looking through you? Here is your chance to distinguish yourself from your brother in their eyes, and you're beginning to shy away, you coward.

"I saw you walking around. I watched you the whole time. What do you think you're doing?" The assistant manager is standing there, bags under his eyes, holding in a yawn.

"I...I took these. Aisle 4. Pop-Tarts."

"I know." The manager catches his breath. He must have been hiding all the way at the other end of the checkout counters. "What the hell are you doing?"

"I...a guy. A guy told me to take them. He...he just told me." Not this way. I'm not ready for them to see me this way.

"A guy? Really? Let me take those."

You are facing each other about a foot apart in the middle of the parking lot. You hand him the box.

"Right. Go away. Just leave." He shakes his head, and drags himself back into the store.

Then you aren't ready for them to see you in any way.

You act as though you have become deaf, trying to maintain the last shred of dignity you have and at the very least receive a stern talking-to. You follow him in, tripping at his heel, a bewildered puppy of a boy. You half-heartedly direct him to the

aisle where you took the box, wondering if he'll call your parents or the authorities if you stick around. You are a pale-faced, quivering jelly, and you can feel the blood beating through every capillary in your body. Sounds coming to your ears are difficult to understand as you picture yourself the center of attention, recognized and talked about at last. You are above yourself, around yourself, contemplating, staring, wondering who this frightened child is, hoping that he has determination enough to accept the consequences of his actions, hoping that there will be consequences to his actions. Praying that there won't be. Finally, you begin to make out that this assistant is still speaking, and looking at you as if you are little more than a slug, oozing a trail of slime across his previously clean night.

"Didn't you hear me? Leave. Fuck off. Go!" He rubs his face, clearly wanting to just finish his shift without any trouble.

You are sixteen, arriving home from school and work at nine thirty at night. The house is empty, though there is the lingering smell of a dinner prepared. You check the refrigerator to see if there are any leftovers and find the interior empty except for a bottle of baby formula. Normally when your parents have to leave like this, there is a note hanging above the stove. This time there isn't one. You know where they are, anyway. They are probably at your sister's apartment. She is nineteen and recently had a baby with a guy she had known for only two weeks before she got drunk and fucked him on a kitchen floor. Several months after getting pregnant, she and the father decided it would be best to marry. Unfortunately, the newlyweds do not really know much about childcare, so your parents are constantly there helping them cook, clean, and care for your young niece. You cannot resent the child for existing or your parents for caring.

Still, it would be nice to have someone around. This is the third time this week you have come home to an empty house with no food. Buying groceries and eating out is starting to take away from your college savings. You cannot begrudge your parents the affection they have for their granddaughter, but you can resent them for deciding not to care about you. Another night with no lights on, no food, no mother or father to ask for advice or conversation. And your money is beginning to run low.

You close the fridge with a sigh. Unaccompanied by the thrill which would come later, you drive to the store. The strain on your wallet, the hunger in your stomach, the hurt in your chest are all too much. This night, for the first time in your life, you shoplift.

It is not very difficult. All it requires is anger and a complete lack of thinking otherwise. You take an apple from the produce section, sticking it in the pocket of your coat. You also manage to steal a small loaf of bread and some cheese, pressing the bread close against your stomach to keep it hidden. You have not learned yet how

to take bread without squishing it against your body, making it appear unappetizing.

With so many similar nights to come, you will have plenty of time to learn.

It is the morning after you have been caught shoplifting, and you arise early to cook the French toast. Your parents awake to the scent of cinnamon and egg, coming out to the kitchen to discover what is going on. They find you there, preparing breakfast. They do not have much to say, but they eat the meal and seem to enjoy it. They do not ask you where you were so late last night. Undoubtedly, they did not even notice that you stole the car. They sit and read the paper, then put their dishes in the sink and begin taking their bags outside. You help to carry their luggage and put it into the trunk of the Volkswagen. They enter the house to do a last check to see if they forgot anything, and when they come outside, it happens.

Perhaps they can smell the nervous sweat on the sweatshirt you still have on from the night before and a parental instinct kicks in, or perhaps they are merely confusing you for your brother. Whatever the case may be, as they leave the house they both pause to hug you. It is a short, mute embrace.

“Have fun in Seattle.”

“Bye, Jon...sorry, —.”

A brief hand wave from your mother.

In a few years, you may be able to sit down and have a real conversation, but for now, this is enough. You are terrified of lifting your carapace again, to see the attention-seeking, impulsive, scared boy beneath. To test the boundaries of what you might do to attract the notice of your parents is to invite the unwanted admittance that you do not have it. That you do not have a home. You will give up thievery, at least for a short time, since you are not sure you can best those results, or you are afraid that you can.

It looks as though you will be needing a new way to feel special.

Congratulations, you champion of losing. Well done, you.