

Ashley Steele

assemble the proletariat

Here's the thing: it's a lot easier to shoplift when you're oblivious to your friends putting \$20 worth of makeup in your grandfather's old ski jacket. Sorry Pappy.

I wasn't expecting Nico to call me up that night because we usually hangout on weekends but with this pandemic, I was willing to take any excuse to leave my jail cell of a dorm.

"Corey and I are bored. You wanna roam around Target?" Nico had said into the phone.

Nico and Corey were probably halfway to my dorm by the time they decided to call me. I looked down at my piles of homework. Fuck it.

"Yeah sure, why not."

Having a global pandemic shake up your college experience truly makes you feel as though you're wasting your life away. I was eighteen at the time and had done nothing extraordinary. No parties, no meeting new and interesting people, no adventures. Meeting Nico and Corey in a virtual women's studies class was sheer luck. They were seniors who knew each other from high school who had taken me under their wing.

Why? I didn't think I was very extraordinary, but Nico's always going off about the smart things I say in class, like when I talk about the intricacies of biphobia or the fact that white gay men are still extremely privileged in our society, despite their queer identity. Nonetheless, they both asked for my number and we've been hanging out ever since.

I had thrown on my favorite jacket: my grandfather's old purple and green neon skiing jacket. I looked in the mirror and tousled my brown curls.

"Geez," I breathed.

I got a closer look at my face. Almond shaped hazel eyes, a sharp nose. A tiny scar going through my right eyebrow. Dozens of tiny brown freckles covered my skin from my forehead to my chin. I scrunched my face as I studied it. I pinched my cheeks to make it seem like I wasn't half asleep and I bounded out of the room.

The cold air from outside hit me like a brick as I pulled open the heavy doors to the back of my dorm building. Who told teenagers that it was cool to unzip your jacket and why did I always follow that?

Corey's beat up green Jeep Wrangler was idling in the parking lot. I could hear the bass booming from some hyperpop song as I made my way over. Corey looked up at me from their phone, their green eyes shining in the blue light of their phone screen.

"Hey kid!" they yelled through the closed window. Even in the dark, their wavy bright orange hair seemed electric.

I pulled open the back door of the car. I hadn't realized how much I needed a break from homework. How long had I been working? Four hours straight? Jesus Beans, be nicer to yourself.

"Hey Beans, what's up?" Nico asked as they turned around in the passenger seat, their white beanie pulled down over their forehead of messy curls. How did their hair always frame their face so perfectly?

"Please end my suffering of online school and immense piles of homework with some unnecessary purchases from Target," I clicked my seatbelt on. "If we have to suffer another semester of this, I might drop out and join a runaway circus."

Corey adjusted their rearview mirror.

“*We?* Babes, this is Nico and I’s last semester. This is it. We’re probably gonna have a stupid ass virtual graduation and then what? Adulthood I guess.”

I hated when they mentioned that they were seniors. Nico and Corey were my only friends at college - I could barely meet anybody with all of the restrictions. No more than one other person in your room, grab and go food at the dining halls, personal study areas in the library. I understood why our university had to do it, but college was so much lonelier than I had imagined. I adjusted my beanie.

“Don’t remind me,” I mumbled.

-

We were perusing the makeup aisles. Did I need anything? Of course not. I was a broke. Did anybody ever need anything when they walked into Target? You always left with way more than you planned on buying.

Nico and Corey huddled close together, looking at some Chapstick. Corey walked over to me and grabbed my wrist, eyes wide, long hair swishing past their shoulders.

“How did you like Professor Brown’s lecture today? I think she’s one of the weirdest Professors I’ve ever had but she definitely keeps my attention and that’s hard to do when class is over Zoom.”

I paused.

“It was interesting, yeah. I really like her though. I feel like she genuinely cares about her students which is refreshing, especially now.”

Nico giggled and stuck their hands deep into their pockets.

“Mm-hmm,” Corey sighed. “Let’s go check out the next aisle, I need Band-Aids.”

I shoved my hands into my pockets. Nico and Corey had already walked into the next aisle. My hand wrapped around something small. Frowning, I pulled it out of my pocket. A strawberry Burt's Bees lip balm.

I shoved my hand deeper into the same pocket. My fingers closed around two more identical cylinders. I reached my hand into my other pocket and pulled out a small container of eyeshadow.

Nico popped their head around the aisle.

"You good Beans?"

Did I grab these? Did they fall into my pocket? Did someone put them there? Had they been there earlier?

Nico walked down the aisle, their checkered Vans slapping against the white tiled floor. Their lanky body practically hovered over mine as they reached out a shaky hand. Nico's hands were constantly shaking, even if they weren't nervous. I always pretended not to notice.

They lightly put their hand around my wrist. The sleeve of their jacket moved up the tan skin of their arm, revealing a tiny stick and poke tattoo on their wrist of a smiley face that Corey had given them a couple months ago. My eyes flicked up to Nico's face. Their deep brown eyes were dancing behind their circular rimmed glasses.

"Come here," they whispered as they pulled me along to the next aisle.

They dragged me over to Corey who was looking intently at the Band-Aids.

"Should I get Peppa Pig or Toy Story.... or.... oh my god I need to get glitter," they reached out to grab a small box.

Nico checked out the area, their head slowly swiveling left to right.

"You're good," Nico mumbled.

Corey lifted up the bottom of their sweatshirt and shoved the box of Band-Aids between the waistband of their jeans and their stomach. When they dropped their hand, it looked as though nothing had happened. You couldn't even see the bulge of the box in their waistband.

"You want a pack, Nico?"

"Nah, I'm good. I just grabbed a box last week for my testosterone shots. I wanna check out the eye drops though."

"C-Corey," I stammered.

Nico and Corey looked at me in unison.

"You guys," I dropped my voice to a whisper. "You're shoplifting?"

Nico chuckled.

"Beans, I hate to break it to you, but Target doesn't give a shit about you and this pack of Band-Aids. Do you know how much money this corporation has?"

My eyes bounced between Nico and Corey. I was at a loss for words.

"You don't have to join if you don't want to, but we've been doing this for years," Corey said as they shoved their hands into their jean pockets. "I taught Nico everything they know."

Nico got serious.

"Hey, Beans, if you're uncomfortable we can totally stop. We should have asked."

They reached out and touched my arm, sending electricity through my veins. Fuck.

Corey's eyes lit up.

"Dude dude dude it's like those indie movies you watch, you know, uhhh, the coming of age ones? You love those. Kids in those movies do stuff like this and *worse* all the time and you *dig* that shit. Live a little!" Corey said.

I guess they weren't wrong.

“Have you guys ever gotten caught?” I asked, still on the fence.

“Oh, plenty of times,” Nico said.

Corey shoved them.

“Sometimes the alarms go off but they can’t search you or do anything about it, it’s in their training. You just have to walk out confidently,” Corey reassured me as they tucked a piece of auburn hair behind their ear.

“And,” Nico said as they tugged on their mask, their eyebrows waggling. “No facial recognition with masks on.”

I hadn’t even thought of that.

“When was the last time you felt alive, huh?” Nico asked.

That was a great question. Probably when the three of us got drunk at Nico’s place and started having a dance party in their basement. Before that, it was when we all picked up pancakes at a local diner at 3am and blasted music on the way back home. We put all of the windows down even though it was thirty degrees outside. Nico and Corey had a habit of making my life feel like a movie.

“Okay, okay,” I said, keeping my voice low. “But you guys have to help me cause I have absolutely *no* idea what I’m doing right now.”

Nico and Corey high fived each other, giggling like idiots.

“Hell fuckin yeah we’ll teach you, our little apprentice,” Corey pulled on my beanie. I could practically see the glow of their smile through their mask.

-

“Alright, so, here’s the rundown,” Nico started.

We had drifted down the aisles, talking aimlessly so we wouldn't draw any attention to ourselves.

"If an item is smaller than your phone, grab it and put it in the same hand as your phone. Put the item in your pocket, along with your phone. Then take just your phone back out while the item stays in your pocket. Easy."

I watched Nico as they explained, their shaky hands moving a mile a minute. I could listen to Nico talk for hours. The range of emotions they could go through in just five minutes was unhuman. There was something about watching their face and the way it shifted and changed with every word that was just so mesmerizing.

Corey cut in.

"If it's bigger than your phone or might take up too much room in your pockets, slide it into the waistband of your pants like I did with the Band-Aids."

Nico nodded. "I did that all the time when I used athletic tape for binding before my top surgery. I don't want to spend money when I don't need to," they huffed.

I thought back to when we went to Nico's house and had gotten drunk. Their house was really nice. It didn't seem like they needed to be shoplifting, especially since they could afford top surgery and weekly testosterone shots. If I had to guess, I would say Nico was middle to high class since both of their parents had good paying jobs, one of them being a surgeon, and they never seemed to worry about much financially.

Nico began cracking their knuckles. They knew I hated when people did that.

"So... why exactly do you shoplift?" I had asked.

Nico placed a hand on their neck. "Because capitalism sucks."

I remembered rolling my eyes. "Is that it? Seems like an easy out."

Nico eyed me up. “Because being trans in a cisgender world means paying to have your body look and feel the way you want it to in ways that cis people could never understand. Because I shouldn’t have to pay for things like hormone treatment and athletic tape to bind my chest just to feel gender euphoria for once in my life.”

I felt like a complete dick. “Y-yeah, totally.”

“It’s not your fault, Beans. I wouldn’t expect cis people to get it. Like, yeah, I’m well off. I’ll admit it. But I hate that I have to conform to the rules of cisgender society in order to be seen as acceptable in my trans body. It doesn’t feel fair. You don’t have to worry about people misgendering you based on your appearance. I have to work that much harder just to feel seen.”

I tugged at my beanie and stared at my shoes. I wanted the ground to open up and swallow me.

Corey pipped up. “Being one of eight kids means feeling unseen. It means having your needs neglected. I’ve had to pay for my own things since I was thirteen. I get it though, my family is struggling. It’s not their fault. Shoplifting just came to me naturally. Also... yeah fuck capitalism,” they said with a smile.

“Yeah, that makes sense. I guess I just didn’t really fully get it before,” I said.

We meandered down the aisles, eyeing up things to grab. I started to feel better about the whole thing. They both had genuine reasons for shoplifting. It wasn’t just something they did for fun.

“Socks are a good place to hide things too,” Nico grabbed the eye drops they were looking for and reached down to their shoe. They pretended like they were tying their laces and slipped the eyedrops into their sock.

“Damn,” I whispered.

“The thrill is like nothing I’ve ever experienced,” Corey said. “Your heart just goes a mile a minute. When you pull through with it and succeed, it’s amazing.”

I shook my head. “How do you make it past the scanners at the doors?”

Corey pulled a box of cake mix off a shelf, looked at it, and put it back.

“You have to check for scanners on the items. The more you do it, the more you start to make note of what’s easy to get away with and what isn’t.” Corey started walking backwards as Nico and I walked normally in front of them.

“It’s a lot easier to do it in the fall and winter when you have big jackets with lots of pockets,” Nico said as they opened their jacket up to show hidden pockets on the inside. “Works like a charm.”

I nodded, my mind racing. There was really an art to this. I felt like a child.

“Do you want to be more nonchalant or do you want to grab your things and get out as quick as possible?” I asked.

Corey thought about it and looked at Nico.

“Probably both? It depends on the situation. Right now, we’re fine being slow because we don’t want to draw attention to ourselves and Target’s huge. You just have to make sure to keep an eye out and to block whoever is taking something from the view of others.”

“Gotcha, yeah, that checks out. Damn... you guys know a *lot*.”

Nico scratched their head, suddenly shy.

“I guess it sounds kinda bad when you say it out loud, but it’s just become really normal for us. It’s kind of fun, you know? Stealing from under these big corporations’ noses. Power to the people, yeah?” they said as they shoved me. I hoped they couldn’t see my smile from my eyes.

We made our way to the drinks. I had been wanting a lemonade for a while.

“Lemonades on the house!” I said as I grabbed some from the fridge.

Nico and Corey laughed as I passed them each a drink.

“Maybe some Diet Pepsi too, you know, for later,” Nico said as they reached out for a drink.

Looking back on this moment, we were so incredibly stupid for not checking our surroundings first. We were too caught up in the moment. Idiots.

I remember lifting up my sweater, shoving a couple lemonades into the waistband of my pants when I heard someone clearing their throat. I looked up to see a Target manager standing a few feet away, hands on her hips. Her dark hair was tied into a tight bun at the top of her head and she was glaring at me above her glasses.

“I - uh - ”

“What do you think you’re doing? Stealing those drinks?” The woman asked. My eyes flicked down to her nametag. Marsha.

My hands instinctively went to my pants as though to put the drinks back, like that could save me. The look on the manager’s face made me take a step back. I remember hoping that Nico’s tall figure or Corey’s protective energy could save me. I turned my head in the slightest to look at them, the fear in both of their eyes shining like light from identical lighthouses.

“I’m going to have to – ” the manager started. Before she could even finish her sentence, I saw Nico and Corey grab each other’s hands and speed off through the aisles, their feet slapping against the linoleum.

“G-guys?” I sputtered out.

My mouth lay open in shock. I could see Nico holding on to their beanie in one hand while they gripped Corey's in the other, Corey's long orange hair flying wildly behind them as they made their quick escape out of the store.

I couldn't fucking believe it. They had ditched me.

The manager shook her head and sighed. "Sorry kid, but I can't just let you go."

My legs felt like Jell-O. I couldn't even imagine running away at this point. I could not believe they left me like that.

Fuck capitalism until you get caught, right?

-

That was a year ago. I had gotten off with a warning and was told to never come to that Target again. Nico and Corey had tried reaching out to me every single day for a couple weeks since they ditched me, but their actions left a sour taste in my mouth. I was a fucking freshman and they left me standing in the middle of Target with stolen merchandise in every pocket.

I had been touched by their reasonings for stealing. I believed them. I believed Nico and the pain of transitioning and having to exist in a world that doesn't want you to be seen. I believed Corey and being one of eight kids and having to fend for yourself.

At the end of the day, they did it for fun. They did it for the thrill. They used their sob stories as excuses to make themselves feel better. Their apologies were half-hearted at best. They sent me things like "You should have run with us, why didn't you?" and "We had to do that, Beans. You wouldn't get it."

I felt sick to my stomach for a week straight after that. They didn't even drive me home. They completely left me deserted. I had to catch a grimy bus, tears seeping into my mask.

It really made me think: did I even know these people?

After all, things had felt a bit desperate. I had no friends. They seemed cool enough. They were everything I wanted. They were older, they smoked weed, they wore thrifted clothes, they had cars, they were socially conscious, they were queer. They were straight out of a movie.

A fucked up movie where they take advantage of the younger character and leave them in the dirt.

The pandemic had come and gone and I was a sophomore now. Nico and Corey had graduated and moved away. I had never seen them again. I had new, genuine friends. The kind of friends who would wait for you to tie your shoe if you were walking somewhere. The kind of friends who made you feel alive but also asked about your day and would sit in silence with you while you cried. That's how I knew they were good.

I would never forget Nico and Corey - they truly did show me what it was like to be alive, sometimes in the worst ways.

Some people aren't meant to be in your life for long.