

The Little Things

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‘So much choice,’ I mumble, reaching for a bag of Red Frogs and sneaking them into my backpack alongside the bag of Doritos and the bottle of Sprite. Keeping my face hidden from the shop cameras, I stroll up to the store entrance, feigning interest in a rack of birthday cards. I look up to make sure no one is watching, feeling butterflies in my stomach as usual, feeling the same rush of adrenaline. I slip through the doors and turn right, sprinting away. I keep running for the next block, then turn in behind a storage building and take a seat. I remove my sunnies and hoodie, placing the items into my backpack. I sit like this for a few minutes, letting my breathing return to normal.

It doesn't get any easier.

When I'm calm, I stand, preparing myself for another run. ‘Now to do it all again,’ I say, sighing.

Today has to be special.

Flipping up my hoody, I creep back onto the street, checking for patrol cars or shop workers. All clear, looks as though I'm safe. Being in a city makes it easier to disappear in the crowd, where I can walk down the sidewalk without drawing suspicious glances. I've found the trick to shoplifting is to take small bits and pieces from many stores, where the owners don't pursue too seriously. Another important lesson I discovered is not to take items protected by the alarms; I'm not a fan of running 'til I throw up.

I walk through the doors of my next target, scoping the place out. No alarms, no one checking bags, and only two busy employees; perfect. I keep my head down and walk along the narrow aisles of the shop, feeling as though I have a superpower and can turn invisible whenever I want. Adults ignore me in public, or they look down at me and smile absently. Either way, they pay no attention to me. I browse the store, grabbing various items from the shelves then putting them back, and sometimes slipping them into my bag.

I keep at this for a while, progressing from the fresh produce aisle to the cleaning supply aisle. I stop in the meat aisle for a while, appearing to read the different cuts of meat as I listened to a couple have an amusing argument about what they each wanted for dinner. The man wants chicken parmigiana with mash potato and the woman would like something called shredded beef ragu pasta. The argument continues until the man concedes and grabs a large pack of chuck steak, placing it in the trolley. Then, when his partner looks away, he

grabs a small pack of chicken breasts and places it under the steak. He sees me watching and nods.

‘Shhh,’ he says with a grin. ‘Can’t always let her win.’

I smile at him and nod, before heading to the personal hygiene aisle. By this time, I have gathered a new toothbrush and some more chips. I walk towards the next aisle but stop as something catches my eye. I hesitate, debating whether to do it. Taking small bits of food and cheap items is one thing but stealing something like this could land me in big trouble. I grab the item off the shelf and move to the corner of the store, where I rearrange my bag, adding it to the other stuff. Slung the bag over my shoulder, I walk towards the exit and see the couple at the checkout, distracting one of the workers.

As I’m about to step onto the street, two police officers appear from around the corner. I hesitate for a second, panicking. Is it me they’re after? The officers look at me.

Oh no, that’s it, I’m done for.

I get ready to run, but their gazes move on as they pass the store. I let loose a sigh of relief, my pent-up adrenalin dissipating. Before I can leave the store, the shop worker who was serving the couple yells at me, seeing me leave without paying. I turn, long enough to see the employee running at me, but he is too late as I’m already bolting out of the store.

I sprint, right into the path of the two police officers.

‘Get that kid,’ the shop worker yells, pointing. I’m trapped between him and the police officers.

‘Hold it there, kid,’ the younger officer says.

By now, I’ve turned and am racing for the shop employee. His eyes widen, not expecting this kind of behaviour. I run towards him, ducking under his arm as he reaches to grab me. Hearing footsteps behind me, I glance back to see the two officers in hot pursuit, with the shop worker standing at the entrance of the store with his hands on his hips, staring after me. I turn into a side street, then into another small street that backs onto a full carpark.

Diving in behind one of the cars parked in the centre, I spin to see the younger officer at the entrance to the carpark, with the older officer coming around the second corner. He has his hands on his head and is panting, the running taking its toll. I catch my breath as the younger officer checks behind cars, while his partner sits down at one of the benches along the sidewalk.

Preparing to run again, I observe the officer getting closer. He is two cars away, off to my left. I move around the car and crouch behind the back wheel, ready to dash away. His

boots crunch against the bitumen. I get a whiff of his aftershave. The muscles in my legs shaking with adrenaline, but he keeps walking.

I'm safe.

'Over there,' the older officer shouts. He'd moved around and seen me.

I stand, and my bag catches underneath the car. My ears ring from a piercing screech. I look at the young officer and we make eye contact over the cars as I try to unhook my bag. When it comes free, I race off down a long street with nowhere to hide. The young officer makes ground fast, catching up to me in a matter of seconds. He seizes my arm.

'Calm down,' he says, panting with a smile, 'you made that a bit difficult, didn't you buddy?'

'I'm sorry,' I say, steeling myself for what's to come.

'That's okay—'

He breaks off with a groan, as my heel hits him in the gut. He releases my arm, and I don't waste any time making my getaway.

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I walk for an hour, further from home than usual. My street is more like an ally, one that backs onto an industrial factory that hasn't been used in years. My home is a small four-person tent that I stole about a year ago when I was first introduced to the homeless life. I never wanted to steal, would have much preferred to get a job, but stores won't accept a twelve-year-old boy in tattered clothing, and if I ever told them why I needed employment, child services would sweep in and take me. And I can't let that happen. I open the door to my tent, which is hidden behind a large garbage container, under the protection of the factory walls.

In the tent are my seven-year-old sister, Hanna, and four-year-old brother, George. Since Mum and Dad died last year, I've looked after them, not wanting our little family to be split even further.

'Patty,' they cry in unison, excited for my return.

'Hi, you little ratbags,' I say, zipping up the tent door and pulling off my bag. 'Have you been good today?'

'Yes, we have,' says Hanna.

I reach into my backpack and pull out the chips, lollies, and Sprite. Their faces light up with joy. 'That's good to hear.'

I place the food and drink in the middle of the tent and reach back into my bag, pulling out a small remote-controlled car and handing it to George.

'Happy Birthday,' I say.

Attached below is the random poem that we did in class:

Page Juaning high
Cows curtains playfully
Studying space projector
Naïve pork chop