

real

I am supposed to write a story that starts with two people approaching a store. So here: two people are walking toward a store. I am one of them. This is not some cute postmodern exercise. This is actually me, Jeremy, walking toward the store right now and writing in my notebook as I do it. I know this is supposed to be fiction. Sorry.

Courtney is with me. She says hi. She will be annoyed if you think I am making her up. She also wants me to tell you that we used to date, and that my random emotional unavailability once frustrated her so much that she went home and cut herself, three times across the back of her calf with an X-Acto knife. My belief is that this detail will make her seem more made-up, not less. She wants you to appreciate that I caused her to cut herself and later broke up with her, but she is still the first one I call when I need someone to approach a store with me.

The store is the CVS in Harvard Square. It's a Saturday afternoon in March and cold enough that Courtney says I had better be done with the backstory by the time we get there.

When I called Courtney, my idea was that we could stage some screwball conversation in front of a clerk. I could come up like we were old friends and she could act like she had no idea who I was and then it could come out that she had an identical twin who died spelunking six months earlier. Courtney said this was stupid and rejected all my other fake conversation ideas as "even stupider than the spelunking dead twin."

Then I asked if she would steal something for my story and she said, "Sure." We are now right outside the store. Courtney takes off her gloves, all ready to steal for the sake of short short fiction.

She holds the door, and I walk inside, still writing. Courtney knows I have never stolen anything from a store in my life, and she regards this as a character flaw. She once stole a toy pirate when we were at Target because she knew it would scandalize me.

Courtney takes a basket. I have already told her what to steal. I came here yesterday and decided on a four-pack of Nutter Butter cookies. I chose them because they are cheap and small, and I thought “Nutter Butters” would sound good in a story.

The Nutter Butters are near the end of Aisle 4. She walks straight to them. I am not even halfway up the aisle when she takes a four-pack off the shelf and looks back at me as if to say “Steal this, right?” She drops it in the basket, then adds a box of Cheez-Its. She continues on to the back of the store and turns left.

Next I see her standing by the Easter candy in Aisle 3. She waves a box of yellow peeps in my direction and puts it in the basket before walking away again. She does the same thing in Aisle 2 with a purple hair clip, and in Aisle 1 with an package of assorted fruit-flavored chapsticks. I have told her that I will cover the expenses for this story, including but not limited to bail and fines.

She thinks there is zero chance of getting caught because we are white and grown up and look like busy professionals. Her theory is that she could put a candy bar in her purse right in front of the cashier so long as she looked appropriately entitled. If asked, she would politely clarify “I don’t pay for Snickers,” and that would be it.

She is now all the way on the other side of the store, looking at office supplies. She gestures for me to come over. She has maybe six things in the basket, none of which are the Nutter Butters.

She leans into my arm and looks down at the notebook. “How’s the story?”

“Can we go now?” I write.

“Yes!” Courtney writes, before handing back the pen. She leans harder into my side for a couple more seconds and then turns and walks to the front of the store.

I am pretty sure she just slipped something into my coat pocket. I am not going to check. I do not want to know for sure. Indeed, I would have plausible deniability for the whole thing, if not for how I am writing this.

When I join her in line, she is looking even more pleased with herself than when she won our bet about whether “capade” as in “Ice Capades” was a real word. She wants to see what I am writing now, but I won’t let her. I think I am supposed to know that the Nutter Butters are in my pocket. I think she expects that my prim squeamishness will overwhelm me by the time we get to the front of the line, and I will take them out and pay for them. Then she can spend the rest of the story mocking my provincial law-abiding ways.

The cashier has a nametag so worn I can only make out a K, D, and Y. She asks if we have a CVS card. I keep expecting Courtney to make some comment to her about spelunking or being an identical twin but she doesn’t. We pay with my credit card.

We walk out of CVS and then more briskly down the street. I am not really expecting some voice behind me to cry “Stop, thief!” but I still feel a rush like I am stepping away from big danger. When we are past the bookstore, Courtney looks back. Then she turns and starts laughing and grabs my arm. She takes the Nutter Butters from my pocket. I think she expects me at least to play like I’m angry with her.

Instead I say, “Nice twist. That was good for the story.”

“I know. But it would be an even better story if you had gotten busted.”

“That would make it a long story,” I say, “and this is short short fiction.”

I brought along my camera so I would have proof. I hold out the camera with one hand and take our picture. The result is the faces of two people in their early thirties, cheeks pressed together, smiles wide with invincible glee, me holding up a black notebook, her holding up a Nutter Butter.