

The Store I

Moving through the aisles of the store, she picks things up in her hands, inspects them closely, and then puts them back down again. Sometimes she carries things that she wants in her arms. She knows that she won't buy them, but she enjoys having them for a short while, the feeling of potential, the limbo between wanting and owning, and the look of recognition on peoples faces when they see the things she's selected. When she is ready to give them up, she waits for a moment when no one is watching, and puts them back down in different locations, randomly rearranging the store's display: a butcher knife with the coffee makers, bath towels with the baking dishes, a silk blouse with the power drills.

Sometimes she hides things in unusual locations: a crystal vase inside a washing machine, a serving spoon in a microwave, shoes in a laundry basket, socks behind the fluffy cushions of a tidily made display bed. It feels good to leave the store knowing that if she returns for these things later, they will be there waiting for her, as if they belong to her in some way, as if they want to be her's. It's her preferred method of reserving items because it bypasses shop staff, avoiding questions, suspicion, or disappointment from the other side of the counter. If the objects are never found, she gets the satisfaction of owning them in the sense that they will never belong to someone else. When she returns to a hiding spot to find an object has been discovered and returned to its place on the shelf, where it will sit, waiting to be bought by someone, she can't help but feel disappointed. She suspects that someone had been watching her when she put it there and it makes her feel uneasy. It's not that she's afraid of being caught, because she isn't technically stealing, but she doesn't like the idea of being watched doing something that feels so personal, or the idea of someone meddling with her arrangements.

Today she has something very specific in mind. She needs to buy new glasses for a cocktail that she wants to serve this evening at a party. The drink requires a specific type of glass, otherwise it can't be called by its name; as if the taste won't be the same if the shape of the glass isn't correct, as if two glasses containing the same ingredients won't taste the same. That's why stores like this exist, so packed with things, because every recipe, every occasion, every setting, calls for a specific object. She thinks about her kitchen as a collection of implements that were bought for a specific purpose, but will probably only be used once. These things clutter the kitchen, remaining present even when they aren't being used. They haunt her because she knows she couldn't afford them, and it's only when she finally gets rid of them, that she realizes that they were never worth their cost.

Shelf after shelf, she arranges different glasses in groups, turning them upside down, imagining how they would look in her cupboards at home. She puts her hand inside of one and runs her fingers along the inner wall to see how it would feel to wash them in the sink. She tests the thickness and strength of the glass and decides that it is strong enough to withstand being dried and polished. The thought of a glass breaking while her hand is inside it makes her stomach turn, but not because of the damage it would do to her physically. It's the idea of something containing a part of her body shattering that particularly disturbs her. She has imagined it so often that she has resigned herself to the idea that it will one day happen.

Looking at the price, she calculates the total cost of of set she needs for that evening. It is more than she wants to spend, because she doesn't want to spend anything. They aren't exactly how she had imagined them, but she probably won't find anything better. Picking them up off the shelf, she balances them in her arms. Halfway through counting, she realizes that there aren't enough. In this moment of realization, three glasses fall out of her hands, crashing onto the faux-marble floor. The sound echoes throughout the large empty space of the department store. She looks up as the sound bounces off the aluminium-siding roof and deflects off the steel beams holding it up. She hadn't noticed how unfinished the roof of the building was compared to its warmly-lit floor.

Coming out of this moment, she walks away to find a shopping cart. When she returns, someone in a store uniform is cleaning up the broken glass, reassuring her that it's nothing to worry about. Now there are only half the glasses she needs for her party that evening so she decides to buy an assortment of glasses, four from each of the six different sets the store has to offer. There are advantages to having a variety of designs rather than a group of identical ones. If one gets broken at least she will know which one is gone.

The Store II

She walks through the room. The coffee tables are at knee height and she carefully navigates around them. They are loaded with platters full of small identical pieces of food, piles of paper napkins, and small, white plates. She can't see what's at her feet because she is carrying a large tray of glasses. She is fixated on keeping them balanced and cannot look down at her feet. Her wrists ache a bit and her ankles almost wobble in her shoes. Her skirt is cut in a way that makes her take small steps. She doesn't mind because she knows that it is perfectly tailored, that it fits her the way it was intended to. She prefers it to the elastic skirts that most women wear. They always look too small, too tight, and too short as they climb up their legs with every step they take over the course of the day. Secure in the knowledge that her skirt was made to fit her specifically, her nylons catch on the corner of the table as she brushes past. Three glasses tip off the tray and crash onto the glass tabletop. The sound barely has time to resonate before the guests cheer loudly and help her clean up the liquid pooled around the plates of food. The mood seems to have lifted and they take off their shoes and start to dance with glasses in their hands. One drops onto the carpet, but doesn't make a sound as the vessel and its contents are absorbed by the soft surface.

Later in the night, people are smoking cigarettes out on the balcony, others are sprawled out on the carpeted stairs and the couches. The music is turned down and someone accidentally drops a glass off the side of the eighth floor balcony. A distant sound is heard as it meets the pavement below. Luckily no one is sitting at the park bench surrounded by a row of terracotta flowerpots filled with red geraniums. She takes the elevator to the ground floor, collects the pieces, and puts them in the ashtray next to the bench. She hears the sound of laughter shifting volume as people open and close the sliding glass doors above.

The next day, she returns to the store with the remaining glasses. There are fifteen left of the twenty-four after the breakages and the one set of four that she is keeping for herself. She walks up to the counter with a big plastic bag containing five boxes of glasses. They are carefully washed and re-wrapped in their tissue paper. The receipt is carefully taped to the side of the bag. Her stomach feels queasy from the thought of the exchange. She thinks about the security guards that are probably watching her on the surveillance cameras. She wonders if they recognize her as the woman who broke the glasses the day before, and if they have seen her as she prowls through the store on her regular visits. She hopes that the cashier won't acknowledge her as a regular visitor or as someone who makes frequent returns. At the counter, she delivers her story about bringing home a selection of glasses to try them out before deciding to keep one of the six sets that she bought the previous day. The cashier says that she understands the need to see things at home in their proper setting in order to make a decision and that she does the same thing herself occasionally. The beauty and thrill of this type of exchange is the possibility of maintaining total anonymity, and total innocence, this is her power as a customer.