

Character

Narrator (M/F) - Young man or woman

Scene 1

Narrator: It all started when I was a freshman in high school. I was thirteen, one of the younger ones in my class. So, I couldn't get a job, aside from a babysitter or something, but what thirteen-year-old boy knows how to change a diaper? Or like, make milk? Or whatever babies eat. Squash?

My parents gave me an allowance in exchange for doing chores around the house. Five dollars a week. Five. Dollars. A week. I mean, it's better than nothing, I'm grateful, don't get me wrong. It's just that, one trip to Mickey D's and I'm bankrupt, you feel?

So instead of blowing my measly chunks of change right away, I got a jar, and started saving up all the fives. Smart, I know. Even back then, I was sharper than most kids. I'm sorry, I'm getting off track. Anyway, because I was saving my money, I never had much to spend when my friends would ask me to go to the arcade, or the movie theatre, or to buy drugs. That last one was a joke. But you get what I mean. So, I'd usually go along just to observe, but it's not much fun to just sit back and watch your boys shooting at a bunch of space aliens when you can't even help them. Like, what am I, a chaperone? And then they'd take all the tickets they won up to the prize counter and load up on bouncy balls and ring pops, and maybe they'd give me like, one ring pop out of pity, and it didn't even taste that good because I didn't win it for myself.

This one time, we went to the mall. It's a little after noon, we're at the food court, and I'm hungry. I mean, *really* hungry. Now, a \$6 soft pretzel is one buck over my budget, and an \$11 burrito bowl is totally out of the question, even if I skipped the guacamole. My friends tell me to wait on the pretzel line with them anyway. And as we get closer to the counter, I see it. A silver tray, piled high with pretzel bites. The ones with cinnamon sugar. Free samples. I grab one, walk away, real casual. I'm thinking nothing of it. That is, until I pass the Chinese food place. More samples. Sesame chicken? Sign me up. I'm more of a steak guy, but hey, the chicken's free. I keep going. Free garlic knot at the pizza place. Tiny little cup of iced tea from that one hipster coffee shop. So now I'm thinking...a couple laps around this food court and I could have myself a decent meal, totalling at *free* ninety-nine, baby. Heck yes. That's when I hatched it. My genius plan.

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Went home that day and dipped into my savings jar. I grab \$15, that should cover it without putting me in an irreversible amount of debt. Walk down to the Halloween store that pops up seasonally in the neighbourhood. Lucky me, it's the first week of November, everything's half off. I stock up. Sunglasses, various hats, wigs, a fake moustache, a feather boa. Oh, and a nun costume, but that one was more of an impulse buy. And so it began.

I headed back to the mall, *JanSport* stuffed with costume pieces, adrenaline running through my veins like never before. And my plan springs into action. I'm a man with a mission, circling this food court like a vulture zeroing in on its prey, grabbing one free

sample after another. First round done, I pop into the nearest bathroom, throw on my first costume, grab a peek in the mirror. I'm unrecognisable. But just in case, I decide to change my personality along with my look. My mom sent me to acting camp when I was eight, and I was never, like, *great*, but I was the understudy for Jojo in *Seussical*, so take that how you will. I walk up to the pretzel place first, grab myself another sample, and say, "Fank you so much! Cinnamon, how delicious!" in a flawless British accent. I read the cashier's face. She suspects nothing.

I repeat this process at every food place, and change costumes again. Now, I'm a German man with a moustache. Like a cool, curly moustache, not like a Hitler moustache. "Zank you for zee garlic knot, have a vunderful day." Boom, costume change. I'm a wholesome, somewhat sassy little woman from the South. "Ya'll really did the damn thang with this iced tea. Almost as good as the sweet tea my mama use'ta make!" I'm morphing in and out of these personas like some kind of chameleon. The employees are completely oblivious. Everything is working seamlessly in my favour.

It's time for my final costume. A baseball cap, tiny glasses, and a charming, boyish tee shirt. I'm playing a wee toddler with a heavy lisp, goofy with a bit of a mischievous side. I walk up to the pretzel counter on my knees so I look super short, like I'm literally four years old. "Can I get a pretzel pretty please, miss? My mommy said I can have a delicious pretzel if I be a good boy." Cashier forks over the food, but this time she's looking kind of concerned. I'm barely ten steps away before I hear, "Excuse me, young man." It's mall security. Apparently, it's like, not okay for a toddler to be waddling around unattended. I make an absolute mad dash for it. Ran all the way out of the mall and down the street, back to my house.

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Now, it's not a crime to take advantage of a free sample system. At least, not that I know of. But I was terrified that they had my face...faces?...on camera, and that if I ever showed up at the mall again, I'd be arrested. Didn't go back to that mall for three years. I got over the fear, eventually, and in my senior year, I braved the trip once more. I actually ended up getting a part time job there. I work at the pretzel place. And as far as I know, I haven't been recognised as the guy who pulled off the most intense free sample heist in history, all those years ago...I don't think they'll ever find out...