

A CHEAP LAUGH FOR THE INTERNET

By Bradley Walton

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CHARACTERS – A 40-something VAGRANT and a college STUDENT. The characters can be male or female. Both are dressed for winter. The STUDENT's clothing is clean and fashionable. The VAGRANT's clothing is dirty and mismatched.

PROPERTIES – The STUDENT has a cell phone and money, both of which can be mimed if performed in forensics competition.

STAGING – The scene is set in the grocery section of a large discount department store. A bare stage is fine.

AT RISE: *The VAGRANT appears to be putting something in his coat. The STUDENT is taking the VAGRANT's picture with a cell phone.*

VAGRANT: What'd you just do?

STUDENT: Nothing.

VAGRANT: Uh-uh. I saw you. You took my picture.

STUDENT: So what?

VAGRANT: Why?

STUDENT: I don't know. I just did.

VAGRANT: You wouldn't have done it without a reason.

STUDENT: I have a cell phone camera and it was an impulse. Is that reason enough?

VAGRANT: No, it isn't.

STUDENT: Look, I'm going now, okay?

VAGRANT: You're not going anywhere.

STUDENT: You don't tell me what to do.

VAGRANT: Give me the phone.

STUDENT: I am not giving you my phone.

VAGRANT: Give me the phone.

STUDENT: I just told you—no.

VAGRANT: How far are you willing to go with this?

STUDENT: Are you threatening me? We're in a public store! There are people around! And security cameras!

VAGRANT: It's five minutes after two in the morning. There's no customers here. And the overnight crew is on their lunch break. There's a cashier at the front of the store, which maybe leaves a manager who's probably sitting in his office. And the cameras don't actually do anything. They're just for show so you think you're being watched.

STUDENT: How do you know?

VAGRANT: How do you think I know? Because I spend a lot of time here. It's warmer than it is outside.

STUDENT: What? Are you homeless?

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VAGRANT: No, I dress like this for the other Halloween in February! Of course I'm homeless!

STUDENT: All right, I'm sorry, okay?

VAGRANT: It's not okay.

STUDENT: They let you hang out in here?

VAGRANT: The people who work here, they don't make much money.

They look at me and they see themselves if they catch a really bad break. As long as I don't draw any excessive attention to myself, they don't say anything if I hang out in here on really cold nights. The managers are the ones I gotta watch out for. They'll throw me out because they think my being in the store upsets the customers. Now give me your phone.

STUDENT: What are you going to do with it?

VAGRANT: Does it have Internet?

STUDENT: Yeah.

VAGRANT: Then I'm gonna break it.

STUDENT: I paid two hundred dollars for this thing! I'm not going to let you break it!

VAGRANT: You paid for it, or your parents did?

STUDENT: It's my phone!

VAGRANT: Your parents, right. Now hand it over.

STUDENT: I'll delete the picture!

VAGRANT: How will I know that you actually did it?

STUDENT: I'll let you watch. Here, look. This is the picture.

VAGRANT: Lovely.

STUDENT: I'm deleting it. See?

VAGRANT: Yeah.

STUDENT: Okay. There. It's gone. We're done. Can I go now?

VAGRANT: Let me see the picture that came before that.

STUDENT: That was the only one I took of you.

VAGRANT: Then you shouldn't mind showing me the picture that came before it.

STUDENT: I'm not showing you my pictures!

VAGRANT: Picture! Now!

STUDENT: Okay. Here.

VAGRANT: That's what I thought. You got a picture of me putting that bag of almonds in my pocket. What were you going to do with that? Were you going to share it with the manager? Get me thrown in jail for shoplifting?

STUDENT: You'd have heat and food.

VAGRANT: Listen, kid. I've been in jail and you wouldn't be doing me any favors by sending me back.

STUDENT: I wasn't going to show it to the manager, okay? I wasn't going to show it to anybody in the store.

VAGRANT: Then what were you going to do with it?

STUDENT: Nothing.

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VAGRANT: Don't lie to me.

STUDENT: All right... I was going to post it online.

VAGRANT: Online?

STUDENT: Yeah.

VAGRANT: Where online do you post pictures of homeless people shoplifting food?

STUDENT: It's a website that has pictures of people in this store.

VAGRANT: Pictures of people shoplifting stuff?

STUDENT: No... people that look... y'know... sort of out of the ordinary.

VAGRANT: Elaborate. Please.

STUDENT: It's people that look like...

VAGRANT: Like what?

STUDENT: Well, they're...

VAGRANT: Spit it out, already!

STUDENT: Backwoods trailer park rejects, okay? Weird-looking people!

Funny looking people! People you look at and you laugh at them.

VAGRANT: While inside you're secretly glad that you're not them?

STUDENT: I don't know... I...

VAGRANT: Kid, I expect you to be glad that you're not me. I don't have a problem with that.

STUDENT: Okay. Uh...

VAGRANT: What I do have a problem with is the idea of a website where people can go and post photos of other people that they think are beneath them for the sake of a cheap laugh. And worse, that anybody would actually post pictures there. That's low. That's really low.

STUDENT: I'm sorry.

VAGRANT: And not only would you post a picture of me there, you'd post a picture of me shoplifting food. Not a TV or a computer or some kind of luxury item. Food. So I don't starve to death. That picture you took, it's like, "Hey, everybody! Look at this guy! He's dirty and his clothes don't match, but that's not the half of it! He has to steal food! 'Cause the only thing funnier than a dirty hobo in a discount department store is a hungry dirty hobo in a discount department store!" That's classy, kid. Real classy.

STUDENT: I'm sorry. I'm deleting the picture. See? *(Holds up phone.)*

VAGRANT: How many pictures have you posted on that website?

STUDENT: None. This would've been the first.

VAGRANT: How many?!?

STUDENT: Four.

VAGRANT: Show me.

STUDENT: What?

VAGRANT: You have your phone. You have your wireless Internet. Show me.

STUDENT: Why?

VAGRANT: Show me.

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STUDENT: Okay. (*Tinkers with phone.*) Here, give me a second. (*Holds up phone.*) This one.

VAGRANT: (*Not liking what he sees.*) All right. What else?

STUDENT: (*Holds up phone again.*) This.

VAGRANT: Uh-huh. Keep going.

STUDENT: (*Holds up phone again.*) This one.

VAGRANT: And the last?

STUDENT: (*Holds up phone again.*) This.

VAGRANT: (*With a slight growl.*) You got a thing for homeless people shoplifting?

STUDENT: It's just what presented itself.

VAGRANT: Okay. You may not believe this, but just because you think somebody dresses funny or looks funny or whatever doesn't automatically give you the heavenly mandate to take pictures and stick them on the Internet. Just because you can act like a jerk doesn't mean that you should. In the second place, not everybody can afford to buy healthy food or nice clothes and not everybody has a good metabolism. Third, not everybody cares what you think, so making yourself the judge of people who shop here doesn't actually give you godlike stature in the universe.

STUDENT: Yeah, well... obviously, you care what I think if you're this worked up.

VAGRANT: I'm not worked up because I care what you think of me. I'm worked up because of the basic disrespect you're showing to me and those people you photographed. That last one in your bunch... the old woman in the camo jacket with the pink scarf and the blue sweatpants who's stuffing the cereal bars under her coat? I knew her. She froze to death two months ago because the shelter was full and I heard the manager threw her out of here because he saw a picture of her shoplifting on the Internet!

STUDENT: Are you trying to lay a guilt trip on me?

VAGRANT: I'm trying to get it through your skull that actions have consequences.

STUDENT: It's not my fault that she was stealing! Not only that, I could've turned her in and I didn't!

VAGRANT: If you'd turned her in, you'd have at least been acting on some kind of moral conviction. Instead you let it go so you could laugh at her. You didn't do her a favor. You put her in a position that killed her and you insulted her to top it off!

STUDENT: I didn't kill her.

VAGRANT: Not directly, but you did something disrespectful that led to her death.

STUDENT: If she hadn't been stealing, I probably wouldn't have snapped the picture!

VAGRANT: If she hadn't been hungry, she wouldn't have been stealing. If she hadn't lost her job, she wouldn't have been hungry. If her ex-

husband had paid child support, maybe she'd have had enough money left over each month to have some savings. If her daughter hadn't been killed in a car crash, maybe she could've helped her mom out. Bad stuff happens to people. Sometimes it's just random. Sometimes it's other people being irresponsible. What you did was worse than that. What you did was mean.

STUDENT: Mean? After all that, you're going to fault me for being... mean?

VAGRANT: You were having a cheap laugh at somebody else's expense. Mocking them. You didn't care about that woman. Your intentions were malicious. Us stealing food... that's not malicious. That's us trying to survive. No matter how low you think that we are, I got news for you... you're lower.

STUDENT: Yeah. Okay. Sorry. You don't have to be so...

VAGRANT: Actually, I do. I don't have much pride left, but it's all I got.

STUDENT: Here, let me give you a couple of bucks. Please.

VAGRANT: I don't want to soil my hands with your money.

STUDENT: I'm sorry, okay? What I did was wrong. I was wrong. But you stealing food is wrong, too.

VAGRANT: What? I shamed you so now you're gonna turn me in to the manager so you can feel good about yourself again?

STUDENT: You shamed me, so I'd like to buy those almonds for you so you don't have to steal them. And yeah, the up side for me is that maybe I get to walk out of here not feeling like quite so much of a scum ball. If you don't want to take my money, then let me at least pay for 'em at the checkout, okay?

VAGRANT: Cash register's at the front of the store. I can't go up to the front with you, 'cause then they're gonna expect me to leave. *(Beat.)* Not unless you want to put me up for the night at your place.

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