

## How to build and break a family in *Shoplifters* (2018)

“Whatever’s in a store doesn’t belong to anyone yet.” And thus, what’s the harm stealing something for good use?

Or so goes the reasoning of Osamu Shibata, the patriarch figure of the Shibata family. At least, they have all the requisite parts of a family. There’s the wife, Nobuyo (Ando Sakura), the younger sister Aki (Matsuoka Mayu) and the moody son Shota (Jyo Kairi), all living under the cluttered shack of the frail grandmother Hatsue (Kiki Kirin). It’s a cobbled-together heap of an existence, but it’s a good one, roughly bound up in the necessities of stolen instant ramen and shampoo. When Osamu and Shota happen across a little girl named Juri freezing outside, it’s only reasonable that they take her in for a night, and a return attempt gets naturally aborted when Nobuyo overhears Juri’s abusive family fighting without regard for their missing daughter.

If blood relation is removed from the traditional equation of family, what ties are we left with? Director Kore-eda Hirokazu displays an achingly tender understanding of the emotional transactions of family life: Grandmother saves the best bite of mochi for Aki; Nobuyo pilfers a tie pin for Shota’s curio collection; and Shota makes sure to steal a bag of Juri’s favorite gluten cakes. Despite the harsh living conditions, each mundane exchange is imbued with a desire for love. But had Kore-eda just stopped here, *Shoplifters* (2018) would have merely been a pleasant, if somewhat trite, meditation on a family persevering through poverty.

Yet try as we may to escape into the warmth of found family, *Shoplifters* thrums with a measured loneliness. “Maybe it’s stronger when you choose [your parents] yourself,” muses Nobuyo when Juri chooses not to return to her biological mother. In

contrast, Jyo's Shota is an inscrutable tangle of a boy, a confident partner to Osamu in a routine convenience store heist, and then a troubled elder when he realizes his ultimate legacy with Juri is teaching her to shoplift. While it'd be easy for Shota to completely embody the role of Osamu's son, he refuses to call him "dad" – a simple but uncanny distancing.

There's no heavy-handed moralistic judgement here; rather than agonize over choice, *Shoplifters* becomes about the necessity of belief. Shota's never belonged to anyone beyond the Shibata family, or so Osamu tells him. Nobuya reasons that keeping Juri isn't kidnapping, so long as they're not extorting a ransom. The Shibatas are not mean-spirited at all; they genuinely believe that their decisions are in everyone's best interest, and you root and empathize for them because otherwise, their entire fringe existence would come crumbling down. In striving to remain undefined in society, the Shibata family becomes a case of mutually assured destruction, only without the clear-eyed realization of wartime. Meanwhile, in the background, child welfare services file Juri's missing person report two months late. As the daily vignettes pile on top of one another, as winter shifts into summer and back into winter, the fraught strands of the Shibata "family" get further untangled into compromising, devastating truths. But Kore-hada never devalues any relationship, because the feelings were always real.

If the first 90 minutes of *Shoplifters* are a collage of the expansive definition of family, the last 30 minutes are a tacit, but tender crumpling of the collage itself. In a world made smaller by poverty and happenstance, Kore-hada carefully illustrates a haunting question: To whom do we belong to, and how might we totally fall apart?

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