

## The Balancing Act

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Nico perused the merchandise of Thrift Town with an invigorated swagger. Today was that special day. It was his special day. His wardrobe was not complete and it would never be complete without this single item. Nico had plenty of shoes— Guilford's, Sperry's, Chukka boots— that was not an issue. Nico's issue was his lack of a mark of masculinity in an increasingly “gender is a spectrum” world. He was searching for the quintessential leather jacket. He refused to go to Gucci or Eddie Bauer. He salivated over the worn elbows and perfect patina of a secondhand jacket; patience was not his virtue and he could not toil over breaking in the leather. It was to be worn now, and look good now.

The colors of autumn, winter, and summer were bundled together on the aisles of Thrift Town. For most shoppers, it was distracting. But for Nico, his mind was tightly leashed to the rustic smell of leather; he combed the aisles for the jacket. As much as he drifted towards the row of burnt umber flannels, his own intuition reeled him back to reality. As he zigzagged through aisles and people, he remembered a conversation with his coworker Rachel. His footsteps became more sporadic and his resoluteness began to crumble like the sunbaked rubber trim of his shoes.

“I'm getting a little tired of your sexist attitude Nico,” said Rachel glaringly.

“Oh c'mon Rach. Please don't tell me ‘She wears the pants in the relationship’ offends you.”

“My name is Rachel to you. And it does. By saying that phrase, you insinuate that males are and should be the dominant figure in a relationship.”

“What! No, no. Pants are freeing and represent independence. Whoever wears them in a relationship is liberated from restricted motion— they can move freely. Pants don't signify the patriarchy. Both men *and* women can wear them,” Nico refuted.

“Oh. That's interesting.”

“Do you see where I'm coming from?”

“I just find it funny that you think gender is a binary. It's actually a spectrum, and your rigid constructions of gender really contribute to this backwards society we live in.”

“... Are you serious right now.”

This conversation hung in Nico's mind, polluting his conscious with words like “androgynous” and “gender identity”. He was raised with principles of equality but not with these cloudy identifiers. Yet this encounter was not unexpected. Nico knew the risks when he started working at Fair Trade USA a few months ago. Fair Trade USA was a fine institution that aimed to “channel more of the opportunities and benefits of globalization to the underprivileged farming and working families who today are being left behind.” Nico had practically memorized this mission statement that was plastered along the walls of the workplace. Truth be told, the people were nice enough. Smiles were not hard to come by next to the employee fridge stocked with free Kombucha Wonder Drinks or next to the hand crank coffee grinder. But there was an intoxicating air of self-righteousness that floated between open cubicles. It was as if everyone thought they were changing the world. It was as if a box of Nobel Peace Prizes was just waiting for one more Fair Trade certification to burst open and send glory to all.

Nico brushed this memory aside as he plunged back into Thrift Town and the materializing row of leather jackets before him. He had just arrived at the gates of his transformative destination. Petty thoughts and controversy would not interfere with his quest for the perfect leather jacket. The stuffed aisles slowly returned to focus around him. The low hum of the ceiling fan whirled and whirled like a metronome of mutual understanding. Nico was at peace. A wave of relief rushed over his mind to quench the embers of bitterness.

Cowhide. Bison. Deerskin. Motocross. Bomber. The options and styles and types and colors were endless, at least on paper. Nico had done his preliminary research. He read the “Lengthy Buying Guide” to leather jackets on Reddit. He browsed through GQ’s recommendations and saw Diesel’s offerings. Yet all these words and images only jumbled his thoughts. Nico was obsessed with the idea of the leather jacket but did not anticipate the intricacies involved with actually choosing one. He always did his research. But those Google searches were useless now that Nico was brushing his hand over the worn leather jackets in front of him. He decided then and there that he would forget his preconceived notions and take home only what spoke to him. A visceral connection was the only connection that would do.

The fantasies were running wild. Nico could imagine slipping on the fitted shoulders of the smooth jacket and cocooning himself in a bison of warmth. His overly PC coworkers would take one glance at the stunning leather jacket and the man underneath and simply shiver. They were staring at a bulging wall of masculinity. In fact, they weren’t just staring. They were *admiring*. They were witnessing a David and Goliath story in the making. The coworkers were the oppressive and boastful Goliath. Nico was David. And his leather jacket was the stone hurled at light speed toward its delicate destination.

For all he knew, time had passed. Passerby’s had passed. Cashiers in the distance had cashed. It was all irrelevant. Nico had specifically assigned “LEATHER JACKET QUEST” as an “All day event” in his Google Calendar. There was not a worry on this fine afternoon. Nico’s quest was nearing completion. A pile of rejected jackets lay crumpled in a heap. In Nico’s left hand, he grasped the representation he was seeking. The bison leather was a dark brown, the shade of a black coffee. The creased leather emanated authenticity like the palm of an old man. Nico knew it had a story, but only with time could he fully understand its complexities. There was no name stitched into the inside liner and no relics of a past owner. The only identifier was a price sticker on the left breast. It seemed almost sacrilegious to banish such a rugged jacket to the aisles of a thrift shop. Not a soul would drop off their 20-year-old son at an adoption agency. Nico acknowledged these issues and accepted their presence in his subconscious. As he thought before, it would take time to fully understand the intricacies of the jacket. Just like it took time to master the oboe.

Nico walked to the cashier with invigorated swagger. He was a changed man, no doubt about it. He observed the “NO RETURNS” sign pasted in aggressive font and chuckled. Returns are for the insecure, he thought. Nico would never part ways with this leather jacket.

“You find what you’re looking for today?” asked the cashier.

“Absolutely. This is exactly what I’m looking for,” responded Nico.

“Oh, hey. I remember this jacket. The woman who brought it in shaved half of her hair and totally rocked it.”

“Nice. Her boyfriend must’ve been quite a style icon.”

“Um.. Yea. Sure.”

Nico was grooving. To commemorate this moment, he put in his earbuds and listened to nature noises as he rode the train home. Specifically, he listened to the ocean tides rising and falling in a metronome of tranquility. The random collision of water against water, biosphere against biosphere. Nico peered down at his new leather jacket and felt the tingles of achievement mingling at the base of his spine. One more thing was needed. The white price tag sticker was still attached to the left breast. He carefully reached over and peeled it off.

Under that price tag was a sequined heart the diameter of a Coors beer can. The light through the dirty window of the train twinkled off the permanent purple sequins. Nico had reached the intersection of masculinity and femininity. The tranquil sounds of the tides turned to the unrelenting cacophony of crashing waves in an instant.