

Mick Stern

More than One Condition

The other day I went into a drugstore to pick up some dandruff shampoo. Though my hair dwindles, my dandruff output remains steady. The remaining hairs must be working at it harder and harder. Anyway, I guess I was more than usually absent-minded that day, because I simply put the bottle of shampoo into my pocket. Of course, a sales clerk happened to be watching at the time, so I immediately jerked the bottle out of my pocket with a silly, embarrassed grin. Then I saw to my surprise that no sales clerk was watching me. In fact, nobody was watching me at all. What I had taken for a squad of undercover cops was really a rack of sunglasses on sale. In a flash, I realized what had happened. I had just experienced an episode of kleptomania followed by a paranoid hallucination.

It was a textbook case.

In the next store, a supermarket, I had another attack of paranoid kleptomania. I stuck a package of pork chops under my coat, then immediately felt intense remorse and fear of arrest. I felt compelled to return the item immediately, but before I could put the chops back, an employee in white apron appeared behind me. I darted into the next aisle, but it was crowded with shoppers. And the next aisle also. I paced around nervously, too scared to let anybody see me get rid of my stolen goods. Finally I went next door to a bookstore, and there, in the darkest and most deserted corner—the poetry section—I slipped the package of pork chops in between *The Wasteland* and the poems of Emily Dickinson, figuring that if anybody smelled anything, they'd blame it on T.S. Eliot. On my way out, I stole a copy of *Oliver Twist*, which I left in a liquor store between the gin and vermouth. The owner of the liquor store was a suspicious type. I couldn't steal with him watching me all the time. I could only keep reaching for bottles and then pulling my hand back suddenly. I finally decided to buy a bottle of wine but he wouldn't sell it to me.

It was slowly becoming apparent that a man with my particular compulsions shouldn't be hanging around shopping centers. I decided to visit a friend. As we drank some iced tea and sat around chatting, I surreptitiously picked up little objects off his coffee table and tucked them in my shirt. Every time he got up to answer the phone or

fetch more coffee, I would replace the objects. When he discovered that his glass of iced tea was missing, I got down on hands and knees and pretended to find it under the couch. He was a little upset. "What the hell are you doing?" he bellowed. "What is this, some kind of stupid game?"

"Forgive me," I said, as pathetically as I could. "I've become a kleptomaniac."

He could only gape at me in surprise and shock.

"I'm guilty and I'm tormented with remorse," I said. I pulled a small clock and a couple of coasters out of my pocket and put them back on the coffee table where they belonged. "You see," I said, "I'm both kleptomaniac and paranoid."

He thought about his for a moment.

"Hell," he said, "you're even more messed up than I thought."

It was a logical inference, but I didn't like his tone of voice. "It's better than being an arsonist and a nymphomaniac," I said.

"You keep my mother out of this," he said.

And that little sentence, trivial in itself, set me to telling him about my own parents. My father was a policeman and my mother was a shoplifter. They met in Woolworth's, at the notions counter. Mom had the notion to steal something and Dad had the notion to apprehend someone. And that's what they did. He courted her all the way to court. He told her, "If you don't marry me I'll testify against you in court and you'll get ninety days." "Some choice," she said. "Ninety days or life." And so my mother gave up a promising career in the glamorous field of price-tag switching in order to get married.

At this point in my reminiscences my friend gently took me by the scruff of the neck and told me to go home and try to stay out of trouble. Trouble is the only thing that you always get when you ask for it. I thought to myself, "OK, I won't bother anybody. I'll just go home and steal to my heart's content." Then it occurred to me that you can't steal your own stuff. You can do anything you want with your own stuff *except* steal it. Which goes to show that ownership has its limits. We tend to think that the rich can do whatever they please, but there's one thing they cannot do: they can't steal their own stuff. However, they can hire other people to steal from them. In fact, they can generally count on the regular staff to do it without being asked. Poor people don't have old, faithful servants to rob them; they have to depend on complete strangers.

Right now I'm sitting in my living room, overcome with kleptomaniacal urges, so I decide to find out whether or not I can steal from myself. So I start lifting objects from my living room and sticking them in my pocket. But I don't really enjoy this activity very much. For a thief, it's like masturbating. The moves are the same, but there's no relationship there. Finally, I decide to fake it. I call the police station and report a burglary. A policeman comes to my door.

"What'd you lose?" he says.

I name several items, such as a walkman, a gold neck chain, and an expensive watch—objects which are even now bulging in my pockets.

"See anybody lurking around here?" says the cop, flipping open his notebook.

I say yes and proceed to describe myself – my height, my age, my distinguishing features. The policeman gives me hard looks as he jots down the information. Finally he closes the notebook and growls from the bottom of his throat, suggesting that he has trouble expressing his anger without the aid of a nightstick. As soon as the door slams, I feel something funny in my hand. I realize that I'm holding the policeman's hat. I don't even remember stealing it, but of course, guilt and paranoia set in immediately, so I run out the door and yell, "Hey officer, you forgot your hat!" But he already drove off. Shit, now I'm in real trouble. What do you do with a hot cop cap? Bury it? Burn it? Suppose he comes back for it? Maybe I should hide it in the bushes and call the police station in the guise of an anonymous tipster and tell them where to find it. But they might trace my fingerprints or something. I only have one thing going for me in this whole situation. I'm white. Everything else fairly sucks.

So here I am standing in front of my door holding the policeman's hat and wondering what to do with it, when a little boy shatters the quiet with a terrible scream. He yells, "Waaa, he took my bicycle!" That same moment an older boy, a teenager, is riding past me on a bicycle. I immediately put the cap on my head and yell, "Stop in the name of the law!" Then I sprint after the bicycle. The teenager speeds up, but I'm right on top of him in a moment. I push him off the bicycle, he takes a few bounces on the pavement, and then lands face down in the middle of the road, leaving the bicycle sprawled out behind him. I pick it up, ascertain that it is not damaged, and wheel it over to the little boy, who laughs with delight and claps his hands together gleefully. "You dumb son of a bitch," he says, "that wasn't my bicycle, it belonged to that guy!"

“But– but why didn’t he tell me that himself?” I manage to stammer.

“Because he’s a deaf -mute, that’s why,” the little boy says.

I shake my head in disbelief. “No. No. No way.”

“He is so. He lost his hearing in the same accident that killed his family. Their house just collapsed all of a sudden and he was trapped in the rubble for days. He had to eat his own dog to survive. See, he didn’t lose his hearing *physically*, he got what they call traumatic hearing loss. It was caused by listening to the pathetic whimpering of the dog as he stabbed it to death with a fork. It was one of those little dessert forks. I don’t know what people see in them. I don’t understand the big attraction of napkin rings either.”

By this time, I wasn’t really listening. “Kid,” I said, “how would you like to own an angry policeman’s hat and a crippled deaf-mute’s bicycle?”

“No thanks.”

“Don’t say ‘no’ so fast. Let me make you an offer. Suppose, just to sweeten the deal, I promise not to twist your arm halfway up your back.”

“That’s what you call a sweet deal, huh? They must call you Sugar Daddy.”

“Sometimes candy man.”

“Honey Bunch.”

“Jelly Baby.”

“Tootsie Roll,” he suggested.

“OK, OK, that’s enough repartee. Look, you arrogant tadpole, I want you to remove this haberdashery and machinery from the vicinity of my responsibility instantaneously.”

It was either my impressive choice of words or the arm lock around his windpipe that finally persuaded him to relieve me of the incriminating items. Instantly, I felt a blessed relief. My urge to steal just stole away. All the shimmering delusions of guilt, remorse, and paranoia just vanished and I experienced the heady sensation of being a normal person. I was overwhelmed by normal thoughts, normal moods, and normal opinions. First I voted for a politician who promised to cut my taxes. Then I took all the money I saved from lower taxes and spent it on lottery tickets so the government would have something in its budget. After all, the government has to make money somehow, or else it’ll become just another unprofitable service like the solar system.

As I was grappling with the problems of being normal, my thoughts were rudely interrupted by the sound of a police siren. A cop car stopped in front of me and a policeman without a hat came out and put handcuffs on me. In the back seat, I saw the damaged deaf-mute whose bicycle I had taken earlier. Only he seemed to have regained some of his sensory aptitudes. He was crying and pointing to me, saying, "That's the one, that's the one who tried to kill me."

"You're in big trouble now," said the officer.

"I didn't try to kill him," I said, "but honestly, I really don't know why I didn't. It was just a moment of weakness, your majesty." I knew he was only a cop, not a king, but it doesn't hurt to flatter people a little in these circumstances.

"Your majesty, huh?" said the cop. "I don't like that kind of sarcasm. You're under arrest for insulting an officer of the law. In addition, I'm charging you with theft, assault, attempted murder, and several counts of shoplifting."

"I'm absolutely normal in all respects!"

"OK, then you're also under arrest for obstruction of government and undermining the constitution. You voted Republican, didn't you?"

I'm awaiting trial now, so I have to be careful and avoid stealing things. So I'm stealing *words* instead. Every single sentence that I've written here is stolen; this story is actually *The Snows of Kilimanjaro* by Ernest Hemingway, but I've rearranged the words very carefully so that nobody will ever be able to tell.

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