

Crimes of Passion

I was not born a thief. Sure, in junior high I pocketed the occasional bottle of polish from the drugstore, but I didn't really want it, didn't even paint my nails. Shoplifting was just a bonding ritual. The same way you had to sip some beer or take off a joint whether you wanted to or not, you had to do something if everyone else was doing it. It wasn't optional. You know what I mean.

For some girls, shoplifting was fun but not for me. I was always terrified of getting caught. I never did it alone and never took things just because I wanted them. I knew not paying was *wrong*, but I was not really *bad*. My stealing was social, not antisocial. I could still see myself as a good person on the right side of a fine but clear line.

By high school, a spool of thread or card of buttons would sometimes slip into my purse while the clerk was cutting fabric. I figured if I was buying something, taking something of lesser value was only fair. I knew kids who did much worse. I was still an okay person better than most.

Later, moving out on my own was a financial shock. I barely had enough money for food; it seemed crazy to waste it on things like toilet paper, especially when rolls were available for free in public restrooms, and you could also unscrew a light bulb if you needed one. Burn? Drugs had samples of shampoo sitting right out on the counter, and down the street in the lounge at Saks the tampon machine had no lock.

It wasn't like I was stealing for kicks or to get frivolous luxuries. It was a matter of survival. I swiped the shakers from the Chicken Pie Shop because I needed salt. It was my Jean Valjean period. Not exactly bread for a starving child, but I was eighteen. Cut me some slack.

Around that time I wiggled my way into a performing arts college. My major was acting, but as a scholarship student, I had to take a technical minor. I chose costume design, and as a plus, got keys to the laundry room. Students were not supposed to use the costume shop washers for their personal laundry, but everyone ignored the sign. I wasn't the only one to take advantage of the free machines.

Sometimes there was even a line. But one Sunday I had the place all to myself.

I? just put in a load and had time to kill, so I started thumbing through some costumes hanging on a repair rack. And that? where I found it. Crammed in between a torn rehearsal skirt and some ratty tights was the most fantastic lace blouse. It had this Victorian lady meets flower child look, and was way too delicate for a costume. It wouldn? last ten minutes on stage, so why was it left there?

I slid it off the padded hanger and spread it carefully on the folding table for close examination. The crazy patchwork of lace could have been spun by spiders on acid. It was so light I could read my palm through it. Mismatched pearl buttons winked from the bodice. Of course I tried it on.

And oh my God! The blouse was made for me, like it completed me in a way. That? how it felt. Fate had brought us together, and I was so meant to have it.

I loved this blouse with a jealous passion I had never felt for a piece of clothing. Unlike the jerk who had abandoned it, I could see its true value. I had to rescue it from certain death at the hands of careless actresses. So when my laundry was done I hid the blouse in my duffle and hurried home. I did not feel guilty; I felt elated.

The lace blouse and I might have lived happily ever after if I had just kept my cool. But no, I couldn? wait to show it off. So that very night I put on the blouse with my tightest bell bottoms and wore it to a cast party. Most of the school was there. It never crossed my mind that this was incredibly stupid until the head of the costume shop backed me into a corner.

“Nice chemise, she said, smiling.

“Thanks, I mumbled.

“It? always been one of my favorites.”

Shit. My vision tunneled.

“A designer friend at the L.A. Opera made it for my birthday. He pieced it all by hand. Notice it has no side seams.”

“I noticed. Mouth dry; palms wet.

“As you know, constructing a garment without seams is very difficult, not to mention collecting all the antique lace. This rosette here, her finger poked at my heart, ?ctually came from my grandmother? wedding gown.”

“I? really, really sorry. The lace was burning a pattern into my chest. ? had no idea it was yours. I? give it back to you right now, but I don? have anything else to wear.

“No, you keep it. It looks better on you. She turned and walked away.

I almost died right there. Instead, I ran home and threw up. After a sleepless night, I was ready to take the damn thing back. No kidding. It was wrapped up and ready to go.

Then I thought, ?hat the hell, she *did* say I should keep it. So I did. But now the spell had been shattered. The lace blouse turned against me, sending nasty vibes through the closet door. I never wore it again, but the bitter taste of that night still burned my throat. I couldn? liberate a single thing for over two years.

I finally sold the blouse. Buffalo? Breath only gave me five bucks for it because it had a hole. What? I needed the money for a move to New York?here I was more broke than ever.

So when a theater friend invited a bunch of us to go with him to Massachusetts to open up his summer home for the season, I jumped at the chance to see some serious old money up close. This trip was a real eye-opener. Our host? extended family owned an entire lake with a dozen individual lodges dotting the banks. They always took rowing skiffs to visit each other and drove antique roadsters for trips to town. Everything at the lake was frozen in a time warp. I still have dreams about that place.

The rambling, main residence was dark wood, inside and out, and crammed with memorabilia and antiques. There was a Steinway in the living room and cabinets full of china that probably came over on the Mayflower. I stayed in the guest house, which was an exact miniature of the main house. I could have lived there forever. Unfortunately, we stayed only a week.

The first night in my little house I was looking for some matches. And, just thrown in a junk drawer with sticky rubber bands and bits of string, I found a fantastic, silver man-in-the-moon tea ball. It was large and deeply embossed with the classic man-in-the-moon face. The top of his head had a little hinged door that opened and clicked shut. It was a real antique.

I was at my tea drinking peak and had three tea balls at home, but nothing like this. I couldn't imagine why such a valuable tea ball was in a junk drawer until I noticed it was missing its chain, which was also in the drawer and would just take a twist with pliers to reattach.

I washed the ball with soap, but could only make a start on the years of tarnish. I used it for my tea all week, spooning it out of my cup like a boiled egg. I was about to ask our host if I could *please* have it, when I overheard him say no to his own girlfriend's request. She only wanted an old horse halter.

"Mother always knows if something goes missing, he said.

If Mother was keeping track of the man-in-the-moon tea ball, why was it in the guest house junk drawer? I almost took it. I really wanted to. But I flashed on that blouse. I mean, what if he came to my apartment one day and saw his mother's antique there? So, as we were leaving, I carried the ball and chain into the main house.

"It just needs a little fixing. I handed it to my friend.

"Right. He said and tossed it into another drawer like a worthless piece of trash.

To this day, I wish I had just stolen it.