

LIGHT FINGERS

by Linda Boroff

Like gymnastics, shoplifting is a discipline of youth. Now I am not referring to kleptomania, that naughtiness of dithering grannies. I mean true boosting, as a serious vocation. As an art.

Current criminological theory views shoplifting either as a sexual aberration or—among youth especially—as an early indication of sociopathy, a prelude to riskier, more remunerative crime. But to Jeffrey Holsclaw, shoplifting was an end in itself. He was born to boost, and in him, the art of boosting reached its apex.

Physically, Jeffrey could have been bred for his calling, a specific shoplifting mutation. His arms were long, his hands huge, with spatulate, magnetic fingers and the soft, unerring touch of a poolshark. His eyes were large, for ingenuousness, and wide-set, for greater peripheral vision. His demeanor was bland. Most significant of all, he was unobtrusive, a gangly kid among kids, never even suspected.

Jeffrey could think on his feet, and where others hesitated he grew bolder. The more secret mirrors and cameras the better. Floorwalkers were his best—oblivious—audience. He could deliver a detailed, holy-cow description of a culprit to a security guard while caressing the missing merchandise in his pocket. He was a magician.

Jeffrey sat beside me in physiology class at Santa Monica High School, junior year. We shared responsibility for the dissection, initially of an earthworm and later, of a bullfrog. Jeffrey and I had taken to each other instantly, with the unspoken bonding that

sometimes occurs between two loners, the affinity of outcasts. We christened the earthworm Eurydice and the bullfrog Bacchus.

I was, and am, a rumpish, atrophic female, with a Dr. Demento nimbus of ochre hair and the fuddled, myopic gaze of a small subterranean animal. In high school, I carried a briefcase, the unmistakable hallmark of the clod, and a clod I was. Ungainly, provokable, I batted at the wisecracks and taunts of my peers as at a swarm of wasps. I left a trail of derisive laughter in my wake, not at all mitigated by my grades, which were high. What did I care? One ill-advised, briefcase-swinging charge at a tormentor had earned me forever the nickname Ferdinand the Bull, soon shortened to Ferd the Nerd.

I see myself at sixteen in a characteristic posture: planted like a stump, left arm akimbo, leading with my jaw. My right arm is extended and at the end of it is my fist, middle finger protruding. I am standing in the driveway of my house on California Street, watching my father leave my mother and me for the last time.

He sits, jowly, unrepentant and misunderstood in his new sideburns, at the wheel of his Chrysler, curtained with suits and shirts. My mother, anaesthetized with Valium, sways beside me, blinking in the sunrise. The elephantine car hums to life, coughs loose its emergency brake, and backs hesitantly out of the driveway. A quick shift and it is away, galloping ponderously over the speed bumps of the cul-de-sac into its future. The morning rings with sudden silence.

Jeffrey Holsclaw lived with his parents off Pico Boulevard in a respectable lower-middle-class neighborhood of black homeowners. The Holsclaws were the only white family on the block. Their two-story house of mottled gray stucco sat behind an empty yellow cottage, in a nest of weeds and garbage populated by rodents sleek and bold. The neighbors complained frequently to the city about the mess, but the neighbors being black and peaceful, their complaints

were prioritized and the situation persisted.

To say that Rae and Jerry Holsclaw were outrageous drunks does not, perhaps, convey the extent of their pathology. Each and every day beginning at about noon, they drank vodka "martinis" until they achieved coma, usually at around 7 p.m. This coma, however, was intermittent, punctuated by mania, and during these episodes, they were capable of any act within the human repertoire. Neither worked, Rae being the beneficiary of a small trust, administered and pillaged by a local lawyer, himself alcoholic.

Amidst this hell of infinite and unpredictable permutation lived Jeffrey, angry, green-eyed, and helpless. He kept a bedroll in the yellow cottage, which had once been a rental but was now empty for obvious reasons. Nights, he would escape to the cottage to lie alone on the floor listening to the brawls, battling his impulses to intervene. It was Jeffrey's profound hope that one happy night, his parents would murder one another.

Jeffrey shoplifted as a member of a theft ring run by one Lewis Cooper, nominally a bail bondsman, actually a fence. I met Lewis Cooper one evening shortly after my father's abdication. Alienated, hostile, I had begun to accompany Jeffrey on his boosts, as he termed his shoplifting sorties. This particular boost had netted him four Limoges vases, which I subsequently discovered in my briefcase. The lifting of the vases had taken place during the purchase of a miniature porcelain shoe for his "grandmother's collection." If either of Jeffrey's parents ever had a mother, I was sure she would have been more pleasurably occupied in dismembering Beowulf than in pottering over tiny pink sabots.

We encountered Lewis Cooper in the back room of a bar on Second Avenue and Broadway. The clientele of the bar consisted that night of one whore, of the platinum wig and dewlaps variety. The bartender gave me a dismal premonition that Jeffrey's father might

still be alive in fifteen years.

Lewis Cooper was seated at a card table beneath a naked lightbulb, behind the slats of a backwards chair. The first thing you noticed about him was his left ear, which was missing. His arms, musclebound, protruded bulkily from a dingy white short-sleeved shirt. But for their menace, they would have resembled the clay arms on a kindergarten sculpture. When Lewis saw me he raised his eyebrows, opened a thick mouth, and touched each corner with his tongue.

"Jeez," he said.

"This is Georgette Cagney," said Jeffrey. My name was, and is, Barbara Aldrip.

"Ya cool, Georgette?" Something about me seemed to tire him out. His eyes were barely open. Through the slits between his moist lids, I glimpsed eyeballs slithering back and forth like a couple of anchovies.

"Show him." With trembling hands, I opened my briefcase to confront the accusatory stares of John, Paul, George, and Ringo before withdrawing the vases and handing them over.

"Where'd these come from?" asked Lewis Cooper, turning them over and peering at their bottoms.

"She gets half," said Jeffrey, ignoring the question. "She'd have took the fall."

"Fall," scoffed Lewis Cooper. "Kid, I check my fillings every time you leave." He reached alarmingly deep into pants as tight as sausage casing around his thighs, withdrew a money clip that was a serpent's head, and freed two twenty-dollar bills. I blinked. The

vases had cost upwards of three hundred dollars apiece. Jeffrey took the money and threw me a twenty.

"Really," I stammered, "I don't..." they both looked sharply at me, "...deserve all this," I finished lamely. They looked back to one another.

"I'll be here," said Lewis Cooper. Jeffrey took my arm and we left the room. In the bar, the whore had found herself a john of sorts, who looked about ninety. Both of his hands were down her wrinkled cleavage and she was staring morosely at an ancient piece of cardboard with pouches of Bromo Seltzer tacked to it.

"Bye," said Jeffrey. The bartender looked up, then he looked at me. Then he looked back at the bar.

The night air outside couldn't have been sweeter if it had come wafting from Tara. There was a soft, dry breeze and we continued along Broadway toward the grassy cliffs that looked down on the ocean.

"What do you want to do now?" I said finally.

"I don't know. Will your old lady give you shit if I come home with you for a while?"

"Probably," I said, "but she gives me shit for everything since my dad left. I look just like him," I added, as if that explained something.

"Last night," said Jeffrey, "they decide to have steak for dinner, right? So she gets the barbecue in from the patio and fires it up in the goddamn kitchen. So he starts trying to tell her that we're all going to croak if she doesn't get it out of the house, see he's too drunk to carry it out himself. But it doesn't make any difference because she's too drunk to understand what he's saying anyway. So

she starts giving him a ration of shit about raining on her parade, fucking up her big steak dinner and he's laying there on the couch calling her names, bitch, whore. Meanwhile, the fire burns on."

"Where were you?" Jeffrey snorted.

"I was there, unfortunately. So finally she's had enough, and she picks up the barbecue fork and starts after him with it. Well that gets him off his ass in a hell of a hurry and while they're busy chasing each other around I take out the barbecue. So then she falls and he gets the fork away from her and we get her locked in the bedroom after she'd kicked both of us in the nuts at least twice.

"So then he starts snitching her off, how she's been giving him shit all day long and she's a crazy drunk and then he gets on to how he's pretty sure I'm a queer and I tell him to shove it and then he starts coming after me and she's in the bedroom screaming that she's going to set the house on fire if we don't let her out."

Jeffrey shook his head and stopped to light a cigarette. He seemed to have finished, and in fact, most of his anecdotes petered out in just this way. So what then? Oh nothing, it went on for a few more hours and then everybody went to bed. Didn't remember a thing in the morning, same old. I had to ask anyway.

"So what then?"

"Oh nothing. I called up JoEllen," said Jeffrey offhandedly, as if that were the most natural thing in the world.

"Miss Karp?" JoEllen Karp was our physiology teacher. Although she seemed middle-aged to me at the time, she could not have been more than twenty-nine or thirty. She was renowned among the student body for her jittery nerves and looked as though she had been constructed only of bones, tendons and taut, sallow skin. The

muscles on either side of her jaw were nearly the size of walnuts from the bruxing and clenching she did even while awake, and she carried her lower jaw slightly forward, which made the tendons of her neck stand out even more. She had the round, bright eyes of a bird, and her scapulae were prominent beneath her blouse like featherless, folded wings. Miss Karp used to call me Barbie, which made me feel like one of those hippos named Fifi or Gigi, but it beat Ferd. In fact, I had liked Miss Karp, until that moment.

"Why Miss Karp?"

"She told me to, if things got really bad." As far as I was concerned, things were always really bad.

"So how many times have you called her?"

"I don't know."

"Well just roughly."

"I don't know. Lay off."

"So did she get your parents squared away?" Jeffrey made a face.

"Fuck no. She got me the hell out of there."

"To where?"

"Nowhere."

"Jeffrey, when you leave one place, you have to go to another. You always have to be somewhere."

"Okay, we went to her place."

"And then what?" He did not respond.

"You stayed the night?" A realization was dawning on me. "With Miss Karp?"

"Barbara," Jeffrey stopped walking and faced me. "Cool it." I gasped and stared, and Jeffrey stared back at me defiantly.

"You guys," was all I could say, "are going to get into so much trouble."

"How?" said Jeffrey. "You going to tell somebody?" My chin trembled with anguish and betrayal and something more: suddenly I felt like the only creature in the world without a sex life. Even newts, even frogs made love. But I, like poor hermaphroditic Eurydice, began and ended with myself. I alone was all the lover I was ever destined to embrace.

"Those rules," said Jeffrey, "are for people who can afford them. People like me and JoEllen have to take love where we find it. We can't worry about rules." I recalled Miss Karp checking skirt lengths one morning, the girls in our class kneeling before her like acolytes, hemlines brushing the floor. She sent three of them home.

"Does Miss Karp know you boost?"

"Course not, said Jeffrey, oddly sheepish. "I've never had the nerve to tell her."

"Oh, I don't think she'd be too shocked."

"I guess I'll go home after all," said Jeffrey, turning away. Like Lear, I couldn't resist demolishing what I had already damaged.

"Don't feel bad, Jeffrey" I hooted after him. "I work hard for my

grades too." He didn't turn around.

And so two painful weeks passed in which my world narrowed to myself; my isolation became complete. I trudged around school in a gothic stupor and exchanged hardly a word with Jeffrey, sullen and deft at my side in physiology lab. Before us, pinioned Bacchus gleamed saffron and pearly, and we dissected away at him in grim, precise unison. I avoided Miss Karp, and she, doubtless knowing the cat was out of the bag, avoided me too.

On the home front, my mother had found herself a job as a ward clerk at Santa Monica Hospital working the three-to-eleven shift. To compensate me for the loss of her prickly companionship, she stocked the house with moon pies, TV dinners, and Fritos. I gained four pounds. Every other evening, my father made his obligatory phone call promptly at 7:30, asking the same halting questions, receiving the same guttural, stilted replies. I was okay, he was okay.

One night, however, the telephone rang twice, and the second call was from Jeffrey. He was at a phone booth in West Los Angeles. Parked out of sight behind him were two new imported bicycles. He needed me to come by and ride one to Lewis Cooper and pronto. He had forgotten to steal locks for them.

"Jeffrey, how'd you get two bicycles out of the store?"

"After I stole the first one I went back in so they wouldn't suspect anything. And they didn't, so I took another one."

"Jeffrey," I said, "I don't know how to ride a bicycle."

"How'd that happen?"

"My father tried to teach me but I kept falling off. Now it's too late."

"Too late is the best time to start," said Jeffrey, and hung up the phone.

Shaking and giggling, I changed into pants and caught the Wilshire Boulevard bus, feeling like a spy out to retrieve the drop. I put on dark glasses in case I was recognized. When I got off the bus, Jeffrey was waiting for me in jeans and a green T-shirt, a sweat band around his head. I could have eaten him up alive.

"I figure," said Jeffrey, "the side streets are safest. For you, I mean." The traffic on Wilshire Boulevard was a brilliant rolling bank of red and white lights as far as the eye could see.

"But how about for you?" He shrugged.

"I like traffic," he said. "Makes it easy to disappear."

"Then we'll take Wilshire," I said joyously, not caring if I died. I tossed my head back and breathed deeply of the unburned hydrocarbons as if they were Arabian jasmine.

"Here, take this then," said Jeffrey, producing a bicycle from behind a car rental sign. It was a splendid magnesium-frame bicycle, light as a puff; a silver skeleton with a seat like a greyhound's muzzle. "Now," said Jeffrey, "you throw your leg over the bar, put your feet on the pedals and go like hell. As long as you're moving you won't fall off."

"Okay," I cried.

"Hold on," he said, reining me in. "We'll walk them across the street and then get going. Don't look back. Look straight ahead." We crossed breathlessly like two bombers caught in a searchlight. "Go," he shouted.

I hoisted my leg over the saddle and encountered the firm midway pedal and stood down on it. The bicycle shot forward and I wobbled, but the other pedal came up smoothly under my foot, engaged it. I pushed back and hung on shakily, and up came the other pedal and yet again the other. I sat on the hard wedge of seat and pumped away, eyes wide, and my legs began to churn and the wind gusted into my face: I was riding. I was flying. Cars careened past like beasts running alongside me in a stampede. In my peripheral vision, buses loomed and retreated. I was invulnerable, invisible, immortal, a speeding wraith riding a sliver of light into the ether.

When we reached Second Avenue, Jeffrey spun his bike to a stop and I fell off into his arms, tangled in the pedals, the wire wheels. I was euphoric, whooping and laughing.

"Go on home," said Jeffrey. "Ride it home. It's a gift."

"No," I said, staggering, my knuckles white on the handlebars.

"Get on and ride, goddammit. It's yours." I searched his remote eyes.

"What if my mother finds it?"

"That's your problem." He remounted his bike and vanished suddenly into the dark. Alone, I picked up the bicycle, which seemed to have lost its magic. It was an alien object now, stiff and unwieldy. Stolen. Tentatively, I rode it home, stashing it under a tarpaulin in the garage. If my mother noticed it there, I never heard about it.

Jeffrey's parents lived on as public nuisances until his father entered the Veterans Hospital in West L.A. with terminal cirrhosis. According to Jeffrey, Rae then got on all her best clothes, drove down, and signed him out for one last fling. He died that night while Jeffrey slept. No model widow, Rae soon took to setting fires in Topanga Canyon and was promptly institutionalized. The day school got out,

Jeffrey and Miss Karp departed Santa Monica together. He was seventeen and she thirty-one, and to the best of my knowledge nobody ever tried to find them.

I still have the bicycle, and every morning as I back my car out, my eyes encounter it. It is a fine machine, its wheels elaborately cobwebbed, and a thick layer of the limey dust that collects in garages lies on the seat. Someday, I keep telling myself, I am going to ride it again

