

Relationships

[TWO-MINUTE MEMOIR]

London on Zero Pounds a Day

AN AMERICAN EXPAT GETS INTIMATELY (NOT TO SAY CRIMINALLY) ACQUAINTED WITH THE BRITISH AISLES. BY EMILY BOBROW

I STOLE LITTLE things now and again throughout college—sandwiches from the cafeteria, pens from the bookstore—but it wasn't until I moved to England that I began shoplifting regularly.

It started on a visit to Topshop, a temple of consumer gratification in central London. My wanderings often led me this way, and on that day the bright colors, hipster mannequins, and pulsating rhythms pulled me in.

The store seemed endless. Near a jumbled pile of bangle bracelets, there was an entire wall of socks. I let out a chuckle. It was ridiculous, this breathtaking array of socks. To my 22-year-old eyes, it all seemed obscenely bourgeois. Then I touched the elegant wool of a pair of earth-toned argyles, and suddenly I had to have them. When I saw the price, my breath caught in my throat. I wanted these socks—I even felt I deserved them—but paying 14 pounds was out of the question. Then it occurred to me: I could take them anyway.

I wondered whether I could get away with it. I looked for witnesses, then stuffed the socks in my bag. Then I grabbed a pair of multicolored knee-highs and, glancing around, put those in my bag as well. The next few minutes felt purposeful, even empowered. Drifting to another part of the store, my steps were light and unrushed. My heart raced, but I was pleased with myself for being so daring, so dangerous. I looked to see whether I had been noticed. No one seemed to care. I felt the bracing lift of adrenaline.



As I headed toward the doors, I gritted my teeth and forced an air of nonchalance, suddenly concerned about triggering the security alarm. My palms moistened as I neared the security officers. By the time I stumbled into the damp chill of the night, my heart was pounding. I thought a guard might chase me down. I moved swiftly

down Oxford Street. A few blocks later, my pulse calmed and I felt elated.

When I got home, I took out the socks and just looked at them. I felt like I'd accomplished a mission, like I'd earned something on top of my meager income. I didn't know exactly why I'd done it. Part of it was loneliness. London was a test. In

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college, it had seemed romantic to head somewhere chilly and northern, with nothing but a bag of clothing, my copy of *Zuckerman Bound*, and my aspirations.

I took a job as a temp worker at one of the BBC's fluffier magazines. But as the months wore on in the cold, damp dark of a London winter, my wide eyes discovered a soggy, modern place. Streets were dirty, food was tasteless, and everyone had asymmetrical clothing, futuristic sneakers, and spiky, self-conscious hair. I scribbled daily in my journal, dramatically underlined passages in novels, took very long walks along the Thames, and wrote elaborate letters to my friends back home. I'd pass windows glowing with candlelight, where women laughed as men poured wine. I wasn't expected anywhere.

I'd been searching for a way to possess London, a way to feel like my decision to live there had been the right choice. Stealing let me feel like I was scoring points against the big, bad city.

Soon I found myself in the Borders bookstore in central London. Crossing the threshold, I knew I'd walk out of there richer somehow, with something stuffed in my pocket, tossed in my bag, or balled up in my warm fist. Unlike the smaller bookshops further up Charing Cross Road, this grand outlet offered excess, absurd and meaningless. Who would notice that a book or two was missing? It would be a mere hiccup in the hum of this well-oiled retail machine.

I selected several magazines and a couple of books, then headed to the café upstairs and bought a coffee. This I did pay for—part of my strategy. At the table, I began reading one of the books, bristling with satisfaction. After half an hour, I casually removed the security sticker. It would look like I'd already purchased the book, I reasoned, and was removing the

unnecessary bits. A few minutes later, I removed the security stickers from everything else, then slid the pile in my bag. As I moved to the door, a queasy rush made my cheeks flush. But the guard didn't even notice. The air from the street cooled my face, and the tingling shift from paranoid vulnerability to exquisite power made the hair on my neck stand up.

My foray into petty theft was a game with its own naïve rules: I only stole from big corporations and I only took modest things. When I left Boots with a tin of lip gloss in my bag, or Woolworths with a glove filled with softening candy, my heart would quicken. Every time a security guard failed to sniff me out, I'd quiver with a sense of accomplishment. Suddenly every store promised an adventure, not just a warehouse of unaffordable goods.

Over the months, I became less careful. In August, I was in an HMV, where I'd bought a cassette. This was part of my routine: With my shopping bag, I continued to browse, as if the store was too compelling to leave right away. While scanning the racks—indifferently, as though I'd remembered some unfinished business—I collected a Lauryn Hill, a Sebadoh, and a Dylan I didn't have. I moved quietly and gracefully among the aisles, headed to a listening station and donned the enormous headphones. There, with the sexy bump of Morcheeba filling my ears, I began the thrilling ritual of unwrapping the cassettes to remove the security devices. I wanted it to seem as though I'd already bought them and was too excited to resist a peek at the liner notes. With the ease of experience, I threw away the plastic and slipped the cassettes into my bag. The music was playing so loudly that I didn't hear the security guard approach.

I had never been the kind of person

who needs to be escorted through a public space by a security officer—swiftly, uncomfortably—by my elbow. He led me to a back room, where the store's head of security interrogated me. I sat, my pathetic stolen goods on the table, answering questions with something approaching honesty. I told him, no, I didn't steal often (not true), and I never took much (true). No, I didn't know I could be shipped away (true). I worked at the BBC (true). I had taken only three other tapes (not true). I did it because, well, stealing made me feel like I was getting even (true).

In the end, they did not press charges. I guess the sight of the trembling American girl, eyes wet with remorse, was enough to beg mercy. My punishment was embarrassingly mild: I had to pay for the three tapes and pledge to return the others.

But walking away from HMV, from which I'd been officially banned, I felt lighter. Sharing my secret made me feel cleansed. The nagging suspicion of youth is that every transaction, every relationship, involves a sucker. Pocketing stray, useless bits of the city—socks, books, even cottage cheese—had let me feel the sucker was not me. Getting caught showed me who the real chump was.

When I came back the next day, I was disappointed. I entered the store feeling reborn, expecting to see my picture next to the words "Keep out!" or "Thief!" But there was no ceremony. The cashier accepted the tapes with a look of boredom and promised to pass them on to the manager. She had no way of knowing what it meant for me to be back there, tapes in hand, eager to begin my new life as an upstanding citizen. I had recognized my folly. And I was surprised by how little anyone cared.

EMILY BOBROW is based in New York and is an editor for *Economist.com*.