

The Young Shoplifters
by
Austin Mitchell

Syd Bethune was into his third day of work at the bank as a trainee customer service representative. Suddenly he looked up from his desk and immediately his hand went to his mouth as in walked Reds Bryan, his former branch manager.

He immediately spied Syd and came over.

“Syd, you are working here again? I can’t believe it. You know that I live abroad now. I just stopped by to greet some of my former colleagues, but it seems as if most of them have left the branch. But one day you can tell me how you got re-hired.”

Reds shook Syd’s shaking hand and disappeared upstairs. Syd kept a nervous eye on the stairs until he saw Reds descending them and disappeared out of the bank. He said a silent prayer that he hadn’t said anything about him.

But that Friday at about two o’clock he got an urgent call summoning him to head office.

“Mr. Bethune, you didn’t tell us that you formerly worked with us and of the circumstances why you had to leave,” Mrs. Hall, the bank’s personnel manager, stated.

“I don’t know what you are talking about. I’ve never worked with this bank before and I can prove it.”

Mrs. Hall began reading from his file.

“Do you deny it now, Mr. Bethune?”

“No, I’m sorry, it’s only because I wanted a better job, why I did it.”

“I’m really sorry, Mr. Bethune. I hope nothing like this ever happens to you again. You do understand that the bank has to protect its property and reputation. But see your services have not gone unrewarded,” she said, handing him a brown envelope.

Syd thanked her and left the bank. When he opened the letter, it gave an account of the first incident.

Syd remembered cashing those pensioners’ checks and collecting two thousand dollars for his efforts. A month later the fraud was discovered and he had to pay back the money, he had collected or face jail time. Three years later and Syd now in a low paying government job decided to try his luck again and would have gotten away with it had Reds Bryan kept his mouth shut.

Three months after being fired that first time from the bank, Syd formed a partnership with two friends, Junjo and Bankie. Bankie did hardware sales, while Junjo (like Syd) was an office clerk. To supplement their meager wages, they stole easily concealed items from all kinds of stores. Syd could remember doing these same things to make up his lunch money. He had been punished many times by his parents who thought the money, they gave him was enough.

Bankie soon got into trouble when he walked out of a pharmacy with several bottles of cologne. A guard chased and held him. He had to be rescued by the police after irate passers-by took him away from the guard and beat him. He was fined one thousand dollars or three months in prison. The syndicate didn’t think he was very smart and he was booted from the organization.

Perhaps their favorite time was when the two biggest department stores in town had their blow out sale. This normally took place between April and May, after the Christmas and Easter holidays.

This particular season, the blowout sale was in full swing when Syd weighed in, going into the store (the Monday following his latest dismissal from the bank) without a belt or tie but coming out wearing both items. The next day he was back, making off with a shirt this time. Syd decided to take it easy the next day but got away with a pair of pants and two belts that Thursday.

On Friday he managed to snatch a hat. That same evening, he met Junjo in Half Way Tree. He had been stealing things at the other giant department store.

“So how is it going, Junjo?”

“I heard that they held you last night, Syd.”

Junjo dipped into his bag and brought out a pair of Italian made shoes.

“You stole those from Mac’s store? How did you manage to beat their security system?”

Syd knew that they only had security guards inside of the stores. Their goods weren’t tagged like what he’d heard happened abroad. He prayed that such a system never reached Jamaica.

Just then Cal Morgan came up to them. He arranged deals for a cut out of the proceeds.

“I don’t rate what you guys are going on with. To me, you are petty thieves. Sid, it’s two times they fired you from the same bank. To me what they fired you for is foolishness. You can’t work at a big bank like that and let them fire you for small change,” Cal told him.

“I never knew that they would have sent me back to the same branch this last time here. The first time I didn’t know that, Phil, the guy at the pension place was so soft. He started talking even before the police arrested him. You have any bright ideas?”

“What do you suggest that we do, Cal?” Junjo asked.

Cal stretched out his hand to Junjo.

“Give me back the twenty dollars I paid the guard at Mattis’ pharmacy not to come after you for those two bottles of cologne.”

“I will give you back the money when I sell some of the things I took from Mac’s store.”

“I have a sweet deal for both of you. I know people who have money in the banks and they’re not going to miss a couple thousand dollars. We are going to draw the checks in your names and you will get thirty percent of it.”

Both Junjo and Syd looked at each other.

“When can we start?” Syd asked.

“About how much will each check be worth?” Junjo chimed in.

“They’ll be worth five thousand dollars.”

Both Junjo and Syd nearly jumped out of their seats.

Syd had been in banking too long not to know the regulations governing persons moving such large amounts of cash.

“Don’t you think they’ll call to find out who’s cashing the checks?”

Cal took out a letter and showed them.

“They’ll call this number and somebody will answer it.”

“It’s too easy, what about identity cards?” Junjo asked.

“We’re going to fix up some papers for you to get identity cards very fast. Both of you can take it easy for this weekend. If you pull this off and my friends feel that they can trust you, we’re going to let both of you in on some big deals.”

Upon Cal's departure the two friends debated whether to follow his advice or not.

"It's foolishness, Cal's talking because I wouldn't mind if the sale could last another week," Junjo opined.

"You can say that again, I haven't gotten enough things. I'm not even going to make any money on what I've taken so far. They have some expensive suits, I wish I could get two of them," Syd declared.

"How are you going to take away suits? If it was in America, it would be easier because everybody wears suits over there, but down here as they see you walking out of the store, they would hold you."

"Junjo, I will see you, don't bother let them hold you."

"Don't worry yourself, Syd. I'm too smart for that."

The two men shook hands and went their separate ways.

Syd went to work that Saturday morning and left to go shopping at midday. He actually reached Ruddy's after three o'clock. The crowd was indeed thick as persons tried to get the last of the sale. He tried on several pieces of clothes and decided to steal an overcoat, a cap and a tie by putting them on. He then decided to buy three socks, the same amount of underpants plus two short sleeve shirts. At the cashier, he turned around and saw Reds in the line behind him. As the cashier rang up his goods, he heard a store attendant say something to the guard and pointed at him.

The burly guard grabbed Syd and held him tight.

"Where are the things that you stole?"

"I'll pay for them. I forgot that I had them on," Syd said in a fake accent.

“I hope you have enough money,” the store attendant warned as Syd began taking off the stolen items.

A crowd had gathered. Some of the store attendants were trying to see if they had ever seen him before.

“That guy has been here every day since the sale started,” another store attendant declared.

“That guy’s a thief. Let’s carry him outside and beat him,” a middle-aged man threatened.

“A good-looking man like you stealing. You should be ashamed of yourself,” an old lady reprimanded him.

Just then the manager came out of his office.

“That man there stole some of our clothes,” the guard told him.

“What does he have on for us?”

The assistant pointed out the stolen items Syd still had on and some of what he had in his hands.

“Take them off. Are you sure that he didn’t steal anything else from us?”

“Take him down to the back room and search him, Justin.”

“Let them take his photograph so that we can put it up in the storefront.”

Syd looked up and saw Junjo’s picture along with those of other banned persons above the store’s entrance. So that was the reason why he was so reluctant to shop here and of course he didn’t dare go near Mac’s.

When Syd returned, the manager asked.

“You found anything else on him?”

The guard shook his head as Syd had given him a ten dollar note to keep quiet about the pair of socks he had on.

“Okay, pay your bill and get out. You’re lucky Reds begged for you.”

The manager then moved to another part of the store.

Syd found the money to pay and exited the store, his head bowed.

He was at home that Sunday morning when he was told by his landlady that he had a phone call. Syd went to answer it.

“Syd, they arrested Junjo. They caught him stealing up at Mac’s store,” Marge, Junjo’s girlfriend, stated.

“I can’t believe that Junjo’s involved in something like that, Marge. It must be a lie they are telling on him.”

“He’s at the station right now. They will give him station bail, but it’s one thousand dollars.”

“I tell you what, Marge, I have a bank manager friend who I can check. Maybe it will be Monday before that happens.”

“Then you mean that he has to spend the weekend in jail?”

“I will try and see what I can do.”

That reminded him that he was still trying to reconcile with his own girlfriend, Holly.

“It’s just one week you worked with the bank. So why did you apply for a job with them?”

“I found the bank work boring. You are just pushing paper around and checking off money. I was just trying it out as it was during my leave. I am going back to my old job because I like it more.”

“You were getting more money than you are making at that government office.”

“I talked to a couple of workers in the bank and they said they didn’t like the work. They only work there because they can’t do any better.”

Holly still wasn’t buying his explanation about his one-week stint at the bank. She still felt that he was hiding something as one week wasn’t enough time for a person to get the feel of a job, she argued.

Syd decided to call Cal that Sunday afternoon.

“Cal, what’s going on? You know that after you warned Junjo to stop what he was doing for this week-end, he went to Mac’s store. They held him; right now, he’s in jail.”

“What a foolish guy. My mind tells me to leave him out of the deal.”

“Give him a chance, Cal. He’s a good guy. I will talk to him. His girlfriend says it’s one thousand dollars to bail him.”

“That’s a lot of money. I will put it up for him, but he has to agree to take part in the scheme.”

“All right meet me in Half Way Tree, Monday morning. His girlfriend will be coming with us.”

Marge told Syd that she would phone Junjo’s employers and inform them that he couldn’t make it to work as he was ill. She was fearful that they might find out about his arrest.

Syd and Marge went with Cal to bail Junjo that Monday afternoon. The trial date was set for Tuesday of the next week. Since Junjo couldn’t afford a lawyer Cal told him that he should plead guilty and he would get off with a fine as it was a first offense.

“I don’t want to take part in what Cal is planning. I just want to stay by myself and don’t get into any more trouble,” Junjo declared as they sat in the park in Half Way Tree that evening.

“How are you going to pay your fine if they find you guilty? I’m sure that you don’t have that kind of money in your bank account.”

“I’m only going with you guys because it will help me to pay my fine.”

“Cal says we have to meet him on Wednesday to discuss the operation some more.”

“All right, I will see you then.”

The two men touched fists and then went their separate ways. That Thursday both Junjo and Syd left work midday. They were given suits to wear and briefcases to carry. Syd’s teller went around a corner and in two minutes she returned asking him how he wanted the cash. He took it in twenty-dollar notes. Syd, Junjo and Cal were laughing as they made their way from the bank.

“That was easy,” Cal said. “I told you guys that it would be no problem.”

“Yeah, a couple of that every month and I’ll be all right,” Syd stated as he slapped his briefcase against his leg.

Junjo paid his fine out of the money he got from the deal. The next day Cal phoned them to say that he had another job. This was at another bank and the strategies would be the same. So, the next Friday they turned up at the bank. Syd joined the line first. Junjo was several spaces behind him while Cal stood at the back of the banking hall watching the proceedings. Syd gave the teller his check and identification card.

“Just a minute, sir,” she said and disappeared into the bank.

Probably gone to confirm the check, he thought.

Five minutes passed and the teller didn't return. Syd counted several persons between him and Junjo. A guard came towards him, then two policemen, Syd panicked!

"Come with me, sir," a Sergeant said to him.

Syd looked around, but there was no sign of either Junjo or Cal. "What's the matter, Sarge?" he at last found the courage to ask.

"Something's not right about the check you gave the teller and we want to ask you some questions."

Syd was arrested, charged with forgery and issuing false documents. In jail, he reflected that his experience that Friday afternoon at Ruddy's should have served as a warning. Junjo's arrest should have served as a further warning. He was also worried that they would find out about the first check although he had used a different identity card for that transaction.

To Syd's surprise his lawyer was able to win a three-year suspended sentence, for him plus a hefty fine of four thousand five hundred dollars. His two brothers in the States were able to come up with that money. When Syd was released from jail, he wondered how he was going to pay his bills. His brothers told him that he was on his own. His savings couldn't go far; he couldn't fall back into stealing because of the suspended sentence. The only possibility was to get another low paying job or go back to Cal and let him arrange some deals for him. That might be a no no because of the suspended sentence hanging over his head.

He and Junjo met accidentally in Cross Roads two weeks after he came out of jail.

"I like how you behave, Junjo. Imagine you never even came to look for me when I was in jail."

“How was I to come and look for you and I heard that you squealed on me and Cal.”

“It’s a lie you’re telling, nobody didn’t tell you anything like that. You just ran left me alone in the bank. Hey, I want some of the money that you have left.”

“Want some of what? You must be mad.”

“All right, I am going to tell the police that you were involved too, and let them lock you up.”

“Go on, you are an idiot, Syd. I don’t want to have any more dealings with you because you are a traitor.”

“It’s you who are a traitor,” Syd hissed his teeth and walked away.

Marge confronted Junjo two days later.

“Junjo, I heard that your picture is on Ruddy’s store front saying that you are a thief. Syd told me about everything that you, he and Cal used to do.”

“It’s a lie he’s telling. He begged me money and because I refused, he’s telling lies on me.”

“Junjo, I can’t bother. Suppose any of my friends go to Ruddy’s store and see your picture, what do you think they are going to say?”

“Go up there and see if it’s not a lie he’s telling.”

“Syd, you have to try and make something of your life. I know that it was Cal and Junjo you were following. I only hope that you aren’t going to let them turn you fool again,” Holly said as they sat on the verandah of the house where Syd had his room.

“Junjo and I are no longer friends and Cal ran away to Montego Bay.”

“All right, so now that you don’t have a job, where are you going to get money from to buy food and pay your rent?”

“I’ve sent out some applications already.”

“Who is going to recommend you, Syd? Why don’t you fix up your parent’s shop down in Oakley district? I will help you and I’m sure if you tell your brothers, they would help you too.”

Syd looked at her before replying.

“I don’t know if I want to go back to the country and down there is slow.”

“Maybe when you lived down there it was slow but things are picking up now. Remember that the house is adjoining the shop. You can fix up one of the rooms, and live in there meanwhile you are operating the shop.”

“All right I will give it a try, but after I go down there how am I going to see you?”

“I will come to look for you and help you out with the shop.”

“I don’t even know if my brothers will help me again, maybe it’s you who has to talk to them.”

“I will talk to them, I’m sure they will listen to me.”

“I don’t know what I would do without you. Marge has left Junjo and you still stick with me.”

“I want you to turn over a new leaf, Syd.”

“Holly, I’m not going to let you down. I am going to try my best to make things work this time.” They hugged each other before pulling apart and continued talking about their future plans.

From the collection of short stories, Bring Back the Good old Days by Austin Mitchell.

Chapter 2

Syd was half asleep on his shop counter when he heard a car horn, waking him up. It was Cal! He jumped off the shop counter and greeted him.

“What happen, Cal? How did you find me up here, man?”

“Cal shut the car door and the two men shook hands.

“Marge told me where you were.”

Syd walked around the seemingly brand-new Toyota Prado.

“I like your wheels though. It looks brand new.”

“This is the latest and most expensive edition on the market.”

“You must be rolling in cash to be able to afford one of these.”

“Not exactly, but this is as a result of some wise investments.”

They had moved back to the shop and were sitting on stools.

“So how are things in this part of the world. The roads are very bad, man.”

“Yeah, I know, the trucks hardly want to bring any goods for us.”

“So where is Holly? I thought she would be down here with you.”

“Holly, no sir, I asked her for a child, but she told me that I had to marry her first. I see lots of girls around the place having babies. I just sent her away. Right now, it’s two baby mothers I have.”

“Since I went to Montego Bay I get two youths too, but it’s with one woman though.”

“Whenever she came down here, she wanted to sleep in a separate room from me. I don’t quarrel with her or anything. I just waited until I was sure she was asleep before I left to sleep with one of my women.”

Cal laughed.

“I made sure that I returned before she woke up.”

“So where is she now?”

“I heard that she got married to a little Christian guy about four months ago.”

Cal digested this last piece of news about Holly.

“So, you don’t want a drink?”

“Sid, I won’t distress you, but I have a little fridge in the car. I’ll get two malt beverages for both of us.”

He went and opened his car trunk and got the two malt beverages. When he came back Syd was serving two female customers.

After the customers left and they were having the malt beverages, Syd said.

“God knows, you must feel proud. Imagine going to a dance, stage show or party and you can treat your friends to liquor from your car trunk.”

“This is the way most of the top guys are operating these days. Some of them have sets in the back of their vehicle. They can hold a party anywhere. Car stereo contests are being kept regularly.”

Syd had heard and read about it in the papers.

“Cal, I need some help from you. I need a link, up here is too slow. I don’t want to stay in this place and rot. I want to go somewhere and make some real money.”

Cal looked around him at the dilapidated houses. Some were very much in need of a coat of paint. He noticed the overgrown hedges. It seemed that the district hadn’t yet recovered from the latest hurricane. He noticed that Syd’s shop and house were in need of repair and a coat of paint too. He couldn’t see any improvements to the buildings.

They had finished their malt beverages now. Cal went for two more.

“About how many years have you been down here, Syd?”

Syd thought for a moment.

“About four.”

“Another four, ten years and it’ll be the same. I want to get out of Oakley district, it’s the poorest part of Jamaica.”

Cal took two swallows of his drink.

“I bet you never tell me who I saw down there?”

Syd drank some more of his beverage.

“Who, Cal?”

“Think again, Syd.”

“I can’t come up with any names.”

Cal drank some more of his drink.

“Junjo, he’s so big, it’s a shame.”

“What, Junjo? It’s a lie you’re telling, Cal. Junjo living in Montego Bay. I doubt if he knows which parish it is in.”

“He’s down there all right. He’s driving a brand-new Honda Accord. He has his own business and lives in an upscale apartment.”

“I’m not calling you a liar, Cal, but I find it hard to believe.”

Cal took out a cigarette and lit it. He lit one for Syd.

“If you never believe me first, I know you aren’t going to believe this. He and Marge are married.”

He got up off his stool and went outside. He came back and stood in the shop’s doorway looking out. He turned to face Cal.

“But they had broken up after she discovered that he was a thief.”

“Well, she doesn’t think so anymore. She’s driving a Toyota Camry these days.”

“In just a little under four years, both of them have achieve so much. I should never have let Holly persuade me to come back down here. I’m glad I ran her away from me.”

A young woman came into the shop.

“Syd, what’s going on? Have you eaten lunch yet?”

Syd looked at his watch and realized that it was after one o’clock.

“Ariella, meet my brethren, Cal. Remember, I used to tell you about him. So have you brought lunch for me?”

“I hope it’s only good things he told you about me.”

The young woman smiled and nodded.

She took some plastic containers out of a bag she had.

Syd and Cal were soon eating the meal of roasted fish and food. They were washing it down with coconut water.

“Ariella, come here, baby. Come and sit on my leg.”

The girl did as he requested. Cal could see that she was a beautiful girl of medium height and body. She was wearing a tank top and a jeans skirt and slippers.

The two men continued eating.

“Cal, this girl is my future wife.”

Cal swallowed some food before replying.

“If many more men taste her cooking, you are going to have trouble, Syd. Just for the food I’d marry her myself.”

Syd laughed and eased her off his leg.

“I won’t let you taste her cooking again.”

“You can’t do that to me, Syd. Don’t you have any more sisters, Ariella?”

“She has two older sisters, but they are both married and her younger sisters are both in high school.”

“Seems like I came at the wrong time in both cases,” Cal said and laughed as they both finished eating.

Ariella started to take up the dishes.

“I have some nice cousins,” she said and both Syd and Cal laughed.

“I’ll be back up here next month. You can introduce them to me then,” Cal said as the girl went inside to wash up the plates.

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