

In youth, it had been comics and oil paint, but now, when Chris the artist got low in the dull glare of the city's afternoon light, he stole books. Break ups. Parental visits. Long Sundays. For each prickly thought, something in Chris' brainstem prescribed a theft from Barnes & Noble's summer reading list or Shakespeare & Company's employee favorites.

He knew an enterprising young man named Pace, who would buy or trade for an arsenal of useful items. Last Memorial Day, the day the city turns on the summer furnace, Pace slid up to him on street and said he wanted to buy Chris' books. Chris was still popping sweat, as he'd just slipped out of St Mark's Bookshop with six floppy, oversized pictorials under his ill-seasoned pea coat. Pace could have been security, a police officer, or even a FBI agent investigating an underground book-thieving ring. He was dressed casually enough, in oversized jeans with a rhino on the back pocket and a red hooded sweatshirt with the same emblem. Pace's blonde, salesman-slick hair said to Chris,

"You can trust my opportunism because, a) We share a compulsion. Our perversity is our bond." As much as it said, b) "I have been highly trained by the moral majority to catch and punish deviants like you."

While Chris immediately yearned for a, b certainly threatened his lackluster but non-incarcerated existence. In one of the most awkward defenses a thief can adopt, Chris stared blankly at his possible captor and pretended he hadn't heard him.

"Buy. Your. Books?" Pace repeated slowly, and smiled as one might while giving directions to a tourist. Seeing no other recourse than the fates at hand, Chris nodded his ascent. Pace led him a few blocks, explaining the exchange rate for books to

cash, batteries, smoke, X, CDs (burned or new), pirated DVD or VHS and the time frame he'd need for special requests. Chris was thrilled to know an illicit tour guide as even-keeled as Pace. Their pairing was fruitful, as Chris' first Manhattan hero, albeit one who kept a keen professional distance, turned pathology into living expenses.

At times, Chris ran into some of his brigand compatriots in the hall leading to Pace's apartment. He never spoke to any of them but he was thrilled to be a part of this private market. Sometimes they nodded a greeting and Chris nodded back. It was almost as good as the stealing or painting and it felt great to be social with one's peers.

Chris had been to see Pace more and more often as the summer and fall passed. This November Sunday slid sleepless from morning to a blazing channel-surf afternoon, without one look to the canvas and brushes. The work was cold. All his tubes of paint were stiff.

Chris told people who inquired that he had a lot of trouble calling himself an artist. He loathed fellow painters. As much as working jazzed him, he only painted on the rare days when there were both inspiration and idle hours. Even in his own head, Chris Keaton the Artist did seem an inaccurate title. His breadth of work lent little credence to his membership in any imagined community of broad thinkers. Though surgically precise with the brush, Chris painted only portraits with no landscape at all. A detailed head and shoulders held up against a single background shade. Lined against one wall of his apartment, the work looked like mug shots for perpetrators. A visual chronicle of commoners guilefully invented, complete with full lives illuminated in each complex expression. Occasional girlfriends found them fiercely life-like, a bit proud and unpleasantly haunting. When voiced, the three views were often summed into the term

“evocative”. What the work actually evoked was not often explained to Chris, as most never expected him to take the criticism to heart.

Chris also refused to paint any actual people he’d met or caught with his own eyes. Somehow that felt mundane. Working from life was a task and Chris was as hungry for a hyper-reality when he went to the canvas as he was out stealing. Sometimes Chris painted in features of the thieves he’d met in Pace’s hallway, but he never wanted to expose their full identity. In others, he’d paint those he’d read about in the paper’s police blotter, so long as there was no photo. When people asked, Chris admitted he was obviously a little neurotic about his painting. Unmentioned was the thrill that non-artists found it enigmatic. Nobody knew or asked about the books, his pirate CD horde or his other lowly crimes.

When misappropriation called, Chris was sure to put on dress shoes and his wool pea coat.

Who would stop good shoes at the door?

He’d tacked a square of nylon across the inside of his jacket and lined the interior with tin foil. He did the same on both front pockets, so that there was a metal pouch behind where he kept his keys and wallet. Pace said the tin stopped sensor alarms.

Chris cast an eye on the fading clock, decided today was definitely a fine book shopping day and took some masking tape to brush lint and cat hair off the jacket before he went out.

It’s awkward to confront people who care about their appearance.

On the train ride down past Columbia University he popped sweat on his neck and got excited. He threw his jacket over his lap – in some states you could be arrested for

brandishing an erection in public. His heart was pumping too. It was disconcerting, a man of will overtaken by the electricity of the moment. He tried placating the call of his adrenal gland with a few old mantras. It was therapeutic, beating a store, so why not feel good about the deed. That was the whole point. Walking into a big retail palace and proving life was easy. Logic. If P then Q. He who leads a charmed life will carry luck in his pocket – along with a New York Times bestseller's list.

The sun was still out above the building tops but the air above the subway on 86th Street was deceptively frigid. Chris made his way down Broadway, speeding his steps every twenty paces or so, to appease his body's complaint about the cold. He turned off the sidewalk at 83rd.

He liked ripping off Barnes & Noble. Around the sheer volume books people felt calm, and the grand scale of the stores in NYC were enough to make the most manic shopper consider taking on a more docile and contemplative approach. Whatever one happened to bring home resonated with the experience, as though the purchase was imbued with a grain of wisdom from each the shelved writers. A memento of the promise to improve one's life through quiet, calm, reflective shopping. Bravo Barnes & Noble merchandiser. Chris had to give credit where it was deserved.

When opportunity presented itself, Chris also liked picking up batteries free of charge. Pace traded at premium rates and lifting six to twelve packs of AAA Energizers that were advertised to power the itty-bitty booklight was funny. Not really in a clever way, Chris thought, but enjoyable none the less. Like a movie made by a favorite sitcom star. It was a simple pleasure, trading larceny for confidence. Chris felt he'd improved as an afternoon burglar over the last months. With each small heist, he was closer to

painting again. Save this latest dry spell, he had been working more than ever in his life. He was turning out a painting at least once every six weeks. Just beat a few more Buddha-fat store managers. Just be smarter than a few more Long Island Hawk-eyes spying out from the one way glass. He knew the original ideas would come. The paint would get hot.

Beyond creative stimulus, the other angle in pilfering from Barnes & Noble was purely recreational. You could always find women in big bookstores dying to make eye contact with Mr. Right over a stack of book club suggestions. Chris thought the best part was that they really considered wading through the rows of banter a social outing. These were real women too, not biddies, or desperate housewives. There is simply something in the rug-muted aisles that said to women - you're communing with the *inteligencia Americana*. If only you had a soul mate, just a person to share a moment with. Maybe light some candles...

Chris liked the whole idea of two people connecting by chance as well. That's how he'd met Pace after all. And he thought fate might be kind enough to throw him another bone in the form of like-minded woman. Maybe not a thief, but someone who could be passionate like he was. Maybe light some candles ... He realized he was a little fem sometimes. He didn't mind at all, being a little fem.

Often he would find a young woman. Not that a woman in her thirties or forties would be useless, she just needed to be lackadaisical in stride. If she were flustered, Chris had reasoned, there was no chance at a real connection. She had to be in the shopping Zen that was all about achieving that souvenir of serenity. He'd wait for her to

handle some of the books. Maybe she'd slide a hand down the front cover. She'd be careful not to crack the binding. This might not be the one after all.

When a few paperbacks had been examined and replaced he would go up and just touch them. He'd place a stiff finger on the top of the spine and cock his head to read the title. Invariably the woman would turn to wonder at this young man who had beaten lottery ticket odds. Fate had obviously garnered his curiosity to the very same pebble of literature she had just considered. Chris would notice her sheepishly, push his hands in his double pockets and shrug a little. He'd cross her path a few more times before he'd start loading up his coat.

During these flirting crimes, Chris really didn't care what he was stealing. He took science texts, graphic novels, philosophical treatises, karate manuals, and all types of books for Dummies. So long as the woman would turn the corner and see him cramming his jacket full, his shoplifting was without direction.

Their faces would often fall out of expression when first glimpsing him. Chris would look up at them, trying to put on the same blank, uncertain look, his appeal nothing more than a reflection. It was true that some of them would run for a guard or click their shoes quickly down the escalator and out onto the street. What Chris really expected though, was a sweet, austere sneer at his infraction. If they stayed their fight or flight retrogression just long enough to pull their lips into a little, red crescent of disdain, it was certain he would go unpunished. He imagined they must have felt something akin to royal cleverness at the expense of the kitchen hand. They'd wave their wrist with a reprieve and Chris would smile. A woman of the world deciding to let his purloin pass, whatever the small factors might be. There was a base thrill in receiving their

permission. Chris didn't know if the women thought he was a kleptomaniac or a man of unfortunate luck, but he was sure not one of them would ever conceive his real motive. Misdemeanors for imaginary art might be a bizarre purpose but Chris fancied it his most clever and infallible source of inspiration.

The thief blew into his hands when he pushed into the lobby. He never made it to the battery rack though, as today's woman emerged almost immediately from the New Fiction shelves, smirked excruciatingly briefly under Chris' scan, and turned toward the escalator. Blonde bob haircuts got him all the time. A new bob cut gave women a smart, button-up confidence Chris liked. He enjoyed stealing in front of sharp women the most.

Anybody could beat a sappy young secretary.

This girl had a pop in her step and zeal in her shopping considerations. She was slight, and had deep set blue eyes, accentuated even more by a thick and out of place overabundance of mascara. Chris liked that despite her long wool skirt and loose turtleneck those cavernous eye sockets made her look a bit like a harlot. He followed her up the escalator.

Steps, glances and the fingering of books went according to the norm. She liked Hemingway and Hesse – or the person she was shopping for did. Though Chris was rapidly convincing himself that she was just browsing books she remembered as her favorites. When he was positive there was no ring on her finger he went on to the next aisle ready to perform.

She turned the corner while he was pulling the first paperbacks. He noted some authors and covers in the frenzy – Miyabe, Murakami, whom the Chicago times had

called a compelling genius. Chris was keen to be compelling himself. He evened his face. He looked up and she was frozen.

That's when Chris felt the hard grip against his collar. One quick inhalation of breath and he caught the musk of dry cleaning and heavy cologne.

"What the fuck? You don't think nobody sees you?" Chris snapped his head from the woman to the guard. Books dropped out of Chris' hands with loud flapping sounds of collapse. He felt his chest start to heave with panic. There was blood rushing in his ears - and the woman's voice.

"Oh, sir, sir. Please, this is my cousin's first time in the city, and," she lowered her tone, "and he's mildly retarded." She looked right into Chris's face with her hollowed blue eyes. "C'mon Bradley, honey, we'll buy these books another day. Okay?" She started stacking the books Chris had dropped. "Can you help clean up, Bradley?"

The guard narrowed his eyes as Chris let out a nervous laugh that sounded genuinely affected by a lobotomy. The woman turned her raccoon eyes on the guard and tilted her bob in an implicit plea.

"Well, Ma'am, I..." The guard had both hands up.

"I really appreciate it," the woman's eyes darted down to the guard's plastic tag. "Phil. I appreciate you didn't make this a whole big scene. Its more embarrassing for me when all the alarms go off, and Bradley gets excited..."

"Books!" Chris yelled with childlike triumph.

"Okay Bradley! Phil, thanks again, I think he's getting cranky." She put her arm around Chris' and started for the escalator. At the mezzanine they broke a smile at each other.

“C’mon Bradley,” she said, “Lydia needs to get a cup of coffee.”

Chris knocked down more books on their way out.

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“So you do this to pick up women? This works all the time?”

Chris was beaming at her. Lydia sat with her fingers laced together on the top of the diner counter. Her posture was reminiscent of unfortunate visitations Chris had had to the guidance counselor.

“No, I don’t do it to pick them up, really. I mean, none of them ever talked to me before. Wait, that’s not true, one lady asked me if my ever parents taught me anything. But really, most people don’t care about it, and strangely enough, those that do are really too polite to say anything.”

“Sure thing, Bradley,” Lydia popped open a compact, examined both eyes, pouted and kept digging in her purse. “Sorry, I have to be somewhere in a little while.”

“I told you its Chris.”

“I know. Anyway, that explains why maybe you’re not in jail. Good sense of social decorum can keep a girl outta tight spaces too. And a little five finger discount never hurt anybody but celebrities. But the in front of women thing – I’m not getting you.”

Chris thought she sounded a bit rehearsed, but went with her.

“I don’t know really. I picked it up young. Literally. Maybe I have arrested development.”

“I guess that’s honest,” Lydia said, her eyes wandering back to her bag.

“In a way.”

“And what do you mean by that, Bradley?”

“Well, I said it – I know it sounds honest, admitting you have arrested development, but really I said it so you would be drawn in by it, instead of putting on your make-up.”

“Ah. Now that you’ve admitted this, I am to find you even more alluring? I see.”

Lydia slipped out lipstick from a small clutch.

“Best case, yeah maybe.”

“Okay, so I’m interested. What do you do besides your job?” Chris felt Lydia’s attention angling for him over the mirror.

“I should ask you.” Chris started playfully; “I still don’t know why you’re doing this.”

Lydia checked the mirror again, once at each dusky eye. “It makes me feel better. You know, stepping out, meeting a compulsive performance artist in the sea of Manhattan’s droll population. Kinda makes you want to light some candles when you get home. Right? Anyway, when not a thief or a waiter, you are a ... what?”

“I paint,” Chris spoke, feeling herded.

“Houses or canvas?” Her lips curled, showing off a fine cupid’s bow.

“Portraits mostly. Actually only.” He wanted it to sound clever, but the old joke hollowed out. Lydia gave it no notice, but Chris felt himself slipping into a sudden catatonia of self-retrospection.

“Isn’t that a boring thing for an artist to do,” Chris thought.

“So no rolling hills or fruit baskets. Got it. Do you fuck your models?” The compact snapped closed. She didn’t bother to hide her study and gauge, but Chris was still too hung up on own question to be shocked by Lydia’s.

“I don’t paint real people. Just for recreation...” he let his words trail off realizing that he’d started hotly. There was a twinge of adrenaline in his chest, as though, for the second time today there was authoritative hold on his shoulder.

“You don’t make it sound like it’s recreational. It sounds really the opposite.” Lydia grinned; encouraged that Chris hadn’t stumbled over her lascivious detail.

“I know how people are. I know them better than most know themselves, sometimes – maybe more than sometimes.” Chris was hotly embarrassed by her smile. He felt the words were tumbling out of his mouth, but rambled further, trying for some semblance of a point. “That’s why stealing is such a joke. I don’t need to illustrate that. I want to paint something original, I guess.”

“Is that a lifelong philosophy?”

“No,” Chris said carefully, still feeling riled.

“Sometimes shake and bake theories are the best. You’re a pretty confident guy. And thats rarity in this city, let me tell you. Most fellas talk you through their first million-dollar year but deep down they’re still just big babies. Those guys are only good for one thing. You know, made to be played.”

“I painted a guy like that once. He came out looking like my dad.” They broke into laughter on the same breath. His wits rallied at her levity, but Chris still felt as though he was treading water.

“I’d like to see your work Chris,” Lydia said.

Chris put some money on the table. He thought he'd suddenly lost hold of his kick and stroke as he hailed a cab going back up Broadway. He'd be sputtering for air any minute. His apartment had only been graced by a few women since his move to New York, and all had visited only after a long campaign of dates, trust summits and amendments of chastity. Yet, when Lydia took hold of his hand he had to look away lest she see his jeering face.

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Instead of looking around the room, she stood on her tiptoes to kiss the back of his neck. Her hands wrapped over his hipbones to steady her balance and to press her body against his back.

"Turn around," she whispered. Chris turned with his eyes asleep into her kiss. She slid her hand against his groin and began to suck his bottom lip.

"I want you," she hummed. Chris began to move toward the bedroom but her frame resisted. "I want you right here, please." He opened his eyes and her dark sockets howled desire.

"Please?" she rasped with a slight pleading. Chris felt momentarily warm with abashment in nodding his ascent but her lips tugged into a smile at receiving his permission. She slid her hands over his chest as she eased onto her knees below him. Chris struck a languid slouch against his door as she peeled back the top of his trousers and took him gently between her lips. As his breath grew labored she eased her grip along his shaft and began a slight rhythmic sigh. Between the waves of sensation, Chris

heard the boiled tones of her coaxing. She continued at metronome pace, speeding only at Chris' escalation of breath. He felt like he should stop her. But he didn't. He thought if he pushed her away, he'd scald them both with embarrassment. He couldn't break their connection.

“Lydia, I’m...” Chris let his words go as Lydia stretched her sigh into a fervid hum.

Chris heard her swallowing, while he gripped the doorknob and filled his other fist with her hair. Her smile was a long red bow of pride.

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As Chris thought back on their coupling in the moments before sleep, he was surprised at how violent it had been. He had imagined himself as a tender lover, but that quality had melted away as soon as Lydia slipped out of her sweater. There were three or four faded hickeys at her collar and breast, and a cluster of rose finger marks on her left shoulder. Seeing her injuries from a previous lover elated Chris' thoughts. His mouth had wandered roughly over her body and his hands sealed over her wrists. Lydia implored him to hold her down. She asked to be taken. She held up her breasts in each hand and offered them. When she mounted him, Lydia wanted to be spanked rather than held.

“Go as hard as you want, baby,” she told him. “You can make it hurt.”

Her words squeezed his chest. For a few thrusts he couldn't breathe. When she urged him again he felt furious. He started smacking his palm against her ass with a

viciousness that surprised him. She came with Chris' left hand holding her firmly against his chest, and his right popping against her flank. After he released, he caught her studying him. He realized she had been relishing his. She smiled with demure guilt and then told him he was animal for spanking her so hard.

Chris had thought his violence would have made him feel guilty later, but as he lay there, the only feeling that remained was his own royal vibrancy.

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Lydia woke him in the deep of that night. She had curled her body around his back and was whispering to him.

“Christopher. Christopher.”

She wasn't pleading anymore. She sounded proud. He knew in the days to come that this whisper would haunt his thoughts. She sang it into his blood. Lydia's hand closed around his cock as she pushed her body against him. Her teeth bit harshly into his shoulder. She rolled him onto his stomach, increasing her pace and still intoning his name. He came quickly moaning into the sheets.

“Bye-bye Christopher.”

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Chris woke and phoned the restaurant that he was deathly ill and that he'd be in tomorrow. He slunk around his room, pretending to look for his pants, scanning the

bureau tops for a note or maybe something scrawled in lipstick. Today was even more of a book shopping day than yesterday. He shaved and inspected the love wounds at his shoulder. Chris stood in his bathroom for a while looking at the thin red welts and started building scenarios of how he might see her again, by chance, in a Barnes & Noble. When the sink overran he knew he needed more than some paperbacks and a trip to Pace's. He needed to do something original.

Maybe the complete works of Jim Thompson.

Maybe a bank.

When he crossed into the living room looking for his thieving coat and good shoes he could smell the scent of fresh oil paint. By the door, there was palate out of place covered in a smear of deep red. "Thanks Bradley" had been written by fingertip. Chris laughed and then laughed at himself. Not a cruel laugh, but a chuckle one can make in certain moments of manic inspiration. He moved to replace the palate, but when he confronted his small easel decked with empty canvas, his right hand lifted a brush.

Chris tried painting her for hours. The things he remembered came easy. His stroke over the eyes and mouth was delicate and quick while the paint thickened with revision at her slight shoulders and the folds of her clothes. Chris wanted her out of him. He imagined her nighttime exit as he wet his bristles with cool blue and filled the background with his living room. He wondered if Lydia had looked at his work before she left, or if she had taken anything.

He was starving by that afternoon and the open oils and turpentine had him light-headed. The work didn't really capture her. Her expression ended up looking butch. Her blonde hair clashed with much of the color, and no amount of softening had pulled

the form together. But he had caught her sharp grace, and he couldn't bring himself to abandon the project. Chris felt the weight of import and substance in his work. The paint was grease-fire hot. This wasn't going to be just his clever imagination. Whatever the look of the color or line, this would be her.

Once the confidence took hold, he allowed some abstraction out of hunger. He grayed in some shadow. Lydia's hair went dark. Those cavernous eyes lightened a bit and her nose got longer. She filled up the canvas with new height. He painted her in one of his shirts. His line grew crisp. The short winter sun ran out on Chris and soon after he could only see the color by squinting just inches from the canvas. He felt like he was close. Concentration barely kept the frenzy out of his hand as it worked detail into the expression.

Chris didn't want to break his efforts, but he really hadn't seen the work for an hour and a half. When he couldn't take another stroke in darkness he stumbled for the lamp switch. As the light clicked on, Chris wasn't all that surprised he was staring at his first self-portrait. It wasn't half-bad, Chris thought to himself. Maybe he looked a bit snide with that smile, but not half-bad. He added a fine red welt subtly jutting out from his collar.