

Four Ways of Looking at a Crime

As I write this, I'm aware of a multifaceted dark blue beaded ring on my third finger, right hand. I loved the dime store--any dime store.

One hot day in St. Louis in 1942, Mother was shopping somewhere else, probably in the sewing notions area. So for a few minutes I could look where I pleased. In the curtain gadget section, I saw them, rows and rows and rows of little white rings. I liked rings. That is, I never had one before, but right then I wanted one on my finger. My mother had her dull silver (it was platinum) wedding ring incised with forget-me-nots on her hand all the time, but she seldom wore any other jewelry, either real or pretend. Fake costume stuff," she'd call it.

The row of glistening ivory celluloid beckoned. In our house the draperies were gathered or pleated at the top and fastened in ways beyond my reach. Once in a while Mother would remove the filmy sheers from bedroom windows, wash them carefully, by hand of course, and stretch them to dry on the sharp tacks of very prickly curtain stretcher bars that she assembled like an artist's easel, while warning me to stay away.

Thinking of dollhouse furniture and other tiny things, I saw the rings and wondered if one would go on my finger. I pulled one from the display and tried it on. Then I put it back. Mother came into view as she was paying for her purchase. When the sales clerk was busy making change, I slipped a ring into my pocket. We went home.

Some time later Mother saw the white thing on my finger, and asked where I got it. At first I didn't want to tell her. I'm sure now that she figured it out. But I had to confess that I had taken it from the dime store. Immediately she marched me back to that department, found the clerk and insisted I apologize directly to her, as well as return the ring. I was so embarrassed and ashamed.

Since then I have occasionally been attracted by stuff, but never tempted myself to the extent of actually shoplifting. I own and wear much more jewelry than Mother ever did. I still like rings but I can count those I've owned on one hand and three fingers, in chronological order: a peach pit I laboriously filed at Scout camp, a silver friendship ring (we're still friends 80 years later), a Zuni turquoise dancer inlaid on silver from NM, my engagement black and white pearl ring that my mother in law washed down a drain, my wedding band that I lost with a purse outside Kroger's in a shopping cart the year after my husband died, my grandmother's lapis lazuli ring found on her hand in KY after her mail plane crashed in a March storm, my aunt's gold and pearl pinkie ring, and the blue ring I bought in CT at Seabury.

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Here comes that mother and child again. I wonder why. The child's face is barely taller than the counter, but she avoids my eyes. Did the thread I sold not match, and she wants to return it?

"Hello, Madam. May I help you?"

"Yes, thank you. Now tell her what you told me." She turns toward the child.

"I'm sorry, but I took this ring. And here it is," she lisped, offering me a single small white curtain ring, the kind people use to hang voile or nainsook kitchen curtains.

"Yes, but what do you mean?" I asked.

"Mommy says I stole it from here. I have to apologize and give it back to you. Please take it. I'm not allowed to keep it."

"Thank you," I say, looking as stern as possible. "That was a bad thing to do, if you didn't pay for it. Don't ever do that again!"

"No, I won't."

The unsmiling mother collected her dignity and her ten year old, walking quickly out of the store. I wonder how many other parents would have made the child apologize.

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Maybe Carolann will be entertained by a little trip to Woolworth's this afternoon. I could use some more blue and green floss to blend in that embroidery I started the other day. The clerk was helpful and we finished my errand quickly. I'll reward her for not whining by offering cookies and chocolate milk when we get home... What's that white thing on her hand?... Looks like a little ring. She doesn't have anything like that, I know...

"What's that on your hand, honey?... Where did you get it? And when? Did you pay for it? I know you don't have any money. But it's not yours! You didn't pay for it and neither did I. I would have given it to you if you had asked, but you didn't ask.... I didn't even know you were interested in it..."

Why did you do that? That's not right, you know. Come on. We are going right back to that store and you are going to return the ring. Furthermore, you will apologize to the lady in the curtain department.

And you will never take anything again like that, in a store. Do you promise me? OK, here we go...

"You are the clerk who helped me when we were here a while ago? I'm sorry to bother you again, but my daughter has something to tell you..."

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“Tell me! I don’t speculate.

She did what? That’s hard to believe. I’m sorry to hear it.
And what did you do about it?

Did she give it back? And what did she say? Yes, I am surprised. The little rascal.

Does she understand that taking the ring was wrong? Do you think I should talk to her
about this?

Well then, I won’t, unless there is another occasion. We’ll both be alert.

NOTE: There never was another occasion.

Carolann Purcell