

The 'Thrill' of Theft

It's not just movie stars. Why, each year, ordinary people shoplift \$13 billion of lipsticks, batteries and bikinis from stores

By Jerry Adler
NEWSWEEK

Feb. 25 issue — *If all you've ever done is pay for stuff, you'd never know how it felt. It was thrilling, she says, a heart-pounding rush of greed and fear as she stuffed the bathing suits into her bag, two identical sets of tops and bottoms, because she was going to a concert the next night with a friend and they wanted to wear the same thing.*

SHE WAS IN eighth grade then, and she'd been stealing for a year, partly for the fun of getting away with something, but also partly because no way was she going to spend \$70 on one of those suits. "I think, 'I could be spending my money on this, but I'm getting it for free,'" she told NEWSWEEK. "Then I get to spend my money on things my parents don't know I'm buying—like beer, drugs and cigarettes." But there's always danger. "Your heart starts to race, and all you can think about is getting out of the store. It's like, 'I've taken what I need to take, let's get out of here.' But I get really excited because I'm thinking 'I already got a bunch of stuff in my bag and I can get a whole lot more.'" She moved on to the rack of Mudd jeans.

Some 800,000 times a day, this tableau of temptation, fear and exhilaration plays out in the humdrum aisles of department stores and supermarkets, frequently over such unlikely objects of avarice as batteries and souvenir knickknacks. It's a window into our desires: retailers like Brandy Samson, who manages a jewelry and accessories store in the Sherman Oaks (Calif.) Fashion Square, uses shoplifting as a guide to taste. "We know what's hot among teens by seeing what they steal," she says. It can be a cry for help on the part of troubled celebrities like Bess Myerson, Hedy Lamarr and maybe Winona Ryder, who was arrested in December on felony charges of taking \$4,760 in clothes from the Beverly Hills branch of Saks Fifth Avenue. She pleaded not guilty and was freed on bail, although her fans continue to protest the injustice of the arrest with FREE WINONA T shirts. And it's an economic bellwether: thrills and temptation won out over fear in 2000 to the tune of some \$13 billion, according to Checkpoint, a top retail-security company (which notes that employees steal the most by far). And in the current recession, the company is predicting a \$1 billion jump in shoplifting losses, with more people out of a job, and fewer salesclerks to watch them as they nervously sidle down the aisles heaped with DVDs, lingerie and balsamic vinegar.

FIVE-FINGER DISCOUNTS IN HISTORY

Shoplifting was the first distinctly modern crime, a product of late-19th-century mass merchandising. "Consumer culture manipulates the senses of the shoppers, seduces them, weakening their ability to resist temptation," says Lisa Tiersten, a cultural

historian at Barnard College in New York. Department stores, bursting with fans and muffs and bustles stocked conveniently out of sight of the distant shop clerks, proved an irresistible lure to otherwise respectable housewives. The spectacle of middle-class women stuffing their corsets with swag was so unnerving to the Victorian sensibility that in 1890 a new mental disorder was postulated to explain it, “kleptomania.” Shrink no longer believe, as they once did, that it originates in the uterus, but kleptomania is still a recognized condition, although rarely diagnosed these days. By far the largest category of habitual shoplifters, experts say, are suffering from nothing more exotic than addictive-compulsive disorder; the rest include professional criminals, drug addicts supporting their habits—and thrill seekers, who are often high-school kids. By some estimates, a quarter of all shoplifters are teenagers.

She made only one mistake that day, but it was a costly one: she began her spree by taking an empty shopping bag from another store, to hold the items she planned to steal. A clerk at the first store watched her go and alerted the manager of the boutique where she was headed. As she left with the bathing suits, the jeans, and a couple of beaded T shirts stashed in her bag, she was stopped by a clerk. “They arrested me and walked me through the mall, they took me to the juvenile center and called my parents. I got grounded for probably like a month and a half, but it was the first month of summer vacation so it was really bad.” She was not prosecuted, although she had to write a 25-page report on how shoplifting affects the economy.

A few decades after the invention of kleptomania, a 6-year-old named Gretchen Grimm began what may be one of the longest criminal careers in history, swiping a lipstick for her mother at a Woolworth’s. The only daughter in a family with seven older sons, Grimm felt overlooked and began stealing, she believes, to win her mother’s attention and affection. It ended last year when Grimm, at the age of 83, finally kicked the habit with the help of psychotherapy and the anti-anxiety drug Paxil. Over the intervening years, while she raised five children and worked as a nurse at the University of Iowa, she stole, by her own account, “clothes, jewelry, toilet paper, towels, pencils, pieces of stone—everything.” At the moment of theft, she says, “you feel wonderful, elated, slick and cool and cunning.” But immediately afterward, guilt would set in, and often she would actually sneak her loot back into the stores.

STEALING AND SELF-ESTEEM

Grimm’s story illustrates two important truths about shoplifting. The first is the powerful ego boost it can provide, especially to insecure young people. In that context, experts say, while stealing can never be condoned, a single episode—especially as part of a group—is not necessarily a cause for parents to panic. “As an isolated thing, most 12-year-old girls with a peppery personality do it once,” says child psychiatrist Elizabeth Berger, author of “Raising Children With Character.” “It shows you’re a real badass.”

The other lesson is that a crime that can be perpetrated with equal ease by first graders and old ladies is pretty hard to stop. Grimm had only one serious arrest, and hid her habit from her family for almost her entire life. She started getting caught more often

in her 80s, and would call her psychiatrist, Dr. Donald Black. “She usually gets off because she’s old,” Black says. Technology has provided merchants with a new generation of sensor tags sewn inside clothes or hidden in packaging. Cameras now are ubiquitous in large retail stores, hidden in clocks, smoke alarms, even the pushbars on fire-exit doors. But most stores, as every shoplifter knows, are reluctant to pursue criminal cases against amateur crooks, reasoning that the cost in publicity—and possible liability for false arrest—isn’t worth the gain.

She’s 17 now, and she’s learned her lesson, which is to be more careful and steal stuff only when she really needs it—like last week, when because her car insurance payment was due she was out of cash for a Valentine’s Day present for her boyfriend. So she picked up a nice candle for him, and, while she was at it, a Bob Marley T shirt for herself. “Anything free is cooler,” she says. “And I still get a rush from it.”

With Julie Scelfo and Gretel C. Kovach in New York, Karen Springen in Chicago and Tara Weingarten in Los Angeles

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