

# Shoplifting

*by Stephen DeVoy*

This is a story of two boys, Juan and Dan. They've never met, but they share something in common. Both have shoplifted.

Juan lived in a small shack on the hillside of a small ejido within Tijuana. Though the ejido was small, many people lived there. They had no running water. Most had no electricity. Juan's shack had no floor and when it rained, his feet would get muddy without even leaving the shack. Juan's parents were very poor. There was no work to be found. His father spent the day selling hand-carved wooden crucifixes to the American tourists waiting in line at the border crossing to San Ysidro. His father worked hard. He spent the entire day in the sun, holding up a large crucifix, shouting "Cheap Christs, Cheap Christs, Cheaper than K-Mart" to the idling cars beneath the hot Baja California sun. His skin was very brown from the intense sun. Years of working in the sun had dotted his face with black patches.

Juan's mother, Maria, spent her days in the bars of Tijuana lining Revolution Avenue. She was a devout Catholic, but poverty had driven her to spending her time in bars looking for a chance to earn a few dollars from the drunken American soldiers that spent their free days and evenings prowling Revolution Avenue. It hurt her pride to work in this way, but she had to choose between her pride and feeding her children. Her children won.

Every day, just before noon, Maria would walk with Juan down from the hill, through the ejido and then along the curved roads of Tijuana, down through the heavy traffic and polluted air, until they reached El Centro de la Ciudad. Along the way, whenever their path took them up a hill, they could see northward, towards San Diego, where beyond the patrolling helicopters a shining city gleamed and where it was said life is better.

When they reached Revolution Avenue, Maria would kiss her son goodbye for the day and hope that both he and she would live to see each other again in the evening. Juan would stand on the sidewalk and watch his mother walk down the avenue and turn into one of the bars.

Juan tried to find some way to earn money while his father and mother were out doing the same. Sometimes he'd offer to watch the car of a tourist for a dollar. Other times he would find a shop keeper willing to pay him to wave tourists into the store from the street. At times he could earn some money this way, but at other times there was no money to be earned and he would wander the streets hungry.

This was one of those days and Juan was very hungry. He tried begging, but no one

would give him a peso. As he walked down the avenue he spied a table with fruit displayed. Tourists were buying the fruit. He watched them eat it and this made him all the more hungry. Juan would not have an opportunity to eat for hours, he felt a little dizzy from the hunger, his stomach made that noise that stomachs make when they are empty and he felt very sad.

At last, he could stand the hunger no longer and mixed with the tourists standing around the table. He slipped his hand between a young couple, reached over to a bunch of bananas and grabbed them. He pulled the bananas through the space between the couple and, as the bananas slipped by, the couple turned and looked at him, only to alert the table's owner. Juan ran as fast as he could, bananas in hand, and turned up Avenida de los Heroes. He passed the concrete apartment buildings, turned onto another main street and lost himself in the crowd of people walking up and down the street.

As he ate the bananas he felt happy. His stomach felt good. His energy returned. In time he would find some more work that afternoon and maybe, if he were lucky, he'd have dinner.

Across North America, in the town of Norwood, Massachusetts, Dan and his cousin Sean were returning from an afternoon working out in the town recreational department's public gym. They were hungry. They had only another mile to work before returning to Sean's house. A refrigerator full of tasty food awaited them.

As they walked up Dean Street, Sean complained of being bored. The two boys lived in nice houses, one in Dedham and the other in Norwood. Their fathers were employed. Their mothers did not need to work. They had bikes, toys, books, movies and places to play, but still this did not satisfy their sense of boredom.

As they passed a plaza, Sean noticed the grocery store. "Hey, let's see how much food we can steal!" said Sean. "I'm hungry and I don't feeling like waiting until we get to my house."

The two carried towels with them that they used to dry themselves after showering inside the gym's locker room. They went into the store, carefully loaded snacks into their towels and then slipped out of the store. Once outside of the store, they walked around to the side facing the Neponset River. Between the river and the grocery store laid a patch of swampy land. They placed the snacks along the wall of the grocery store. No one ever walked on that side of the building.

Proud of getting away with theft, they left the pile of food on the ground, brought their empty towels into the store once again and filled them up with more snacks. They repeated the operation four times. Each time the pile of snacks next to the grocery store grew larger and larger.

On their final attempt to leave the store, a bagger noticed that the two had come in

and out of the store four times. He followed them. As the two boys walked towards the river, a package of cup cakes fell out of Sean's towel. Seeing the food fall from the towel, the bagger's suspicions were confirmed and he shouted at the boys.

"Hey, come back here!" he shouted. "You didn't pay for that!"

The two boys dropped all of the food and ran. Like fools they ran towards their pile of snacks along the side of the building. The bagger followed. He gained on the two boys. Just as the boys reached their pile of loot, the bagger grabbed them by the arms.

"Look!" he yelled at the boys, shaking them. "I have to call the police or I will lose my job. I need this job to feed my family. I don't like seeing two boys your age being hauled away by the police. I don't like the idea of you earning yourselves a police record either, but I need this job."

"I ll tell you what," the bagger said. "I'm going to let you go, count to ten and then come running after you again. If I catch you, you'll be turned in. Now run like hell!"

Dan ran into the swamp and Sean followed. They submerged themselves up to their necks into the muddy water behind a bush. They waited there motionless for ten minutes. The police came, looked around and did not find them. After another twenty minutes the police left. Dan and Sean came out of the muddy water and headed home. They nearly cost a man his job. Their clothes were ruined and they didn't even need the food they stole. They felt stupid. They never did it again.

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