

Fast Talk

a short story by BELLA MAHAYA CARTER

At fourteen, shoplifting is fun.

Like a sport, it takes a lot of skill. I have to be quick and gutsy and able to fool people. I put on my good-girl face and wear my cargo pants because they have deep pockets.

I started out with things that fit in the palm of my hand: candy, barrettes, nail polish, jewelry. Then I graduated to clothing, sometimes putting it on underneath bulky layers, some-

times stuffing it in my pockets. I am still amazed whenever I walk out of a store into the sunlight, loaded down with loot.

One day in early spring I get this crazy idea to steal a canoe for my boyfriend, Gregory. It's the thing he'd like most in this world, next to scoring with me. We're standing under an elm tree at the park near his house, Gregory's arms wrapped around my waist.



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"Come up to the lake," he says, "for my birthday."

Gregory's family owns a lake house upstate, but I've never been there. "I'll have to ask my mom," I say, already knowing she'll say yes, which is the total opposite of what would happen if Papá were here.

"She'll say yes," Gregory says.

"Maybe," I reply, bending to pick up a twig, then snapping it. "What do you want for your birthday?"

"You," he says, smiling and looking at me with his ocean green eyes.

He should have said, "Sex," which would have been more to the point. Two girls I know at school are doing it, but I think it's too soon. Gregory tries not to pressure me, but lately every time we make out I feel his thing on my thigh or my stomach, his hot breath on my neck. He says things like "Sure would feel nice," and "Are you scared?"

Three months ago, on New Year's

Day, my father left. He held my face in his Old Spice-scented hands and kissed my cheeks. "I'm not leaving you, *mija*," he said. "I'm leaving your mother. It's the hardest thing I've ever done. But I love you. I'll always love you. *Comprendes?*"

I wanted to nod my head, but it wouldn't budge. I'd known this was coming.

My father stood and looked around the living room. TV, DVD player, books — he left them all behind, taking only his Bible and one small suitcase. He walked out the front door and was gone. Next thing I knew I was on my hands and knees, eyes blurry with tears, picking pieces of tinsel from the Christmas tree out of the thick gray carpet.

Last week Mom told me Papá is moving away from New York to Las Cruces, New Mexico. I don't know if this has something to do with me wanting to steal the canoe, but when I ask my friend Freddy and his big brother Moose to help me, I say, "It's for Gregory."

Saturday morning we go to the mall and, once inside, head straight to Sports Central. We pass dumbbells, tennis rackets, sweat suits, and sleeping bags, and then finally we're at the canoes. There are two sizes: big and bigger. I figure bigger is better, so we hoist one high over our heads and make for the front like we own the place, angling the beast through the store's narrow aisles. The dorky salesman with the striped tie actually grins at us as we leave. We navigate through the mall this way, quickly and confidently, and we get lots of smiles.

Back in the parking lot, Moose, Freddy, and I tie the canoe to the top of Moose's Camaro. People passing by say things like "Hey, that looks like fun!" We tell them, "It's a blast!" and give each other high-fives and go crazy laughing.

I'm in the back seat and we're about to pull away when it hits me. "We forgot the paddles," I say, getting out of the car.

"Fuck the paddles," Moose says.

"I'll be right back," I shout as I rush back across the parking lot to the mall entrance.

Once inside Sports Central again, I find the paddles, take one in each hand, and head for the front of the store. Just when I am

out the door and think I've made it, the guy with the striped tie — who turns out to be the manager — grabs me by the shirt.

"Not so fast," he says. "Where do you think you're going with those? You got a receipt?"

"Um, not exactly."

"Didn't think so."

He takes one paddle and leaves me holding the other. He puts his free hand against my back and pushes me through the mall.

"Hey!" I say. "Where are we going?"

We keep walking, and I wonder how long Freddy and Moose will wait for me. Suddenly I spot Mrs. Delvecchio, my mother's bridge partner, coming toward us. I slump forward, letting my stringy blond hair fall over my face, but she sees me anyway, stolen paddle in my hand.

"Miranda?" she says. "Miranda Muñoz, is that you?"

No, you nosy bitch, I want to say, but instead I manage a polite "Hello" and keep on walking, saying that I'm in a hurry. She already has that I'm-going-to-tell-your-mother-young-lady look on her face. The manager keeps his mouth shut. I like this about him.

"You can't call my parents," I tell him. "They wouldn't understand." I see a kid in a wheelchair and say, "I'm their only normal kid. My sister's blind — she can't see anything, not even shadows. And my brother? He's crazy. Last week he tried to hang himself because, you know Carol Lesser? The girl who got killed down by the railroad tracks playing chicken? She was his girlfriend. He was there when it happened, picking pieces of her brain off his NYU sweat shirt after the train squashed her head."

He takes me to the security office, but it's locked. "Back in fifteen minutes," the note says. The manager pulls me away. We pass Limited Too, where I've stolen skimpy shirts and belts, but I swear up and down to him that I've never stolen anything before. He opens a door that says EMPLOYEES ONLY, and then we're in a concrete hallway that smells of rotten food. I expect to step on a rat. It's cold, and the hairs on my arms stand up like little soldiers. Then he leads me through another door to an employee lunchroom that reeks of cigarette smoke. Lockers line the grimy walls. Two vending machines and four tables with chairs are crammed close together, but no one else is here. The manager stands with his back to the pay phone, jingling the change in his pocket. "Want a Coke?" he asks, stepping toward the machine.

"Thanks," I say.

He motions for me to take a seat, then sets down two cans and sits across from me. He's wearing a Sports Central name tag. CHARLIE, it says.

"Is that your name?" I ask, pointing to the tag.

"Mr. Harrigan to you," he says. He loosens his striped tie, and for the first time I get a good look at him. He's tall and skinny and has pasty white skin and an angular face. His gray eyes have droopy lids, which make him look sad, and his left shoulder twitches. He reminds me of my father, who I wish my mom would quit talking about. I'm sick of hearing how poor his parents are, how self-righteous he is, and I sure as shit don't

want to hear another word about my parents' former sex life. I don't want to know that he never wanted it, except to make babies. Or that he called it "God's work," which drove Mom crazy.

"It's not normal," Mom said once, looking at me in her vanity-table mirror while she brushed her blond hair. Papá used to call her his "golden girl." He'd never expected to marry a gringa, but he couldn't resist Mom's sweetness and generosity, as well as her beauty.

"Men are supposed to want it," she said, putting down the hairbrush. "You'll understand when you're older."

Despite what she says about Papá, Mom prides herself on being one of those parents who never bad-mouth the other parent after a divorce. Can't she see what she's doing? It makes me wonder what idiotic things *I* do without realizing it, aside from the obvious, like stealing, which suddenly seems incredibly dumb.

"My parents would be so mad if they knew," I say to the manager. "It'd be a real disappointment."

"How come you didn't think of that before?" he asks.

"Well," I say, "I should have. I can see that now, but my friend dared me. This is so unlike me!" I squeeze out a few tears, wipe my eyes with the back of my hand.

"Doesn't sound like much of a friend to me," he says, passing me a napkin.

"I know. But she's popular," I say. "My mother would kill me." I pause, trying to think up a good lie. "Mom is a violinist, and honest to God I don't know who's strung tighter, her or that *valuable* instrument of hers. She's always calling it that — her '*valuable* instrument.' Sometimes I feel like throwing it out the window, like she threatens to do with my stuff when I don't pick up after myself."

Mr. Harrigan smiles a little.

"You know somebody like that?" I ask.

He nods.

I bite my lip and look down at my hands. "Yeah, well, my parents have my life all planned. I'm supposed to go to Harvard. This would kind of blow that, you know? I get straight A's and was voted most creative in seventh grade, probably because of an art prize I won." Suddenly I remember a piece of art I once saw in a magazine. "I made this church out of milk cartons," I say. "You know, the little ones they sell at lunch in the cafeteria? I glued fifty of them together, papier-mâché it, then sprayed it gold and cut out windows, which I covered with colored cellophane to look like stained glass. I called it 'Our Lady of Miracles.'" I look up into his gray eyes and say, "Do you believe in God, Mr. Harrigan?"

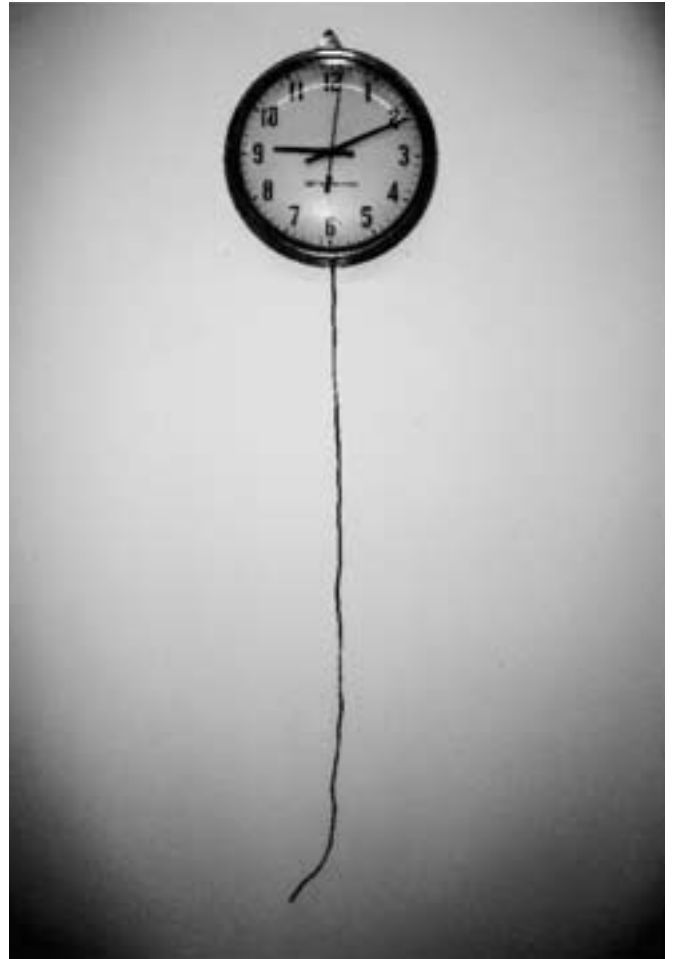
He looks at me real serious, then says, "I do. Absolutely."

"I thought so," I say. "Are you Catholic?"

He reaches down the front of his shirt and pulls out a medal on a skinny silver chain.

"Saint Christopher," I say. "My favorite saint."

My aunt gave me a similar medal, which I used to wear to church on Sundays. Mom never wanted to go; she went because Papá made her. He knew everybody at Saint Michael's. Though I never admitted it, I liked church. I liked looking up



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at the priest's colorful, embroidered robes while taking Communion. I also liked the stories, the stained-glass windows, the organ music, and being forgiven for my sins.

We haven't been to church since Papá left.

(end of excerpt)