

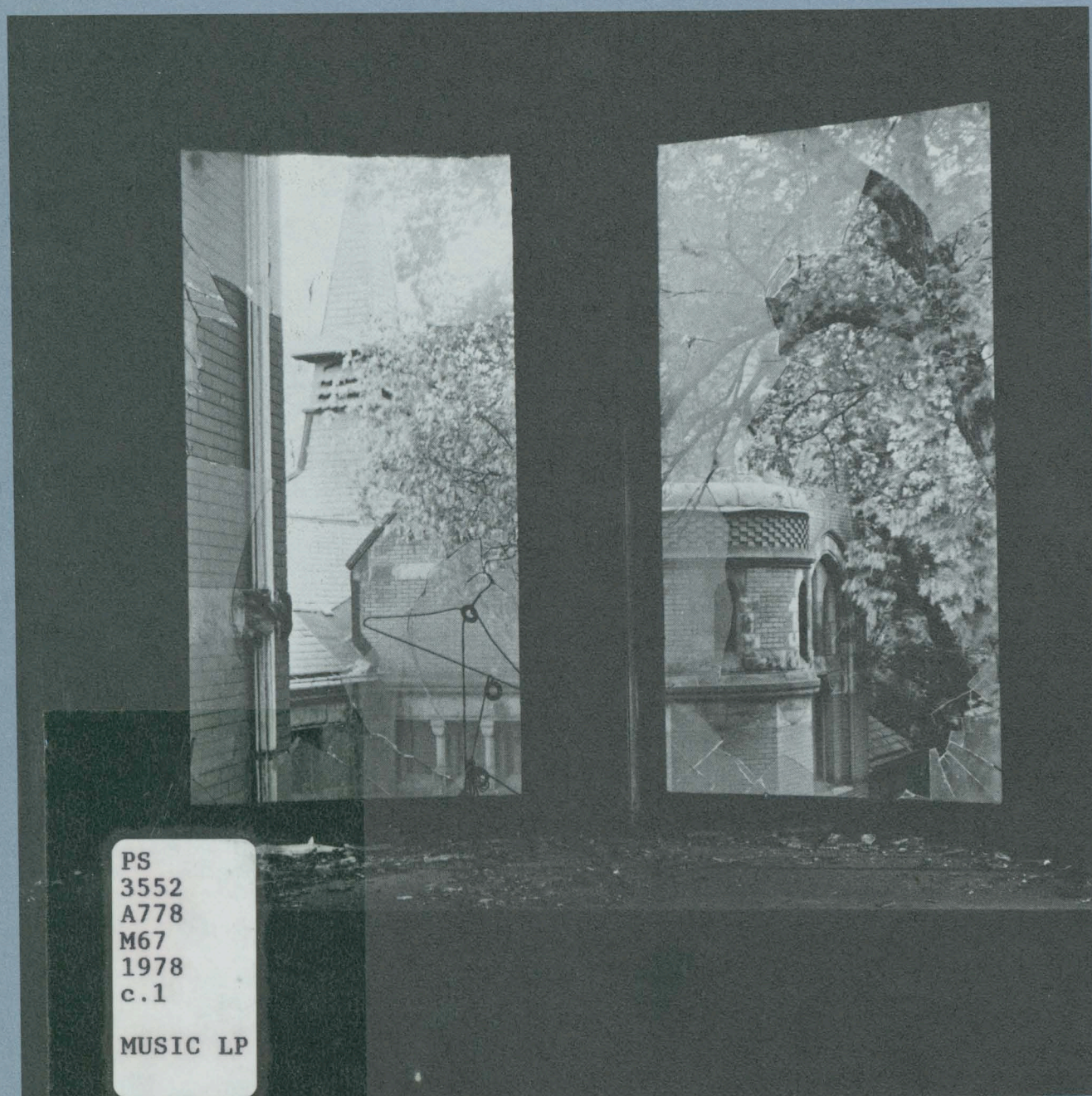
MORE
STORIES
OF
THE
DEPRESSION
WRITTEN
AND
READ
BY
BERNARD
BARSHAY

THE
OLD
MAN
AND
THE
HOUSE

THE
BANK
THEFT

THE
STRAIGHT
PATH

FOLKWAYS RECORDS FL 9785



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MORE STORIES OF THE DEPRESSION

by Bernard Barshay

MORE STORIES OF THE DEPRESSION tells how that greatest of all American economic catastrophes affected the lives of an old man, a youth, and a boy.

The first of these stories, "The Old Man and the Mouse," describes the poverty and loneliness of a pensioner in Brooklyn. The second, "The Bank Theft," deals with a Midwestern student's temptation to commit a crime when suddenly deprived of the means to continue his college education. The third, "The Straight Path," treats of the waywardness of an eleven-year-old in Harlem, anxious to stay out of trouble but beset by harsh economic reality.

THE OLD MAN AND THE MOUSE

The noise began again. It couldn't be the refrigerator, the old man thought, and wished he had the new silent kind that ran on gas. His bedroom was very close to the kitchen and for a long time now the broken-down frigidair had made those awful sounds. But he knew he still would have heard noises without it. The subway, eighty feet below his apartment, ran in both directions. And when it did the stove would vibrate until the train moved away into the distance. The stove was supposed to have been new when he had taken the apartment nine years ago, but it wasn't long before it began to be as noisy as the refrigerator.

Yet this sound wasn't from the stove. Then what could it be? Not another mouse? He had been visited by four of the creatures

since he had lived here, and was this to be the fifth? He was thankful at least that they came singly. More than one at a time would have been too much to bear.

The first arrived the second year he had come to this once luxurious apartment on Flatbush Avenue with its twelve-foot ceilings and richly ornamental but now closed-up fireplaces. He never saw the mouse, was not even aware of it until that loathsome day he found it lying dead on the living room carpet, close to where he usually sat listening to his phonograph records. How long had the mouse lain there under his favorite chair? There was no odor of any kind, no gray excrement--a sure sign of its presence.

The old man picked it up gingerly with a newspaper and carefully placed it in the garbage can in the vestibule downstairs. But within a year he was visited again. At first he couldn't be sure it was another mouse. The noises in the kitchen could be the refrigerator, the stove or possibly even from the howling wind beating against the cracked window panes. But then there were the unmistakable squeals of what must be Number Two.

One day he saw it scampering away. He followed it into the living room, but it disappeared into the clothes closet. He emptied all the underwear and shirts he kept there but to no avail. He searched for holes in the floor, but found none. Where could the creature be? That night there were no squeals, so he really didn't care. He had peace once again.

Then came Number Three, his most disagreeable experience. That particular mouse lived in his apartment for weeks before the old man became desperate and decided to act. First he purchased some warfarin, a deadly poison, which he sprinkled on bread in several places in the kitchen. But the mouse still lived on even after eating all the bait.

Then, in despair, he went to a druggist who gave him a special kind of mouse seed, now forbidden to be sold it was so toxic. But as

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he was an old customer of his, the druggist relented, warning, "Be very careful with it, away from children, dogs or cats." The old man smiled. There were no children, dogs or cats to worry about. He lived alone, had done so for years.

But the seeds accomplished little. The days stretched into weeks and still there were those disturbing noises at night, until once he caught the mouse running from the kitchen into the living room. He followed, not believing he could possibly reach it. To his astonishment the mouse began to wobble and was unable to get away. Hopeful that he might be able to kill it before crawling into one of those unfathomable nooks or crannies where it could hide, the old man seized a hammer and lumbered after the mouse.

He managed to get close enough to deliver a strong blow just before it reached the bookcase in the living room. The mouse staggered, then fell backward. Gleefully the old man struck again and when blood spurted from its stomach, he stopped. The mouse ceased moving and in seconds its eyes, still open, became glazed. The old man's joy turned to disgust and quickly he sought newspapers. Wrapping the corpse into their folds, he disposed of his second body within three years.

Number Four was like the second, a fleeting visitor who stayed for only a short time, then left probably scornful of the meager provisions in the apartment. But now, if the new noises meant that Number Five had arrived on the scene, he supposed he would have to do something about it soon. He didn't relish being awakened in the middle of the night by the rustling of paper or the scrambling underneath the refrigerator.

Then he had an idea. Why feed it for days or weeks until the poison began to effect its deadly but much too tedious course? He could use every scrap of food for himself. Let Number Five run loose. Eventually it must die from hunger or thirst or, what was more likely, leave the way it came when it found that his apartment was no cornucopia.

But he thought of the first mouse and the ugly sight when he found it underneath his chair. If he hadn't discovered it, how long would it have lain contaminating the air and possibly spreading contagion? This time the new mouse might die in some closet and lie there for months. Yet wouldn't the smell make him aware of it? Perhaps not. There were so many smells it might mingle with the others, for the old man seldom cleaned the entire apartment.

It tired him to stoop, even using the lightweight vacuum cleaner. He confined his efforts to the three rooms he usually used: the kitchen, living room and bedroom. But every six months or so he forced himself to clean the other two rooms, which mainly housed the accumulation of years. Piled high were stacks of books, magazines and papers. That always meant pushing boxes and cartons around. Then there were the closets, with so many shelves he seldom bothered with them anymore. Years had gone by since he had rummaged in those, for it brought the old man pain even to open the closets, where pictures of his family were stored--his family long since gone.

He envied those who had passed on. Their worries were over. To survive them all, he was certain, was much worse. Yet he was grateful that he had this five-room apartment and still paying the small rent as nine years ago. Few Brooklynites were doing this, he knew. But the elderly couple who had owned the two-family house almost all of those years wanted someone who was quiet and paid his rent regularly. Anxious to sell the building so they could move to Florida, they were content to let matters stand as they were. Thus there was an unwritten agreement: no raise in rent and no request for painting or repairs. For this he was grateful because his monthly pension check hardly covered the bare necessities of life.

Finally the building was sold, and the new owner--an absentee landlord--did not raise his rent either. Evidently the status quo would continue. The old man was satisfied. But he was now completely alone in the building--that is, until the other apartment, now vacant, was rented.

* * *
The following week the old man's sleep was again disturbed by the rustling of newspapers near the garbage can. He chided himself for not emptying it more often, though it meant walking down two flights to the vestibule. If Number Five smelled no garbage, it might leave the apartment. But the rodent kept him company not only that night but for many days.

He had seen it twice, first when it darted away when he entered the kitchen for some ice cubes and the other time when he came back from shopping. He had opened the front door and there it was--in the doorway, wondering perhaps what HE was doing there. The sun was shining brightly and the light from the windows bathed the creature in an incandescent glow. It was small, but he knew it was not young for it had flourishing whiskers and was grayer than a young mouse would be. Also, its eyes possessed that rheumy look he had seen on the mouse who had died under his chair--probably of old age.

Number Five did not run away, merely moved slowly from the doorway when he advanced toward the kitchen. The old man did not even think of killing it. Somehow the knowledge of someone else in the building gave him comfort. Someone was aware of his presence, was conscious of his being. And sometimes the old man wasn't sure he had a being, thought of himself only as an essence, of a body that had once been but now existed only as a kind of atmosphere.

When the old man placed his carton of milk on the kitchen table, he looked around to see if the mouse had followed him. But it was gone. The old man shrugged his shoulders. He knew he would see it again.

* * *
The noise from the kitchen became more frequent at night, and the old man decided to wait up for the mouse when it made its appearance, always after ten o'clock when he turned off the lights. That night at about ten-thirty he heard the usual stealthy movement. Quickly the old man switched on his bedroom lamp and shuffled into the kitchen to seize the hammer. Number Five stood there motionless. Why

doesn't he run? mused the old man, intrigued by the creature. Getting closer he could see that its whiskers were frayed, as though its struggle for existence had been as arduous as his own.

He's had a tough life, too, the old man reflected, and put down his weapon. After all, what harm could this creature do? The mouse still had not moved but seemed to be studying him. And--was that stance of his a plea for something? Food? The old man smiled. Poor fellow, he doesn't know any better. He's come to the wrong place. I've got only half a loaf of bread and some milk in my refrigerator. He felt a wave of compassion for Number Five, who was just like himself--with not a friend in the world.

The old man opened the frigidaire and removed a slice of bread. Mice liked cheese, but he had none. This would have to do. He put the bread on a plate and placed it on the floor. The mouse was like a statue, uncertain what to expect from this tall monster who apparently was not going to attack him.

The old man turned around slowly, knowing that if he made a rapid movement the rodent would disappear, and left the kitchen. When he returned in a few minutes, the mouse and the bread were gone. He smiled again. At least it'll live another day. Then he berated himself for not placing water in a dish. It's going to be thirsty. But this could be remedied.

In the morning the old man found that the water he had put out was gone but, he thought ruefully, it's sure to come back now. Why did I do it?

The next night he placed a few scraps of bread on a plate next to some water, and again could not explain his action to himself. Once more, in the morning, the dish was empty although this time he slept soundly and not heard the mouse come out of its hiding place.

On the following day, returning from a visit to the butcher to buy hamburger, a treat he gave himself weekly, he was surprised to find the mouse in the kitchen. A daytime visitor now, he mused, easily recognizing it by the frayed whiskers. How had that happened?

he wondered. Was it in a fight with another mouse for some food? Number Five, as before, did not move from its position, but merely watched what it now knew to be its benefactor.

The old man had a sudden impulse. But petting the mouse would be crazy. He went into the living room to rest from the labor of climbing up two flights of stairs. There waiting for him was Number Five. Did it know his habits that well? The old man sank back in his easy chair, scrutinizing this creature who sat just a few feet from him.

Of course it, or he--for the mouse was no longer a thing but almost a person--wanted food. Yet he had resolved that only at night would he feed him. He had not seen any droppings, but knew that a well fed mouse would be certain to leave them all over his apartment.

The old man bent down as though to tell the mouse he was sorry, and the creature actually went up to him. One paw was lifted toward him and the old man touched it, the first physical contact with anyone in years--giving him a warm glow. The rodent squealed happily, apparently appreciating this new bond between them. The mouse really liked him, considered him a friend. It was a compliment.

The pact between the two was now sealed. For the next few weeks the old man did not feel alone or abandoned. And now he did not even mind picking up the few, meager droppings left by his friend.

The mouse seldom stayed now in its unknown lair. It roamed the apartment at will and occasionally even slept in the company of the old man, trustful of not being molested. Meanwhile he was happier than he had been for a long time. The mouse had ceased to make noises at night and it was easier to sleep.

One morning the old man returned to his apartment to find Number Five on the floor near the foot of his bed, an area it never frequented. When the old man approached, the mouse did not move to greet him as it had been doing lately by lifting its paw. Startled, the old man put his bag of hamburger in the refrigerator and reentered the bedroom. The mouse lay there as before, but it had never been that

still. Slowly the old man moved closer. Then he saw what he had dreaded. The eyes were glazed. It was dead.

Tears suffused his vision. He had lost his last friend. Then he brushed the tears away, for soon enough, sure enough there would be another. Number Six would take his place.

THE BANK THEFT

It was one of those things you dream about--just dream about because you know, just know, it'll never happen in real life and to you, and especially when you need it most, money. A few times Rick had the experience of making a phone call and then, when hanging up, finding money coming out of the coin-return slot. Errors, of course, and seemed to happen on long-distance calls. Once three dollars in quarters tumbled out of the slot, and it was like manna from heaven. But they were only coins, not bills, and big bills--this particular manna.

Rick had gone to the bank to close his account before leaving the university. The money would last only a few months but long enough perhaps to enable him to find a job. He was told that a good place was Delaware as the chemical factories were still operating at almost normal capacity. Also, they were located near the Delaware River, and he could save money on food by fishing--if a job did not immediately materialize.

He could not continue at the university, now that the money for it was gone and his father dead. What had made him do that desperate, that terrible thing--to leap from a building ninety-seven feet high? But what courage it required! Could he ever do anything like that or have nerve enough to risk all in the hectic Wall Street days of the twenties? Rick doubted it. But his father had challenged the odds in the stock market and won, piling up thousands, then tens of thousands until--

Rick did not permit his thoughts to drift any further. He must think of himself now. . . and his future. . . his bleak future.

It was late in the afternoon, almost time for the bank to close, and a number of people were on line--many anxious to cash checks before the Friday closing. It was now standard practice for most Chicago banks to close on weekends, so the mad rush always ensued just before the six o'clock deadline.

As he neared the head of the line, he noticed that the teller seemed a bit unsteady. Either it was from excessive fatigue or something else. But the man, a tall, spare individual of about fifty, appeared not only slow in his movements but erratic.

One customer had already told this teller that his bankbook had been returned without the interest of the previous three months being credited. As it was June thirtieth, the last day of the quarter, the teller apologized profusely. When he spoke Rick caught the smell of his breath, strongly alcoholic. My, my, he told himself, I thought banks didn't hire luses. To drink on the job and on a hot day like this. He must be mad.

The woman in front of Rick merely wanted a money order, but had to repeat the amount. This particular teller couldn't be hard-of-hearing, too, Rick wondered.

Then it was his own turn. The clock now showed four minutes to six, and the teller said to the two people behind Rick, "There won't be time for you. We're closing in a few minutes."

This was very strange. The bank's policy, Rick knew, was to let no one in after six p.m. on Friday. But once you were inside and got on line, you were served no matter how long it took. Actually, he knew, the employees worked until seven p.m., clearing up all business and straightening out records.

Then, too, this particular teller was the only one still working. All the other windows had the sign: "CLOSED." The two men behind Rick looked puzzled and left the line. Rick never saw them again.

Meanwhile the teller had left his window after taking Rick's passbook and withdrawal slip for \$400. He now returned with the passbook. The pungent odor of whiskey was overpowering. This guy'll be fired if the manager gets close to him before seven o'clock, Rick reflected.

The teller counted eight fifties, but just then the phone rang. He placed the money in Rick's hand and lifted the receiver. "Y-yes, Mr. Harrison," he stammered, "I'll-I'll be in your office as soon as I finish with m-m-my last customer."

Uh, uh, mused Rick, putting the money in his wallet, he sounds scared. Maybe someone has told Harrison, whom he knew to be the manager of the bank, about this guy's drinking; or perhaps the two dismissed men had lodged a complaint.

The teller then did a most peculiar thing. Obviously upset by the phone call, the rush to finish on time, and perhaps the angry looks the two men who left the line might have given him--Rick could only guess--he left the window again, still holding Rick's passbook.

The teller went to a nearby desk and stamped ACCOUNT CLOSED in Rick's passbook, something he had evidently forgotten to do. Then he returned to his window and counted out eight new fifties. He placed them in Rick's palm and shut the window tight. He was about to put up the sign, "CLOSED," then remembered something, opened the window again, and handing Rick his passbook said, "Sorry." He again shut the window, and hastened toward Mr. Harrison's office. Rick could see his face was flushed and knew that liquor was not the only reason.

Rick was about to call out when a voice within said, "Quiet, you fool." He turned around. No one had been behind him to see the transaction.

That extra four hundred. He certainly could use it. Then the voice said, "Why are you standing there? Get out of this bank and do your thinking elsewhere." He saw guards beginning to bolt the

doors, so hurried out before they asked him to leave. Leave? Why not? And go where? Out of town as soon as possible.

He stood at the corner, wondering whether he should indeed chance it. Could he get away with it? Or would the mistake be found that night between six and seven, and a policeman sent to his address to retrieve the stolen money? For Rick had to admit that it was not a case of "finders keepers", but of outright theft.

True, he hadn't intended to steal, done nothing to encourage it, merely accepted money that was not his. But though passive, it had been a positive act on his part, if action of any kind could ever be called passive. Why not stay in the dorm another night, at least, then if they came for him, he could say, "I'm sorry, I didn't count the money. Sure, take it back," and probably nothing would happen. And if they didn't come for him, what then? Would he wait until Monday or Tuesday? No, he decided, that would be unbearable. Then, too, if he left town, how could they find him, or for that matter how could they be sure it was he, the one who had the extra money?

Supposing he could actually get away with it and keep the four hundred, should he nonetheless return it voluntarily? But he would make that decision the next morning, provided no one came for the money tonight.

Yet the inner voice told him he had already made up his mind: that he would never surrender the extra four hundred of his own free will.

Of course the police might catch up with him eventually, but he could always deny receiving the bonanza. It was his word against the bank's. Let it try to prove its case. There were no witnesses, and the drunken teller wouldn't even recall by then whom he had served last on that Friday or how and why he had erred. He was probably being fired right now for drinking on the job, and the manager would attribute any discrepancy in figures to poor work on his part all that day.

It was very unlikely that the teller would be charged with stealing the \$400. Anyway, what was four hundred to a bank that dealt in millions? Not even a drop in the bucket. They would never miss it. Moreover, mistakes like that, or perhaps smaller ones, occurred all the time, Rick convinced himself.

He left the corner where he had been standing and headed for the university, very conscious now that he had more than eight hundred dollars in his wallet and careful to let no one approach him. It would be ironic, wouldn't it, to have his pocket picked just at this time. It reminded him of the story he had heard about the robber fleeing from a bank after a heist only to be robbed himself on the way to the getaway car.

Rick changed his route and turned into a side street where there were comparatively few people. He had to think--to justify what he was doing.

Necessity? He was alone in the world, with no relatives and only a few school friends who were entirely dependent upon their own parents. He needed the money. God, how he needed it! From what he read in the papers, the depression would get even worse. Heads of families were standing on breadlines or depending upon soup kitchens for sustenance. Other men were selling apples at street corners, many of them skilled workers unable to find a job. What chance did he have against them, only a sophomore and barely twenty years old? No, boy, take the money and run.

If he was stealing, from whom? A rich corporation. Would anyone suffer from his act? No one. But the Bible, the Ten Commandments said nothing about justifiable theft.

Then, too, if he got away with this, would he attempt similar acts in the future? Would it encourage him to choose a life of crime? He knew that successful thieves often continued their unlawful ways even after accumulating enough to live on for years. Nothing succeeded like success.

But Rick dismissed this line of reasoning. He had not planned the crime; the money had literally been placed in his hand. Perhaps, even, the Lord wanted this to happen. The coincidences were all too many. Being on line with two other men who had been dismissed by the teller. (He had never heard of such a thing. The Lord had wanted no witnesses.)

Then to have that phone ring at just the right moment, so the teller forgot giving him the first four hundred. Also, his neglecting to stamp "ACCOUNT CLOSED", which was why he had left the window a second time. (Why had the teller forgotten to do that? Otherwise he never would have handed Rick the second four hundred.) Then, of course, his being partially drunk.

It all added up to the Lord or Fate or the Devil or some force working in his favor--that is, if he got away with it. But Rick believed the chances were good. At any rate, the suspense would last only until the end of the evening.

Either the bank would know of the error by seven and be able to trace it immediately, or never know. There was always the possibility that the bank would need several days to track down the error, but that was unlikely. The fact that the weekend lay ahead was another coincidence, Rick thought. Hell, if it was in the cards for him to get the dough, then that was that.

Now came the rationalization which ended all further thought. If he got a good job, he might return the four hundred to the bank without telling them he had taken the money. (That would be foolish and might mean jail.) He had heard of many cases of "conscience money," where employees returned purloined funds to their employers without revealing their identity. Petty cash stolen for an immediate and pressing need, or property appropriated unlawfully on an impulse. Kleptomaniac drives were not so uncommon. Yet with the return of stolen money or goods, consciences were cleared.

Of course Rick did not think his act morally wrong, to start with. Everyone knew banks did not create wealth nor produced anything. They

existed because of a surplus of funds which were then used to "earn" more money, but only by charging high interest rates to borrowers. This, according to Karl Marx, was wrong and only tended to solidify the power of the non-producing classes. Workers paid for this in one way or another. Private banks would be abolished in a Socialist state; so Rick told himself he wasn't stealing from the poor, only from the rich. Yet if he should ever wish to return the \$400, he could do so. Though he left that door open, it was a very narrow crack indeed, and he knew it would require an entire change in his moral philosophy for that to happen.

He returned to his room and began to pack. The next hour or so would tell the story.

The minutes went by very slowly, but inevitably the hands of the clock in his room edged toward seven, then eight. One more hour, he told himself, then he could be sure--at least sure enough so that he could complete his plans to leave the next morning for Delaware.

By ten he had finished packing. No one had knocked on his door. He had done it! Without a pang of conscience he removed his clothes and went to bed, sleeping the sleep of those whose bellies are full; but in his case it was his wallet. To that extent he was a rich man, a rich man indeed.

THE STRAIGHT PATH

An eleven-year-old boy in Harlem with a hard-working widowed mother, a "latch-key youngster," so-called because of his complete lack of supervision from three o'clock until suppertime, was apt to get into trouble. He might even go so far as to peddle dope, sell numbers, shoplift or snatch purses. Rufus did none of these things; he wanted to stay on the straight path. Thus, unlike many other boys and girls in his segregated school near Lenox and Seventh Avenues in upper Manhattan he spent his afternoons doing homework, studying

or reading. If he still had time left over until his mother returned home from her job, he played basketball or softball in the after-school center.

But on weekends Rufus often found he had time on his hands. When he needed it most, the after-school center was closed. With police always on the lookout for "trouble-makers" in the streets, Rufus knew he was better off staying away from the numerous gangs which many boys of his own age were beginning to join. Yet what was he to do when he got tired of reading? The radio, now more than six years old, always seemed to break down just when he was listening to a good program and it often took weeks to get it back from the repair man. For awhile the set seemed to work all right, and then again something would go wrong with it. Rufus knew his mother was getting tired of paying for repair bills, but also was aware that she could not afford to buy a new radio.

If only he could go to the movies as often as he wished! How he loved films! And he could learn so much from them--see how people lived in different parts of the world. Wasn't it true, as his teacher said, "A good picture is worth a thousand words"? But his mother had little money to spare for what she considered a luxury.

And then one day Rufus, in desperation, decided on a scheme to see movies free at his local Loew's theatre. He was sure he was clever enough to get away with it, for hadn't he fooled the theatre manager once with his trickery? A few weeks before, the new Loew's had opened its doors for the first time with a first-run showing of the Lon Chaney movie, "The Unholy Three."^{And} there was to be a contest where winners would receive free tickets of admission, management's method of drawing patrons away from the old movie houses in the neighborhood. "IMITATE LON CHANEY'S HANDWRITING AND GET IN FREE!" the sign read. Also, "Persons whose signatures bear the closest resemblance to that of the movie star will be declared the lucky contestants." The handwriting of The Man With the Thousand Faces was on exhibition in a glass panel outside the theatre.

Rufus told a friend about his plan the next morning. "Bob," he said, with a gleam in his eye, "I know how we can be sure of winning."

"How?" asked Bob.

"Well," said Rufus, glancing about to make sure no one overheard him, "why can't we take some tracing paper and copy Lon Chaney's signature?"

"From the one under glass?"

"Yep."

"Hey, that's a swell idea," said Bob, impressed. "Why don't we?"

"We might be caught," replied Rufus. "The cashier might see us, or the ticket collector or even the manager."

"Maybe, but I think it's worth trying--only I ain't got the nerve."

Rufus, however, did have the nerve. Two days later, during a heavy afternoon rain, he trudged to Loew's. Yes, he had figured right. No one was near the marquee, below which the glass panel stood.

Hastening to the exhibit, Rufus withdrew paper from beneath his jacket and slowly, carefully, traced the movie star's signature. He looked up. Apparently, his action had been unnoticed. He did it a second time--for Bob--and then returned home. The next day both boys handed in their entries.

Rufus' trick was successful, for the following week he and his friend were chosen as two of the three winners.

Now emboldened by his first easy success in deception, Rufus resolved to gain entry into Loew's again, this time through another ruse. And if his plan worked, he would be able to see as many movies as he wished--without paying.

He had discovered two swinging doors, each located at either end of the main entrance, supposedly used only for exits but also leading to the balcony. The ticket collector's post was about thirty feet from the door nearer to him. Rufus felt that if he waited for a

very busy moment when the collector had many people around him impatiently waiting to give him their tickets, he could push open the other door. He had a splendid chance, then, of dashing up the steps to the balcony before being noticed, and in the ensuing darkness escaping detection. Wiry and lithe, Rufus was confident he could reach the head of the staircase before the collector could catch up with him. At any rate, on very busy days he would not be so silly as to leave his post to chase after a boy. And more likely than not, if Rufus wore sneakers, he could pull off the stunt without even being heard.

After a week of constant study of the collector's movements, Rufus made his first effort. His plan worked perfectly. Why, no one even saw me fly up those steps, Rufus gloated, as he settled down in his balcony seat to enjoy the movie.

From then on he made his mad dash toward the balcony whenever he felt lonely and depressed, the collector being aware only once of what he was doing. But as the boy had calculated, on that occasion all the man could do was shake his fist at him, encircled as he was by patrons clamoring to get to their seats.

* * *

One day during Christmas vacation, with more leisure time than usual, and the after-school center closed, Rufus determined to make his "ten-second sprint," as he called it. It was, however, a weekday with few people entering the theatre. For a moment Rufus hesitated. Perhaps it was a poor afternoon for his stunt, and just possible that the collector might be on the lookout, ready to leave his post to run after him--especially with business slack.

But being in one of his melancholy moods, Rufus resolved to run the risk. After all, what else was there for him to do that day except see a movie? The radio wasn't working, and he had no books to read. Only he would wait awhile.

He walked slowly around the block, hoping that in the meantime more people would come to Loew's, which would keep the collector

busy. When Rufus returned to the theatre, the situation had improved, for a group of moviegoers had arrived and were now crowding around the collector.

The stage was set.

Sauntering toward the swinging door furthest from the collector, Rufus paused momentarily. The door had been opened and a distance of twenty feet separated it from the large staircase, which led to the balcony.

Three leaps and I'll be at the landing, he thought. Three more and I'm at the top. The "ten-second sprint," all right. The collector suspects nothing. Now's the time!

As the collector bent forward to examine a pair of tickets, the boy raced toward the staircase. Reaching it, he paused for an instant to gauge the distance to be covered. Then he sprang forward.

Rufus felt like a bird ascending the steps to the landing. It was all so easy. Wasn't it wonderful to be as intelligent as he, and to have so much daring?

Two more jumps and he was halfway up the top. Three more and he would be there. Then all he need do was dart a few feet into the balcony and the inky darkness would envelop him.

As Rufus poised for the final leap, he thought he heard a commotion downstairs. Perhaps he had been spotted. Well, if so, it was too late for them to do anything about it. He was smarter than they.

But as he started his jump, Rufus looked up and there, waiting, were two men with outstretched arms ready to grab him. His heart pounding, Rufus swerved aside as he reached the head of the staircase, narrowly evading one man, and then lunged toward the balcony, hotly pursued by the other.

The boy reached the balcony steps barely ahead of the second man, now just a few feet behind. Feigning to run up the steps, Rufus instead dodged around a corner of the entrance to the balcony and was now in the lobby. Then down, down the staircase he ran, down toward

the exits and the two swinging doors. But as he reached the bottom, he saw the collector and the manager at either door, barring his way to the street.

He looked about him frantically. Where could he run now? There was but one way--to the orchestra. But as he pushed open one of its doors, he ran directly into the arms of a fifth man who quickly grabbed him by his coat collar and held him.

In a moment Rufus was surrounded by his other pursuers. Fighting, kicking, clawing, the frightened boy was dragged into the manager's office. All the men wore grim expressions.

"Thought ya could keep on sneakin' into the movies?" asked a short, squat individual angrily. "Didn't ya?"

Rufus recognized him as the manager.

"We'll let the police handle you!" said the ticket collector.

Rufus sobbed! His mother would be horrified if she learned of it, and of the many times he had sneaked into Loew's.

The manager turned away from Rufus and picked up the telephone. "Gimme Police Headquarters," he said.

Rufus knew that the only possible way out of his predicament was to show remorse. He was not--even now--genuinely sorry for what he had done, only sorry he had been caught.

He began pleading for mercy. "I'll never do it again!"

"I only did it because I couldn't afford to pay my way in."

Then he went into a long story, in which he told the listeners of his mother's poverty and how she was unable to give him money for movies.

"That's still no reason to do what ya did," said the manager.

But he knew the boy was unquestionably scared and was certain his capture had taught him a lesson. Pretending great reluctance, he finally let him go but not without exacting a promise never to sneak in again.

Rufus left, feeling quite ashamed but also thankful he had gotten off so easily. When he got home his mother was already there.

Without a word and with a big smile she led him to their dingy little living room, saying, "Rufus, I got big s'prise for you. Look," and there was the largest console radio he had ever seen.

"Mamma, Mamma, is it ours? No, it can't be!"

"Yes, darlin'," she said. "Ours. . . eight tubes. . . Majestic. . . the best."

"But--"

"I been savin' up for it all year--that is, the down payment. Now you won't never have to be playin' 'round with those bad boys on weekends."

The tears rolled down Rufus' cheeks as he thought how dangerously close he had come to having a police record, and how unhappy his mother would have been. But more than that, the tears flowed at the thought of his hard-working mother pinching pennies so he could have this wonderful radio to keep him out of trouble.

He had learned his lesson. From now on he would stay on the straight path! With a mother like his, it was worth it--even without such a fine radio.

BERNARD BARSHAY BIOGRAPHY

Bernard Barshay's keen interest in the Great Depression stems from bitter recollections of his childhood and youth spent during those years in New York City slums. As a result, his writings reveal a social consciousness epitomized by TWO SHORT STORIES OF THE DEPRESSION (Folkways Record 9783), THE NINETEEN SIXTIES (Folkways Record 9784) and other works.

Mr. Barshay received his B.A. and M.A. degrees from Brooklyn College. He then became an outstanding reporter (Hartford Times, Washington Daily News, Associated Press) and later professor of journalism at Long Island University.

In recent years he has produced a number of radio and television programs based on his newspaper and magazine stories and travels (North American Newspaper Alliance and Long Island Press foreign correspondent).

Several of Mr. Barshay's plays have also been presented off-Broadway. One of them, "The Dream Murder," was an adaptation of one of his FOUR AMERICAN MURDER MYSTERIES (Folkways Record 9781 and Folkways Cassette 79781).

