

## TAKEN INTO CONSIDERATION by Neil Shenton

When she was tired of shoplifting, Helen always headed for Centenary Square, where the café bar served good coffee and croissants. The tables and chairs spilled out into the square proper. She felt a part of the bustling shoppers and excited children as she listened to the carols on the precinct radio.

A security man ambled past nodding to her. She was a familiar figure on his beat. A smartly dressed, middle aged woman with gold on her sticky fingers.  
Respectable..... Safe..... Boring.....

She had been stealing for six months, since a week after Roger had left her for his young research student.  
She had realised she had no friends of her own.  
She had become one of Roger's projects. The shops were a sort of therapy. A cry for help, she had read.  
If so, no-one was listening.

In the taxi home she inspected her morning's work. Another digital watch, ear-rings, a flask. She was pleased with that – one of her biggest trophies yet!

There was a police car outside her house. Helen panicked.  
She'd been seen – they had followed her – don't be silly, how could they?  
But why were they here?  
She paid the taxi in a hot fumble as a young policewoman came to her.  
The wind plucked strands of blonde hair from her cap.

“Mrs Baxter? Now don't be alarmed. I'm afraid you've been burgled”.

Helen stared at her trying to hide her relief.  
They went into the house. The burglar had been tidy, but, efficient.  
All her ill-gotten goodies gone. The cutlery, watches, pens, gloves – all still boxed or wrapped – gone.  
But all she told the policewoman was that she had lost a carriage clock and some money.

A week later the policewoman returned.  
The carriage clock had been recovered. Her burglar caught.  
'Trying to flog stuff to the traders on the Flea Market.' said the policewoman  
'And, you should have seen his flat – like a mini warehouse – most of it still in boxes. Presents, most like'.

Christmas came and went. Helen didn't go back to the shopping precinct.  
There were a few cards and two phone calls.  
Her only visitor was a man from the Victim Support Scheme – Jeremy.  
He ate a mince pie while he advised her about insurance and security.

One evening in March the doorbell rang. Helen part opened the door, frightened of who might be on the other side, but found a young bearded man hunched inside a duffel coat.

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He stared at her, their breath merging in the frosting air.

'I'm not here to cause no trouble' he said finally. 'I'm the one who did your house before Christmas'.

She didn't know what to say. Congratulations? Better luck next time?

Instinctively she tried to close the door but his foot was quicker.

'You've got a nerve' she said. 'What do you want?'

His eyes widened suddenly as the anger spilled out.

'From you? Nothing. You set me up with the cops. Six months I got because of you. Six. I just wanted you to know'.

He removed his foot and the door closed with her pressure.

When she opened it again he was near the gate. She didn't want him to go.

'I don't know what you're talking about. If you think I've done you some wrong, at least you can tell me what it is', she shouted.

He turned and came back to the door.

The cold was making his nose run.

It was a moment similar to when she was shoplifting. Do I take it now? Yes or no?

Decide. Quick. Decide. She opened the door wider.

He looked at her in surprise and walked through.

They sat by the fire watching the flames. His name was Carl.

'You told the cops lies'. he said. 'I took loads of gear from here. New stuff. When I told the cops they just laughed. All this from Mrs Baxter's? Not what she says. You've been a busy lad. Now look at this list and tell us what's down to you? Go much easier in court if you give us some TIC's.'

She looked puzzled.

'Offences taken into consideration', he said slowly as if to a child.

He was calming a little. He told her the cops welched on the deal anyway.

He got 6 months for being a big time thief.

Got out last week with good behaviour. But he'd lost his flat, his girl, everything.

She went to a cupboard and returned with the watch, earrings and flask.

'This was the sort of stuff you stole, wasn't it? I'm sorry I got you into more trouble, but I couldn't tell the police the truth. I stole it all myself, you see. I'm a shoplifter'.

She felt a thrill at saying the word for the first time.

'You do see my problem Carl? I mean, how does one explain 6 men's watches still in their boxes?'

He stared at her. Then roared with laughter.

They talked till after midnight. She went into the kitchen to make cocoa and when she returned, he had gone. She went to bed with tears in her eyes.

Carl came back at Easter with a huge chocolate egg with her name on it. He'd found a new flat but needed a reference.

Helen typed him one on Roger's letter headed paper.

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On Easter Monday she gathered all Roger's belongings into black bags for the refuse collection. There was no anger any more.

Carl's flat became a major focus for both of them.

Helen began to steal for it – cutlery, a small mirror for the bathroom, a bedside lamp. He chided her at first and then just laughed, saying she'd be the one doing 6 months soon.

Helen knew he was right. She would be caught one day. But it didn't seem to matter. Her life had a shape of her own making. Someone found her funny and interesting and actually listened to her. She was being used, but, so was he.

A reasonable basis for friendship, she thought.

In December, they organised a celebration at her house.

The first anniversary of his arrival in her home. They got drunk on a punch Carl had made. They sang songs to each other. Carl had a sweet voice.

During the evening, Jeremy from the Victim Support Scheme called.

He had also noticed it was a year from her burglary.

He declined a drink but was pleased to see Helen so happy.

He gave Carl his card, suggesting he might consider training as a volunteer visitor himself.

While Helen tried to suppress the giggles, Carl said he'd think about it.

He said he'd always been interested in crime.

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