

Before you read, define "shoplifting" and "citizen's arrest." Do you think citizen's arrests are common or recommended by police?

As you read, decide whether you would report a shoplifter if you saw one trying to steal something.

Citizen's Arrest

There had been no mistake. I had seen the man take the lighter.

Short Story by Charles Willeford

Notes

Charles Willeford (1919–1988) was a Miami author of many novels and short stories, including a series of crime novels about Miami. He also wrote nonfiction and poetry, and he reviewed mystery and suspense fiction for *The Miami Herald*. As a tank commander in the Second World War, he received the Silver Star, Bronze Star, and Purple Heart, among other awards.

attentively: paying attention in a concentrated way

effusive: gushingly, in a demonstrative way

gabardine: twill-woven cloth

indignantly: angrily

inventory: stock

It was fairly late in the afternoon when I stopped at Gwynn's Department Store on my way home to look at some new fishing tackle. Gwynn's is the best store in the entire city; there are three full floors of everything imaginable. So I always took my time shopping at Gwynn's; a man who's interested in the outdoors can spend several hours in there just looking around.

My back was to the man at the counter—the thief, I should say—because I was looking at the shotguns in the rack behind the locked glass doors. He must have seen me, of course, but he didn't know, I suppose, that I could see his reflection in the glass doors as he stood at the next counter. There was no clerk in the immediate vicinity; there were just the two of us in this part of the store on the ground floor. Casually, as I watched him in the polished glass, he snatched the heavy lighter off the counter and slipped it into the deep right-hand pocket of his green gabardine raincoat.

I was pretty well shocked by this action. As a kid, I had pilfered a few things from ten-cent stores—pencils and nickel key-rings, and once a twenty-five-cent "diamond" ring—but this was the first time in my life I had ever seen anybody deliberately *steal* something. And it was an expensive table lighter: \$75 not counting tax. Only a minute or two before I had examined the lighter myself, thinking how masculine it would look on the desk in my office or on the coffee table in a bachelor's apartment. Of course, as a married man, I couldn't afford to pay that much money just for a cigarette lighter, but it was a beautiful piece of work, a "conversation piece," as they say in the magazine ads. It was a chromium-plated knight in armour about six inches tall. When you flipped up the visor on the helmet a butane flame flared inside the

empty head, and there was your light. There had been a display of these lighters in shining armour on the gift counter, and now, as the big man sauntered toward the elevators, there was one less.

If I'd had time to think things over I am inclined to believe now that I would have ignored the theft. As I've always said, it was none of my business, and nobody wants to get involved in a situation that is bound to be unpleasant, but at that particular moment a young clerk appeared out of nowhere and asked me if I needed any help. I shook my head, and pointed my chin in the general direction of the elevators.

"Do you see that man over there in the green raincoat? I just saw him take one of those knight table lighters off the counter and put it into his pocket."

"Do you mean he stole it?" he asked, in a kind of stage whisper.

"No." I shook my head again. "I didn't say that. All I said was that he put the lighter into his pocket and then walked over to the elevators."

The big man entered the elevator, together with a teenaged boy who badly needed a haircut, and the operator clanged the door closed.

The clerk, who couldn't have been more than twenty-two or three, cleared his throat. "I'm afraid, sir, that this sort of thing is a little out of my province. Would you mind talking to our floor manager, Mr. Levine?"

I shrugged my reply, but there was a sinking sensation in my stomach all the same. By mentioning the theft, I had committed myself, and now I knew that I had to go through with it no matter how unpleasant it turned out to be.

The clerk soon returned with Mr. Levine, a squat bald man in his early forties. He wore a plastic name tag and a red carnation on the left lapel of his black silk suitcoat.

I briefly explained the theft to Mr. Levine. He pursed his lips, listened attentively, and then checked out my story by going over to the glass case of shotguns to prove to himself that the gift counter was reflected perfectly in the polished surface.

"Would you be willing, Mr. ...?"

"Goranovsky."

"Would you be willing, Mr. Goranovsky, to appear in court as a witness to this shoplifting? Providing, of course, that such is the case."

"What do you mean, if such is the case? I told you I saw him take it. All you have to do is search him, and if you find the lighter in his raincoat—in the right-hand pocket—the case is cut and dried."

"Not exactly, sir. It isn't quite that simple." He turned to the clerk, whose eyes were bright with excitement, and lowered his voice. "Call Mr. Sileo, and ask him to join us here."

The clerk left, and Mr. Levine steepled his fingers. "Mr. Sileo is our security officer," he explained. "I don't want you to think that we don't appreciate your reporting this matter, Mr. Goranovsky, because we do, but Gwynn's can't afford to make a false accusation. As you said, there was no clerk in the vicinity at the time, and it's quite possible that the gentleman might have gone off to search for one."

I snorted in disgust. "Sure, and if he can't find one on the second floor, maybe he'll find one on the third."

"It's possible," he said seriously, ignoring my tone of voice. "Legally, you see, no theft is involved unless he actually leaves the store without paying for the item. He can still pay for the lighter, or put it back on the counter before he leaves."

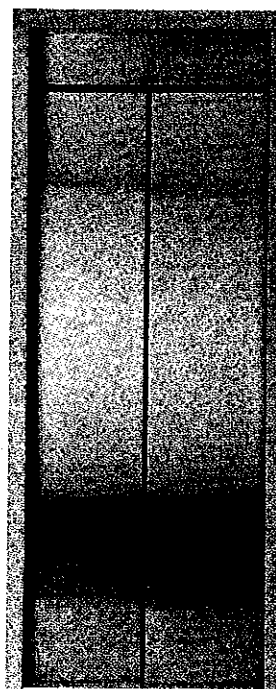
"Sure, I see. Why not forget the whole thing? I'm sorry I brought the matter up."

"No, please. I merely wanted to explain the technical points. We'll need your cooperation, and it's Mr. Gwynn's policy to prosecute shoplifters; but you can't make charges without an airtight case and a reliable witness. If we arrest him within the store, all the man has to say is that he was looking for a clerk, and there isn't anything we can do about it. He very well may be looking for a clerk. If such is the case, we could very easily lose the goodwill of a valuable customer."

"I understand; I'm a businessman myself. In fact, I hope I'm wrong. But if I'm not, you can count on me to appear in court, Mr. Levine. I've gone this far."

We were joined by Mr. Sileo. He was slight, dark, and businesslike. He looked more like a bank executive than a detective, and I had a hunch that he had an important job of some kind with Gwynn's, that he merely doubled as a security officer. In a businesslike manner, he quickly and quietly took charge of the situation.

I was directed to stand by the elevators and to point out the thief when he came down. Mr. Levine was stationed in the centre aisle, and Mr. Sileo took up his post by the Main Street entrance. If, by chance, the shoplifter turned right after leaving the elevator—toward the side exit to 37th Street—Mr. Levine could follow him out, and Mr. Sileo could dart out the main door and circle around the corner to meet the man outside on 37th Street. Mr. Sileo explained the plan so smoothly, I supposed it was some kind of standing procedure they had used effectively before. The eager young clerk, much to his disgust, was sent back to work by Mr. Levine, but he wasn't needed.



To my surprise, when I looked at my watch, only ten minutes had passed since I reported the theft. The next ten minutes were much longer as I waited by the elevators for the man in the green raincoat to reappear. He didn't look at me as he got off, and I pointed him out by holding my arm above my head, as Mr. Sileo had directed, and then trailed the man down the wide corridor at a safe distance. I wondered if he had a gun, and at this alarming thought I dropped back a little farther, letting Mr. Levine get well ahead of me. Mr. Sileo, who had picked up my signal, went out the front door as soon as it became apparent that the man was going to use the Main Street exit. I could see Mr. Sileo through the glass door as he stood on the front sidewalk; he was pretending to fumble a cigarette out of his pack. A moment later, just about the time I reluctantly reached the Main Street doorway myself, Mr. Levine and Mr. Sileo were escorting the big man back inside the store.

I couldn't understand the man's attitude; he was smiling. He had a huge nose, crisscrossed with prominent blood veins, and he had a large mouth, too, which probably looked bigger than it was because of several missing teeth.

The four of us moved silently down the right side aisle a short distance to avoid blocking the doorway. For a strained moment nobody said anything.

"I'm sorry, sir," Mr. Sileo said flatly, but pleasantly, "but this gentleman claims that you took a desk lighter off the counter and put it into your pocket without paying for it."

I resented the offhand way Mr. Sileo had shifted all of the responsibility onto me. The big man shrugged and, if anything, his genial smile widened, but his bluish white eyes weren't smiling as he looked at me. They were as cold and hard as glass marbles.

"Is that right?" He chuckled deep in his throat. "Is this the lighter you mean?" He took the chrome-plated knight out of his raincoat pocket.

"Yes," I said grimly, "that's the one."

He unbuttoned his raincoat and, after transferring the lighter to his left hand, dug into his pants pocket with his right.

"This," he said, handing a slip of paper to Mr. Sileo, "is my receipt for it."

Mr. Sileo examined the receipt and then passed it to Mr. Levine. The floor manager shot me a coldly furious look and returned the slip of paper to the man. The thief reached into his inside jacket pocket for his check book. "If you like," he said, "you can look at the cheque stub, as well."

Mr. Sileo shook his head, and held his hands back to avoid taking the chequebook. "No, sir, that's quite all right, sir," he said apologetically.

Mr. Levine made some effusive apologies for the store which I thought, under the circumstances, were uncalled for—but the big man cut him off in the middle of a long sentence.

"No harm done," he said good-naturedly, "none at all. In your place, I'd have checked, too. In all probability," he qualified his remark.

"It was my mistake," I said, finally. "I'm sorry you were inconvenienced." And then, when neither Mr. Levine nor Mr. Sileo said anything to me, and the big man just stood there—grinning—I turned on my heel and left the store, resolving, then and there, never to spend another dime in Gwynn's as long as I lived.

There had been no mistake. I had seen the man take the lighter, and there had been no clerks anywhere near us at the time. I stood beside my car at the curb, filled with frustration as I ran things all over again in my mind. A trick of some kind had been pulled on the three of us, but how the man had worked it was beyond my comprehension. I opened the door on the sidewalk side and slid across the seat. As I fastened my seat belt, a meaty hand opened the door and the big man in the green raincoat grinned in at me. He held out the shining knight for my inspection.

"Want to buy a nice table lighter, buddy?" he said, chuckling deep in his throat. "I can let you have it without any tax."

I swallowed twice before I replied. "I knew you stole the lighter, but how did you get the receipt?"

"Will you buy the lighter if I tell you?"

"No, damn you; I wouldn't give you ten cents for it!"

"Okay, Mr. Do-Gooder," he said cheerfully, "I'll tell you anyway. This morning there were several lighters on the counter, and I bought one of them at ten a.m. After stashing the first one in a safe place, I came back late this afternoon and got this one free. Unfortunately, you happened to see me pick it up. The receipt I got this morning, however, served me very well for the second. The store stays open until nine-thirty tonight, and I had planned to come back after dinner and get another one. So long as I took them one at a time, one receipt is as good as three, if you get my meaning. So the way I figure it, you ought to buy this one from me because I can't come back tonight for my third lighter. You cost me some money, fella."

"I've got a good mind to go back in and tell Mr. Sileo how you worked it."

"Really? Come on, then. I'll go in with you."





"Get the hell out of here!"

He chuckled, slammed the door, and walked away.

My fingers trembled as I lit a cigarette. There was no mistaking my reaction now—I was no longer frustrated, I was angry. If the man had been my size—or smaller—I would have chased after him and knocked out the remainder of his front teeth. I also considered, for a short moment, the idea of telling Mr. Levine how he had been cheated. All they had to do was to inventory their remaining lighters (there couldn't be too many of them in stock, an expensive item like that) and they would soon find out that they were one short. But after the cold way they had treated me, I didn't feel like telling them anything.

A policeman's head appeared at the car window. "Is this your car, sir?"

"Of course."

"Will you get out, please, and join me on the sidewalk?" He walked around the front of the car and I unfastened my seat belt and slid back across the seat; I was more than a little puzzled.

"Take a look," he said, pointing at the curb when I joined him on the sidewalk. "You're parked well into the red zone."

"That isn't true," I said indignantly. "Only the front bumper's in the zone; my wheels are well behind the red paint. There's supposed to be a little leeway, a limit of tolerance, and I'm not blocking the red zone in any way—"

"Don't argue with me, sir," he said wearily, taking a pad of tickets out of his hip pocket. "Ordinarily, I'd merely tell you to repark or move on, but this time I'm giving you a ticket. A good citizen in a green raincoat reported your violation to me at the corner just now, and he was a gentleman who had every right to be sore. He said he told you that you were parked in the red zone—just as a favour—and you told him to go to hell. Now, sir, what is your name?"

You take it from here ...

Responding

1. Discuss Irony With a partner, answer the following questions.

- As you read the story, what did you think the narrator was going to do at different times?
- How did the thief get away with his crime? What was his trick?
- What is ironic about the ending?
- Why did the thief betray the narrator to a policeman?
- In your opinion, is the story believable?

2. Fill in a Chart Make a chart to show various characters' initial reactions to the theft. Suggest reasons for each.

<i>Character</i>	<i>Reaction to theft</i>	<i>Reasons</i>
<i>Mr. Goranovsky</i>		
<i>clerk</i>		
<i>Mr. Levine</i>		
<i>Mr. Pileo</i>		
<i>thief</i>		

3. Write a Personal Response In a paragraph, indicate what you would have done in the narrator's place. Would you have turned the thief in initially? What would you have done when the store personnel didn't believe you or back you up? What would you have done when the thief confessed his method to you or offered you a deal on the stolen lighter? Exchange paragraphs with a partner and discuss your views.
4. Focus on Theme One of the themes of this story is that the justice system is not always "just." Write a paragraph about this idea based on the events and outcome of this story.
5. Argue a Related Issue In a small group, discuss the narrator's initial inclination to ignore the theft. In your opinion, should people get involved in reporting crimes that don't personally or immediately affect them? Is it better to be honest and speak the truth or to be silent and not tell? Share your group's opinions with the rest of the class.

Extending

6. Rewrite an Ending Write a different ending for this story starting with the scene before the narrator got a ticket.
7. Write a Complaint Letter In the role of the narrator, write a four-paragraph letter to the police protesting the ticket.

TIPS

- In paragraph 1, indicate what the ticket was for and that you are protesting it.
- In the middle paragraphs, recreate the situation, explaining how and why you got the ticket and what was really going on. Tell why you are protesting.
- In the final paragraph, say what you hope the police will do in the light of the facts.

