

Raul

PAUL LAMAR

On the twelfth day of his new job as a security guard outside of S–, one of M–’s finest men’s shops, Raul B– stumbled upon a unique answer to the question of store security, though he was never to be aware of his particular gift or its profound impact on crime in M–.

It was, of course, already his responsibility to be alert to customers leaving the shop with their purchases; at his previous job in his hometown of J–, he had famously (at least in the owner’s eyes) developed a sixth sense about who might be departing without having paid for the shirt or the tie or the pair of colorful socks that were becoming all the rage, thus requiring him to ask—but always politely, even deferentially—to examine the bag’s contents, which occasionally saved everyone embarrassment or even criminal prosecution because he had a way of making the patron feel at ease enough to offer a plausible (but obviously fabricated) explanation. Needless to say, when Raul had to move to M– because of his widowed mother’s declining health, the owner of J–’s men’s shop was certainly sorry to see him go.

But here in the city, he could be observed, as I say, to be looking critically not only at the customers leaving S– but also at the bags of people strolling by S–, customers who had not come from his store but who were merely carrying their bags from shops down the block or around the corner or across the park.

Looking critically in what way? The first time he manifested—completely by accident—this piercing look was to a woman with a

red scarf, walking briskly down the street in the direction of the post office. It was around 1:00, and Raul's attention had been wandering slightly (his mother had had a restless night), and perhaps because of the red scarf, he had watched this woman fixedly from about 50 yards away, never taking his eyes off her until she was about 10 feet away, when he suddenly realized that he was staring, and, in a flash of self-consciousness and professional pride, stared—purposefully—at the white shopping bag, hanging from her wrist.

He furrowed his eyebrows severely and tightly pursed his lips, almost as if he were, with X-ray vision, identifying every object, including the sales receipt, in her bag, though he was, in fact, merely trying to wake himself up. And when the woman was just below him (he was stationed at the top of four steps that led invitingly to the front door of S–), he gave the faintest of professional, dismissive nods, prompting the woman to draw the bag closer to her and walk a bit faster.

In fact, this woman, one Mariana del Thiem, had just shoplifted a silver lavalier from X– on Calle 66, a piece of jewelry at that moment sitting at the bottom of the bag, underneath a modestly priced sweater that she had bought at the same store. Mariana del Thiem was so completely rattled, however, by the judging eyes of Raul B– that, at the next corner, she ducked into the church of San D– de la Cruz and, in an attitude of prayer, secretly and hurriedly dropped the lavalier into the slot of the collection box used to help the poor. Then she undid the red scarf from around her neck and put it over her head, made the sign of the cross, and vowed never to steal again.

And so, over the next 17 years, the shoplifting rate in the central shopping district of M–decreased by an extraordinary 11% because

that was how long Raul B– continued to work at the store in M–. And every weekday, at about 1:00, he found himself fighting fatigue (though his mother had passed away during his 13th year in M–, he was himself getting older) and nearly lapsing into unconsciousness by fixing his gaze on some approaching passerby (always someone wearing red clothing or carrying a red bag or even possessing red hair), and then, out of self-consciousness, staring at that person with a look of such knowingness and judgment that those who were not guilty of stealing nevertheless felt chastened to do better in whatever area of life they had slackened in, and those who had indeed stolen were prompted to return the item or—like Mariana, now a doting grandmother of twin boys, about to make their first communion under her tutelage—to stuff it into the same collection box at the same nearby church.

By coincidence, in the very month and year that Raul began his job, a young priest, Father C–, from Raul's hometown, became the priest at San D– de la Cruz, and as the pieces of jewelry or beautiful ties or fur accessories began to appear in the collection box or on the steps below it, so, too, did the reputation of Father C– increase. The faithful noticed the regular appearance of the gifts and associated them with the arrival of the good-looking young priest. By the 15th year, in fact, Father C– had developed such renown for Christian charisma and charity that he was sent—slightly baffled but certainly agreeable—to Mexico City to serve in the cathedral.

Of course, after Raul retired, the rate of shoplifting began to creep up again, albeit slowly, and no measures the police or the government took could ever cause it to go down as low as it had once been. □