

The Stolen Bathing Suit

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I needed a bathing suit, and I didn't have one. That much, I know.

I was a freshman at Radcliffe, living in the quad in a tiny room that I'd requested when my roommate, Carol, stopped speaking to me after she returned from Thanksgiving break. Though she never explained, I knew that her close proximity to my experimentation with sex and drugs was threatening her educational goals and probably her image of herself.

I went to Touraine, on Brattle Street in Harvard Square, to get the bathing suit because it was the only department store I could walk to from my dormitory. I'd never gone in before; it wasn't an enticing place, its double glass doors nondescript, its staid wares catering to older women; inside, racks of clothes with a handful of mannequins modeling the options, a shoe department, a glass counter with scarves and jewelry. There were only a handful of other shoppers that day, as I made my way to a small area for bathing suits in the back. I chose a few – dark-colored one-pieces – and headed to the fitting room.

The full-length mirror, the fluorescent lighting, the lines of the suits cutting into the pale flesh of my thighs: Disgust. Self-hatred. I needed a bathing suit, but I didn't want one. Standing there quietly in the stall, I formulated a calculation that equated not wanting with not paying. It was an unarticulated concept, below my actual thoughts, but I heard it, and it spurred me. I slipped the suit into my bookbag, returned the others to the rack, and strolled out of the store.

Nothing happened. No one knew. I never felt guilty; it didn't feel wrong. I had my suit even though I didn't want it.

I stole only once more, a few months later, this time in a different store in Harvard Square, this time a pair of jeans I wanted but didn't need. I tweaked the calculation: not needing could be tempered by not paying. I folded the pants and slid them into my bag, and, again, strode through the store's door.

At first, I thought maybe there was a fire or some other emergency. At first, I didn't realize I was the one who had triggered the alarm. Not I, actually, but the jeans. I stopped. A man was approaching me. He was walking quickly; he wore a black uniform. I couldn't meet his eyes, feigned surprise – "Oh, I must have forgotten to pay." I was lucky: He took the pants and warned me not to do it again.

Out on the street, in the sunshine, I walked on the sidewalk with my eyes cast down. I felt sobered; the jeans felt stupid.

I know that an eddy of emotions spun inside me. Shame, guilt, humiliation. Disgust and self-hatred. But I didn't name any of them then. I let them whirl around and around for days until they dissipated. And I never told anyone what I'd done.

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Susan is a writer and educator. Her articles have appeared in The New York Times, Communication Arts, and more. Her short memoirs are published in assorted anthologies and literary journals; one was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. She is a co-author of "Still Here Thinking of You: A Second Chance With Our Mothers" (Big Table Publishing, 2013). She has taught memoir writing for nearly 15 years. More at www.susanhodara.com.

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