

Why does a police car look so much like a police car, like it couldn't be anything else? It couldn't be any more noticeable if it came on to the estate sirens blazing.

'It's there,' I said, 'past the lamppost.'

She stopped the car. She got out, I got out. Our house is the corner one in this squared off bit of street so you have to walk across the stretch of grass where you're not supposed to play football or cricket, and everyone does. I'd heard them as we came round the corner. The Patel kids and our Anthony. They play cricket like world war three. When the car stopped and I got out it went quiet. Desperately, impressively quiet, like someone had said, 'Freeze!'

We went through the gate and she was going to knock on the front door.

'Back way,' I said and we walked round.

Just for a second it crossed my mind that I could run for it. But where could I go? Besides, she was dead close. Breathing down my neck. I went in. As usual, Mum and Dad, were at the table, drinking tea. Smoking. Actually, not smoking. Mum had just put one out, Dad had nicked the filter off a new one, ready to light up. They looked across - and then they saw her. Miss Bluebottle.

'Hi,' I said. And my voice was real normal, as if I wasn't being brought home by the busies.

She said, 'Hello Mrs Markham, Mr Markham.'

They just sat there. Looking. Like they were seeing a scene on telly and waiting for it to change. They're not exactly action packers at the best of times.

'Are you going to tell them, Louise, or shall I?'

Mum and Dad just sat there. Like, *What's this? What's going on?*

'I got picked up for shoplifting,' I said.

'What?' said Mum.

Dad didn't say anything. He forgot to light his cig. His mouth kind of opened, like it was waiting for his cig. Then he closed it, and his head kind of nodded, as if it didn't have anything to do with him.

'Can I sit down?' the copper asked.

'You better come in the front room,' said Mum.

'Hang on a minute,' said Dad. Then he looked at me. 'Did you do it? Were you shoplifting?'

And I knew if I said *No*, he would shove her out the door, copper or no copper.

'Yeah.'

He lit his cig. We went in the front room.

We all sat down. Somehow the copper ended up sitting next to me on the settee. Mum and Dad in the chairs, looking ... separate.

'A colleague and I responded to a call from Merediths Bookshop at 4.30,' said the copper, liked she'd learned the lines. 'There were several girls together, seen behaving suspiciously, and suspected of shoplifting. The manager had apprehended Louise.'

Mum said, 'What were you doing in Merediths?'

Dad said, 'Who were you with?'

'That's what I'd like to know,' said the copper. 'The other girls got away.'

I said nothing.

'Merediths?' said Mum. 'What did you take?'

'*Julius Caesar*.'

'Who?'

I really appreciated Dad making one of his stupid jokes. It was almost like he couldn't help it, even when I was on the point of being hung, drawn and quartered. Then I realised, he wasn't joking. He'd gone senile. I always knew he would. He always said I'd send him round the twist one of these days.

The copper said, 'Louise had four copies of *Julius Caesar* in her anorak. We have

reason to believe one of her friends took multiple copies of Thomas Hardy and another girl took ... some poetry.'

I nearly said Sylvia Plath, but that would have given the game away.

'Is this true?' said Mum.

I wished I could think of some way of denying it. Like claiming the books had just kind of made a rush at me and leapt inside my jacket, like someone was after them. Brutus or someone.

'Yeah.'

'Why?' said Mum.

'For GCSE.'

'Why four?' said Mum.

That was when I decided to shut up altogether.

'Were you taking them to re-sell at school?' the copper asked. As if she hadn't asked me before.

Dad was sort of looking at his feet. I expect he was remembering how when I was little and looking through his books he'd told me which ones he'd *liberated* and when I asked him what *liberated* meant Mum had nearly started to beat him up.

I wanted to tell him it wasn't his fault. It wasn't even my idea. I said nothing.

'So what happens now?' said Mum.

'I have to write a report. The inspector needs to see it. Then it's up the inspector. And Merediths.'

'Is she going to be prosecuted?' said Mum.

'You're an idiot,' said Dad. 'What are you?'

I didn't think I needed to answer.

'Possibly,' said the copper to Mum. 'It would help if she'd give a full statement.'

*Shop my mates*, she meant.

'Can you leave us to talk to her?' said Mum, thinking she could get it out of me.

'I'd prefer it if we could have a statement now,' said the copper.

I said nothing. Why was I so slow? By the time I'd got to the door at Merediths, everyone else had gone and they'd done this clever locking thing so I couldn't get out. I mean four copies of *Julius Caesar*. I wouldn't have minded getting nicked if I'd gone for a big one. Post Office job. I wished I didn't feel sick.

'Well?' said Mum. 'Who was with you? Whose idea was it? Have you done this kind of thing before?'

Say nothing.

'What was wrong with the Library?' said Mum.

'I told you. I told you I needed the books.'

Dad leapt off his chair and came yelling and screeching towards me like he was king of the apes.

'Yahahh!'

Then he stopped in the middle of the room, like he really was king of the apes, shaking a tree.

'I was gettin' em. I was gettin' em for you. I gave you one. I gave you bloody *Julius Caesar*.'

Mum glared at him and I could hear her thoughts saying, *Sit down you. Stop making a show!*

He sat down, but like he couldn't keep still. He was bashing his hands up and down on the chair arm. He found this tab end in his shirt pocket and lit it.

'They were captured on video,' said the copper. 'We will identify them. It would be simpler for us and easier for you if you'd make a full statement.'

'Come on,' said Dad to me. 'Come in the kitchen.'

I got up and followed him in.

He put the kettle on. Tea and cigarettes. That's what he lives on. Cigarettes and

tea.

'Why? Why? Why bring one of them in the house? We can do without the law. Isn't it bad enough?'

'Yes it's bad enough.'

He sent me back in, to ask if the policewoman took sugar.

In the kitchen, he said, '*Julius Caesar, Julius Caesar*. What was wrong with my copy of *Julius Caesar*?'

'It was scribbled in.'

'Annotated. The word is annotated.'

It was like he was dragging the word from somewhere a long way off.

'You're an idiot? What are you?'

There are always three choices when you get a remark like that. You can say, *All right. So I'm an idiot*. You can say nothing, maybe include a sigh. Usually a good option. Or you can say something else. I said,

'Property is theft.'

He banged his hand on the table and at the same moment looked out of the window and saw the police car. He said,

'And theft is a criminal record. For the rest of your life. We don't do that. We pay for what we want or we go without, all right?'

'I'm sick of going without.'

'And do you think I'm not?'

He put teabags in three cups. I poured myself an orangeade.

'Before this tea mashes, I want to know.'

'What?'

'Everything.'

I closed my lips.

'Not her. Me. I want to know. Why four copies of *Julius Caesar*?'

'Me and my mates.'

'Most kids don't care. Most kids play truant. Couldn't you just have played truant during English?'

'We like English.'

I shouldn't have said that. It narrowed it down. He pretended I hadn't given anything away. He said,

'Good. You can study for a degree in jail.'

I started to drink my orangeade. He snatched the glass off me.

'Who? Name names.'

'No.'

'They've got them on video.'

'So they don't need me to tell.'

'Becky Cosgrove, Diana Maynard, Jenny O'Brien ... ?'

He should have been a detective. He should have been something. Then he wouldn't have been here. Spending his life at the kitchen table in a puff of smoke. Offering me his scraggy old books. I wanted something new. Mine. I kept remembering that time I'd spread his books on the carpet, and he'd said, *These were the ones. The ones I liberated.*

'What about you? You used to liberate books.'

'That was then. This is now.'

'So?'

'*Liberated.* The word's ... gone from the language. And ... it was different. We thought we were on the edge of something, something better. We thought the world was going to be a better place. New ... social arrangements.'

He bashed the teabags round the cup.

'You could be expelled.'

I cared and I didn't care. I cared when I got caught. I cared in the car. I cared

when I saw Mum's and Dad's stupid pathetic faces. But now, I was only sorry I was an unsuccessful liberator. I was only sorry it was just books. I hated him for ever liberating books. I hated him for stopping.

He squeezed the teabags. I passed him the milk.

'You make a statement. You've got no choice now. You were caught red handed'  
*Cliche*. I didn't say it, but I looked it. Then I took a drink from the orangeade.

He went on, 'You tell her what you told me. And ... if they were your friends they wouldn't have left you. You're an idiot.'

'You keep saying that.'

'I know one when I see one.'

It should have been, like heightened experience. Like, *This is happening to me*.  
*This is happening to me, Now*.

But it wasn't. This rhyme kept coming back to me. Dad had pinned it on the back of the kitchen door and now I didn't just know it, I Knew it. The look of it, the curly scrawl of it.

*The law condemns the man or woman  
Who steals the goose from off the common,  
But lets the greater villain loose  
Who steals the common from the goose.*

'You shouldn't steal from bookshops,' he said. 'Like you shouldn't steal from ... You shouldn't steal from bookshops.'

'You did.'

'I was wrong. You're supposed to be smarter.'

'Says who? And anyway ... if I'd come home with a diamond ring that would have been all right would it?'

'No! Are you determined to throw your chances away?'

'I'm not supposed to have chances. I'm not supposed to do well. I'm supposed to play truant. I'm supposed to fail.'

'What?'

Mum came in, looking to see what had happened to the tea. She made me carry the cup of tea to the policewoman. As if that was gonna make some difference. As if she's gonna say,

*Oh thanks for the tea. It's such a good cup of tea that we'll leave it at that shall we.*

The copper took a sip from the tea. I could tell that it was too strong for her. She said,

'Right, Louise. I'll take your statement now.'

They both looked at me. They all looked at me. Waiting.

'I needed books for school. I needed *Julius Caesar*, *Thomas Hardy's Short Stories* and *Sylvia Plath's poems*. I needed to be able to read them. Learn them.'

It was supposed to be my statement, but Mum butted in, saying how I'd always been a reader and they'd never had the money for computer games and all those things. That I was in the Junior Library, and how I upset I was that time I got butter on *Just William*.

The policewoman waited till Mum had finished.

'And had you planned this, Louise? You and your friends. Or was it spur of the moment? You had Two pounds on you.'

'I knew what they cost. I'd already checked the price. I didn't have enough money.'

'So you planned it?'

I said, 'It was premeditated.'

Dad looked as if he was gonna do his jungle act and Mum put her head in her hands. Visual cliché.

'Premeditated, between you? You and the other girls?'

I suddenly thought that maybe I should use all sorts of words that I could later claim weren't my vocabulary and then I could say the statement was fabricated. Or maybe I could just leave the country. I said nothing.

'Will you tell me who the other girls were? -- Are they girls from your school? Your class?'

'What other girls?'

Mum said, 'Louise!'

'Have you taken other things ... before?'

We'd planned to. Often enough. We'd planned to form a ring - clothes, jewellery - credit cards. We'd sometimes imagine what we'd do if someone *approached* us like you saw on telly. I mean people usually thieved to support a habit. If you didn't have a habit, you could be quids in.

'No.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes.'

'So why today? Why these books?'

'Couldn't afford them. Needed them.'

She stopped writing. 'It's unusual,' she said. 'Teenagers don't usually steal books. Not even university students steal books.'

'I want a good education,' I said. I glared at Dad.

She wrote that down. Was she going to write everything down? Like the jurors in *Alice in Wonderland*?

'You're refusing to name the other girls?'

'Yes.'

'Is there anything else you'd like to add to this statement?'

'Yes.'

They all waited. Actually, there wasn't, but then I had to think of something.

Frances McNeil

*Nickin' Julius Caesar*

I said, 'Education is something they can't take away from you. That's why they don't want us to have it.'

I thought Dad was smiling, but he was crying. Like really crying.

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