



GONE SHOPPING

The story of

Shirley Pitts
Queen of Thieves

LORRAINE GAMMAN

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B L O O M S B U R Y R E A D E R

GONE SHOPPING by Lorraine Gamman

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When Shirley Pitts died tragically young in 1992 the most famous of the criminal underworld were present or represented at her funeral. Even the Krays sent their condolences...

Shirley Pitts, the eldest of six children was born upside down on 24 november 1934. Her "career" began by thieving bread off doorsteps and coal from coalcarts. Her father's bungled attempts at blackmarketering and her dipsomaniac mother's inadequacies made Shirley resolve not only to be a first-class thief but also the best mother her six children could wish for.

Before she died Shirley told her story to Lorraine - the story of a generous, brave and beautiful woman with a huge sense of fun and a love of life.

About the Author

LORRAINE GAMMAN is Professor of Design, at Central Saint Martins (CSM) College of Arts and Design, University of the Arts London (UAL), where she has taught design and contextual studies since 1989. She is also currently a Visiting Professor and Research Associate at the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS) Australia.

Gamman has published widely on visual culture and design, including co-authored academic books, articles and critical reviews. In her spare time from the day job (which is limited) she is currently writing a crime novel. It is set both in Old Hoxton, where she was born (and still has many family connections) and today's "New Hoxton", a few miles down the road from Stoke Newington, where she lives with her partner and daughter.

PREFACE

Exit the 'Queen of Thieves'

On 25 March 1992 twenty-one Daimlers in regal procession followed Shirley Pitts (also known as Hawkins, amongst other aliases) to a South London cemetery. The woman the newspapers called the 'Queen of Shoplifters' was finally laid to rest, in a £5,000 Zandra Rhodes dress she didn't buy over the counter.



Funeral of Shirley Pitts, March 1992 (© L. Gamman)

Family and friends did their best to say goodbye privately, but it wasn't easy. Photographers and reporters trampled on church and mausoleum roofs to get a better look and turned the funeral into an absolute farce in their attempts to locate 'criminal aristocracy'.

Shirley Pitts' journey had been a long one, far longer than the twenty miles between her home in Chigwell and her final stop at Tooting cemetery. Necessity appears to have been her early criminal inspiration. Shirley was seven when she first went out thieving, stealing bread and milk from doorsteps because her family were hungry. Like her brothers and her father Harry Pitts, who died in prison in 1962, Shirley grew up within criminal subculture in London and soon came to see crime as a 'normal way of life'.

As well as shoplifting, an activity she regarded as her 'bread and butter' trade, Shirley went on to earn her living from fraud, bank robbery, the escort business, jewellery theft, burglary and numerous other scams. In between wearing expensive designer clothes (she developed a penchant for Chanel suits) and having a good time night clubbing, Shirley also found time to give birth to seven children by three different fathers, to be as decent as she could to those close to her and to move home so many times that it wasn't always easy for her partners, let alone anyone else, to know exactly where to find her.

One of the things that most surprised me when putting together Shirley's life story was not only the extent of her criminal career, but also the fact that much of the early 'crime' material in this book sounds like it belongs to a different century. London fifty years ago was a very different place to the city we know and love today, and the mature Shirley was a very different person from the little girl who grew up to be a professional thief.

Shirley Pitts survived so many social changes, including those that influenced the way sixties criminal subculture of theft and bank robbery in London evolved in

the eighties to embrace a new (and perhaps even more cynical) world of drug-related crime. Yet Shirley seemed rather untouched by it all. She had simply ‘done’ every crime going, and, to use a cliché, ‘knew what it was all about’. From shoplifting to bank robbery, from confidence scams to running an escort business, Shirley really was a professional. Yet she didn’t seem cynical about crime at all, despite making her living from it. In many ways I think Shirley viewed crime as a means to living the ‘good life’. Crime was a game to Shirley, a way of providing the money needed so that she and her family could live in style until Shirley pulled off the ‘big’ one (or at least won the pools). Meanwhile, Shirley never seemed to lose hope that she would achieve her dream. Even when she was dying she still found the energy to pull one last scam – she just couldn’t give up the idea of a better tomorrow.



Shirley Pitts with Chris Hawkins, her long-term partner, in the mid-1960s (© C. and R. Hawkins)

To really understand this crazy optimism, and the determination of Shirley’s so called ‘criminal’ mentality, it is perhaps necessary to look beyond tabloid stereotypes and to scrutinize the powerful social forces that inspired this passionate woman to break the law in more ways than one. Such an opportunity to see things from the ‘inside’ is rare. Successful criminals make their careers out of not letting people know what they are really doing, maintaining a façade of respectability for the general public while going about the routine tasks of working at crime. Shirley was no different from her male counterparts in as much as she kept her secrets close to her home. It took a lot of trust between us for her to drop the masks of scam and pretence and for her to tell me how she really felt. Perhaps it also took the realization by Shirley that her life was nearly over and her words could no longer put her at risk of prosecution for her to finally ‘confess’.

On the surface, Shirley was romantic and oh so comical with her humour and ability to accurately mimic people she had met. She always made me laugh when she

told me her stories, but I soon learned to recognize that she split the crime part of her self off from the rest of her personality. Her laughter often hid the sort of experiences buried deep down that most of us can only imagine in our worst nightmares. In retelling these stories, I hope not to promote more crime voyeurism, but, on the contrary, to try to accurately represent, without 'added' glamour, the relationship between poverty and contemporary crime as seen from a woman's point of view.

It was no easy task trying to do this or even putting this book together. At first Shirley didn't want to talk about anything but the past. She tried to avoid discussing the harsh realities of her life and seemed far more interested in recounting nostalgic memories of crime incidents involving friends like Ronnie Knight, Freddie Foreman, Buster Edwards, Charlie Wilson or even the Krays than she did in talking about herself. It took a long while for me to get Shirley to talk about herself in the present tense. Even then our conversations about the criminal aspects of her life were still so entwined with stories about her family that it was often impossible to get her to separate them. In the end, to help our erratic conversation make sense, it is a fact that I have substantially 'ghost written' Shirley's voice in this book – even though the stories themselves originally came straight from Shirley's lips. To the best of my knowledge, nevertheless, I can confirm that all the facts recounted in Shirley Pitts memoirs are absolutely true (I corroborated much of the material via secondary sources) except some names and places have been deliberately altered to save family and friends from possible prosecution.

Shirley Pitts lived for over fifty years as a successful thief and this book presents her story in its entirety, 'warts and all', hopefully without bringing trouble to anyone else's door. It's true Shirley lived outside of society's rules and I haven't written this book in order to suggest that either Shirley Pitts' life, or her actions, were worthy of emulation. All Shirley tried to do was tell me her version of how her life of crime seemed to her, and to describe the circumstances that led to the making of a professional thief. All I have tried to do in writing up this true story is let you see the full human dimensions of the generous and likeable woman the newspapers crowned the 'Queen of Thieves'.

To say Shirley Pitts was one of a kind, and that I truly miss that laugh of hers, would be an understatement. If only a tenth of Shirley's extraordinary and generous spirit shines out through the pages of this book, and some people begin to review rigid definitions about what's supposed to make a person truly 'wicked', then I will have done my job properly and kept my promise to a decent woman I was proud to call my friend. Unlike many of her criminal contemporaries, and it must be said even some of her own family, Shirley Pitts truly *did* believe in old-fashioned values, including now outdated crime values like 'honour among thieves'. I hope by keeping my word and finishing this book – as I always promised Shirley I would – it will be clear to the reader what we shared in common. To put it in a nutshell, real loyalty and friendship are earned not bought: Shirley Pitts earned mine, as well as my respect.

The last words of this introduction should come directly from the lips of the remarkable woman whose 'criminal' life is the subject of this book. Before she died, Shirley Pitts asked me to send warm greetings to anyone who recognizes themselves within these pages. In particular, she asked me to let them know 'that this book is dedicated to all the lucky bastards who never got caught, as well as to some of the poor sods who did'.

Does crime pay? Read Shirley's story and make your own mind up...

Lorraine Gamman

EXTRACTS

CHAPTER FIVE

Meeting the Forty Thieves

Things weren't as hard as when my dad was in prison, but even when Harry was there, there was still never enough money to go round. I remember once when my mum was taken into hospital and my dad was looking after us, we needed some clothes. So my dad asked Alice Diamond to get us some clothes. Alice Diamond was a hoister and hung out with this gang of shoplifters from the Elephant called the 'Forty Thieves' (after the story about Ali Baba and his gang, I suppose). Alice Diamond was the chief of this gang. She was the biggest woman you ever did see. with diamond rings on her fingers and fox furs around her neck. I thought she looked the business. Anyway, my dad asked her to get us kids some clothes, I think it was about Easter time. She said she would take me down the Cut so I could pick out what I wanted and choose sizes for my brothers and sister.

I remember we went into Peacry's, which used to have things hanging up all over the shop: handkerchiefs on pins, socks on pins, as well as men's suits. I didn't realize it then, but Alice had big shoplifting drawers on. As we walked round the shop, she kept asking me, 'Will this fit your brother?' and I said 'yes'. Then it would be, 'Will this fit you or your sister?' Every time I said 'yes', she put some stuff into a holdall bag she had with her, and I remember feeling nervous as well as excited. I wasn't sure how she was going to get out of the shop with it. When I think back, this shop was so typical of the period. You had to queue up to pay the woman sitting at the end of the counter. She would pull down a chain with a tin on it and put the money and the coupon in the tin. The system was like a railway line in the air. The money would go up to a room upstairs and your change would eventually come down. I stood in the queue waiting with Alice and she said, 'When I give you the nod, I want you to take this bag and walk out of the door.' I was scared but I thought I'd better do as I'm told because Alice knows what she is doing. The male shop assistant who was helping customers in the shop had gone down to talk to the lady who was handling the money. Alice nodded and out I went with the bag and waited in the doorway of the Old Vic in Waterloo Road.

Eventually Alice came out. I think she bought a pair of socks and a handkerchief (because you could get two small things for half a coupon then). When Alice saw me waiting for her with the bag, she pinched my cheek, pleased, and said, 'I'm going to treat you, darling, for being such a good girl.' Alice gave me thirty bob (£1.50) and I was in heaven, because that was such a lot of money then. When we got home with all the stuff, my dad was really pleased as well. He didn't know what I had done and paid Alice for the clothes he bought of her. Well, Alice must have been delighted. She was on a good little earner, because, looking back, I could see that I had taken all the risks by being the one that had walked out of the shop with all the stuff. I mean, you can't be nicked until you walk outside the shop with the stolen clothes.

On the way back home, Alice had already told me not to say anything to my dad, because she said he was 'old-fashioned' and 'would go mad'. I didn't see the point in telling him and anyway I wanted to keep the thirty bob. When I went to school the next day – I was at St George's Catholic School then, in St George's Road – I remember buying virtually the whole school ice creams. I was 'big bananas' in the playground for at least a week.

I didn't go out with Alice again until the Christmas of that year. Alice Diamond, Nora Nolan and Nell Waites were going to get our clothes again, because my dad had asked them to. I couldn't wait to go out shopping again with them. These women were like film stars to me. They had furs, beautiful make-up, and I thought they looked like Rita Hayworth (one had long red hair) and Barbara Stanwyck in the way they dressed. They arrived for me in a Chrysler car, and I thought I was going to heaven, not out thieving.

In those days riding in a Chrysler was like going out in a Mercedes. My dad had cars like that when he had money, but generally people were still going about in horses and carts and even the Royal Mail was still transported on a horse and carriage thing. This car was something else. It had a tube going through the back so you could speak to the driver. I was told to sit up in the front because I was small. They said I could 'help' them work. My job was to take the bag out of the shop and unload it in front of the car and go back to the shop again if Alice and the girls didn't come out. They said nobody would pay much attention to a little nipper like me. They paid me well for this day's work and I asked them if I could go out with them again. They said I was 'game', so I could. They liked me and this made me happy.

I remember I was really rich after this. In fact I was the richest kid in our road. I liked the work and I wasn't frightened, even when we went up the West End. The Forty Thieves taught me how to spot some of the silly shop walkers you got in those days. I remember one in particular who used to hide or look at you straight away. It became easy to spot them and my job was to help the girls get their bags out of the shop without being noticed by the walkers. I'd stroll into the shop with an empty bag that was exactly the same as the bag held by Alice or one of the others. When the bag was full, we'd quietly swap. I'd pass over the empty one and walk out with the full one. It really was child's play, and such a good technique.

Even forty years later, I was still working this way. I'd go to really expensive shops in Kensington like Louis Vuitton or Celine holding an extremely expensive leather holdall and load up with the best handbags or clothes I could get my hands on without being spotted. When the shop was full, one of my mates would come in and carry out the full bag as they went, passing me an identical leather holdall to fill up.

Some of the techniques I used throughout my life to work as a thief were learned from going out with the Forty Thieves. But I learned to develop my own style and exclusive looking 'helpers'. There were sometimes up to eight of us shoplifting. Each woman would go in the shop separately until they made a crowd and a diversion for the others - which is no doubt how they got the name 'Forty Thieves'. I'd play hookey from school and wait for the gang wherever they told me to meet them and go in and mingle with the crowd before taking out the bags. Eventually by about 1948 – when I was fourteen and a half I was a fully-fledged shoplifter – I knew how to roll the gear as well as carry it out. I knew all the shop walkers and I even had my own set of shoplifting drawers.

My first hoisting drawers were really funny and I never liked wearing them. They were big old bloomers, like what the old dears still wear. They were made of silk, because with silk you can get more stuff down, because it slips around you. My

first knickers were bigger than me. One of the reason I never liked to wear them (why I preferred to use the bag) was because, even though they had been specially made for me, they were uncomfortable. I was so skinny then, really a shrimp, and the material rode up and gathered around my waist. My legs were so skinny I couldn't put them together when I had stuff down my drawers, and I used to walk like a duck. But I mastered the art, did learn to walk and how to get big items down me – like leather, suede or mink. I always did love the minks – selling them and wearing them. Later on, I used to earn a good living from the mark-up mink, but the vegetarians ruined all that.

Anyway, the most important thing the Forty Thieves taught me at this time was how to roll the stuff. Good hoisting is all in the rolling – especially if you want to take fur or heavy items. You can't just go into a shop and plonk stuff down your drawers – you have to know how to roll it. There is a certain way that you learn to take the stuff from the top and roll it small. For example, you can't leave empty hangers on the clothes rail because that's a sure fire way of getting caught. And if you are going to take a bundle of stuff – like a row of dresses or a couple of suits – you must roll them properly, tight, without the hangers hooking into them or the things get ripped and then they are no good. The Forty Thieves showed me how to roll the stuff from the bottom to the top of the hangers and to cover myself by putting a red herring item in front to cover the action of rolling. You work in pairs. Someone else looks on while you roll and when you've been given the all clear that it is safe to take the stuff, you gently drop it down the rail and into your drawers. Most people looking at you from a distance don't see a thing happening – it just looks as though you are trying to make your mind up about the item held up in front of you, as people do when they go shopping.

Alice and her friends took me hoisting all over the West End of London. I remember once we were down Bond Street wearing smock coats. She got us to take the stuff off the rails and walk along with the tickets on it like we were shop assistants or something. That woman had some nerve and I really looked up to her. My mum knew what was going on, because Alice Diamond and the others would sometimes come into my mum's place and literally use it like a slaughter to sort the stuff out there. They would give my mum clothes for herself as well as kid's clothes. They used to pay me money for my work, about twenty or thirty quid, and Nell would always be borrowing it from me. They were quite good to me, although I did realize they got their money's worth out of me.

Sometimes they just belted the shops. They would take everything in sight and have you working until nine o'clock at night, loading the car up with more and more gear to be resold. I never minded the hard work, because just being around these women was a day out for me. As I said, they were like film stars, so glamorous and beautiful, and I liked to with them. I suppose they influenced me not only by making me work on my appearance, but I saw they used their looks to appear respectable. Afterwards in the pub you'd see another side to them. I thought it was just brilliant when they'd take me in the pub. I loved to watch them putting on their lipstick and hearing them laugh over their gin and tonics or cocktails with the stories of 'near misses' or other close encounters with shop walkers that day.

So I liked the work and the people but also, by going out with the Forty Thieves, I saw a different way of life. I had visited the West End before, of course, but I had never been to Harrods or the posh hotels they took me to. Depending on what we were doing they would dress me up and get me to play my part. I remember once they dressed me up in a 'college girl' uniform that they had stolen, complete

with navy blue hat. This was the cover for the shopping trip that day. I wore the uniform when I went with them around Harrods. I wasn't allowed to open my mouth (I was so Cockney then) and, on the pretence of buying me things or looking at things for school, they took loads of kid's clothes that would be good sellers back home.

I remember feeling that all the big department stores and people in them were so posh compared to me. In Harvey Nichols or Debenhams in Wigmore Street (a very high-class store in those days) I'd take myself to the toilets and think I was visiting a palace. In these stores it was the first time I had been to a toilet where you had your own suite. All marble, your own hand basin, powder, comb and hairbrush. Seeing all this made me think that one day I wanted to live like this at home.

During the months I went out with these women I sort of educated myself about what was what. Alice and the others would take me for high tea in places like the Savoy and other posh places that I've forgotten the names of. I'd be watching everybody and generally soaking it all in while Alice and the others would put on someone's fox or mink and walk out of the hotel. They didn't always tell me what they were up to, but I remember seeing it all go on and taking it all in for a later date. I only stopped going with them regularly because the school complained about my truancy, and my dad by this time had got wind of what I was up to and wasn't happy about it. He made me go back to school, even though Nell didn't seem much bothered and missed the money I gave her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Secrets of the Trade

I suppose hoisting is just a matter of technique, like everything else. How do you do it? It's like asking how long is a piece of string. There are different techniques for different shops: Harrods, Fortnum and Mason, Yves Saint Laurent, Chanel in Paris, I steal things differently in different shops. No, I'd never bother with Marks and Spencer's and I'd never take food. Why should I bother with half-a-crown stuff when a £5,000 designer dress, resold, will earn me enough money to eat out all week.

I use a foil bag sometimes, though I work the old way still too – down my knickers, you know how I mean. But when you use a bag, it's different. You get a really smart carrier bag from somewhere posh and then you layer the inside of the bag a few times with foil. The point is that when you take the clothes out of the department stores or even these little exclusive shops, you have got to get past the bells: you've got to cover the little round pin at the back of the alarm as well as the buzzer itself with the foil. It's all got to be covered up, and checked to see if there is any gap in the foil that you often get takeaway meals in. Anyone can line a carrier bag, or even have a leather handbag lined like mine, but it's got to be thick foil, because the other kitchen foil splits if you push the hangers in the bag too quick. The tiniest hole can set off the whole alarm system and that's enough to get you nicked.

The buzzers that annoy me the most are the ones with ink in them. They are disgusting – who invented them I don't know! Some people do get covered in ink and ruin the clothes even after they have got them out of the shops, but I found a way around that. A friend of mine who worked in a store helped me out by giving me a tool. I've not had it very long – just a few years – but it has saved me wasting a fortune.

Once I knew someone who had some beautiful pure silk men's suits. Armani, I think they were, but they had those horrible ink buzzers on them. They were £500 suits and they only wanted £20 each for them, because no one could get the buzzers off. One by one different people, who said they could unlock them, tried and ruined the suits. I mean no one minds messing one up but if you mess three or four suits up it's just a waste. A real crime. And I do hate wasting things just for the sake of it. They say you live and learn and certainly with shoplifting you find out as you go along how to do it so that you don't waste anything, but I've taught myself what to do, and what works and what doesn't. The simplest way to get most of the alarms off is just to burn them through a little bit from the back. Heat melts the plastic at the back of the alarms and then the plastic comes off and the alarms fall apart in your hands.

Twenty years ago we worked with a box. Yes, it was Christmas-time, my kids were small so it must have been over twenty years ago. Someone we knew made a box with lead flashing but that was too heavy to carry. Then they made a box with foil and a spring clip, so as you opened it up, it snapped back again. The box was really beautiful. It was a square box with a flip lid, but because it was wrapped up with some really good wrapping paper from Selfridges, it looked like a big present. I loved that box. You could get three mink coats in it easy, no problem with the hangers if you know how to roll them properly. I used to love working with that box, but in the end someone must have recognized me, and I got tumbled and so had to give it up.

What actually happened was, one afternoon I was out working the shops, and two coppers came in and turned my Chrissie over. I had a big belly that day, not only because I was pregnant with my youngest daughter but because I had been working the shops with my big knickers. You know, putting the stuff down me – the buzzers weren't such a problem then. Well, I've arrived at my place in Haggerston and my face dropped as soon as I see these coppers. The car outside was loaded up with gear as I'd worked really hard getting the most beautiful cashmere stuff from Harrods. I had presents for everyone.

As soon as I spotted the coppers I pretended to Chrissie that I needed money to pay the cab. I gave Chris the eye and he knew I was loaded up. He gave me a couple of quid and my driver took the hint and said, 'Well, that will be £2,' and I paid him, and he drove to take the stuff back round to the woman I'd been working with, who we had just dropped off.

The first copper said to me, 'How are you Shirley?' and as I could see he knew me, I didn't act at all but just said, 'Oh I'll be glad when I drop this one,' but of course he thought I meant the baby not the cashmere coat I had down my knickers.

He said, 'I'm sorry to hear about your brother Adgie' (who had died a few years earlier). He made small talk that my Adgie was very well liked, despite the fact that he was a thief all his life and robbed banks. (I'm not surprised the police liked my Adgie, he always paid them off and never screamed afterwards, because he knew how to play the game.) Finally, the small talk died out and this other copper came out with what they wanted: he asks me if I know anything about a box. So I just acted like I didn't know what he was talking about. Anyway, they asked, would I mind if they looked round. They didn't have a warrant, but I said, 'No, help yourself,' because I knew I'd got everything out.

It wasn't long before the 'nice' copper found the empty box in the back of the cupboard. He went to the other one as he came down from upstairs, 'What do you think about this?' Before he could answer I said the kids had found it outside and brought it in. The first copper said to me, 'Where did you find it, in the street then?' and I went 'No, my little boy Harry brought it in.' He went, 'Oh!' and threw the box back in the cupboard. He knew there was nothing they could do, because they didn't find any gear with tickets on in my house, but I knew it was time to get rid of the box and I made Chrissie tear it up and dump it.

After that, when I went shopping, I didn't take the stuff back to Haggerston any more, because I thought I might be watched. I had enough criminal convictions to be known to the police as a professional shoplifter. So I started dressing up in wigs and different outfits when I went out to work, to avoid being recognized. The kids used to laugh at my wigs. But when I went out, even they didn't recognize me in my get-ups. I was good at making myself look different, I suppose I still am, I enjoy it. It's like making sure you know how to wear the uniform for the job. It was changing my appearance all the time that really got me out of a bad nick, once, when we were in Scotland.

Today I still use disguises and work down my knickers, although I do have some good leather bags lined with foil and use them when I need to. I always change my appearance and I have had so many different names that even I don't remember all of them. I've been stealing ever since I was a child and I'd be trying to do all that in between bringing up my kids with all their problems, so I really have forgot half of what I got up to. I do remember how much the shops have changed from when I went out shoplifting with the Forty Thieves. Even in the 1960s, when I lived in Hoxton

with the kids, and the shops first went self-service, everything seemed much smaller and easier than they are now.

Most days when I go shoplifting I go to Knightsbridge or Kensington. Years before, it would be Carnaby Street and the Kings Road. They didn't have that many buzzers. You could either pull the alarms off the clothes or just put your bag on your shoulder and walk out (because they only had waist-length alarms on the door, and if you put the bag high up, it wouldn't set the alarm off). Nowadays, they have alarms all over the door and on the ceiling, which is why today you need a good foil bag to get a decent living.

You really have got to be so careful about the alarms in the shops today – they've got magnet ones, they've got ink ones, they've got ones on chains. They even have buzzer alarms that go off in the car parks – I bet you didn't know that. So even if you do get the stuff out of the shops, you have to be careful once you're outside and really have to figure out how you are going to work in the shop and outside it before you take anything.

Good hoisters don't just grab the first pile of rubbish they see or they can get in their bag. What you take is all about how much money you are going to end up earning at the end of the day. So you really do have to plan carefully: if you are going to take expensive things, you have to know that you can sell them again – there's no point in taking things you can't sell. So you have to be a fashion critic as well as a thief. You also have to think like a security person or a policeman, to know how to take things in the first place.

One of the funniest stories I remember about shop buzzers was about one of them stick-on buzzers (I don't know why they don't use them much more, they are so simple but really effective). Obviously you can just pull them off, if you see them, but when they are all over the lining of a garment, no one's got time to pull them off one by one. Anyway, one day, it was Harrods again (I used to love their fur department – I think it was me hoisting, not the vegetarians, that led to it being closed down) and they had made it very hard to shoplift because of their new alarm system. But anyway, with my partner David P., I managed to take seven mink coats on the first day of the sale. It was on LBC radio afterwards that thieves had cleared out Harrods fur department.

We just filled bags up and put coats down us and not a peep out of the alarms. So I was well pleased. I used to love taking mink, because you could get big money from selling it. At least a couple of grand a day, sometimes more. That's how I earned my living most of the time, in between other things, by stealing good clothes and fur and then selling them. One of my favourite tricks on the odd day when I felt worried in the shops was to create a diversion by dropping security tags in the shopping bags of regular customers. I'd snap the buzzers off some clothes on the rails and creep up behind the most respectable-looking customers, and drop the tags in their big carrier bags. By the time they got to the doors the bells would just start screaming. The person would be in shock and there'd be a massive commotion. I didn't do this often – only when I needed to – and then I'd love to pick someone really posh, who had clearly spent a nice few bob in the shop – because they always made the most fuss. While the commotion was carrying on it was easy to have a good load-up and slip out of the door undetected, with virtually anything. Often I stole to order. I knew exactly what to get my customers and, because I was in the most exclusive shops all the time, my buyers learned to trust my judgement and fashion sense. I always kept good clothes for myself and people often wanted me to get them the same as my own clothes.

Anyway, the day when we took the seven minks from Harrods, I put one of the coats aside for a girl, S., an acquaintance that lived in Bromley, because I knew it was exactly what she wanted. Her husband paid cash on the nose that night when I delivered it, and I was pleased because I wanted to take the kids out for a spend-up.

A couple of days afterwards my friend rang me and said, 'You're never gonna guess what's happened to me.' Well, I laughed all through the phone call, she was so comical despite being deadly serious. She had gone down to Bromley High Street to do her Saturday shopping, in her new mink coat, and she's got one of those naff shopping trolleys. (What a prat she must have looked in her £9,000 mink pushing an old shopping trolley.) As she's walked into the first shop the alarm went off so she ran out. She went into a department store next, and the same thing happened again. So she goes straight home and gets her husband to go all over the coat. He couldn't find a thing on it.

So S. goes out again. The same thing happens, but this time she ignores the alarms and carries on shopping. She gets a bit of food shopping and then walks into a boutique – Chic Chic, she said it was called. She said, when she got into the shop, the shop assistants kept looking at her funny. Eventually, the manageress says to her, 'That's a nice dress you've got on.' She said, 'Thanks,' and took no notice, going off to look at what to buy. She pays for her goods. When she leaves the shop the buzzers went off again! So the woman says to her, 'Could you please come back into the shop, because, do you know what's happened, I think you've bought something and you've still got the buzzer on it. Could I have a look at your trolley? They've phoned us from the other shop, down the road, and said that as you walked over their rays, their buzzers went off all over.'

S. is cracking up by now. She said, 'Yes, you can have a look in my bag.' I mean, she's not a thief or anything, and so the manageress searched her and didn't find a thing. Then the manageress asked to look at her dress. There was nothing on her dress, so she says to S., 'What a beautiful mink.' Well this is the comment that freaks S. out. She said, 'Yes, my husband bought it for me for Christmas. Isn't it lovely?' hoping like fuck the woman's not going to examine it.

The manageress tells my friend, in a very polite way, that a buzzer may have been left on something else she has bought. Anyway, she went all over the coat and there was nothing on that either. S. breathed out as the shop assistants now say, can they look at her shoes (some shops put adhesive buzzers on the soles of shoes). Again nothing is found. So the manageress said, 'Well, I think it must be something to do with that trolley. That trolley must be setting it off somehow.'

Well, S. leaves the shop and says she couldn't get in the car quick enough. She said she knew it was the coat and as soon as she got in, her husband went all over it again. Finally, when he pulled the lining up he found the buzzer right inside, at the top, on the collar, a concealed adhesive strip. S. said she was so relieved to find it. But I'm not sure she ever went shopping in her mink again.

I've seen some people I know, and I wouldn't do this myself, get so frustrated that they have torn the garment to get the buzzer off. Disgusting. There's no skill or art to that. Most of the women I've worked with are really good at removing buzzers, with neat little fingers, they don't ruin clothes. We've all got clippers and all you do is put the clippers over the two little holes on the buzzer and, as you press, it just releases the alarm. But you have to be patient. Some of the women I have worked with weren't always patient, but it wasn't clumsiness with security alarms that usually got spotted first but the 'wrong' appearance.

I worked with this woman once who used to get a lot of really beautiful stuff with me from Harrods, but she just wouldn't dress up. She was really good, this woman, and worked from the bag, not down her drawers, and I felt safe working with her, because she knew where to look in the shop while I rolled the things up and tucked them down me. But she really didn't like coming in the big stores with me – after we had got one thing, she would want to leave, and I was always trying to get her to dress up so we could go back in the shops over and over again. My friend just wouldn't do her hair different and I would always be nagging her to get a wig so she could change her colouring.

Well, one day we were in South Molton Street, so I took my friend up to this wig shop, which at the time was above a dentist. It was a lovely shop this one, they made beautiful hand-made wigs, and I persuaded her to make an appointment to get a wig. While my friend is arranging a time for the staff in the shop to see her, I nick two wigs. They were in boxes, and you couldn't really see what you were taking. The ones on the stands would be missed right away if I took them, so I took two out of these boxes and we left the shop without them knowing.

We go and find somewhere to have coffee and freshen up before we hit the shops again. My friend sits down and, as I come out of the toilet, I throw this wig on her. It was a black wig with curls going across, and as I put it on her, I said, 'It really suits you.' Well, my friend can't see herself, can she, and says to me, 'What do I look like?' and I said, 'Fine. You look different, but it's really you.' So she didn't feel rotten, I put the other one on, she helps me adjust it and off we go to Browns to steal more gear.

We had a routine. We would walk into the shops separately and pretend we didn't know each other, so we could work together better. So we split up to walk into Browns separately, but as you walk in the shop, there is a big mirror right in front, and for a split second we catch each other's eye. Well, we couldn't keep a straight face. As we came face to face with each other, we just burst out laughing. My friend's in this black wig and I'm in a fucking old ginger one – we just looked so funny, they looked like judges wigs with the curls hanging round our shoulders. My friend was wearing a raincoat, and I thought to myself, we look like Gert and Daisy. Well, this set me off laughing all over again and now I've got my friend hysterical, so there is nothing for it but to go back to the car.

There are so many nutters in the West End, the people in the shop probably just thought were from one of the Christmas pantomimes and didn't take much notice of us. But when we got back to the car and our driver caught sight of us – it was Tony that time – he really started laughing, he just couldn't stop, and my friend was fucking furious. She was really wild by then to think that the driver was taking the piss out of us. After that I could never get her to wear a wig, which was a shame, because if you looked different, and worked with the right people, you could just go back to the same shops over and over again.

Extracts for the 2012 Afterword; The lie that told the truth? Reviewing Shirley Pitts shoplifting scripts and criminal masquerade as “creative practice”

1: This critical essay is aimed at ALL the readers who have just enjoyed Shirley Pitts story. It offers a feminist reading of Shirley’s “crime scripts”, and what I am calling her “criminal masquerade”, defined here as a false outward show and made possible through her use of performance and disguise when carrying out the job of crime. If this description, like the government health warnings on today’s cigarette packets, does not put you off then you probably believe as I do that there is some pleasure to be gained from the sort of contextual and theoretical analysis I am about to propose. Susan Sontag (1966) once pointed out that “there are no facts - only interpretations” and what follows are my own reflections on the life and times of the female protagonist who is at the centre of this book. I do not want to undersell the validity of Shirley’s account, so I should clarify my intention. I aim instead to help you think a little differently about Shirley Pitts by “making strange” her story so you can see her, one more time with feeling, from four different critical perspectives.

2: ...Shirley’s capacity for improvisation is also significant. Her use of “magic bags” (foil lined bags) and the ability to disguise her appearance in order to avoid detection by CCTV and most anti-theft tagging systems, raises questions about the efficacy of the latter. The continuing investment in security measures based on new technologies is comparable to an arms race from the retail industry’s point of view. As the criminologist, Paul Ekblom (1997, pp. 259) has observed, “the challenge [is...] to keep up with the adaptive criminal in a changing world”. Yet, while Shirley maintained an awareness of the dangers of enhanced retail security, based on crime prevention technologies, this did not deter her during a lifetime of prolific offending. Even in the 21st century anti-theft security is still not *built in to the design* of retail outlets via the bricks and mortar, but usually *added on* to objects and products as well as buildings. Professional thieves are able to find their way around such security, as Shirley did, with a used store carrier bag lined with 50p’s worth of tin foil. This modification operated successfully by cancelling out tag alarms, hence the magic bag analogy. The examples in Fig. 1 were photographed by a student and me in 2009 at a shopping centre in Kent when working on a crime prevention project. I should also add that security staff these days are very adept at spotting magic bags and are aided in this task by today’s effective technology that makes this possible. To be caught carrying such a bag, even if a foil lined bag does not contain stolen goods, nowadays constitutes a criminal offence.

Fig. 1 Foil lined bags confiscated by Police in a shopping centre in Kent.

