

# STOCKTAKING

3966 WORDS

## Stocktaking

Shops that sell antiquarian books might get broken into occasionally, but twice at once seems excessive. At least, it does to me; I was one of the people breaking in.

Although I'm usually punctilious – and only someone punctilious would use that word – I didn't extend myself over this one. After all, I was after a single book, not the Alexandrian Library.

The shop stood in a quiet street in Bath. Amongst the honey-toned, Georgian facades, its brickwork looked a bit out of place, an orphan, like me, unsure of acceptance.

Its only alarm was a movement sensor. Normally, I'd research the make and model – if they weren't ones I knew – and knock up an electronic disabler. This time, as I was staying in a nearby hotel during the festival, all I did was set the thing off night after night. It wasn't difficult; I took a walking stick with me and poked it through the letter box.

Despite the music festival, the police weren't busy – in Bath, a couple of double-parking incidents is a crime wave – but they don't like their evening card game interrupted, especially for nothing. So the shop owner switched off his movement sensor and promised to get it repaired.

As I elbowed a small pane of glass on the door, I felt quite nostalgic; it was like being a wayward kid again, before the paraphernalia of keypads and pressure alarms and entrance codes. Headlight beams flashed around me as a car passed, but I was out of sight in the shop entrance. With my gloved hands, I picked out the pieces of window glass and let myself in.

I climbed a few stairs to the back room. The shop had once been a house, although it hadn't been lived in for ages. Upstairs, I knew from my one visit, were two more rooms of books. I closed the door to the back room. As it was windowless, I switched on the light.

Here they all were, the leather-bound volumes, the signed paperbacks, the hard-cover first editions. Clearly, to be kept in this room, you had to be special and valuable – individual. Each book, despite mass-production, had its own appeal and personality. I was about to locate the book I'd come for when I heard a creak on the stairs.

Some people – optimists – would tell themselves it was the wood shrinking, a drop in temperature causing the creak. Being a pessimist, I was certain it was a footfall.

I turned off the light. A few groping paces took me behind a table. The books on it, I recalled without merriment, described Victorian architecture. Particularly prisons.

Perhaps the shop had a cat. A very overweight cat. I like cats. They have all sorts of appealing characteristics and attributes – but they don't include turning a door knob, as this one was doing.

I heard the door inch open. A pause. Then I heard it close. I waited. Had the person gone? Maybe to the front door. If so, what about the broken pane?

I needn't have worried. Whoever it was wouldn't be inspecting the broken pane. I was sure of this. How? Because the intruder wasn't by the front door. The intruder was in the room with me.

You can strain to listen too much. I sensed rather than heard. An empiricist, I rely on my senses but, in extreme circumstances, maybe there's something else. I didn't have the time or inclination to pursue this; the light came on.

Crouching behind the table, all I could see was a stack of books. My nose was inches from H.G. Wells' 'The Invisible Man'.

'Can't find the book you're looking for?' enquired a voice.

I held my breath. I don't know why. A wish not to be seen or heard. A wish not to exist.

'Perhaps I can help you,' the voice said.

A female voice – that much registered. Thoughts whirled. A policewoman? The owner? A ghost?

Calming down, I began breathing again. Slowly, I stood up.

She was facing me. Being observant, I noticed she was between sixteen and seventy; her black outfit, complete with Balaclava mask, accounts for the margin for error. Her gloved hands hung by her side; I was grateful to see they were empty. Clearly, this wasn't the police or the owner with some weighty object for a weapon. It began to dawn on me she was a burglar. A bloody thief! And she couldn't have long given up reading 'Batman' or some other comic.

I'm not good at etiquette. I've always been a loner. But I suspected, in this situation, 'How do you do?' isn't appropriate. An affronted, 'What the hell are you doing here?' seemed possible, as though I was a legitimate occupant. But I'm a burglar, not a con man. Besides, it wouldn't fool *me*, never mind her.

'How do you do?' I said.

I can't be sure – she was covered head to toe – but she appeared to cringe.

'Hi,' I tried, unconvincingly.

'Do you come here often?' she intoned. Even I detected the scorn.

Twenty years I've been a burglar. I've never been caught, not even once. As far as criminal records and the police are concerned, I'm anonymous. I keep abreast of technological developments and I devise my own electronic gadgetry. Yet this, this shadow of a person, this renegade from 'The Beano', had the nerve to disdain me.

'We seem to be here for similar reasons,' I said. 'You'll find the comics in the front room.'

'Comics are considered art nowadays,' she replied haughtily. 'They're even used to disseminate philosophy.'

It was the word 'disseminate' that prodded me. Like 'punctilious', it raises the inner eyebrow.

I tried a new tack. 'This is clearly your first venture into this field. Your outfit does the opposite of concealing your amateurishness. How old are you?'

'Eighteen.'

I was shocked – not only by her age, but that she'd answered the question.

'How old do you have to be before you're a person?' she asked. There was a sudden weariness in her voice, but she soon reasserted herself. 'I need to find out who I am – or *if* I am.'

There are times – in a cosy pub, say – when you know it's time to go. Someone starts confiding in you and, pretty quickly, the raging snowstorm outside seems preferable.

'As we're here on similar missions,' I said, 'let's make our selections and go our separate ways.'

'Which book were you looking for?' she asked.

A number of titles flashed through my head. 'Farewell, My Lovely' was a strong contender.

I glanced at her outfit again. She'd turned a fraction and, now, on her belt, I could see a phone in a pouch.

'I don't believe it!' I gasped. 'You've come here – with a phone! You're expecting a friend to call? – to have a chat?' I took a deep breath and forced myself to calm down. 'How did you get in? An upstairs window?'

'The roof. I clambered across gables and removed a few slates.'

Just like that. She seemed so casual. When I was a youngster on my first solo job, I was tense. She was a mystery.

Until she said, 'I'm a philosophy student. At Bath University.'

Short of giving me her telephone number, her cover, black and all-encompassing though it was, couldn't have been more superfluous.

'It was a first edition of Hume's 'A Treatise of Human Nature', I said. 'The book I was looking for.'

'You study philosophy?' she asked, as though the idea was ludicrous.

Which, I admit, it was. To a certain extent. 'No,' I replied. 'I steal to order. One of my clients wants it.' And then I stopped, alarmed I'd volunteered so much.

'Don't let me hinder you.'

She didn't look as though she'd hinder me. She looked unconcerned. As I couldn't see her facial expression, I visualised the one I wanted.

I turned to the bookshelves and searched. Best to get the job done and be on my way. But the book didn't appear to be there.

‘Can’t you find it?’

I couldn’t. It wasn’t where I saw it when I’d visited. Surely it hadn’t been sold in the past few days? Just my luck.

‘Hume’s not here,’ I complained.

‘Appropriate then.’

‘Meaning?’

‘He couldn’t find himself,’ she said. ‘Or *any* self. Only a sequence of perceptions – the ideas and memories looked at. Not the looker.’

The raging snowstorm outside, had there been one, became positively inviting. I’ve always thought it’s a mistake to teach philosophy to kids: first, because it can be depressing and, second, because it’s bollocks. I mean, philosophy claims to employ logic, yet comes up with multiple, contradictory answers.

‘Surely,’ I said, ‘students aren’t so hard up they have to steal books?’

‘I’m not here to steal books.’

‘No?’ I tried to look quizzical. ‘My logic might not be as developed as yours, but this is a book shop and you’ve broken into it; ergo, you’re here to steal books. Or have I missed some quantum leap in thinking?’

‘I was a Buddhist.’

Evidently I had. I was reasonably bright at school. I learned grammar and my multiplication tables – all right, they’re not exactly predicate calculus, but I managed. So I didn’t like being confused by an angst-ridden teenager. She was like something out of a thought experiment.

‘Anyway,’ she added helpfully, ‘I don’t care much about owning things or coveting them.’

‘I see,’ I said, light dawning. Then it clouded over again. ‘So you broke in here to ...? Burn joss sticks? Meditate on the Eightfold Path?’

‘Hardly’ she scoffed. ‘That would be silly.’

‘God forbid.’

‘No,’ she said as she moved towards a corner. ‘I’m here to break into the safe.’

I couldn’t help staring. I hadn’t realised – and I don’t like admitting this – that there *was* a safe. She moved a couple of piles of books and there it was: an old Chubb combination.

A host of questions raised their hands, like an overcrowded class of schoolchildren.

‘If you don’t care about owning things ...’ was the first and most insistent. It couldn’t even wait for a question mark.

‘I’m hardly going to pillage the place,’ she replied.

Before I had time to think, my second question found voice. ‘How can a Buddhist decide to do such a thing? In fact, how can a Buddhist decide to do *anything*? If you don’t see yourself as a single ego, merely as a walking bundle theory, who’s in charge?’

She turned to look at me. ‘So you *have* read philosophy.’

‘Hell no. I’d rather do cryptic crosswords, or count raindrops, or have my feet boiled in oil. All I’m saying is that perceptions, whether yours or Hume’s, can’t make decisions.’

‘You understand,’ she sighed. There was relief in her voice. ‘I thought I was the only one – which, for a Buddhist, is about as near to blasphemy as you can get.’

‘You’re losing your conviction?’ I asked, trying not to look at my watch.

She faced me, then took off her Balaclava. As she shook her hair loose, I saw a fresh-faced girl with pale skin.

‘I don’t know why I chose a philosophy course,’ she said. ‘Or any course, come to that. I’m not very suited to engaging with things.’

‘Blowing safes doesn’t count?’

‘I’m not going to blow it,’ she smiled. ‘Of course not.’

I was relieved to hear it. For me, the Chubb wouldn’t be much of a challenge, if I’d had my equipment with me.

‘You’re not a happy person, are you?’ she asked, pity softening her voice.

The snowstorm outside turned into a hurricane. I imagined whole trees whistling past and longed to be amongst them.

‘Is it due to your upbringing?’

‘I was an orphan,’ I replied. Sometimes, words just rush out before I give them permission. ‘The truth is’ – well, I’d started, so what the hell – ‘I feel as though I’ve never really had any choice.’

‘How did you become a burglar?’

‘My foster Father taught me,’ I said. ‘I suppose everything’s cause and effect.’

‘Twaddle!’ She looked dismissive. ‘Determinism’s just an excuse.’

‘Everything that happens has to be dependent on something that caused it,’ I said.

‘You really believe that?’

‘Of course. Otherwise the world wouldn’t operate the way it does. Events would be random.’

She looked back to the safe. ‘You told me there must be something that views ideas and perceptions. It’s what’s worried me for some time. Now,’ she added, turning away, ‘I’ve got a safe to open.’

‘What method are you going to use?’ I asked, doubt in my voice. Even so, I moved forward for a better view. ‘Stethoscope? Drill?’

‘This outfit’s tight-fitting,’ she replied. ‘Do you see a concealed stethoscope or drill?’

I let my eyes wander over her body. They took their time. Apart from the phone, they didn’t, among the bumps and curves, detect anything like a stethoscope or drill. They checked again anyway.

She knelt down, flexed her fingers, closed her eyes, opened them, took a deep breath, then turned the knob back and forth.

The safe clicked open.

‘That’s amazing,’ I gasped. ‘How did you do it? Some kind of Zen concentration?’

‘Not really,’ she said. ‘I knew the number.’

That’s the trouble with mysticism; it always turns out a deception – usually *self*-deception. We want to believe in it, of course, but that’s our ancient, Jungian self desperate to escape reality.

‘My uncle owns this place,’ she said as she pulled open the safe door. ‘It wasn’t difficult to find out the combination.’

I’m used to disillusion. Yet, somehow, it still manages to surprise me. Still, if the safe held cash, there might be compensation.

‘If you were able to get the combination,’ I said, ‘why couldn’t you get the front door key?’

Taking papers out of the safe, she said, ‘It was the movement sensor; I didn’t know how to disable it. Thanks for doing it for me.’

‘My pleasure,’ I said, not quite gritting my teeth. She sorted through papers and brown envelopes.

‘It began to go off each night,’ she continued. ‘On the third night, I was watching.’

I was evidently taking this job too casually. I’d even been thinking of shoplifting the Hume book – until I saw the size of it. But what she was saying didn’t make complete sense.

She continued to inspect the safe’s contents. Still no money.

‘The break-in must be attributed to *you*,’ she said.

‘I see.’

‘You, as in unknown professional burglar,’ she added.

‘You’re not as clever as you think,’ I said. ‘The police will find two places of entry; the roof and the door.’

‘Got it!’ she exclaimed and pulled out the contents of a large brown envelope. I frowned. All I could see were photocopies of official-looking documents.

‘Two places of entry?’ She glanced at me. ‘You’re rather gullible, aren’t you?’

I’m not known as a violent person. I’m seldom in fights and I certainly haven’t murdered anyone. Yet.

‘If I’d come in through the roof,’ she continued, ‘I’d have made enough noise to wake concertgoers in the Guildhall. And I’d be covered in dirt and cobwebs, wouldn’t I?’

So what was she doing? Acting out some private drama? A Buddhist Batwoman? A philosophising fantasist?

‘Right,’ she said, standing up. ‘I’ve got what I came for.’

But that didn’t make sense either. She’d looked at the contents of the large brown envelope – and replaced it intact in the safe.

I crouched and rummaged. There was no money – not even a petty-cash box. Again, I couldn’t decide which question to ask first.

‘Let me explain,’ she said, as though reading my mind. ‘I followed you in.’

From a pocket, she produced a key and waggled it. I wasn’t feeling at my sharpest, but even I worked out it fitted the front door.

‘All right,’ I said, ‘I’m your fall guy. But what evidence is there that I exist? As far as anyone can tell, you’re the only ...’

My voice trailed off. Lights in my head were beginning to come on – almost literally.

‘When the headlights flashed across the doorway ...’ I pondered out loud. ‘That was when ...’ I glanced at the phone on her belt. ‘You took a photo of me, didn’t you?’

Her grin confirmed it. I was doing well; I’d managed to link two thoughts. For me, at the moment, that was the equivalent of producing the theory of relativity.

‘Don’t worry,’ she said. ‘It won’t be clear enough to identify you.’

‘But clear enough to clear *you*,’ I said. ‘How do you know I won’t take your phone and destroy it?’

‘Because I sent the photo straight to my computer.’

‘Fair enough.’

‘If I need to produce the photo,’ she added, ‘I’ll do it anonymously. I’m good at being anonymous. In fact, that’s what this is all about.’

‘It is?’ I tried to make it sound less than a question. I didn’t succeed.



‘Have you heard of Theseus’ ship?’ she asked.

As a matter of fact, I had, but felt this wasn’t really the time or place to discuss it.

‘Aren’t you worried the police might turn up?’ I asked.

‘Not a lot. They seldom drive down this street. Besides, I covered your broken pane with an ad’ for Morris dancing.’

‘You did *what?*’ I exclaimed.

‘You don’t approve?’

‘Is there no tactic you won’t stoop to? *Morris* dancing?’

She ignored that and re-boarded Theseus’ ship.

‘The ship was preserved,’ she said, ‘but, over time, every plank and beam rotted and had to be replaced. Could it still be called Theseus’ ship?’

‘You’re forgetting your ova,’ I said.

For a change, it was she who was puzzled.

‘All the cells of your body are replaced,’ I said, ‘except your ova and lens. As for whoever dreamt up the Theseus metaphor, well, the windows of his soul need glasses.’

‘That doesn’t work,’ she complained.

‘Exactly. Nor do so many philosophical metaphors. The brain cells that replace dead cells clearly inherit a lot more than planks that replace planks.’

She remained silent for a moment, then seemed to make a decision.

‘That,’ she said, a wave of one hand indicating the safe, ‘is to do with relationships.’

‘I see ...’ I said slowly, none the wiser.

‘My uncle. He’s a bastard.’

‘There are other ways to get at him,’ I said.

‘I mean his parents weren’t married.’

‘I thought,’ I said with a smile, ‘you meant he’s a swine.’

‘That too.’

I’m glad I’m a burglar. It’s a simple life. All right, you need to keep up with technology, but you know where you are. And who you are. It doesn’t have to get complicated. There’s the moral side to deal with, of course, but how often do you meet people who can’t justify their behaviour?

‘I felt I was a nobody,’ she continued. ‘Maybe that’s why Buddhism seemed natural to me. But I’ve become more individual, less placid, and I resent its teachings more and more.’

‘So pick another belief. As a philosophy student, you’ve plenty to choose from.’

‘I found out I was adopted,’ she continued. ‘But it was unofficial. My adoptive parents refuse to tell me more and I drew a blank with the official agencies.’

I tried to work out what this had to do with becoming Cat Woman and robbing a shop. Fortunately, she got to that bit next.

‘Uncle Jack, who owns this shop, told me he knows all the family history. That’s because his hobby, apart from something I won’t mention, is genealogy. I suppose it’s because his Mother wasn’t married. Anyway, he’s kept my parentage to himself and used it as a psychological weapon.’

At last, it became clear.

‘That envelope you looked in,’ I said. ‘Genealogy?’

‘I found copies of birth and marriage certificates.’

‘In that case, why haven’t you made photocopies?’ I asked. ‘There’s a copier in the front of the shop.’

She smiled. ‘I’m not as bright as the average undergraduate.’

‘You seem to do all right,’ I said with restraint.

‘That’s not because I’m especially bright; it’s because I have a very retentive memory.’

‘Just glancing at those documents was enough?’

‘I’ve got all I need to know,’ she said. ‘I’ll write it out later. I need a sense of self, whether it’s a fiction or not.’

‘Yet you don’t think you’re a product of the past?’ I said, closing the safe.

‘Of course I am. But that’s not the same as determinism. Do you really think that every word and every comma in all these,’ – she indicated the shelves of books – ‘was pre-ordained in the Big Bang?’

I could see where this was leading. It was accept-you’re-responsible time again.

‘In quantum theory,’ I replied, ‘cause and effect isn’t the whole story.’ Well, I had to try.

‘As though randomness would be any better,’ she scoffed. ‘The random functioning of your brain would be a wonderful excuse, wouldn’t it?’

‘Look, I don’t need all this! I only came to nick a book!’

‘Hume’s book.’

‘Sod it, he won’t mind!’ I said. ‘He’d be pleased.’

‘He didn’t find a self that views perceptions,’ she said, ‘but the fact that we can decide which perceptions to view indicates we have choice.’

I made for the door and reached for the light switch.

‘Wait, she said, placing a hand on my arm. ‘You might be a product of your past, but you have a choice.’

‘Which is also the product of the past,’ I said.

‘Yes, the possibility of choice, not the choice made. Influences may be great; they’re not insurmountable.’

‘The choice I’m making at the moment,’ I said, ‘is to get out of here. We haven’t taken anything, but one of us isn’t leaving empty-handed.’

‘I’m not a thief,’ she said hastily, ‘and I wouldn’t be an accomplice to one ...’

She obviously hadn’t finished, so I waited.

‘... but it wouldn’t be immoral if I mentioned that Uncle Jack’s in the middle of a re-organisation. Besides, as I said, he’s a bastard!’

Taking the hint, and not wishing her new-born, innocent self to be sullied, I looked towards the piles of books. And, for the first time, noticed a box of labels next to a pair of scissors. Of course! The piles of books weren’t due to untidiness or lack of space; Uncle Jack was re-arranging his stock.

I must be slowing down or growing complacent, I thought.

A few strides took me to an unfilled shelf. And there, next to other antiquarian volumes, was Hume.

‘Hello, old chap,’ I said warmly. ‘He who was lost has been found.’

I took down the book and, back by the door, turned off the light. We passed through to the front of the shop.

I automatically whispered. ‘You’re going out dressed like that? It’s a miracle you weren’t arrested on the way here.’

‘It’s only a miracle,’ she replied, picking up what was clearly her coat, ‘if, as Hume says, it’s more likely than being a false report.’

I was miffed. I’d got what I came for, but it hadn’t been a good night.

She put on her coat and looked anonymous again. I hoped her full-dress adventure had made her feel better about herself. Looking out through the shop windows, I carefully checked the street was clear.

There were things we could have said on parting. One of them wasn't, 'What's your name?' I'm not the most trusting of souls and this encounter had done nothing to convert me. As we stepped into the street, we made eye-contact, then walked in opposite directions.

On my way to the hotel, I began to think about things. There was a lot to consider. And maybe a choice to be made.

Some other day.

End