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**T 700 BUCKS, IT WASN'T THE MOST EXPENSIVE BIKE,** but it was the most expensive one I'd ever owned: a brand-new Pure Cycles Urban Commuter in Pelican, a fancy name for blue-gray. I liked it because it was light. I was no longer in my 20s, when I would heft my bike up the stairs to my apartment after a night of beach volleyball and postgame beers. I was now in my early 50s with back problems. "I'll take it!" I told the Kozy's Cyclery salesman, breathless after a test ride that probably stretched the limits of how long a test ride is supposed to be.

After tricking out my new ride with a lock, water bottle cage, and strobe lights for night, I immediately took it to the Lakefront Trail, where I flew southbound past the Museum Campus. After several years of renting heavier Divvy bikes, I felt like I'd sprouted wings. I sped along the path with a wide, silly grin, recapturing the giddiness I'd felt as a young girl riding bicycles.

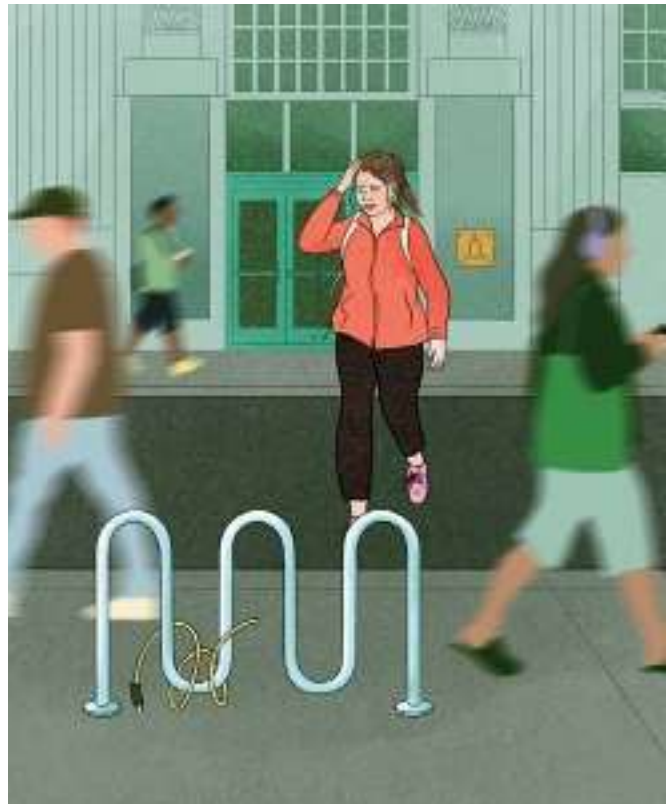
Less than a month later, my bike was gone.

In Vittorio De Sica's 1948 film *Bicycle Thieves*, the main character, Antonio, gets his bicycle out of hock so he can work posting bills—the only job available for him in post-war Italy. If he doesn't work, his wife and two children will starve. I saw *Bicycle Thieves* at the Music Box sometime in my 30s. By then, I'd had two bikes stolen. One was taken from the rear stairwell of my apartment building in Lake View. I had parked it on my back deck and gone inside to make a call—which meant the thief had scaled a locked iron gate, run up the stairs, and carried my bike back down undetected, all within the 20 minutes I was gone. It was my urban baptism. The speed and cruelty of the crime knocked the wind out of me, and I vowed to never leave my bike unattended again, as though it were a toddler who'd suddenly learned to walk.

My second bike was taken several years later from a Wrigleyville apartment building. I had been too tired to schlep it to my top-floor apartment one night, so instead locked it up in the building's gated courtyard. The thieves had somehow gotten in, disassembled the rack, and taken the piece my bike was attached to.

In the '90s, I proudly swapped stories like these with my urbanite friends. We'd ride Chicago's streets long before there were protected bike lanes. We'd find our way around town with maps, not apps. In our 20s and 30s, we could withstand the ups and downs of life—the breakups, the lay-offs, the occasional injuries. We were climbing our way to better-paying jobs and our own houses, maybe even ones with garages that could store our bikes.

**MY NEW BIKE WASN'T JUST FOR JOY-RIDING; IT WAS ESSENTIAL** transportation. I had been recently diagnosed with Morton's neuroma, an impinged nerve, in my right foot. It made walking extremely difficult, and even driving had



## Bicycle Thieves

**When the author's two-wheeler was stolen, she sought justice. But catching up with the culprits wasn't what she anticipated.**

By JEAN IVERSEN

become excruciating. Surgery was likely. Riding a bike, with just my heel on the right pedal, was the least painful way to get around Chicago.

I had locked my Urban Commuter to a rack in the South Loop while I shopped in a store nearby. I was gone 15 minutes, 20 tops. It was a sunny August afternoon in an area with steady sidewalk and street traffic. Not what I would have considered a recipe for theft.

If you've ever had a bike stolen, you know the feeling I had when I returned to the rack. The long stare at the empty space. The denial as I scanned up and down the sidewalk, thinking I must have the wrong rack. The racing heartbeat, the quickened breaths, the panicked posture. The mix of rage and self-blame.

I went from store to store asking receptionists, business owners, anyone who would talk to me: "Did you see something?" I showed them pictures on my phone of my bike, as if it were a missing child. Everyone responded with the appropriate headshaking and sympathy. They'd take my name and number, just to be polite. We both knew they'd never call.

I stood in the hot sun next to the empty rack for the longest time, my jaw dropped, hands on hips. Waiting for the Urban Commuter to reappear felt more logical than walking away and surrendering to the truth.

**IN BICYCLE THIEVES, ANTONIO'S BIKE IS** stolen the first day of his new job, and he takes to the streets of Rome with his young son, Bruno, desperate to find it. His frantic search brings him to an open-air market where thousands of bikes are for sale. He spies a man who looks like the thief, and Antonio angrily chases him across town, nearly losing Bruno along the way.

My recovery efforts took me to the internet. I joined Facebook groups dedicated to finding stolen bikes in Chicago. My posts joined hundreds of others, each more heartbreaking than the last. "I lost my job and car; the bike is my only way of getting around," read one. "It was a one-of-a-kind model," read another. People replied to my post with sympathy and

**"In the days after the theft, I stared down anyone who biked past, willing to tackle them if they were on my Urban Commuter. I studied each rack I saw, hungry for vengeance."**

helpful advice. "Did you report it as stolen to the Bike Index?" "Check the Swap-O-Rama at 42nd and Ashland?" "Have you called pawnshops?"

According to the *Sun-Times*, 1,334 bikes were reported stolen in Chicago in 2019, the year my Urban Commuter was taken. Chicago police are too overwhelmed to do much more than document the cases. Only about 2 percent of people recover their bikes. Those who do often find them for sale on websites like eBay, Craigslist, or Facebook Marketplace – sites I scanned several times a day without seeing any trace of the Urban Commuter.

The theft had made an already burdensome situation nearly impossible for me. One health-related hurdle after another – surgeries, vertigo, a progressive spine disorder – had left me unable to work much over the previous five years. When I was finally able to do so part-time, the damn Morton's neuroma

developed, forcing me to quit, since the job required me to be on my feet. The bike theft felt like getting kicked when I was already scraping bottom.

I called Kozy's Cyclery, desperate for ideas. The people there recommended I email them and other bike shops with a description and serial number, in case the thief came in to try to sell my bike. I knew this was a slim-to-none chance, but it felt better than doing nothing, so I called some local places, including Irv's Bike Shop. The owner, Henry Ortiz, asked me if I had any photos of the bike.

Irv's is located on a commercial strip of 18th Street that runs through the heart of Pilsen. Irving Rout opened the store in 1972. Henry started working there when he was 11, cleaning and doing other menial jobs before becoming a bike mechanic. Eventually, in 2011, he bought the place. I eagerly dashed off an email to him, with a picture of my bike and my cellphone number, hoping for the best but not expecting much.

Henry's willingness to help eased my anxiety. In the days after the theft, I stared down anyone who biked past, willing to tackle them if they were on my Urban Commuter. I studied each rack I saw, hungry for vengeance. This new bike was the first nice thing I'd bought for myself in at least five years, and I cursed the thief as I limped around. My anger consumed me.

**IT WAS A LAZY SATURDAY MORNING** about a week after my bike was stolen when I got a call.

"Is this Jean?" The voice was almost a whisper.

"Yes? Who's this?"

"It's Henry. At Irv's. I have your bike. A woman came in with it, asking how much I'd give her for it."

"What?!"

"I told her I'm calling the company to ask about the value. I brought the bike to my workshop in back. How soon can you get here?"

The time between answering Henry's phone call and being in my car was probably less than one minute. Henry called

again when I was halfway to his store, which was only a few miles away.

"How long till you get here?" he said, sounding worried. "I'm stalling as much as I can."

I parked illegally in front and blew into the store like a gale-force wind. "This her?" I shouted, and pointed to a woman, the only other person in the store. I had expected the thief to be a teenager, not a petite woman who appeared to be in her 40s or 50s.

"Yes. This is her." Henry Ortiz is tall, with a commanding presence. I quickly learned he is also the embodiment of cool and collected. I was not.

"You brought in my bike!" I yelled at the woman, waving my proof of purchase, which I had scooped up as I'd dashed out of the house. I assumed she would run, and I would have just let her. But the woman didn't move. She appeared unfazed.

"No, someone gave it to me. It's mine," she said casually and flatly. I hadn't anticipated any resistance. Caught off-guard, I looked at Henry.

"That bike has been reported stolen," Henry said to the woman, calmly but firmly. "It belongs to her."

I then felt stupid for not calling the police before I arrived. The woman stood there, insisting the bike was hers. So I called 911 right in front of her.

"The police are on their way!" I yelled, thinking this would get her to leave. She slowly turned and left the store, but instead of walking away, she joined a man who'd been waiting outside. They stayed there on the sidewalk, as though waiting for a bus. I was baffled.

A policeman called me back. "I'm tied up right now. I don't think I can be there for hours, if at all," he said. I explained the situation. "Can you take photos of these people and text them to me?" he asked. I went outside and snapped shots of them from several feet away, my hands shaking, then went back inside and texted the officer.

As I waited in the store, I looked at the photos I had just taken. After scanning them closely, I suspected this woman

probably lived on the streets or was close to it. It wasn't just that her hair was in dirty knots, or that she seemed to be missing most of her teeth—it was the dead expression she wore, as though the light in her eyes had been switched off.

For days I'd imagined that some thoughtless thug or elaborate bike theft ring had robbed me, and now here was a woman who desperately needed whatever money she could get for a bike she would never ride with her arms raised, feeling joy. What got me the most was how resigned they both looked. How they just stood there, perhaps clinging to their own reality that they'd soon get money for this bike. The anger drained out of me like air whooshing out of a slashed tire.

Henry waited on customers, who were unaware of the drama unfolding. I walked over to him at the register. "Should I just take the bike and leave?" I asked, shrugging.

"I looked it over while I was waiting for you. It doesn't look damaged," he said. "But you might want to get rid of her water bottle."

We looked outside. The couple had left. Finally, I could allow myself to feel the joy of recovering the bike. I was tempted to grab Henry and hug him. "Who gets their stolen bike back?" I said. "I can't believe you had the wherewithal to act so quickly. How can I ever thank you?"

"I knew right away it was your bike," Henry said. "And I knew I was not going to let her leave with it, even if I had to pay her 50 bucks."

Henry wouldn't take any reward money from me, so I bought a bell for the handlebars and made a mental note to pay his good deed forward in some way.

On the bike ride home, I couldn't believe my reversal of fortune and let out some cries of "Whoop!" But my bliss was tempered by thoughts of the woman and her friend, who went back to a life I couldn't imagine. I wished I could have helped them and winced when I realized I was no longer in a position to do so.

While I was retrieving my car at Irv's later that day, the police officer called to say he was on his way. I told him that it was unnecessary. "I just saw them a few blocks away," he said of the woman and her friend. "She was walking with another bike. A green one. I've seen the guy before. I pulled over to talk to them. They said some guy named Marcus gave your bike to her. Some guy who lives under the viaduct near Loomis. You want me to go back there and look for Marcus?"

"No, no, no, no, no," I said, shaking my head. I couldn't fathom asking this officer to chase down a homeless person



about a recovered bike. I thanked him and hung up.

Who was Marcus? Some Robin Hood who gave stolen bikes to people who needed the cash? Yes, I was in a precarious financial position. But I wasn't living under a viaduct. Much of the self-pity I'd felt since losing the bike vanished. And I had a man named Henry Ortiz to thank—for helping me find not only my bike but some perspective.

I then named my bike: Boomer. Short for "boomerang." It had found its way back to me, an urban miracle. ■