

**Daring, disorderly delicate digits doing distractingly dexterous  
delinquencies: A Short History of Slight-of-Hand Thieves  
Commonly Identified as Pickpockets**

**The Chicago Literary Club**

Paper by  
Robert H. Jordan, Jr., Ph.D.

*The* old man – seeming to be in his late eighties or early nineties - sartorially resplendent in a taylor-made double-breasted, grey pinstriped suit, and shiny, wing-tipped shoes - slowly climbed the stairs leading to the elevated train. Pulling himself up with the aid of the side railing, the ascent was grueling, draining his exhausted, withered frame of what little energy he could muster. Eventually reaching the train platform, he paused and exhaled loudly, “Whew,” indicating clearly that the flight of stairs had taken its toll.

Squinting his eyes, he could see – off in the distance – the towering Chicago skyline. Catching another deep breath, he wheezed and began coughing into a handkerchief – strong, body-shaking, phlegm-producing eruptions, causing many nearby commuters to lean-away, giving him the ‘side-eye’ in disgust. Slowly, he crept out onto the windy, jam-packed train stop, elbow to elbow with, late-day, 5:00, rush-hour commuters. He was mingling with the same weary, cantankerous travelers he had seen for decades. “Whew,” he respired as the coughing spell subsided, allowing him to gradually move, on his wobbly legs, towards a crowded bench. “Here, Pops, take my seat,” said a courteous, equally well-dressed, middle-aged, business executive, wearing a leather Gucci backpack – casually slung over one shoulder. Pops, as everyone called him, smiled and with a raspy voice said, “Thank you, young man.”

As Pops brushed by the commuter to take his seat, the old man quickly swept his eyes over the luxurious, bulging backpack. There in a partially closed side pocket was a fat wallet – temptingly waiting to be removed. When Pops noticed the man’s backpack, his heart begun to flutter, his breath quickened and his eyes focused intently. The emotion was similar to falling in love - a love at first sight. Pops had been through this exhilaration more times than he could remember. Most people looking

at Pops - assuming from his frail appearance that he was feeble and weak - would be making a big mistake for his looks were antithetical to his unique abilities.

Many customs, or formalities for doing things, throughout history, have been known for their strict traditions – established guidelines, mores and habits - that govern how individuals or groups function within society. Often, these rigorous procedures have been handed down for generations: from father to son – mother to daughter. These well-known rules of behavior sometimes apply, surprisingly, to those upholding the law and those breaking the law.

One classic example of a reviled but respected vocation is that of the nimble-fingered thief with the sobriquet of pickpocket - a vocation so universal that almost every language has a name for it: carterista in Spanish; borsay- your- low in Italian; Taschendieb, in German; low-po-de-tis, in Greek and peekpocket, in French.

If you were visiting Europe or studying abroad within the last 20 or 30-years, you were probably warned, before you embarked on your trip, to be especially careful of your belongings. In Florence, or Madrid, or Paris or Rome or almost any other major city in Europe, you probably were cautioned about having your pockets picked in crowded areas. The alert goes out, especially, for major tourist attractions like concerts and monuments or spontaneous, pop-up street corner entertainment like, jugglers, magicians and acrobats who draw impromptu crowds of smiling travelers with swollen pockets and overflowing fanny packs. The tourists are often referred to, by the rapacious pickpockets, as “Marks,” as in, easy marks.

All over the world, picking pockets was once a proud criminal tradition. And, because it required a difficult-to-learn skill – using cunning and guile - sometimes handed down from generation to generation – it was

rich with drama and celebrated within and outside its own culture. Besides safe-cracking, no other crime is specialized enough that its practitioners developed a whole colorful lexicon to describe its intricacies. But, those 'good 'ol days' appear to be over. "Pickpocketing is more or less dead in this country," says Harvard economist Edward Glaeser, whose book, *Triumph of the City*, deals at length with urban crime trends.<sup>1</sup> "I think these skills have been tragically lost. You've got to respect the skill of some pickpocket relative to some thug coming up to you with a knife. A knife takes no skill whatsoever. But to lift someone's wallet without them knowing ..."

Picture this scene. A soon-to-be victim is strolling along Broadway in New York or Michigan Avenue in Chicago. He has just left a bank after making a substantial withdrawal. His wallet has been shoved into his back pocket. He continues meandering, merrily along, unaware that he's about to stumble into the clutches of a well-practiced and precisely choreographed troupe of thieves: lurking nearby. Someone shouts, "Look out for pickpockets," and when the Mark hears that warning, he slaps his hand on his back-hip pocket, feeling for his wallet. It is still there.

According to an article on the website, *Slate*, in a story entitled, *The Lost Art of Pickpocketing*, the victim, in this example, has already been selected by a cabal of thieves – prompting a series of actions - a concatenation of events.<sup>2</sup>

"A steer positioned across the street sees the Mark touch his hip and wipes his brow, signaling to an attractive "Stall" walking toward the Mark. She bumps into him, and while the startled Mark apologizes for his clumsiness, the "Hook" sweeps noiselessly past with a balletic grace and makes the "dip," slipping out the wallet, dropping it into a newspaper and passing it to a second "Stall," who pulls out anything of value and drops the wallet in the trash. All four troupers – working harmoniously - promptly

disappear into the crowd. It might be several hours before the Mark realizes what has happened, and even then, he may never be sure whether it was a pickpocket, or plain carelessness on his part, that cost him his money.”

Marcus Felson, a criminologist at Texas State University who has spent decades studying low-level crime, calls pickpocketing a “lost art.” According to an article in the *New York Daily News*, the only pickpockets left working the trains anymore are middle-aged or older, and even those are few and far between. “You don’t find young picks anymore,” according to the paper. “It’s going to die out.”

Several Chicago Police officers, who were on the Chicago Transit Authority, CTA, Mass Transit detail in the 1970s, told me many stories about their days working to rid the CTA of pickpockets, and thieves of all kinds. Officer Jimmy Davern who worked the area’s bus, commuter rail, and subway system, told gritty stories about the crooks. “Pickpockets are a dying breed,” he said. “The only known pickpockets we encounter are older, middle-aged men; however, they are rarely seen on the system anymore. We would take them off the train and (with his fist balled-up and hitting the palm of his other hand say), explain to them in a way they wouldn’t forget - not to come back.” Eventually the cops and the train thugs established a kind of rapprochement permitting the picks to ride the trains if their hands remained in their own pockets.

Members of the CTA Transit detail say the decline of dipping in pockets, on the rails is extraordinary. The cops say with a laugh,” The subways were always the happiest hunting grounds for pickpockets, who would work alone or in teams. There were classic, skilled canons—organized pickpocket gangs—at the top, targeting wealthier riders, then “bag workers” who went for purses, and “lush workers” who disreputably targeted unconscious drunks. “

Davern, who worked as a Chicago transit cop in the 1970s and '80s, also admiringly recalls “fob workers,” a subspecies of pickpocket who worked their way through train cars using just their index and middle fingers to extract coins and pieces of paper money—a quarter here, a buck there—from riders’ pockets. “They weren’t greedy, and they never got caught,” says Davern.

Bit by bit, Mark by Mark, fob workers could make \$300 to \$400 on a single subway trip; and they would ride most of the day. Then, the more seasoned thieves would go to Florida in the winter to work the racetracks. Many of the city’s pickpockets trained elsewhere, “and if they were any good, they came to New York or Chicago,” Davern says, with a touch of pride. “In the subways, we had the best there were.”

That was in the 70 and 80s. In a 2001 feature story, the *New York Times* reported that there were 23,068 reported pickpocketing incidents in the city in 1990. The total loss to all of the marks amounted to nearly \$10 million. Five years later, the paper stated that the number of reported incidents had dropped by half, and by the end of the decade – moving into the 2000s, there were less than 5-thousand. Today, the NYPD doesn’t even maintain individual numbers on pickpocketing.

Experts offer a few explanations for the gradual disappearance of pickpockets in the United States. More people use credit cards today and carry less cash. Plus, because of enhanced security features, it is more difficult for crooks to use stolen credit cards than it was in the past. But conceivably the biggest reason for fewer pickpockets is that the centuries-old internship system, nourishing the ancestral groups of pickpockets, began to disintegrate with each shrinking generation – crippling the family dynasties.

The long-lost practice of picking pockets has always perpetuated itself by having older, more experienced chieftains —nicknamed “Fagins,” after the crime boss in *Oliver Twist*—teach younger ones the techniques, and then absorbing them into the clans or canons. But due to ratcheted-up law enforcement measures, including heftier sentences, and better surveillance of hot spots and known pickpockets, the specialized system of thievery has been mostly dismantled.

Nonetheless, this is not the case in Europe, where pickpocketing has been less of a priority for law enforcement. Europe is also where professional thieves from countries like Bulgaria and Romania, each with storied traditions of pickpocketing, are able to travel more freely since those countries were accepted into the European Union in 2007. The EU also gave the roving gangs an opportunity to develop their organizations and grow their trade in tourist hot spots like Barcelona, Rome, and Prague. But most importantly the clans were able to incubate new generations of gentle, geniuses who were carefully nurtured on the intricacies of their forbidden craft.

In all likelihood, before you left for an overseas vacation, the warning you received about pickpockets came with the disparaging term “Gypsy” and is probably the label the pick pocketers were given. In most major European cities, “Gypsies” can usually be found in front of major tourist attractions like historic shrines or churches and they are, many times, begging for spare change. They pick religious spots hoping that people with a spiritual inclination might be more generous or that those entering to pray for forgiveness – because of a burden of guilt from a sin sick soul - might feel that a donation to the needy could help them find salvation. Or they could be surreptitiously scanning and analyzing the crowd - looking for the next unsuspecting Mark.

In this time of appropriate nomenclature, I have to add that the proper term for this group, however, is not gypsy, but Roma. The term Gypsy is

today considered pejorative by some. The Roma people have a large presence in Italy, with an estimated population of over 150,000, and the relations between the Italians and the Roma have been tautly strained for centuries.

First of all, I am not praising pickpockets, per se. They are thieves who are stealing your money or belongings. But pickpockets of old, lived and operated by a code of standards that did not include violence. The slight-of-hand thief knew that by perfecting his dexterities he could avoid detection and thereby circumvent resorting to “strong arm,” bellicose tactics that many times led to violent confrontations.

Who would argue with the thought that it is better to lose your belongings through a passive, painless encounter than in a senselessly violent, armed robbery resulting in injury or death?

Unfortunately, today, many pugnacious crooks mistakenly believe that thievery must be accompanied by violence. It does not have to. But, sadly, we hear daily accounts of forceful, car-jackings, purse snatchings that turn vicious, and other unnecessary mayhem that leaves victims battered, bruised or dead.

This is why, for eons, pickpockets have been glamorized in literature. Generations of accomplished robbers have relied on stealth over strong arm, and inconspicuousness over injury. This sneaky, non-violent manner of stealing formed the basic philosophy of European pickpockets for centuries.

The Roma have long been thought to be among the most mysterious, secretive and exotic peoples on earth. They are often described as a race of nomads, who had no real home. Gypsies, as they were referred to, do have their own language, Romani, and they identify themselves as Romani people. They came to Europe long ago from India.



Gypsy history remained unknown for centuries, largely because they had no written language, and strangely enough, there was no formal history on where they originated. Many claimed to be Egyptians—hence the name "Gypsy." But European historians eventually discovered that the Romani language, which they spoke, was related to certain dialects vocalized in India, and from there, their history and ancestry was gradually deduced.

The Roma were a low caste people in India, at a time when the caste system was strictly observed. They made their living, as much as they could, as wandering musicians and singers. But, as outcastes – even lower than the plebeian, common folk - there was little opportunity for earning a decent wage and many began to turn to creative ways to support their families. Theft by picking pockets became one of their better-known ways of producing an income. Early on, groups of Roma Families learned to be expert acrobats and jugglers, who would mesmerize crowds with their skill and legerdemain while their cohorts, with equal abilities in separating the marks from their valuables, would work the audience.

It is noted in the twelfth-century history of Constantinople that Gypsies were already known, far and wide, as bear keepers, snake charmers, fortune tellers, and sellers of magic amulets to ward off the evil eye. Theodore Balsamon, a canonist of the Eastern Orthodox Church and 12th-century Eastern Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch, warned the Greeks to avoid these "ventriloquists and wizards" that he said were in league with the Devil.

Gypsies living in 1497, were thought to follow all kinds of trade, such as shoemaking and cobbling and also smithery. Gypsies were reported in Serbia in 1348; Croatia in 1362 (as goldsmiths); and Romania in 1378—

as slaves put to work as barbers, tailors, bakers, masons, and household servants.

Throughout history, men as well as woman have been known to engage in thievery and picking pockets. Most of the women who lifted items from men were prostitutes who had intimate access to the clothing of the male victims. When the men would go to the wash room or fall asleep, it would be a prime opportunity for the 'woman of the night' to take off with pricy belongings of their male companions.

Men, on the other hand, might work on a Mark by getting the victim, drunk or disabled thereby making it easier to make-off with their possessions. The word, Groggy, according to one meaning is defined as: befuddled or dopey due to drink. Sailors were known to be rationed a quantity of rum and rum was also called Grog, hence the term, Groggy, for one who had, had too much to drink. Today we think of being groggy when we are dazed, and confused; weak and unsteady on the feet or in action.

Over the centuries, the Roma became well-known specialists at lifting items from the pockets or purses of unsuspecting Marks. Their skillful manner of theft became legendary and you didn't have to be groggy to become a target.

People you knew who had been victims would often shake their heads in disbelief – sometimes smiling at the seemingly magical abilities of the imperceptible pickpockets. It was almost like a 'Red Badge of Courage' to be able to return from a vacation overseas and beguile friends back home with stories of how brilliantly a street waif had pilfered a wallet or slipped open a purse to extract a hidden roll of cash.

In an article in The New Yorker, writer, Adam Green interviewed famous pick pocketer and Las Vegas entertainer, Apollo Robins. Robins

said, that bands of pickpockets, especially those working today, have a jargon all their own,<sup>3</sup> within their milieu when discussing their trade, such as: “pit” (inside jacket pocket) and “prat” (side pant pocket), “skinning the poke” (removing the cash from a stolen wallet and wiping it off before tossing it) and “kissing the dog” (the mistake of letting a victim see your face).

Robbins said, street pickpockets generally work in teams,<sup>4</sup> known as whiz mobs or wire mobs. Members of the coterie have special names for everyone: the “steer” chooses the victim, who is referred to generically as the “mark,” the “vic,” or the “chump,” but can also be categorized into various subspecies, among them “Mr. Bates” (businessman) and “pappy” (senior citizen). The “stall,” or “stick,” maneuvers the mark into position and holds him there, distracting his attention, perhaps by stumbling in his path, asking him for directions, or spilling something on him. The “shade” blocks the mark’s view of what’s about to happen, either with his body or with an object such as a newspaper. And the “tool” (also known as the “wire,” the “dip,” or the “mechanic”) lifts his wallet and hands it off to the “duke man,” who hustles away, leaving the rest of the mob clean. Robbins explained to West, the author, that in practice, the process is more fluid— where team members often play several positions—and that it unfolds less as a linear sequence of events than as what he calls a “synchronized convergence,” like a well-executed offensive play on the gridiron.

Stories like the New Yorker article have become commonplace. How could it happen, and the victim never feel the stealthy hand inside his pocket? How did they do it?

It is called distraction: defined by Merriam-Webster as, something that diverts or confuses; an object or action that directs one's attention away from something else.

Our five senses are programmed from conception to alert us to distractions of all kinds: sounds, smells, visual interruptions, tastes and the one used most often by slight-of-hand thieves - touch or feel sensations.

Pickpockets know that distractions can be used to disarm and confuse our own defenses by causing us to focus our attention on a particular area or place away from where the valuable item is located. If the billfold is in the left rear pocket, a bump or blow of an elbow to the opposite side of the body can cause the mark to train his or her concentration on the bump or blow while a perfectly-timed accomplice quickly slips his fingers in your opposite side pocket to remove the prize. Once you realize that there was also a another, less obvious assault on your senses – it is too late. The first, bigger distraction befuddled your complete attention before you could recover and stop the intrusion.

Distraction is how we connect with the world around us. You hear a fire engine outside because the siren disrupted the quite of your bedroom. If you are looking up and staring at the clouds you notice the airplane, high in the heavens, only because the movement in the sky distracted your attention and caused you to look at the plane. You realize it is beginning to rain because you feel the drops on your skin, distracting your attention and causing you to think about the bead of water and deduce it is rain and not liquid from someone tossing water out of an upstairs window. When you are walking around, most of the time, you never notice that you don't smell anything. Think about it. You never contemplate that you aren't smelling something. It is when you pass the chocolate factory that you are distracted and notice the air is filled with the delicious aroma. Or when you walk near a barbecue restaurant, it is the smell of the burning hickory that floods your nose and signals your olfactory receptors – not the vacant, empty air that existed the block before.

Animals in the wild rely on distraction to alert them to encroaching predators. The smell of a hunter's after shave, the noise of a twig snapping in the brush, the sight of the bushes rustling in the distance are all disruptions to the senses that make an animal come to attention and prepare to fight or flee. Distraction is the hotline to the senses used by helpless victims of prey, to alert them to danger.

Used in reverse, distraction is the pickpocket's comrade. Distraction is the "open sesame" employed by the robber to gain entry to your personal space. Distraction is the thief's magic wand to captivate and mis-direct your attention.

Novice pickpockets are taught early-on that paying close attention to the Mark will yield all sorts of valuable information. The reconnaissance will often reveal the exact location of a wallet or passport. Posters or signs on buildings, warning of pickpockets, when seen, will often cause tourists to reach back and pat the pocket where their wallet is hidden to check that it is still there. That is a big reveal – a no, no, that offers the thief answers to the big question he was worrying about - like where exactly have you hidden the prize? Now he knows for certain where to strike.

Yet, it would not be honest or fair to give the impression that all pickpockets are Roma or that all Roma are pickpockets. Even so, legend has it that Roma chiefs would hold classes, tutoring small children on techniques and practices – often selecting – after they blossom - the brightest and most skillful tutees to be anointed to work the streets.

In 1974, while covering a news story for WGN TV, I interviewed a so-called "Gypsy-King" whose clan worked the weekend Maxwell Street flea market. He said he explained to his students that you shouldn't "fear the mark – instead, treat him or her as an object of affection." He

told them to, “Momentarily, fall in love with the mark so you aren’t afraid to touch his or her body and the valuables will come to you much easier.”<sup>5</sup>

In other countries, pickpockets are just as clever – just as adroit. There are many stories of how pickpockets learn their skills. Some tales date back for centuries. Other accounts have become part of classic literature. As mentioned, a definitive story that comes to mind, over how the skill is passed-on, comes from Charles Dickens’ *Oliver Twist*. When many people imagine the training of young pickpockets, they may picture the sooty, almost feral urchins of Fagin’s den. And while Fagin is described as a "receiver of stolen goods," he is also the chief of a group of motley kids who he teaches to earn their keep by picking pockets and other anti-social activities - in exchange for lodging. The tiny lawbreakers rehearse the stealing of fob watches from gentlemen’s waistcoats. But a wrong, flat-footed move from an impetuous child would result in a cuff to head from old Fagin; until the boy or girl got it right.

There is another well-known story that has been Romanticized in books and movies about a mythic place called, ***Escuela de las Siete Campanas***, or School of the Seven Bells. The fabled cloister is supposedly perched high among the misty peaks in the Andes Mountains outside Bogota, Colombia. Old masters in the school are said to teach the skill, stealth and patience of the art of picking pockets. Eventually, there is a final exam – a rite of passage - during which the chief maven requires the initiate to, “pick clean” seven pockets located all over a mannequin. The trick is to meticulously do so without ringing any of the small bells attached to the pockets. The near impossible feat must be accomplished in order for the “green” or immature bandit to graduate from the school. Those in the coterie who do complete the training are said to be sui-generis — a thief of such stupendous genius that the world may never see the likes of him or her again.

As I mentioned, pickpocketing is a practiced and choreographed combination of skill, timing, and distraction. The thieves are clever and use many different methods. Sometimes when they encounter very tight pants or buttoned pockets, they may take the wallet from below - on the outside of the pocket - by using tools or even slicing-open the pocket with a razor. Police have reported that experienced pickpockets can even get into zippered front pockets without being noticed.

But, all the while, distraction is key to keeping the Mark off balance. An attractive woman flirting or showing off in her bikini; a friendly local, offering directions; an old woman dropping her bags or even a passenger vomiting on a busy train — are just a few of the creative diversions used to grab the attention of the traveler while a pickpocket deftly lifts the distracted tourist's wallet and valuables.

People who have not been the victim of a pickpocket may think, I would feel it if a slight-of-hand thief was stealing my belongings. But the stealthy expertise of the pickpocket, along with a compelling and clever distraction, mean you are unlikely to detect the theft until after it has occurred. And, even if you did catch the pickpocket he will have already, quickly passed-off your property to an accomplice. Plus, if you shout, THIEF!, he will bolt and run. If you chase him or her, it could be a dangerous action because you don't know who else might be waiting once you 'round a corner.

It is usually very difficult to spot the pickpocket in a crowd — unless it is a pack of predatory children, like the ones who roam the streets of some cities in Europe and South America. That is because no matter how hard you search, the thieves have learned to blend-in with the surroundings. Pickpockets generally disguise themselves. They have either learned or have been taught very carefully not to fit the common conception of criminals. The men and woman may be in a gang, but

they dress like wealthy businessmen and women. Others carry babies or newspapers – which they use to screen or hide what their hands are doing. Many times, a baby stroller is used as a temporary place to stash “the goods” until they are out of danger. Some have even learned to mimic tourists, their prime targets – allowing them to draw the least amount of suspicion.

The best defense against pickpockets is to make it difficult for them to get to your valuables. Most men carry their wallets in their back pocket. That is not a good idea because thieves have practiced and learned how to gently wiggle it out of the pocket.

Furthermore, it's fairly easy for a pickpocket to sneak up, unnoticed from behind you. Front pockets are safer because the thief has to face you while the act is being committed. But the best option - to safely carry your belongings - is in a money belt, worn under your clothes. The worst may be fanny packs - which are extremely vulnerable - particularly when the pouch is located on your back rather than your front. Backpacks and purses are also out of your line of sight and are considered attractive to pickpockets. Women have learned, if you need to carry a purse, you should hold it under your arm or have the strap across your shoulder and body and cover it with your hand.

Once it became clear that experienced thieves could and would easily get inside your pockets, it spawned a whole industry of travel gear with tactically designed clothing, luggage, and anti-theft items used for concealing valuables when vacationing. The company *Travel Smith* was one of the first to design shirts with hidden, zippered pockets located within other pockets – where pickpockets couldn't reach without causing alarm to the victim.

*Travel Smith* also produced a line of coats and pants with hidden inside pants pockets and sports coats containing as many as 17 large and



small, zippered and buttoned pockets – some double-closed by buttoned flaps that gave the traveler a strong sense of security. *Travel Smith* also designed money-belts with small hidden, zippered pouches for storing two or three large domination bills to be used in an emergency. Secret pockets and compartments were designed into almost everything from hats to belts, clothing to fanny packs, from fake Coke Cola cans to hollowed-out books and clocks. Hidden compartments could be found in the heels and tongues of shoes, the cups of bras or phony lipstick and hollow ball point pen tubes.

And along with the items used as passive, hidden compartments to conceal valuables, a parallel industry also sprang up producing Nija-like weapons that could be used in case of an attack. Belt buckles that contained sharp knives, flashlights that could be converted into clubs, hollowed-out books for storing small pistols and mace. These and many other small arms could be found in specialized stores that stocked items for self-defense.

The hidden pockets and camouflaged weapons became the vogue until after the 911 attack, when the department of homeland security established airport security stations along with new rules prohibiting the carrying onboard planes of many items now considered to be contraband. Almost overnight most of these items were considered **Verboten** and would be confiscated by airport security.

Recently, I came across an old money belt, which I used when traveling abroad, that I had not worn in about 25-years. I quickly unzipped one of the hidden pouches in hopes of finding a forgotten \$100-dollar bill or two. No such luck.

There are still a handful of pickpockets working US cities, and some old-fashioned troupes on the road, according to police statistics. They hit big sporting events like boxing title matches or the Superbowl where

the high-rollers are known to carry large amounts of cash, wear expensive watches and otherwise ask, through their flashy appearances, to 'come rob me, please'... or if you are overseas and look like a typical American tourist, speaking loudly into a cell phone, a Cubs cap on your head, a camera dangling from around your neck, wearing a Harley Davidson T-Shirt, I won't feel sorry for you if the last remaining, gray-haired old pickpocket decides to separate you from your belongings. You asked for it through your glaring, tasteless, attire.

Today, there are only a few gray-haired pickpockets still in circulation. Pops, the last one of the fabled, Chicago slight-of-hand geniuses still smiles when he notices some Marks, who are so easily distracted. Sitting on the crowded bench, on the jam-packed elevated platform, mulling-over the imponderabilia of how his life could have been different, he is widely believed to be the apotheosis of professional pickpockets.

Cleverly, he has even taken note of the new, partially concealed, video cameras located all over the El stop - recording other law-breakers *in flagrante delicto* for authorities to later use as evidence. Shrugging his shoulders in a realization of surrender, he knows his crafty days are numbered. But it's hard to quit. Any acclaimed artist will tell you that the toughest part of creating a great painting is deciding how to stop – when to make the last brush stroke. Fini!

Like a sweets-junkie in a candy store, large crowds and masses of people are still enticing to Pops. The lure of a big score makes him long for the bleary-eyed fans at ball games and busy commuters – headsets and earbuds clogging their ears - crammed together on elevated platforms. Those are the marks he covets.

But Pops has seen some of the masters, before him, stay in the business too long. The smart ones quit while they were ahead - the

greedy ones eventually got caught. A tiny few of them – after narrowly escaping the clutches of the law, experienced a profound metanoia and renounced their sinful ways. The shrewd ones learned that today those video cameras that Pops saw are everywhere loaded with crime-fighting technology called facial recognition. The Cops, the heat, the fuzz have all tipped the scales WAY in their own favor. Facing such a sad, and gloomy future, no self-respecting pickpocket can compete against these ubiquitous electronic foes. Some of his pals from the old days, who are still on the wrong side of the law, have made the jump into fraud or other misdeeds. But sadly, there are the unlucky few who have gone away to the gray-bar hotel - due to a dreaded felony rap.

And from the looks of Pops' own stooped and stuttering step, the days of his graceful pas de deux – pickpocket and Mark, swaying together, strangers, in a complicated arabesque - are long gone. His once silky-smooth and undetectable reach, deep into a Mark's garments has now been hampered by a trembling hand and gnarled and twisted fingers.

But, surprisingly, Pops has not lost his cold-bloodied, nerves of steel. And as he slowly rises to leave the bench and shuffles along the elevated platform, he pauses for a moment contemplating his virtuoso career and every Mark he has, fleetingly loved during his lifetime in the game. "Whew," he exhales – becoming the perfect image for Samuel Butler's aphorism which states: "Life is one long process of getting tired." Then, smiling – with a twinkle in his eye - he slyly drops the business-man's empty wallet in the trash bin and heads for home.

How does a pickpocket fall in love? At purse sight....

---

<sup>1</sup> TRIUMPH OF THE CITY, How Our Greatest Invention Makes Us Richer, Smarter, Greener, Healthier, and Happier By Edward Glaeser, Illustrated. 338 pp. The Penguin Press.

<sup>2</sup> CULTUREBOX – The Slate - The Lost Art of Pickpocketing, By Joe Keohane, Feb 23, 2011, 10:16

---

<sup>3</sup> The New Yorker, A Pickpocket's Tale, *The spectacular thefts of Apollo Robbins*.

By [Adam Green](#), December 30, 2012

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> March, 1975, Television Interview with Vano Mehrstein, Gipsy King for TV news story.