

The Thief

“Hurry, that construction crew won’t be here all day. Cholo, stop playing with that makeup and look for jewelry.” The gang of three boys and one girl rifled through the house with speed and intensity. Opening all the drawers and closets, they threw personal items all over the floor. Balbina, the seventeen-year-old accomplice, took makeup, some purses and a scarf, putting it all in a school backpack she brought. She withheld her anger at Diego, the boyfriend, fearing he would send her back to the home she hated or the street. She stammered a reply.

“OK, I’ll go to the bedroom,” and off she went. She paused to look in a glass cabinet, filled with family heirlooms, Disney figures and colorful glass artwork. She took out a gold jar, admiring the delicate lines of inscription. ‘*To my beautiful daughter on her graduation day.*’ Balbina knew she wouldn’t graduate and didn’t have a father who would care if she did. Her mother was only twice her age and struggling to provide for her two younger brothers, still at home. Balbina left to get away from the poverty and child care duties she had been given. Her father was in prison, taking away any security she might have hoped for.

“Put a, you still daydreaming! We don’t have all day,” said the boyfriend. “Smash that cabinet and get to the bedroom.”

Balbina’s heartbeat quickened while she held back a tear. “Right away Diego,” and she gently laid down the jar, hoping Diego wouldn’t destroy it or the cabinet filled with this family’s memories. But Diego and his brothers were too busy disconnecting electronics and searching for drugs to care, so they left the fragile pieces alone. Maybe he just didn’t want to make more noise that might draw attention from a neighbor.

In fifteen minutes they were gone, out the back yard, across a county lot and into a panel van. The guys, still in their late teens, grabbed two HDTVs, a laptop, 200 DVDs (mostly blu-ray) and a digital camera. Balbina took two purses, makeup and costume jewelry, items that made her feel as though she was part of a family. Diego and his brothers threatened to leave her behind next time, saying she wasn’t taking anything worth selling.

Susan drove into the driveway and saw the smashed sliding door. She panicked, looked around and called her husband. “Jeffrey, we’ve been robbed,” and she began to cry.

Her husband tried to get her to calm down. “I’ll be right home. Call 911 and don’t go inside until I get there.” Susan, still shaking, walked out to the front of the house, afraid to run into the burglars and waited for the police. The police secured the home, dusted for fingerprints and left the homeowners to put back their lives after this invasion.

Back in the neighborhood, Balbina was showing off her makeup, jewelry and purses. She gave a purse and a necklace to her friend Gabriella, who wasn't part of a gang and still in school. "Gaby, this is for your quinceanera and for staying in school." Gabriella hugged her friend.

"These are so beautiful. Gracias Balbina." Gabriella's childhood wasn't taken from her, like Balbina's. Balbina never told her that these items were stolen. They looked new and Gabriella didn't know Balbina was in a gang now, much less that she just helped rob a house. Feeling more guilty than happy, Balbina decided to break up with Diego, leave the gang and move out of the area.

Meanwhile Susan and Jeffrey were trying to recover from the physical losses and emotional terror. Although a lot of the jewelry was locked in a safe, the ones that were taken were from her mother, who passed away just after Susan had gotten married. When she discovered that her mother's wedding ring was gone, Susan cried and held onto Jeffrey. "They took my mom's wedding ring."

Jeffrey consoled her. "It's going to be all right Susan. Maybe the police will catch the thieves."

Gabriella was chatting with a friend in study hall when a police officer came in and put her in handcuffs. "What are you doing," she screamed. In the back of the patrol car she cried hysterically.

"One of the teachers turned you in. The homeowners you robbed sent an email to the school offering a reward for information on items that were stolen. This purse was on the list. See the inscription on the inside."

Gabriella stuttered and replied. "I didn't steal anything. That purse was given to me by a friend for my 16th birthday."

The officer reviewed his report. "Yes, Balbina Gonzalez, we have her print on a jar from the crime scene. We're looking for her now."