

Negative Experiences and Emotional Scars: Things that Can't be Stolen

by Emma Hoyer

The passage of time is something that no one can control. Days, weeks, months, and years go by, and with each passing span of time, experiences are had and memories are created. Memories and experiences can be good or bad, and it often occurs that a streak of bad experiences and/or memories can plague a person for their entire life. Jennifer Egan, in her recent novel *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, presents a variety of characters, some of whom harbor negative experiences and memories in their subconscious. The most detrimental effect that the weight of these negative events has on a character is present when analyzing the supposed central character of the novel, Sasha. Her unhealthy connection to her past directly perpetuates her current kleptomaniac condition, which we discover upon beginning the novel.

The first chapter of *A Visit from the Goon Squad* is titled "Found Objects." The title alludes to the objects that Sasha steals because of her kleptomania. According to a study done at Tel Aviv University in Israel on the disorder classification of kleptomania, Sasha is, by actions and emotions felt in consequence, defined as a kleptomaniac. This study calls kleptomaniacs "pathological thieves," and says, "The pathological thief differs from ordinary thieves in that the act of stealing is performed in order to achieve emotional relaxation and not personal gain." (Dannon 3) The whole chapter is dedicated to one, recent instance of Sasha's kleptomania, where she tries to steal a green wallet, but end up giving it back. Within the chapter is the mention of another instance of Sasha stealing a screwdriver from a plumber, and the emotional relaxation mentioned in the study is evident in the text when it says, "And once the screwdriver was in her hand, she felt instant relief...and then something more than relief: a blessed indifference..." (Egan 8)

Not only does this study define kleptomania in terms of actions and emotions, but it also offers up a reasoning behind the manifestation of this so-called “impulse-control disorder.” The study reports, “Psychoanalysts interpreted the syndrome as a reflection of unconscious ego defense against anxiety, forbidden instincts or wishes, unresolved conflicts...” among other things (Dannon 4). This interpretation fits like a glove over the situation that Egan has written up for Sasha. Unresolved conflicts scatter Sasha’s life, and she has many negative, past experiences by the time the chapter “Found Objects” occurs.

Sasha’s misfortune begins when she is just five years old. At the end of “Found Objects,” it says, “More than once, Coz had tried to connect the plumber to Sasha’s father, who has disappeared when she was six. [Sasha] was careful not to indulge this line of thinking...they were writing a story of redemption....in that direction lay only sorrow” (Egan 9). The details of Sasha’s past involving her father are vague at this point, and are not revealed until a later chapter, entitled “Goodbye, My Love.” Deep into the chapter, we read “Beth and Andy’s marriage, [Sasha’s parents], died spectacularly the summer Ted, [Sasha’s uncle], lived with them on Lake Michigan while managing a construction site two miles farther up the lake” (Egan 218). Uncle Ted divulges the fact that Sasha is around five years old at this point in time, and when the fighting starts, he takes Sasha to the beach to escape from the fighting. Uncle Ted, at one point, “wonders what would become of [Sasha], growing up amid so much violence” (Egan 218).

Within the next year of her life, Sasha’s father disappears completely. Losing her father was just the start of a whole path of trouble the Sasha experiences over the next couple decades of her life. At the age of thirteen, Sasha starts to shoplift with her friends. This information appears in the chapter titled “Out of Body,” and it’s said of Sasha,

She’d started shoplifting at thirteen with her girlfriends, hiding beaded combs and sparkly earrings inside their sleeves, seeing who could get away with more,

but it was different for Sasha -- it made her whole body glow. Later, at school, she'd replay each step of an escapade, counting the days until they could do it again. The other girls were nervous, competitive, and Sasha struggled to show only that much. (Egan 194)

Sasha doesn't seem to be affected at all by the negative consequences that can come of shoplifting. Of course, those negative consequences only occur if the shoplifter is caught, and Sasha feels invincible. It's what she loves to talk about; it sets her above the rest of her friends. Shoplifting gives Sasha some control in her life, which is normally absent.

At the age of seventeen, Sasha makes a big decision and runs away with a drummer from a band called the Pinheads. His name is Wade, and we learn that they run away to Tokyo together. We learn that once the couple arrived in Hong Kong, Wade abandons Sasha. Without Wade, Sasha is lost again. It's a parallel situation with her father, who technically abandoned her when she was six. Sasha makes her way to China, and ends up settling for a while in Naples.

Uncle Ted attempts to be a constant presence in Sasha's life, in order to make up for the absence of her father. When she runs away to Naples, Uncle Ted goes to find her. He doesn't give up after initial failure, and his dedication and perseverance pays off. He, by chance, sees Sasha selling cigarettes on a street corner in "Goodbye, My Love." He ends up spending time with her, trying to learn as much about her experiences over the past year or so, and we hear a glimpse, this time from Sasha's mouth about how her past has affected her while in Naples.

Sasha says,

I kept thinking I saw my father. Isn't the crazy? In China, Morocco. I'd look across a room - bam - I saw his hair. Or his legs, I still remember the exact shape of his legs. Or how he threw back his head when he laughed - remember Uncle Teddy? How his laugh was kind of a yell? I thought he might be following me, making sure I was okay. And then, when it seemed like he wasn't, I got really scared. (Egan 225)

Sasha, within this quote, shows the reader that her father has never left her subconscious. She harbors the memory of him, particularly his physical appearance, in her subconscious, and this is the connection to the past that she clings to. This is the father that she so desperately craves. She remembers him laughing, rather than fighting. She has suppressed the negative emotions that stem from past interactions with her father, but his missing presence is detrimental enough to Sasha.

A study was conducted of neglected or abandoned children in Russia, and multitudes of children were observed, particularly orphans. Sasha is not an orphan, but she has been neglected and abandoned by one of her parents. Both are not gone, but the absence of one is enough to damage her psyche for years to come. The study reports, in its conclusion, that the staff, within the institutions where these children were housed, struggle to “establish personal, warm relations with children” and this “deprives them of individual attention from adults, which they particularly need” (Astoians 39). This raises an interesting point: After Sasha’s father left, who was there for her? If Sasha didn’t have that individual adult attention, she may have been looking for a way to fill that void. Her coping mechanism became shoplifting at the age of thirteen.

Beyond this coping mechanism, running away from home was probably in the absence of having a personal, warm relation with an adult, a mentor, at the very least. Running away was a way to assert her own independence, or a way to maintain control of her own life, which she’s been desperately trying to have since being abandoned. Uncle Ted is portrayed as being there for Sasha when the fighting between her parents started, but where was he when she was thirteen? Did he step out of the picture? Was there limited contact between the two? Of course, Uncle Ted could never truly replace Sasha’s father, but his presence could have been the difference between Sasha staying safe at home, rather than running away with Wade to Tokyo.

While in Naples, Sasha continued to fill the void her father left in the form of stealing things. Rob, the narrator of the chapter "Out of Body," gives us some insight to Sasha's life at that point in time:

In Naples, when she ran out of money, she stole things from stores and sold them to Lars, the Swede, waiting her turn on his kitchen floor with other hungry kids holding tourists' wallets, costume jewelry, American passports. Her first time, Lars made Sasha wait longer than anyone, holding a pair of spangly platform shoes she'd swiped from a boutique. And when everyone else was paid and gone, he had squatted beside her on the kitchen floor and unbuttoned his pants. For months she'd done business with Lars, arriving sometimes without having managed to take anything, just needing money. 'I thought he was my boyfriend,' she said. 'But I think I wasn't thinking anymore.'"

Being alone in a foreign country would cause anyone great amount of emotional disturbance. As a perpetual kleptomaniac, Sasha would be partial to steal things in order to feel that sense of emotional relaxation. In addition, going to Lars would also give her a sense of control. She got to choose when to go see him. She was able to steal things on her own time. Although she inevitably becomes dependent on the money Lars gave to her, provided she steal something, at the beginning, the situation seems ideal, especially because Sasha is in great need as a foreigner and as a woman alone.

After being retrieved from Naples by Uncle Ted, Sasha begins her life again. At age 21, she is a student at NYU. During her time at NYU, Sasha is introduced to Bennie, who will later become her boss. Her college experience isn't necessarily the greatest, partially because the emotions and raw damage that the past years have left on her are still heavily present. However, the best opportunity that befalls her is becoming an intern for Bennie. After spending time as an intern, Sasha moves her way up to Bennie's receptionist, and then finally his assistant. By that time, Sasha is 23 years old, and still working to function normally without her kleptomania taking

too strong of a hold.

However, we learn that kleptomania is winning the battle, more often than not. Back in “Found Objects,” Sasha relays to Coz an encounter with a man named Alex. She talks about how Alex discovers a table on which she’s kept everything she’s stolen since finding a job, working for Bennie. It says, “To Sasha’s eye, [the table] almost shook under its load of embarrassments and close shaves and little triumphs and moments of pure exhilaration. It contained years of her life compressed” (Egan 15). However, these objects are different in nature, simply because of the source from whence they came. In Naples, and even when she was thirteen, Sasha chose to steal from stores. Now, coming closer to her thirties, “Sasha no longer took anything from stores - their cold, inert goods didn’t tempt her. Only from people.” Kleptomania has become, at this point in her life, all about emotional control, rather than filling a void. It’s important, for Sasha, to satisfy the emotional unrest, rather than to suppress the memories of her father. In fact, squashing the memories of her father have taken another form: other men. Sasha has a one-night stand, of sorts, with Alex, she enlists Rob to be her fake boyfriend, and she eventually meets Drew. Sasha is using these men to fill the void, rather than her kleptomania. Her kleptomania has taken on a new form, new meaning. In order to calm herself, stealing something is almost necessary.

Her kleptomania reaches a new high right around age 35. Bennie discovered Sasha’s habits of stealing things and fired her. Now, it’s not specified if Sasha stole from Bennie, but it could be argued that Sasha, at the peak of her emotion suppression, was unable to keep herself from doing otherwise. Nonetheless, Sasha lost her job due to her kleptomania. Bennie, in the final chapter “Pure Language,” says, “She was great. I was crazy about her. But it turned out she had sticky fingers. She stole things. It was kind of a sickness, I think” (Egan 338).

After losing her job, Sasha’s life in New York held no footing. In subsequence, she packed

up her belongings and headed overseas to meet Drew. Pakistan is where her new life begins. Sasha and Drew marry. They settle in the California desert, and the couple have two kids, Alison and Lincoln. The kleptomania subsides, or rather, transforms. Instead of stealing items from either stores or people, Sasha truly uses “found” objects to create sculptures and other art. The objects consist of desert trash and old toys primarily, but it’s important to note that none of the objects are stolen.

Upon realizing this, the first chapter in the novel takes on a new meaning. It makes sense, because “Found Objects” occurs in the present. Sasha is trying to get help for her kleptomania, although she is still avoiding her past, as well as its connection to her present condition. The fact that she’s seeing someone about her kleptomania is a huge step in the right direction. As the novel progresses and we see Sasha go through low points, we do discover, in the end, that she’s recovering from those low points by starting over. She’s moved on from parts of her past, she’s found some happiness in Drew and her children, she’s finding objects and making unique art, occupying her time.

Sasha actually started seeing Coz before she was fired by Bennie. This is a good sign, because Sasha realized her problem before she was fired, and then resolved to fix it once Bennie let her go. Seeing Coz, talking him through what she feels, and even the subtle realization that talking about her father would create too much emotional unrest is something that proves to the readers that Sasha is not a lost cause. The reader is explicitly told exactly what Sasha hopes to accomplish through talking to Coz:

She would stop stealing from people and start caring again about the things that had once guided her: music; the network of friends she’d made when she first came to New York; a set of goals she’s scrawled on a big sheet of newsprint and taped to the walls of her early apartments: Find a band to manage, understand the news, study Japanese, practice the harp. (Egan 6)

However, getting fired and having to change locations put a stop in most of those plans. A new set of goals could be scrawled on a big sheet in California, taped to the wall of her bedroom wall. She has children to take care of, a husband to talk to, depend on. She has her art, which can be interpreted as the current, very healthy way that Sasha is filling the void she may still feel. However, I believe that the void is filled. Sasha is no longer a child, but she is definitely human. Humans, even if they're not children, need to have that personal, warm connection with someone, adult or not. Sasha has that now, whereas before, she really had no one, except Uncle Ted.

Speaking of Uncle Ted, the latest event in Sasha's life that occurs in *A Visit from the Goon Squad* is Uncle Ted coming to visit her almost 20 years after finding her in Naples. The drastic differences between the two meetings are immense. In Naples, Ted was frantic in his search for Sasha, and Sasha was in need of serious help, but not willing to admit it to herself or anyone else. When Sasha had finally settled down with her family in California, she's happy, complete in more ways than before. Ted, at that point in time, will not be frantic, but he will still be reminded of the broken girl he found in Naples. Although she is healing, the impact her decision made on Ted will affect him for the remainder of his life.

Egan's portrayal of Sasha speaks volumes about the effect that the past has on a variety of people. The past can directly affect someone, but past actions touch the lives of other people. Egan choose to portray Sasha as a character who has been through hell, but she didn't stay there. Sasha has redemption, of sorts, as the novel progresses. In the end, Sasha is allowed to have a happy ending and a full family like she never had. Egan is realistic in her depiction of Sasha, because more often than not, people who have demons from the past, as well as an unhealthy connection with them, are able to overcome them and produce a better life thereafter.

However, Egan's message of determination leading to solving problems is laced with a warning. A person's past, the experiences they've had, and the trouble they've been through affect other people. Those people that see a suicide occur, or watch their best friend drown, are forever changed. That experience, though it was not their own, may be what they grapple with as they develop an unhealthy relationship with their past. Of course, they have the same hope that Sasha has, but developing an unhealthy relationship with the past is something that should be avoided at all costs. Accepting what has happened, and moving past it, without fixating on the negative aspects, is the way to live a healthy life and look forward to a wonderful future.

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