

# Catch 'Em in the Act

**Terry Bisson**

Lou was almost thirty. He had a job and an apartment, but he was lonely. He didn't have any friends. He didn't know why; he just didn't.

So he did what everyone who is lonely does: YouTube and eBay. One day it was eBay.

"Say, look at this!" he murmured. Lou often murmured to himself.

## **CRIMESTOPPERS™ VIDEO CAMERA**

**Catch 'em in the Act!**

**BUY IT NOW: \$19.95**

**Brand New in Box.**

**Batteries Included.**

**One to a Customer.**

**Shipping, \$4.99**

That didn't seem like all that much. The shipping wasn't bad either. That's usually where they get you. So Lou did what every lonely person with PayPal does. He clicked on BUY.

Four days later, it came. It was about the size of a cell phone, with a little viewscreen that folded out to one side.

It only had two buttons: SHOOT and PLAY. Not a lot of features. But the price was right.

Lou pointed it at his cat and looked in the viewscreen.

There was the cat. The picture in the viewscreen was black and white, with a little Date & Time display at the top. It was even grainy, like a real surveillance video.

Cool! Lou pressed SHOOT.

The cat took a crap in the corner, and then left the room, looking like a criminal. But cats always look like criminals.

Lou pressed PLAY. There it was again in the viewscreen: the cat, the crap, the corner, in grainy black and white, with Date & Time at the top: **04/18/2008/8:44 p.m.**

The cat slunk off and the screen went blank.

Lou hit PLAY and watched it again.

"Cool," he murmured.

\* \* \*

It was time to try it out in the real world. There was a 7-Eleven only blocks away.

It was empty. Lou went in and wandered to the back of the store. He looked through the viewscreen and scanned the scene, from the beer case in the back to the Pakistani clerk reading a magazine behind the

counter. He looked pretty bored.

Lou hit SHOOT. The Pakistani clerk looked up from his magazine toward the cash register. He hit NO SALE and took a bill out of the cash register and stuck it in his shirt pocket. **04/18/2008/8:58 p.m.**

Lou hit PLAY and watched him do it again. It was a five.

*Cool*, thought Lou. He looked around the store through the viewscreen. In grainy black and white, with the Date & Time display, it looked like a crime scene. But 7-Elevens all look like crime scenes. What it needed was more people.

A black guy came in for Salems and a lottery ticket. Lou got him in the viewscreen and was just about to press SHOOT when the black guy turned and looked straight at him.

“Hey, asshole!” he said. “What the fuck are you doing?”

“Nothing,” said Lou. “Making a call.” He pretended to be punching in a number.

“Somebody ought to kick your ass,” said the black guy. He paid and left. The clerk went back to his magazine. It was *People*. Lou pretended to be looking for something in the candy aisle.

A fat white kid came in. Lou knew him. It was the kid from upstairs over Lou’s apartment. He was about twelve. He lived with his mother. Lou wasn’t afraid of him.

Through the viewscreen, in black and white, with the Date & Time display, the kid looked like a perp. He went straight to the candy aisle and picked out a Snickers.

Lou pressed SHOOT and watched the kid approach the counter. Instead of paying for the candy bar he stuck it into his jacket pocket. Then he jammed it forward like a gun. **04/18/2008/9:04 p.m.**

“Open the fuckin’ register,” he said. “Give me the bills. Keep the change. Keep your hands in sight or I’ll blow you away.”

“OK, OK!”

The Pakistani clerk opened the cash register and took out a wad of bills. He handed it to the kid, who backed out the door, still with his hand jammed in his pocket. **04/18/2008/9:05 p.m.**

Then he ran.

“Did you see that?” asked the clerk. Lou shrugged and said, “Not really.” He didn’t want to get involved.

He backed out the door and left the Pakistani clerk calling the cops. He went back to his apartment and pressed PLAY.

There was the fat kid, robbing the store. It had the Date & Time and everything.

Lou watched it several times. He liked crime videos.

\* \* \*

The next day after work Lou went by the fat kid’s apartment. It was right upstairs. He waited until he was sure the mother was away.

“What do you want?” the fat kid asked. He didn’t want to open the door.

“I saw you rob the 7-Eleven,” Lou said.

The fat kid opened the door. “You’re a liar,” he said. But he didn’t sound like he was sure.

Lou hit PLAY and showed him the video on the viewscreen. “I didn’t mean to,” the fat kid said. “I don’t know what came over me.”

“That’s what they all say,” said Lou. “Give me half the money or I will call the police.”

The fat kid gave him half the money. “Let me see that thing,” he said, pointing at the video camera.

“No way,” said Lou. He went home and counted the money. It was \$62, more than he made in a week.

\* \* \*

The next day, Lou called in sick. “I have the flu,” he said. His boss grumbled but didn’t say anything.

Lou took his new Crimestoppers™ video camera to the mall. It was almost empty during the day. There was only one girl shopping. She was extremely pretty.

In the viewscreen she looked like a perp.

*Cool*, thought Lou.

He followed her up the escalator to Level Two. He watched her in the viewscreen as she went into Cinderella’s Slipper, a shoe store. He pressed SHOOT. She picked up a pair of socks when the clerk wasn’t looking and stuck them down into her tank top.

Lou followed her to the food court. She got a taco salad. He sat down at the table with her even though all the other tables were empty.

“Beat it,” she said. “I’m calling Security.”

“I have something to show you,” said Lou. He set the video camera on the table, unfolded the viewscreen, and pressed PLAY. There she was, stealing the socks at **04/20/2008/10:14 a.m.**

“I don’t know what came over me,” she said.

“That’s what they all say,” said Lou. “I’m calling the cops unless you split the loot with me.”

The girl just laughed. “What are you going to do with one sock?”

That was a good question. “Keep ’em both, then,” said Lou. “Think of me as a friend.” She was extremely pretty.

“Not even a remote possibility,” said the girl, her mouth full. “I don’t like your style. Plus, you are not all that good-looking.”

“What style?” asked Lou.

“Plus, my mother is picking me up,” she said, scooting back from the table. It but not the chair was bolted to the floor. Lou followed her, at a safe distance, out to the parking lot. Her mother was waiting in a Lexus. Lou watched in the viewscreen as the pretty girl got in and slammed the door. He pressed SHOOT as the Lexus drove off. It scraped the side of a Hyundai on the way out of the parking lot, but didn’t stop.

Lou went home alone. He watched his crime videos and then went to bed. Now he had two. But he still didn't have any friends.

\* \* \*

The next day Lou called in sick again.

"This is getting old," said his boss.

"It's the bird flu," said Lou. He had \$62 and he knew how to get more.

He went to the bank. It was a branch with only one teller. He watched the customers come in and out, then picked out a little old lady with a shopping bag. He got her in the viewscreen and pressed SHOOT.

She pulled a ski mask and a .44 out of the shopping bag. She put on the ski mask and fired the gun into the ceiling. **04/21/2008/09:18 a.m.**

Everybody hit the floor.

"Hand it over, motherfucker!" the little old lady yelled. The teller filled her shopping bag with money, and she ran out the door.

Lou followed her.

She ripped off her ski mask and jumped onto a bus.

Lou jumped on behind her. He sat down beside her even though all the other seats were empty.

"I saw you rob that bank," he said.

"No, you did not!" she said. She was out of breath.

"Yes, I did," said Lou. He pressed PLAY and showed her the viewscreen and she shook her head in amazement. "I don't know what came over me," she said.

"That's what they all say," said Lou. He made her give him half the money. It was \$560, more than he made in a month. It was all in twenties.

He got off at the next stop and went home and watched crime videos. Now he had three. The cat walked through the room, prancing like a criminal, but Lou ignored it. He didn't want to run down the batteries.

\* \* \*

The next day Lou called in sick again.

"This is getting old," said his boss. "You are fired."

Lou didn't give a damn and told him so. He had \$622. What did he need with a job?

He went back to the mall. The pretty girl was there again. Her mother apparently dropped her off every day. There was hardly anybody else around.

Lou followed her up the escalator. He watched her in the viewscreen as she walked into Cinderella's Slipper. He pressed SHOOT. She swiped a pair of little pink socks and stuck them down into her tank top. It was pink too. Then she went to the food court and ordered a taco salad. Lou sat down beside

her.

“I warned you,” she said. “I’m calling Security.”

“Go ahead, they might be interested in seeing this,” said Lou. He showed her the video of her stealing the socks at **04/22/2008/10:22 a.m.**

“I told you, I don’t know what came over me,” she said.

“I do,” said Lou. He explained to her about the Crimestoppers™ video camera. “Everybody that I shoot commits a crime,” he said. “They can’t help it.”

“It must be magic,” she said. “If so, it’s not evidence.”

“There’s no such thing as magic,” said Lou. “It could be from another dimension, or something. I got it on eBay.” He made her look at the video again.

“It’s not evidence anyway,” she said. “The socks are pink and that’s in black and white.”

“I’m not interested in turning you in anyway,” said Lou. “I just want to make friends.”

“You have a funny way of going about it,” said the pretty girl. “Now if you will excuse me, my mother is picking me up.”

Lou followed her out to the parking lot and watched her on the viewscreen getting into the Lexus. He pressed SHOOT. On its way out of the lot the Lexus ran over a little dog but didn’t stop.

Lou went home alone. He was more lonely than ever.

\* \* \*

That night he was watching crime videos when there was a knock at the door.

It was the fat kid. The little old lady was with him.

“How did you find me?” Lou asked.

“There are ways,” said the little old lady.

“Let’s see that thing,” the fat kid said.

“What thing?” Lou asked.

“You know what thing,” they both said.

Lou showed them the Crimestoppers™ video camera and explained to them how it worked.

“Everybody I shoot commits a crime,” he said. “They just can’t help it.”

“You’re telling me!” said the little old lady.

“That’s why we’re here,” said the fat kid. It turned out they both had enjoyed the experience, and now they wanted to form a criminal gang. “Your apartment will be our hideout,” said the little old lady. “You can be our boss,” said the kid.

Lou wasn’t so sure. But he let them stay. He even let them play with the cat. He was lonely and a criminal gang was better than nothing.

\* \* \*

The next day Lou called in sick again. Then they went downtown and committed some crimes. They stole a box of nails at the hardware store and a thousand dollars at the Indian casino. Then they went back to their hideout and divided up the loot.

“That video camera is cool,” said the fat kid as they divided up the loot. “It’s like magic.”

“It’s apparently from another dimension,” said Lou.

“Dimension shimension,” said the little old lady. “It’s from the future if you ask me.”

“I got it on eBay,” said Lou. He was beginning to worry about the batteries.

\* \* \*

The next day Lou called in sick again. “You don’t work here any more,” said his boss. “So knock off the damn calling in.”

They went downtown and committed more crimes. Then they went back to their hideout and divided up the loot. Then Lou and the fat kid watched crime videos while the little old lady played with the cat.

Lou had \$979.12 by now but he couldn’t get the pretty girl off his mind.

“Why the long face?” the fat kid asked.

“Fess up, Boss,” said the little old lady.

Lou showed them the crime video of the pretty girl at the mall. He told them everything but the truth: that he wanted her as his girlfriend. He had only just realized it himself.

“She’s a skillful one, that one,” said the little old lady.

“I’ll bet that Lexus is filled with socks!” said the fat kid. “We should ask her to join our criminal gang.”

“Hmmm,” murmured Lou. He was beginning to come up with a plan.

\* \* \*

The next day Lou called in sick again. He hung up as soon as his boss answered. Then they all went to the mall together. They got there late. The pretty girl was already in the food court, having a taco salad.

Her tank top looked stuffed with socks.

“You again,” she said, when she looked up and saw Lou approaching, watching her on his tiny viewscreen. “You’re wasting your time. How can I commit a crime while I’m eating my lunch? Brunch. Whatever.”

It was **04/25/2008/10:09 a.m.** She didn’t see the little old lady and the fat kid sneaking up behind her. Lou pressed SHOOT and they immediately went to work kidnapping her. They duct taped her to her chair and gagged her so she couldn’t scream for help.

They carried her on the chair to Lou’s apartment, which was now their hideout.

“What’s the big idea?” she asked, as soon as the gag was removed.

Lou explained to her about the criminal gang. “We want you to join,” he said. He introduced his two partners. He didn’t use their real names, which he didn’t know anyway.

“You’re a natural,” said the little old lady. “We steal a lot more than socks,” said the fat kid.

“There is no way I’m joining your criminal gang,” the girl said, looking at Lou with scorn. “I already told you, I don’t like your style. And you’re not all that good-looking. So untie me. Or untape me. Whatever.”

“Only if you will join our criminal gang,” said Lou. “Otherwise, you are a hostage. Your call,” he added.

Before she could reply yes or no, he got her in the viewscreen and pressed SHOOT.

“OK, I will join your criminal gang,” she said. “And I will be your girlfriend, too.” It was  
**04/25/2008/12:19 p.m.**

“What’s this about a girlfriend?” asked the little old lady.

“But my mother is picking me up in the mall parking lot at one o’clock,” the pretty girl added. “I have to tell her I won’t be home any time soon or otherwise she will worry.”

“Fair enough,” said Lou.

“Don’t trust her!” said the fat kid.

But Lou was the boss. They carried her on the chair to the mall parking lot and untaped her just as her mother was pulling in. But instead of telling her mother that she was never coming home again, so she wouldn’t worry, the girl jumped into the Lexus and rolled down the power window.

“Fuck you and your criminal gang!” she shouted as they sped off.

Lou watched her depart with tears in his eyes. He didn’t even bother to shoot her departure.

“Told you,” said the fat kid.

“Why the two sad faucets?” asked the little old lady when they got back to the hideout. Lou was crying. “This kidnapping was a bust, but there are lots of other crimes waiting to be committed,” she said, trying to cheer him up.

“The day is yet young,” said the fat kid. “So fess up, Boss, why the long face?”

In a sudden burst of honesty that surprised even himself, Lou explained that it wasn’t the crime of kidnapping that had interested him, but the victim herself—the pretty girl.

“I feel used,” said the little old lady, the cat on her lap.

The fat kid was crying himself. “What about our criminal gang?”

Lou confessed that it wasn’t the criminal gang he had wanted all along but a girlfriend. He didn’t give a damn about the criminal gang.

“You devious bastard!” said the fat kid. He went off on Lou. Then he reached into the little old lady’s shopping bag and pulled out the .44.

“Careful with that,” said the little old lady. “It’s a one-way ticket to Hell.”

“Good!” said the fat kid. He pointed the gun at Lou but he couldn’t pull the trigger no matter how hard he tried.

“I’ve got an idea,” said the little old lady. She grabbed the video camera from Lou and pointed it at the fat kid. She got him in the viewscreen and pressed SHOOT. “Try it again,” she said.

“No,” said Lou.

“Yes!” *Blam!* The fat kid pulled the trigger and fired at Lou but missed, just barely. The bullet went through the cat and then demolished the computer at **04/25/2008/01:32 p.m.**

“Try again,” said the little old lady. She pressed SHOOT again. But just as the fat kid was pulling the trigger, the viewscreen went blank.

She handed it back to Lou.

“The batteries are dead,” he said. He was sorry, yet relieved.

“Bummer,” said the little old lady. She took her .44 back and dropped it into her shopping bag. It wasn’t real anymore; it hardly weighed anything.

A silence fell over the hideout. The cat was bleeding to death.

“What now, Boss?” asked the fat kid. Lou was in charge again.

They took the Crimestoppers™ video camera to Walgreens and showed it to the clerk.

“It takes Triple E’s,” said the clerk. “The problem is, there’s no such thing. It must be from another galaxy or something.”

“Then I guess that’s it,” said the fat kid dejectedly. “That’s the end of our criminal gang.”

“I should have know it would never last,” said the little old lady. “I’m outta here.”

“You and me both,” said the fat kid, and they left, but not together. Each went to his or her own home. The criminal gang was kaput.

“Good riddance,” murmured Lou. He wasn’t going to miss those two. But now he felt more alone than ever.

“Can I help you with something else?” asked the clerk.

Lou couldn’t think of anything so he just went home.

\* \* \*

Lou called in sick the next day.

“I told you, you don’t work here anymore,” said his boss. “Quit calling.”

Lou went to the mall. There was the pretty girl again. She pretended to ignore him. He followed her up the escalator to Cinderella’s Slipper and watched her steal a pair of socks. Without the video camera, she got caught. Her father made her give them back. It turned out that he was the store owner. Lou went to the food court and waited for her to show up.

“I’m sorry about the kidnapping,” he said. “I just wanted a girlfriend. The criminal gang thing is over.



Kaput.”

“Too late,” she said. “I hated that tape.”

“You did say OK, you would be my girlfriend,” Lou reminded her.

“I don’t know what came over me,” she said with a mean smile. “That was on your Crimestoppers™ video and perps always lie.”

“How about I buy you lunch,” Lou suggested. He still had his \$979.12. It was burning a hole in his pocket.

“If you insist,” she said. “You’re not all that bad-looking.” Lou felt a momentary stirring of hope that perhaps things were going to work out after all. She picked out a taco salad. It was only \$6.25, but when Lou pulled out a twenty to pay, the cashier held it up to the light. “This is counterfeit,” he said. “I’m calling the police.”

“I should have known,” said the pretty girl.

“It’s the batteries,” said Lou, showing her the dead video camera. “Without them, crime doesn’t pay.”

“So, replace them,” she said.

Lou explained the problem. “It takes Triple E’s,” he said, “and there’s no such thing.”

“It must be from some alien planet,” said the girl. “I never liked your style anyway.”

Then she walked away, prancing like a cat, leaving the unbought taco salad behind. Lou didn’t follow her. It was over, he could tell. He could hear sirens. He walked home alone.

His apartment was lonelier than ever. It felt more like a hideout than a home. Not only did Lou not have a girlfriend, he didn’t have a job anymore. His money was worthless. His Crimestoppers™ video camera was no good anymore and it was one to a customer. His computer was totally demolished and to top it all off, his cat was dead. That one shot had done it in.

The police were pulling up out front. The pretty girl was with them. She had apparently led them to his hideout.

Lou locked the door and sat with the dead cat on his lap. Its fur was still soft in places. Soon he felt better. “So what,” he murmured to himself. So what if he had failed, and he had to admit he had. Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

**04/26/2008/02:47 p.m.** The police were breaking down the door but Lou would never forget his adventures with the Crimestoppers™ video camera. And he had learned an invaluable life lesson. Now at least he knew what the problem was.

It had something to do with his style.

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