



A Very Young Criminal

Writing prompts, discussion questions, and audio transcript

ABOUT THE STORYTELLER

Julie Sternberg is the author of the bestselling LIKE PICKLE JUICE ON A COOKIE; its sequels LIKE BUG JUICE ON A BURGER and LIKE CARROT JUICE ON A CUPCAKE; THE TOP-SECRET DIARY OF CELIE VALENTINE series; and the picture books BEDTIME AT BESSIE AND LIL'S and PUPPY, PUPPY, PUPPY. She is also a co-founder of Play Me a Memory.

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Talk it Out

Once Julie was at home and had successfully stolen the paper, why do you think she started to cry and decided to tell her parents?

Read the following quote from author Veronica Roth:

Let the guilt teach you how to behave next time.

Now discuss:

What do you think Veronica Roth's statement means? Do you agree with it? Use Julie's story to help explain your opinion.

How do you think Julie should answer the question, "Have you ever stolen?" in regard to the experience she had when she was four? Should she, even in adulthood, say yes? Why or why not?

Brainstorm how Julie can learn to forgive herself for her mistake she made in the past.

Write it Out

Choose one of the following prompts and write 1-2 pages, double-spaced:

- Pretend that you are Julie and write a letter of apology to either the store you stole from or your parents. Write two versions of the letter: one as if you are four years old and one as if you are the age you are now, looking back. In both versions, be sure to include a description of what you did, why you did it, and how you feel about it now.
- Write a monologue from Julie's point of view describing exactly what is going on in her head during one (or more) of the following moments:
 1. when her mother says she can't have the paper;
 2. when she steals the paper;
 3. when she hides it under her shirt on the way home;
 4. when she sits down to write on the paper; or
 5. when she starts to cry.
- Describe a time when you broke a rule or a law. Be sure to answer the following questions: What did you do? Why did you do it? How did it feel? Did you ever apologize? How does it make you feel today? Is there anything you can do today to make up for your mistake in the past?

TRANSCRIPT OF THE AUDIO MEMORY

Julie: When I was four years old I went into the supermarket with my mom, and she picked out for my friend Stephanie a pad of pale pink stationery with white dotted lines and a bouquet of flowers in the bottom corner. And I wanted one too. It was for Stephanie's birthday. It wasn't my birthday. And my mom said, "No." So I took one. I took a pad of stationery, and I slipped it under my shirt. And I made it home with it, not being caught. And I went into my room and I sat on the rug in between my two twin beds. And I started to draw on the first sheet of stationery. And then I started to cry.

And I brought it to my mom. My mom drove me back to the supermarket and made me go inside and confess to the – knowing my parents, probably to the manager. I don't really remember. I remember going back to the supermarket. I don't remember who I gave it to. But when I told this story my mom told me that it had been very important to her and her dad – to her and my dad, rather, that I go back and give it to the right person. The person that I had done this bad deed against in their view at the supermarket. Which was interesting to me, because as parents they thought they were sending the message through that piece of the act. And I don't even remember that piece of the act.

Questioner: It could have been anyone.

Julie: For me it didn't matter. I think it was important that we go back to the store. But really all of the emotion of it is [associated with] writing on it.

I know that I had some level of guilt for decades, because when I was in – I don't know if it was the early years of college. It might have been in high school, and I worked in my parent's store and I had to take the personnel test that everyone takes. And one of the questions was, "Have you ever stolen?" And they know whether or not you're lying based on how long you pause before you answer a question. And I didn't know what to do. And I was four [when I stole].

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