**Don’t Pen it on Me!**

Groaning with displeasure as I glanced at the classroom clock, I impatiently fiddled with my pen hoping that English class would soon end. I was anxious to get home and play “Counter-Strike,” an online video game of the first-person shooter variety which I normally enjoyed with several of my high school friends. With my priorities being as previously described, it should be no shocking fact that I do not recall what was being discussed; probably Beowulf and Grendel or some similar generic and required high school material. As I sat in my seat at the back of the classroom, Mrs. Swanbeck prattled on incessantly about all things non-video-game related. This was insufferable, having to wait like this for something as monumentally important as shooting my friends in the face online. By the time the bell finally sounded, I was writhing with anticipation. Mrs. Swanbeck made her closing remarks as usual, and then turned myself and several friends over to our beloved pastime.

Students began filing out of the classroom when I noticed a pale, blonde boy glancing covetously at a jar of pens on the teacher’s desk and then put several of them in his pocket. I had never actually spoken to this boy before, but had definitely seen him interact with others on multiple occasions. From this impromptu reconnaissance, I knew this boy’s name was James. He just did not seem like the “type” to do such a thing. Perhaps he was suffering from a brief, albeit severe lapse in values and needed someone to set him straight. I’m honestly not sure why I took it upon myself to confront this boy regarding the recently-swiped pens. All I can say is that it bothered me the way an Obsessive Compulsive Disorder patient is bothered when unable to entertain their particular quirks. It caused me to become irritated and even anxious, oddly enough. The whole thing just felt wrong to me, and while it’s obvious that stealing is crappy behavior in general I still remained baffled as to why I should feel obligated to intervene. After all, they were just mere pens with nothing very special about any of them. That’s when the realization struck me. What better a reason to attempt to set this situation right, than the simple fact that it was wrong? Yes, stealing is just plain wrong, period. To say anything more would be a supererogation. Someone not doing something simply because it was wrong, I mused. Imagine that!

I began to approach James and after a few steps in his direction, our eyes met and he appeared to be trying to conceal his guilt. It was clear to me he now understood that his mendacious mission would soon come to an end, and he turned his back to me. Once I had successfully traversed my way to the aspiring thief, I tapped his shoulder. “I’d probably put those back if I were you,” I helpfully suggested.

I will not soon be forgetting the monumentally hilarious facial expression that James wore in that moment. The boy’s visage was a showcase of embarrassment, guilt, and fear all neatly consolidated into one pathetic expression of failed thievery. I had him dead to rights and he knew it.

All I received in reply was a monotonous “Why?” I racked my brain, frantically searching for a response that I thought could possibly convince this guy to see reason. Awkwardly enough, the only response to come to mind was the very basic, but true sentiment of my prior epiphany. “Because it’s wrong,” I said. The would-be pen thief stood in silent contemplation, staring through me with hollow, dead eyes for a length of time I am sure was quite less than it felt to me in that moment. After a sufficient amount of blankly-staring, the boy finally replied “Alright,” and then promptly restored the English teacher’s pen jar to its original and un-robbed state. Whether he had experienced an epiphany of his own or was merely afraid that I would bust him, I am unsure. I strongly suspect the latter, but the reason for his unexpected compliance is of insignificant importance.

The fact I was able to leave the classroom that day with uncompromised values is where my own personal victory and the true significance of this tale lie. Things are no longer quite as black and white as they used to be and the more I age, the more gray I see. Still every choice I am presented with, no matter how convoluted, can be eventually reduced for classification into one of two categories: right or wrong. This fact is a comforting point of reference in my life’s journey; a steadfast beacon brightly shining through the ever-increasing moral fog of this world, and guiding me safely home to what I know is right.