Now, if you'll excuse me, I have an article to outline and a piña colada to review.

CRIME PAYS (but you have to wait 25 years)
by Tom Bentley

When I was in high school, I had no money to buy the records I craved. I fretted about this, but I didn't want to get a job. I realized that some of the local drug and department stores carried most of the records that the music stores did, but that their recordings were tucked away in high aisles cluttered with other goods, far away from registers and the eyes of employees. In a big local drugstore, I bought a record, which was bagged, and then I returned to the record area and put 10 more records in. Terrified, I walked out of the store. Nobody followed.

I was stupid and lucky, but I realized if I were brazen enough, I could do it again. Which I did. And again and again. I systematized my work: Making cheap purchases, I collected bags and legitimate receipts from all the major area stores. I even got a tiny stapler that I carried, to use in those stores that stapled purchases in the shut bag, with the receipt exposed. I’d select my evening store (and bag) and return for plunder. I branched out into clothing, small cassette players and other electronics. I sewed a very broad, very deep pocket into a coat I wore so that I could easily slip things in it. In a mirror, I practiced how to clamp things under my arm under the coat so they couldn’t be seen.

I moved on to more overt acts. I carried new briefcases out of stores by their handles, walked out of stores with unrolled sleeping bags, dribbled a new basketball out of a store—I acted as though these were my goods, and that my acts were invisible, which they were. I began selling the goods at school and taking orders. I became a very accomplished shoplifter; I stole things from counters while I talked to the cashiers, just for the thrill.

I continued doing this for a couple of years after high school, until I was caught by a plain-clothes officer in a large grocery store—from which I'd been stealing liquor for a year—with a half-pint of stolen whiskey. Since I was now over 18, I stayed 3 days in jail, because the combined value of four cars (three of my roommates, and one of mine) was determined by the judge to be less than the $500 required for bail. High living it wasn’t.

Despite the fact that my first experience running a business was a successful one, I realized that my business principles were compromised. From that point on, I paid for my whiskey (and all those other life incidentals).

Turning things around

Segue about 25 years into the future. Man (that being me) in a fiction-writing class stares numbly at blank page. The assignment was something like, “Take an abstract emotional concept, such as hate, love, pain, guilt, whatever, and construct a lead character who is the deepest embodiment of that abstraction, but bring that character to life.”

That gave me all the motivational push of cooked cabbage, but after stewing a bit, a tangential theme bubbled up: present a character who is temperamentally (and declaredly) devoid of the ability to experience a certain emotion. That character: me. Or a certain exaggerated flavor of me, that being the fellow who in his heady shoplifting days would blithely toss off statements like, “I’m not stealing. I’m liberating these goods. All of these stores are just capitalist dogs preying on people.”

A more mush-mouthed version of Soggy-Headed Robin Hood probably couldn’t be found, but the thought of those silly spoutings put me in mind of a character who thought that if he didn’t consciously admit his feelings—in this case, guilt—those feelings didn’t exist.

I set to work. I made my protagonist, Douglas, an aloof, hyper-intellectualized, Nietzsche-spewing Catholic high school student, who was an expert shoplifter. He sets up a series of shoplifting “experiments” (escalating in their bravado), which he calmly executes, and then he returns to his home with the goods, where he calculates the value of his thieving and the dearth of his emotional response.
The chink in his armor came in the form of a naïve (and fetching) young classmate who is intrigued by Douglas’s odd manner, and who begins a casual flirtation. Douglas decides to incorporate her into his experiment, theorizing that he needed a vulnerable human element to show his true transcendence over guilt. The story had a lot of symbols and a motif critical to its sad end.

When I’d finished the story, I thought it was good enough for presentation in class, though I worried that I’d created a lead character with such exaggerated skills and morbid self-fascination (and, oh dear, based on me) that he would be a kind of straw man, dead on the page. However, it went over fairly well with my classmates, with some caveats.

What next?
I left the story alone for more than a year, until I read about a short story contest at the National Steinbeck Center in Salinas, only a half-hour from my home. I debated whether it was worth paying the application fee to send the story in, because I was flat certain it didn’t have a chance of winning, particularly because the judge was John Steinbeck’s son, Thomas, also a writer. Though I recognized that they weren’t asking that the stories be written in the tang of Steinbeck, those dark voices in my writer’s head told me that my themes were too far off base to win.

My shock was tangible when I got the call that I’d won the first-place prize: $1,000 and a luncheon at the Steinbeck Center, with an award presentation from Thomas Steinbeck. I was still in a haze a week later when I went on stage to accept a beautifully engraved glass plaque, a certificate, the check and a warm handshake from Leon Panetta, Bill Clinton’s former Chief of Staff and a local resident who had been a last-minute substitute for the ailing Thomas Steinbeck. That was almost 10 years ago, and I still look at that plaque with a flush of pride and happiness.

The prize was a confirmation that I do have the stuff to craft a story, and also an admonition to press forward with my writing, despite all of the night sweats that writers have over the merit of their work. (Not that, of course, pressing forward means those night sweats will go away—just that they can be showered off before you hit the keyboard again.)

In that time since, I’ve won or been in the top three in a few other short story contests, as well as some nonfiction contests. I was able to finish a novel (yet unpublished) and am slogging, albeit s-l-o-w-l-y, through another. And I don’t flinch on the occasions when I’m asked my occupation: my answer is “writer.”

It beats shoplifting for a living.

STALKING THE STARS
by Kristin Bender
The road that led me to cover Christina Aguilera’s wedding, spy on Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie in New Orleans, track Jennifer Aniston in Chicago and follow Tom Cruise and Katie Holmes to Rome, Italy was not one I ever expected to travel. After all, I am A Professional Journalist.

I have for 15 years now earned a pretty good living writing for newspapers, magazines and the occasional Web site, but I’ve always loved the tabloids and gossip mags. I remember flipping through them as a kid, awestruck by stories about two-headed babies, the Loch Ness monster and UFOs that always seem to land in the Midwest.

My love affair endured even after I became a “proper” journalist. I admired tabloids like the National Enquirer for scooping the big-shot papers on stories like the O.J. Simpson murder trial and Monica Lewinsky scandal. How did they do it, I wondered?

I would soon find out.

The assignment
The call to join the tabloid-entertainment press came as I was inching through traffic on my