

Epiphenomena

Everyone had a theory about the burglaries. The Stockwells, whose jewelry had been taken, appealed to macroeconomics: skyrocketing rents plus stagnant real wages equals desperation equals petty crime. The Mazzolis, still grieving the loss of their hand-woven Kashmiri rug, went in for cultural anthropology: the thefts, and especially the forced entries, were traumatic, but also the inevitable result of systematic traumatization of the Other. (*How do you know it was an Other?* they were asked; *We're not saying we believe in intrinsic Otherness mind you but you can't deny the historical tendency of individual actors however alienated from the dominant culture to reify the dominant cultural rubric*, they replied; *Gotcha*, was a typical response.) Mrs. Springer, whose home had escaped any nefarious attention, declared an undeclared public health emergency: there were so many junkies now, they had to range farther and farther to beg, borrow, or, in this case, steal to support their junk habit. (Mrs. Springer was pushing ninety, so her use of archaic terms like "junk habit" that she picked up from watching *Kojak* back in the day was unremarked upon.) The theories outnumbered the burglarized,

because being burglarized wasn't a prerequisite for having a theory. You were doing your bit to hold the numbers down; you had not been burglarized, nor did you have a theory.

But you had a plan.

"I called the police," you said, a note of agitation in your voice. You were standing in your back yard, I in mine, on a fine spring afternoon. To the naked eye, we were separated by an immaculately trimmed hedge, but we both knew we were also separated by a thin nylon cable in the grass, just beyond the hedge, marking the security perimeter you had defined after the Jeffries brothers were hit. All the burglar, or burglars, got were knickknacks—they may have been overwhelmed by choices—but the anomalous nature of the theft made it all the clearer that stakes had been raised. (*Divine retribution for our hoarding: this is the Lord emphasizing that no accumulation of worldly possessions will bring us happiness or ease*, the brothers explained; *We didn't know you were...* everyone else said, their voices trailing off.) You had yet to take action toward enforcing the perimeter, beyond placing the cable, but I observed it, which you respected.

"Wait," I said, "you haven't been—"

"I wasn't calling the police with an immediate emergency. I was calling them in connection to our general state of emergency. Wanting to make sure they recognized it as such. They told me, in that suspect-is-a-male-Caucasian drone of theirs, that if someone wants to steal from you badly enough, there's not much you can do to stop him before the fact. Then they pivoted to how deterrent measures were worth taking anyway, precisely because most people *don't* want to steal from you badly enough; they're amateurs acting on impulse or chasing a thrill or whacked out on something or all of the above."

“‘Whacked out on something’ sounds like Mrs.—”

“Sure, a petty thief can be put off fairly easily. A simple deadbolt, a mid-sized, middlingly aggressive dog, hell, a homemade sign, ‘HOUSE IS ALARMED’ or ‘QUARANTINE’ or something like that.”

“Homemade? The thief will know it’s just a bluff.”

“Maybe. Or maybe not. Who knows for sure? Certainly not a petty thief. A *professional* thief, on the other hand, will regard any impediments or dangers we interpose as mere detours en route to a major haul.”

“That implies that enough of us have enough things of enough value to attract a professional thief *and* that the thief knows it.”

“The thief might only suspect it, maybe wrongly. Or maybe rightly.”

“Wait, do you know something I don’t?”

“All I’m saying is, what we don’t know about other people, neighbors or not, vastly outweighs what we do know.”

I had no idea if you were right, but your argument was unnerving me. “So what can we do?”

“Strategic escalation. We have to transcend deterrence and actively inflict consequences. There’s lots of ways to escalate: hard-wired alarms, electric fences, hell, a moat with alligators, if you have the land. Whoever escalates smartest carries the day.”

“Alligators are smart? C’mon.”

“I didn’t say alligators were smart. They’re one of the dumbest creatures ever to breathe air.”

“I mean they don’t seem like a particularly smart *tactic*, even if you do have the land. It’s more like trying to show how badass you are.”

“Okay, slight amendment: We have to transcend both deterrence and badassery. Let’s begin with the assumption that the bad guys—the home invaders, the domestic terrorists, don’t call them “burglars,” that’s almost quaint—are capable of tactical sophistication, so our own sophistication has to outdo theirs. Apply the logic of strategic escalation, and it’s clear that extraordinary measures are called for.”

“Extraordinary how?”

“Did you know that certain novel central-nervous-system agents, when distributed in a fine aerosol mist, might work to incapacitate the, oh, let’s say domestic terrorists, without permanent damage, to say nothing of lethality, and hence would fall within the Geneva conventions.”

“I didn’t realize the standards of wartime applied here.”

“The most tragic wars are those we don’t realize we’re already waging.”

I had no answer for this, and so you wished me a good day and went to check your perimeter. I walked back toward my house, *extraordinary measures* and *domestic terrorists* ringing in my brain. When I’d reached the back steps, I heard you calling back to me.

“They don’t get it. They’re perfectly lovely people, but they don’t get it.”

“Who are *they*?”

“All of them.”

“What about me?”

You furrowed your brow, as if thinking it over. “I have high hopes for you.”