

Why I'll keep chasing burglars



THE OTHER day I chased burglars across west London. This is the second time I have done so. In 1990 there were 174,780 reported burglaries in London (compared with 127,310 in 1990), most of which seemed to happen in my street. It's the maxim of metropolitan life: "We live in London, so we're burgled."

These figures don't include robberies from persons, muggings, theft and handling of stolen goods including joy riding, beatings on the Tube, or my stolen bicycle. And I am one of many who has decided that enough is enough.

I was on my Notting Hill Gate roof terrace watering the dead geraniums, just about to go on an assignment with a photographer. I looked into the garden below and a man wearing a distinctive red and white woolly ski hat was passing filled dustbin liner bags over the garden wall to another person who looked like an underage dustman. Someone else stood nearby, helping.

The three looked at me watching them, stared back, and continued their business unabashed as I watered my foot. Ah, I was wrong. Obviously they weren't robbers — just youths finding a novel way of disposing of their household garbage ... through my downstairs neighbour's back garden. (We later realised what a very good way theirs was to carry swag; for who would stop someone from taking their trash to a tip?)

I went to ring the police. I called 999 and long minutes later a recorded voice told me that I was held in a queue and would be answered shortly; just the sort of thing that happens when you phone Victoria station to find out train times. On reflection, I actually think the electronic voice said something more self-important like "this is an emergency queue". The Metropolitan police say that 999 calls are answered, on average, within 30 seconds.

Tom the photographer had rushed to the car for his camera, and was standing on the terrace — cursing that he'd forgotten to load the film. But now things were really happening, I was

A. BRAIMER JONES describes the day she and a colleague struck a blow for justice and pursued three thieves who broke into a neighbour's house then made a dramatic getaway

through to the police. "I don't mean to trouble you and they may just be taking their rubbish out ..." I was saying, in my nice and troubled middle-class way.

"They've gone," yelled Tom. "They've gone," I shrieked at the police operator. "Hey, they're back again," screamed Tom. "They're back, they're back!" I whooped. "What ages are they?" said the operator.

Now they were really gone — so we decided to give chase. I grabbed a can of hairspray (the essential weapon for any woman who wants to blind an assailant temporarily). We jumped into Tom's ancient car and set off in pursuit. Suddenly the thieves were heading towards us down a narrow street — in my neighbour's beloved blue Porsche. (We later learned they had taken the keys from his flat.) The robbers obligingly reversed to let us by. Or perhaps it was because we were blocking them.

ALITTLE while later a police car came past us, heading for my house. We screamed to direct him after the Porsche. He was a young policeman and looked, frankly, worried. He scrunched his gears, probably adding to the five he already had, and reached an impressive speed in seconds. Sadly, he was in reverse.

Fortunately my partner and I had noted the Porsche's registration number. I dialled 999 on the yuppie phone. This time we were through to Scotland Yard promptly. Even a police helicopter was whizzed to the scene, we heard later.

The next time we saw the Porsche it had been written off a few streets away. Because it had been speeding when another police car approached, it had also crashed into several other cars and a shop window.

Two suspects were arrested, one of whom had concussion, and a third ran away.

I felt exhilarated by the high drama. But I was also furious, and it was this rage that had spurred me to action.

MY CAR has been broken into twice in a month. My house was turned over last year. My neighbours had their place done over. Last summer a girl was mugged in my street. And when the people downstairs returned to their "home", they found they'd been cleaned out. The burglars had, however, left them a little something to remember them by: excrement smeared on the walls, a condom in the fridge. A tale of everyday life in the city, really.

The after-effects of being a part-time unpaid police-woman are unpleasant. My

gung-ho attitude was rapidly replaced by fear; when you come off the excitement drug you go down. Elation gave way to a feeling of vulnerability; there is a quick shift from victor to victim mode. I haven't slept properly recently. Last night I awoke yelling "get away from my window". There is a feeling of invasion, of home territory encroached.

It was worse last time it happened, only five years ago. I was alone in my then Fulham flat having a lie-in when I heard my front door being opened. There were two robbers standing in my hall.

I screamed "get the f*** out of here" and the man said "stop that f***ing noise". I pursued and caught them, but that's another story.

The following day I started to shake. It was delayed shock. I lived with a lawyer who opened the front door that night to find me brandishing a kitchen knife. Every time the central heating creaked, I knew there was someone in the flat waiting to rape or attack me in revenge. I kept a weapon by my bed.

These stories are not unusual. The only rarity is that I gave chase. And I've been very lucky ...



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