

Smooth Criminal

by Lorenzo Baehne

In an early scene in Marvel's 2015 movie Ant-Man, the film's protagonist, Scott Lang, a convicted felon and former burglar, is summoned to his boss Dale's office at Baskin-Robbins.

"Three years at San Quentin, huh?" says Dale.

"You found out," Scott replies.

"Baskin-Robbins always finds out."

A brief conversation ensues wherein Scott pleads personal reformation and concludes, "It wasn't a violent crime."

Dale heartily agrees, "No. It wasn't a violent crime," he says. "It was a cool crime."

The above dialogue raises questions I have sometimes pondered, such as: Why do certain crimes capture the imagination? What does it say about us that we find these crimes thrilling? And finally, what separates common crime from the riveting variety?

There is sometimes a curious exhilaration we derive from knowing that a few bold people take from society that which they please, the rules be damned; a secret envy of daring criminals, if you will, such as art forgers. We may even, when we consider the subject, covertly substitute ourselves in the place of the actual scoundrels who, by their felonious actions, flip rude gestures at society. It's as though they are saying: "Look at what I can do. You can do nothing to stop me!"

On Christmas day of 2022 several communities near Tacoma, Washington experienced wide-spread power outages. Some

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residents claimed to have heard explosions moments before the lights went out. One assessment placed the figure at sixteen thousand customers sitting in the dark, many of them for nearly twenty-four hours. The subsequent police investigation revealed that three separate power substations had been attacked, and the reason? It was not a political statement by conspiratorial wingnuts, (which might have been interesting). Instead the power was cut to facilitate a burglary at an address which fell within the affected area. The culprits, far from criminal masterminds, were identified via analyzed data from nearby cell towers. Which is to say, they were apprehended because they lacked the foresight to leave their phones at home. It goes without saying these inept antics do not constitute the kind of "cool crime" our friend Dale might enthuse about. But can the same be said about the following caper?

In 2017 an improbable headline swept the globe telling of an audacious heist in London. What was stolen? Of all the unlikely items, books. To be more precise, two and a half million dollars worth of rare titles.

On the night of January 29 three daring thieves penetrated the skylight of a London warehouse, rappelled to the floor, broke into a number of crates, and evidently found what they were looking for. Among the purloined volumes were antiquated editions of Copernicus, Da Vinci, Galileo, Dante, and more besides. The burglars hauled their loot back to the roof and made their getaway without alerting a soul. The stolen titles, we later learned, were en route to the International Antiquarian Book Fair in Oakland, California.

The London heist was impeccably planned, flawlessly executed, and clearly was no hamfisted effort by amateurs. These people were professionals who knew their business. Among the most unexpected facets of the burglary is that no one was harmed in the process. A cooler crime scarcely exists outside of Hollywood blockbusters.

Let us weigh the London book theft against another infamous heist. This one in Boston.

In the early morning hours of March 18, 1990 a vehicle pulled up near the entrance of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. Though it was well after operating hours, two men dressed as police officers convinced the security guard on duty to grant them access. Once inside the two bogus cops took a pair of security guards captive and tied them up in the museum's basement. They then spent the next 81 minutes ransacking the place. The final tally was thirteen pieces of looted art. Among those stolen was Johannes Vermeer's "The Concert," a number of paintings by Edgar Degas, an Eduoard Manet, and two Rembrandts, including "Christ in the Storm on the Sea of Gallilee" and "A Gentleman and Lady in Black." The Rembrandts, horrifically, were brazenly slashed from their stretchers. The theft has never been solved.

The Gardner heist was a crime against art as we can plainly observe by the fact the thieves had no plan for removing the Rembrandts, thus causing irreparable damage in the process. On top of which, their strategy for incapacitating the guards was a dicey one at best. We can imagine all manner of ways in which it might have ended in bloodshed. In short, this was the opposite of a cool crime.

We can perhaps draw from our real-world examples above that which constitutes a cool crime. One of the criteria appears to necessitate a smart class of criminal rather than the scarcely competent variety. Another seems to entail thorough planning. We see near mathematical precision in the London book theft but the same level of preparedness is absent from the Gardner heist. We need nothing more than the slashed Rembrandts and the hastily fettered security guards to deduce this fact. Mere chance also seems to play a role. The thieves in either heist might have been stumbled upon by a hapless employee who remained after hours. Or there

may have been alarms in place the daring thieves were unaware of. Luck therefore does appear to be part of the equation. But at least one additional factor is required in such felonious escapades--audacity.

At the end of World War II the Nazis lay defeated. In the Netherlands the race was soon on to track down Nazi collaborators and bring them to account. It was this endeavor that brought an investigator knocking at the door of Han van Meegeren. How is it, he inquired, that van Meegeren's name came to be associated with that of Reichsmarschall Hermann Goering? By all indications van Meegeren had sold a national treasure to Goering: a priceless painting by Johannes Vermeer, called "Christ with the Adulteress." These actions smacked of treason, the investigator suggested, and treason is punishable by execution. Would van Meegeren care to explain? The story van Meegeren told--after interrogation in less accommodating environs--was literally unbelievable.

Van Meegeren, following years of trial and error, had painted it himself, and "Christ with the Adulteress" was not the only forgery he pushed on the credulous. For the world famous "The Supper at Emmaus" which hung in one of the Netherlands' national galleries, was also a van Meegeren creation. To prove this claim, van Meegeren painted another "Vermeer" before an audience of court-appointed officials. There was no mistaking the eerie similarity between the alleged Vermeers and the indisputable van Meegeren painting.

Although the court deprived Han van Meegeren of most of his wealth generated by peddling "old masters" to unsuspecting collectors (including Goering), he was eventually granted his liberty and released to considerable acclaim. He left the courtroom a national hero, as the man who put one over on the Nazis.

The boldness demanded to successfully execute such capers is breathtaking. Among the public there appears to be an admiration for charming rogues who have the courage to do what we ourselves would never contemplate, far too meek in our ordered lives, perhaps, to do anything more than read--or write--about them. But how far does this permissiveness go, this enjoyment of rule-breakers violating societal values? Why, for instance, do we silently root for the international Elmyr de Horys (de Hory was a prolific Hungarian art forger) but condemn the Donald Trumps of the world? Where do we draw the line?

Perhaps that line is hard and definitive when it crosses the boundary of visiting harm upon others. No one is injured, for instance, when a forger passes off a second rate artwork as a genuine Vermeer. There is even a prankish aspect to these shenanigans. But when an elected official bans persons of a specific religion or nation of origin from entering the country or relegates children to cages . . . well, that is no prank. Instead it speaks to a regressive ideology, an ideology which conspicuously rubs against the grain of American ideals, such as compassion and fraternity.

An additional question we may wish to ponder is: Is motive a factor in our cool crime equation? The simplest answer is, it can be. Certainly this was so in the very fictional case featuring Scott Lang, aka Ant-Man. Lang sought justice for a number of unnamed victims. His actions made him something of a Robin Hood figure, stealing from the rich and giving back to the wronged. However, in the real world examples herein the motives appear purely monetary and therefore far less honorable. Yet these widely publicized capers are no less cool for it.

On April 17, 2023 a shipment of gold and other high value items went mysteriously missing from the Pearson International Airport in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. The theft left authorities completely baffled. The ongoing police investigation has to date turned up few

leads. The brazen theft appears to highlight several of the criteria explored above. From our new perspective we can perhaps appreciate the complexities involved in staging the Toronto heist, and which leaves us with at least one glaring conclusion . . .

'O, Canada, you've been hit by a smooth criminal.

