No one is talking about it very much, but a new form of criminal terror is stalking America—military-style assaults on residences while families are still inside.

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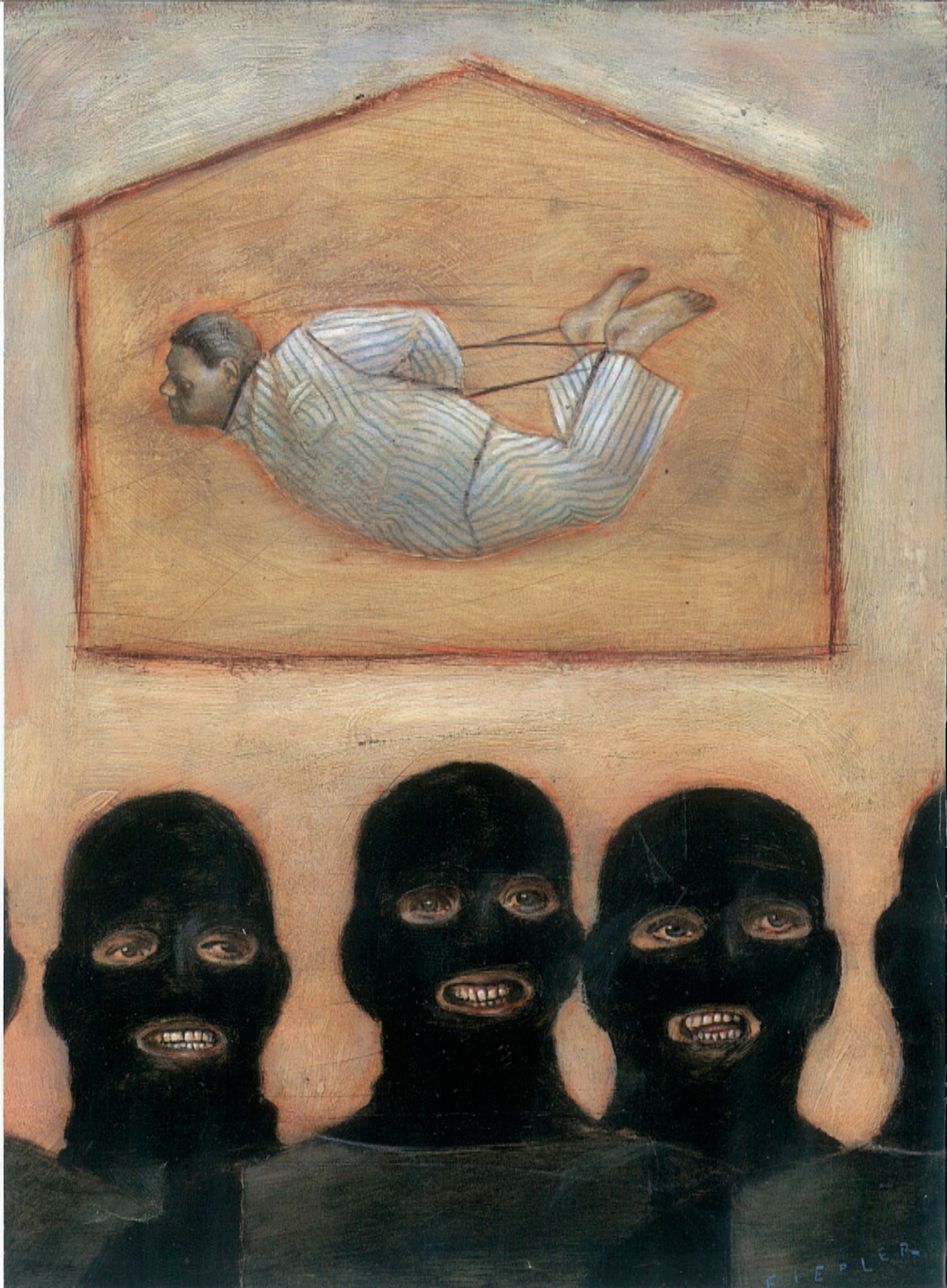
HOME invasion

One evening four years ago Mohammed Khalid was stretching out on the couch in the air-conditioned comfort of his home outside Orlando, Florida, when he suddenly felt the crush of a knee on his chest. A masked man stood over him, pushing a nine-millimeter automatic into his mouth. A second man pressed a revolver to the back of Khalid's head. Out of the corner of his eye Khalid could see other gunmen, masked and wearing commando suits, fanning out through his house. Bandits dashed up the stairs, rounding up his children and nephews. Yet another made for the master bedroom, where Khalid's wife, Afaf, was just emerging from the shower. • In an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instant a portrait of suburban bliss was shattered forever. "I'm gonna kill him!" the gunman kept screaming as he pried open Khalid's mouth with his pistol. Nearly crippled with panic, Afaf led one of the assailants to her bedroom closet. She handed over family heirlooms made of 22- and 24-karat gold worth more than $300,000.

"I prayed to God to save our family," Afaf Khalid says. Her family was saved, and the bandits eventually were caught, but none of the valuables were ever recovered. Nor did the Khalids recover their peace of mind.

Mohammed Khalid has since moved his family to an undisclosed location in another state. But the terror he and they endured has not dissipated. "I'm never going to get it out of my mind," Khalid says. "When something destroys you like that, you never forget about it."

The Khalids, Palestinians who had escaped the political turmoil in their native Middle East, had built the most successful haberdashery in central Florida. They had raised their two children to believe in the American Dream, only to see it dashed in their living room, in the hometown of Snow White and Mickey Mouse.

The Khalids have joined a growing number of victims falling prey to a new form of criminal terror that has been quietly stalking America since the onset of the 1990s. It's called home invasion.

Home invasion is *the* great underreported crime of the decade, striking at communities large and small in the one place where Americans have always taken their safety for granted—the sanctity of their own homes. These crimes involve military-style assaults on residences while families are *inside*.

Unlike traditional cat burglars, who strike while homeowners are out, practitioners of home invasion actually *want* to find you at home. Police say in some cases it's a power trip; the intruders derive a twisted pleasure from playing God with their quarry. More often it's a matter of expedience: At gunpoint bandits can get their victims to reveal the locations of secret stashes or the combinations to heavily secured home safes. Ironically, police say, the boom in sophisticated home-alarm systems may actually be fueling the surge in home invasions; it's easier for intruders to enter with a knock on the door while a family is there than to risk tripping an alarm when no one is home.

As bank robberies and store holdups become more difficult to pull off, criminal bands are turning to home invasions with increasing frequency, law-enforcement experts say. While the big metropolitan areas lead the nation in home invasions, gangs also are striking deep into affluent, tree-lined suburbs, where unsuspecting, well-to-do families make soft, lucrative targets.

Conspiracy is the operative word. For a home invasion involves at least two—and sometimes as many as ten—intruders, each with an assigned task. The team leader often assumes the most difficult one: to confront and subdue the able-bodied male(s) in the household, threatening to resort to deadly force if necessary. Others will roust wives or children from their bedrooms. Yet another will cut phone lines, dismantle security systems, and deal with any unforeseen eventuality. Some gangs will post lookouts, equipped with scanners and two-way radios, to maintain contact with the entry team in the course of the assault.

I first heard about home invasions a few years back, when a friend casually mentioned one such episode. I was stunned when he explained the modus operandi of a home-invasion gang—the targeting of unsuspecting victims in their homes, the use of overwhelming force, the paramilitary nature of the enterprise. It seemed straight out of El Salvador or some other nasty Third World backwater, where the rule of law is the law of the fist—not what you'd expect in the late-twentieth-century United States.

"Children who have always looked to their mothers and fathers for protection are made to see their parents on their knees, begging for their lives," says Florida state's attorney Michael Lafay, who successfully prosecuted the perpetrators of the Khalid robbery. "And it happens in the home, where we all have our comforting routines, and then there's just an immediate and sudden transition to sheer terror. It's as bad as a property crime can get, because it's an assault on the family."

Even while the United States experiences a sustained drop in nearly every other form of violent crime, the reported number of home invasions is soaring. Home invasion is so new a crime the F.B.I. does not yet keep statistics on it. But local police departments around the country, by necessity, are beginning to. The L.A.P.D., for example, recorded a staggering 2,137 home-invasion robberies in 1996—an average of 160 per month within the city limits alone. And those were the reported cases. Police detectives figure that for every two home invasions they hear about, a third one goes by "off the books"; victims are often too fearful to call the cops.

The N.Y.P.D. investigated nearly 800 home invasions throughout the five boroughs in 1995. Pretty dramatic numbers for a crime that remains virtually unheard of among broad swaths of the unsuspecting public. And New York authorities report a chilling new twist on the theme: Home-invasion armies are organizing themselves into anonymous, clandestine cells—much like urban guerrillas or "conventional" terrorists. Gang members know one another only by pseudonym, precluding a turncoat or infiltrator from laying bare an operation's command structure.

Home-invasion gangs go to great lengths to avoid detection and identification—disguising their voices, planting disinformation in their discussions with victims, suiting up with ski masks, gloves, and black Ninja outfits. Gangs will resort to elaborate ruses to gain entry to homes—posing as U.P.S. drivers, lawn-care specialists, or sometimes even as SWAT teams pretending to serve a warrant.

Southeast Asian gangs pioneered home invasions in America. They got started in Southern California in the late 1980s, preying on their fellow Asian immigrants. Law-enforcement experts trace the practice to former officers of the South Vietnamese Army whom American soldiers fought alongside—and to corrupt village bosses who ruled strategic hamlets with an iron fist during the war. They would later turn up extorting money from boat people in refugee centers in the Philippines and Thailand. It is one of the more bizarre forms of "blow back" from our Vietnam adventure, winds sweeping eastward from across the Pacific—the war coming home to roost.

Asian gangs remain the lead practitioners of home invasion in terms of sheer numbers. The gangs mostly target other transplanted Asians, who tend to conduct their restaurant and grocery businesses off the books and hide large amounts of cash in their homes, where the I.R.S. can't find it. But the gangsters do, through the application of naked terror, often leaving victims too shaken to report the crime to police.

Nomadic Asian gangs cruise the anonymous interstate corridors coast to coast—I-5, I-10, I-95—blowing in and out of towns, relying on local informants to pinpoint targets for home-invasion robberies. The assailants are back on the road in a flash, leaving their victims emotionally scarred forever—and local cops scratching their heads, with few leads to pursue.

"They have no boundaries," says Houston police detective Al Lotz, explaining why law-enforcement agencies across the United States are so ill prepared to deal with home-invasion gangs. "We have jurisdictions; they have no jurisdictions."

But what started out as an Asian import has lately taken on a distinctly American character, with perpetrators as ethnically and racially diverse as the country itself—and victims ranging from mom-and-pop shop owners to big-time entrepreneurs. A few years back Houston police pegged most home invasions in Harris County, Texas, to well-planned rip-offs among rival drug gangs. But now, they say, just about anyone can fall into the cross hairs of a home-invasion gang. Authorities believe that right-wing militia groups may figure among the nation's proliferating bands of home invaders. In fact federal agents say Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols staged at least one home invasion in Arkansas in 1994 to raise money for their grim deed in Oklahoma City.

The methods of home-invasion gangs are as diverse as the predators' ethnic backgrounds. Some will troll for victims, cruising streets for attractive, brightly lit homes. Steve and Sharon Blais of Deland, Florida, caught the eye of a quartet of African-American intruders, simply because the Blaises were up late with their lights on. Earlier this year a widower in Tustin, California, was beaten and robbed of $24,000 by a Hispanic couple when he opened the door to a woman who said she needed to use his bathroom.

Other gangs stake out supermarkets or A.T.M.'s for promising targets and follow them home, striking once the victims get inside—out of view of possible witnesses. More sophisticated gangs gather information on their prospective mark for days—even weeks—in advance of an assault.

"They start to collect intelligence," says Florida prosecutor Lafay. "Does the family have a safe in the house? How do they do their banking? Do they own a business? Any one of these things can turn an ordinary family into a target of opportunity."

The Khalid incident provides an instructive example. The Khalids came to the attention of an unscrupulous Lebanese jeweler named Afif Jamal, who operated a fencing operation out of his pawnshop in Fort Lauderdale. In time, Jamal confederated the two-bit thieves he fenced for into his very own home-invasion army, called the Jamal Posse. He would pinpoint targets through his contacts in central Florida's Arab-American community, then send out his men to do the job. Jamal melted down his booty and hustled it out of the country within hours of a hit. He was caught after one of his underlings was picked up on an unrelated charge, and squealed. Jamal got life without parole in 1995 for leading the assault on the Khalid home.

The case of Afif Jamal represents one of the few home invasions the cops have actually solved. Far more often the perpetrators go free—and strike another day. Each new week turns up fresh episodes of domestic terror from across the continent: Miami, Vancouver, Sacramento, Columbus, Boston, Houston. And ever more often from small, quiet towns you've probably never heard of: Pearland, Texas; Medford, Oregon; Richfield Springs, New York.

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But no story captures the essence of the crime quite like the events that unfolded in 1993 in the sun-drenched suburbs outside Phoenix—one of the wealthiest enclaves in the country and, it turns out, the operational theater of the most professional and mysterious home-invasion team yet known to law enforcement in the entire U.S.A.

Arizona's open desert landscapes and prodigious "Help Wanted" ads have made the state a magnet for sun-starved retirees and dislocated Rust Belt workers. But its rapid growth has proceeded hand-in-hand with other, less sanguine developments. Militia groups, bearing names like Viper and Sons of Gestapo, have sprouted like blossoms after a desert downpour. Local sheriffs are deputizing thousands of supporters into armed posses to fight the influx of illegal aliens and drug traffickers. Bounty hunters without warrants are legally breaking down doors. And among the elite who inhabit magnificent, fortress-like homes in the canyons just north of Phoenix, "home invasion" and "remote panic" have become household terms, thanks to the band of assailants that has haunted their neighborhoods.

> "I'm never going to get it out of my mind," one victim says. "When something destroys you like that, you never forget about it."

Between early 1989 and the final days of 1993 this team of masked gunmen collected an impressive $9 million in cash, jewelry, and rare gems in the course of 14 separate home invasions. Nearly all the victims were elderly couples, all members of Phoenix high society. They appeared at charity balls in dazzling jewels and designer costumes. And they kept their valuables stowed away in supposedly secret home safes, a fact that somehow would come to the attention of the thieves.

To better elude the cops, the bandits scattered their targets among four different police jurisdictions—first hitting homes along the steep, red-rock canyons of Paradise Valley, later out in the scrublands of unincorporated Maricopa County, then in suburban Scottsdale, and finally within the city limits of Phoenix. The band had been operating for nearly three years before investigators from around the Valley of the Sun finally put their heads together and linked all the various robberies to the same gang of perpetrators.

But nothing matched the sheer ingenuity displayed by the bandits in their fourteenth robbery, of the Paradise Valley home of millionaire investor James Doane and his vivacious, platinum-haired wife, Cece.

Even by the standards of Phoenix high society, the Doanes presented an exceptionally difficult target. In his late fifties, Jim Doane struck an image of discreet success as a tight-lipped, silver-haired gentleman. He had installed a top-shelf security system to protect their spread on the back side of cactus-studded Mummy Mountain. Even when the alarm was turned off, it chirped at the slightest "perimeter violation" if a door or window cracked open even a hair. The system was rigged to a pair of "remote panics"—hand-held buttons that would summon police with the squeeze of a thumb. Doane made a point of showing his frequent cocktail guests the loaded guns he scattered around the house; there was a pistol with a chambered round in every room.

The Doanes also bought a German shepherd puppy as an additional line of defense to protect their treasure trove of gilt-framed portraits, rare Bavarian porcelain, and two safes filled with gems and antique jewelry. Doane thought the dog's bark in the night would suggest a bite to any would-be intruder. But in a twist truly worthy of Rod Serling's imagination, the shepherd turned out to be a modern-day Trojan horse in reverse, a lure to get the Doanes *out of* their house so that it—and they—could be robbed, to the tune of a whopping $600,000 in uninsured jewelry and gemstones.

The dog disappeared from the poolside garden while the Doanes were out one December night in 1993. Five nights later they received a phone call from a man who said he had found the shepherd puppy.

The caller gave a local address, just at the bottom of Mummy Mountain. The Doanes pulled up minutes later at a Romanesque mansion with granite pillars and a marble walkway. The lights were on, the front door was open. And sure enough, there was their dog, tethered to a leg of a sofa in the living room. "Come on in!" came a cheerful voice from somewhere in the rear of the house. "I'm on the phone. Be off in a minute."

"I was thinking that we might actually be walking into a trap," Doane later told me in the hush of his home library. "But it never clicked. I mean—the house, the area. You just never would have suspected it." When they rushed in to see their prodigal canine, the door closed behind them. Two masked men stood there, pistols drawn.

The Doanes were handcuffed, police-style—hands behind the back, palms out. The bandits cocked their guns and demanded the codes to the alarm system and the combinations to the safes. "You better not fuckin' lie or we're gonna blow your head off, fuckin' bitch," the darker one said to Cece.

The gunman relayed the codes by walkie-talkie to a third party, who remained out of view. Then he added, "She's not wearing the ring." He seemed to be referring to a 9.37-carat diamond Jim recently had given Cece on their first anniversary.

For the next five hours the Doanes sat at death's door while the thieves had the run of their house up the hill. "I really thought they were going to kill us," Doane says. At one point Cece looked up and caught a glimpse of three men conferring in the dim glow of the hall light. She saw the two masked bandits and a third, bare-faced man who evidently had just removed his mask; she could see the ringed impressions it had left around his eyes.

"He was muscular, very clean-cut, with strawberry-blond hair and a peaches-and-cream complexion," Cece remembers. "I swear to God, he was a member of some police department. He had the look of law enforcement." The man was wearing a bulletproof vest.

In the wake of the Doane robbery police investigators scrambled after every possible lead. But—like the narrow, unlit roads that snake their way up Mummy Mountain—all trails led to a bewildering maze of dead ends.

From the Doanes' description of the bandits it was evident they belonged to the same team of professionals who had staged 13 previous home invasions in greater Phoenix's most affluent neighborhoods. Investigators compiled a "link chart," enabling them at a glance to compare the M.O. in all 14 cases. The entry team invariably consisted of the same two individuals, but their walkie-talkies (and Cece's eyewitness account) offered evidence of a third man acting behind the scenes as the lookout, or perhaps as director of operations.

The intruders were always masked and gloved. They usually entered through

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unlocked doors. Upon entry they would knock out alarm systems and rip phones from the wall. They bound their victims with whatever was at hand—in one case with a vacuum-cleaner cable, in another with the cord from a victim's vibrator. Despite the masks and black Ninja outfits, the assailants could not hide certain distinguishing traits.

The man whom police came to call "Suspect No. 1" was described by witnesses as lanky and sandy-haired, with a heartland drawl from somewhere between Missouri and Texas.

"Suspect No. 2" was shorter, stockier, and darker, with a Hispanic accent, leading victims to presume he was Latino. Witnesses sometimes heard the sandy-haired man call him "Roberto." The Latino was terrifying and violent. The lanky "Texan" played the soothing foil to Roberto, as if to make sure no one had a heart attack to gum up the works.

one, each with a bullet to the back of the head. The assailants—one white, the other Hispanic—were identified and caught after they removed their wigs and masks in Sucharski's home, unaware that their victim's hidden camera was recording it all for posterity.

In the Phoenix home invasions "Roberto" would strike the fear of death into his victims at the outset of an assault—pistol-whipping, kicking, and wildly waving his gun. But after Roberto established absolute control, his cohort went out of his way to put the captives at ease. He loosened handcuffs, mixed drinks for his reluctant hosts, and lit cigarettes for them. In one home he allowed an elderly woman to kiss her wedding ring good-bye—literally—as he and Roberto slipped out the door, taking with them nearly $250,000 worth of jewels and ancient Egyptian coins.

Not even security walls deterred the Phoenix bandits. Two assaults took place within the gated community of Clearwater Hills. They bypassed the gates and the guards—belying the

Asian home invaders are notorious for their brutality—resorting to infant murder, rape, and amputation to coerce victims.

Home invaders need to convince their victims that they are willing to go to any blood-curdling extreme. Asian home invaders are notorious for their brutality—resorting to infant murder, rape, and amputation to coerce their victims. So fearless of the cops are Asian gangs, they often don't even bother to mask up for the job.

Real pros stop short of inflicting bodily harm. As long as their offense is only a crime of property, solving the case will remain a low priority for the cops. No perp, except for the truly bloodthirsty, wants a homicide on his hands and hounds on his trail.

There *are* graphic exceptions. An obscure footnote to the O. J. Simpson trial turned up a grisly video of the 1994 home-invasion murder of one-time Simpson associate Casimir Sucharski and two female friends. Sucharski apparently had sensed he was in danger, because he had installed a hidden surveillance camera in his beachside home in Miramar, Florida. The clip shows a pair of intruders in combat fatigues shoving their way through a sliding glass door and throwing their victims to the floor. Then, with deliberate cool, they executed their quarry one by

myth that walled-off neighborhoods offer airtight protection.

In one such incident the robbers found their mark precisely because she lived in a gated community. That victim, who insists on anonymity, told me she brought her jewels home from the safe-deposit box because she believed her new home was safe. She stashed them in the presumably secret safe she had had sunk into the linen-closet floor. Just as she was sliding into bed for the night, she said, two silhouettes rushed from behind the bedroom curtains. "I grabbed my remote panic, but the alarm lines were already cut," she said. They wore the signature ski masks and black commando outfits, and warned they would shoot to kill if she looked up at them. They bound her and made straight for the safe, making off with a cool half-million dollars in gemstones and gold.

The most elaborate home invasions require a meticulous game plan, suggesting sinister premeditation and detailed preparation: on- and off-site surveillance and the befriending of a security guard, an ill-paid gardener, a society hobnobber, an insurance agent, a cop on the local force—or all of the above. The plan often hinges on insider knowledge of a victim's habits and possessions. It's the kind of information that could be gleaned only through the cooperation of a trusted friend, employee, or contractor who is familiar with the target home. Assault-team members are thoroughly briefed on the home's floor plan, the existence and location of safes, the names and ages of victims likely to be present, and an inventory of the valuables to be seized.

"They act like they have already watched the victims somewhere," says Scottsdale police detective Tom Van Meter, who has doggedly pursued the string of home invasions for the past four years. "Because several times when they've entered the house they ask, 'Where's your two-carat diamond? Where's your five-carat diamond?' "

In the case of the Arizona home invasions, Cece Doane was the only victim ever to get a look at the third man—remarkably unmasked. Her recollection was crucial in constructing a composite image. But it has not produced a solid lead.

Van Meter and his counterpart from Paradise Valley, Dennis Dodd, pursued leads through a parade of witnesses, suspects, and informants who seemed to march straight off the pages of an Elmore Leonard novel: ski bums and golf caddies, topless dancers, security guards, stable masters, hotel managers, restaurant captains; sleazy pawnshop owners, jewelers, and used-car salesmen; even Navaho border cops and scrawny Mexican gardeners—you name it.

Promising clues turned up elsewhere in the country. The most intriguing incident led back to Arkansas—a possible home state of Suspect No. 1 and eventual site of the 1994 McVeigh-Nichols home invasion.

A few weeks before the Doanes were hit, a band matching the description and M.O. of the Phoenix robbers held up a jeweler in a house in Lafayette, Arkansas. The jeweler, Marvin Schluger of Manhattan's Fifth Avenue, had come to Arkansas at the behest of an ex-president of Cartier Watches. Schluger was to put on a show of his expensive jewelry to benefit a charity. But within minutes of his arrival at his host's home, two masked bandits appeared from behind the living-room drapes. Schluger was hog-tied and thrown facedown on the kitchen floor. He lost more than $1 million when the gunmen made off with a black bag full of jewels—the largest heist in the history of Arkansas. Local authorities suspect a tie-in with the Phoenix robberies. But after a cursory glance at the case, federal agents discounted a connection with Arizona.

The Doane robbery represented a new variation on the home-invasion theme. "They knew they couldn't do a

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home invasion with us," says Jim Doane. "Chimes go off whenever there's a perimeter violation. I had firearms. They had to get us out of the house. But they had to find a location where they could hold us. They knew all this."

That location had to be within walkie-talkie range of the Doane house—and on the same side of Mummy Mountain for the radios to work. It had to be the home of someone the Doanes did not know; they couldn't have been lured into a friend's home on the ruse of retrieving their dog from a stranger. As it turned out, the Romanesque mansion used by the robbers belonged to a woman who was away on vacation. It was the perfect location.

The F.B.I. eventually entered the investigation in an advisory role. But even with the feds watching, Maricopa County's famous law-and-order sheriff, Joe Arpaio, concedes he feels little pressure to solve the 14-chapter case—despite its status as the most lucrative string of home invasions staged in the entire country. And despite the fact that they all occurred within his very own Maricopa County.

"Is there an uproar over these robberies?" Arpaio asks bluntly. "No. But I've got people who voted for me screaming to clean up the graffiti and lock up the dope peddlers."

And therein lies the most disturbing truth associated with the rise of home invasions: The police are virtually powerless to deter this new form of crime. They often concentrate instead on solving less complicated cases to foster an illusion of effective law enforcement. The home-invasion scourge signals the emergence of a new and dark social force—shadowy, highly disciplined shock troops operating beyond the bounds of the law, focusing on an ever wider swath of the populace, rich and poor alike.

Perhaps only the wealthiest citizens, with millions to spend on elaborate defenses and private security armies, are safe these days. More starkly put, the police—on whom we always have relied to safeguard our neighborhoods—are no longer sufficient protection for anyone.

"We're getting killed out here," said Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department detective William Howell in 1995 about Southern California's home-invasion epidemic. "No [police] department's gotten a handle on the problem."

Few in the field of law enforcement seem to have the wherewithal or the time to deal with the problem. Are home-invasion teams autonomous bands, operating on their own? Or are they foot soldiers under the orders of invisible higher-ups? Do the bandits have links to an international black market, where rare items can be fenced without detection? Do the bands represent the nucleus of some even more nefarious future development, like the emergence of homegrown death-for-hire squads?

"Cops are so busy trying to put out the fires, they don't have time to ask those questions," says Jimmie Sakoda, an investigator with the Los Angeles District Attorney's office.

With regard to the Phoenix bandits, the cops have almost as many theories as there are saguaro cacti on Mummy Mountain. Scottsdale detective Van Meter believes the gang came in from the outside and is now long gone. "I believe they are people from out of state, probably business people," Van Meter said. "And they're just sending out their soldiers to do the work."

But reconnaissance still would have to fall to a local infiltrator who moves in Phoenix high society—someone who has an eye for jewels and is close enough to the victims to pick up details about their possessions, the layout of their homes, their security systems. That person, in all likelihood, is still in their midst.

Where the jewels have gone—including Cece Doane's 9.37-carat diamond ring the bandits eventually found in the safe—is anybody's guess. Some of the items are so rare, says Arizona's top F.B.I. agent, Jack Callahan, "they would be very difficult to fence in this country." Take, for instance, the antique $70,000 Patek Philippe moon-face perpetual watch taken from Jim Doane's safe, so rare "not even The Donald has one." Or Cece's own Patek Philippe open-face with cloisonné case. So far police advisories to dealers have elicited no response.

A gang's level of professionalism typically corresponds to the status of the mark and the attendant challenges to the operation's success. The anticipated haul must be big enough to justify the time and expense. Amateurs are largely responsible for the small-time, spontaneous jobs. The large hauls require careful planning and well-trained personnel. Be they large jobs or small, however, home invasions invariably yield the same result: terrified families and shattered dreams—and a broadening meltdown of our social fabric.

We are used to thinking about acts of terror as public events, coming into our living rooms on the tube: airplane hijackings, the hostage crisis in Iran, sarin gas on the Tokyo subway, the bombs of Oklahoma City, the World Trade Center, and the Khobal Towers in Saudi Arabia. But a new form of terror is afoot in America these days. It's coming to our homes live and in full color. And it's not on TV.