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The Silver Thief

The Story of a Burglar Who Was Too Good for His Own Good

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Sometime during the early hours of January 29, 2002, a great deal of sterling silver vanished from a mansion near Rhinebeck, New York. The mansion, known as Edgewater, was built in 1823 and for decades was the home of a family named Donaldson. Its current owner is Richard Jenrette, a retired financier whose hobby is preserving historic homes. Jenrette takes his hobby seriously. He once tracked down the last living Donaldson descendant, who had moved to the south of Spain, and persuaded her to repatriate the family's original silver to Edgewater. This included a flatware set decorated with the Donaldson crest (a raven perched on rocks) and a dozen teaspoons, each engraved with a sign of the zodiac (a bow to the Victorian interest in astrology, and a playful means of marking the seating arrangement). All of these items were stolen, as were a toddy ladle and a fish server, luncheon knives and demitasse spoons, a chocolate pot, and a six-piece tea set—many of which were designed by such fine silver makers as Tiffany, Gorham, and Martin-Guillaume Biennais.

The mansion also had Gilbert Stuart paintings and antique porcelain, but these had not been taken, and some of the lesser silver was left behind. Furthermore, the alarm had not been tripped. The burglar had gingerly pried the wooden molding from the glass panes of an exterior door, removed the glass, and shimmed inside, thereby failing to break the alarm contacts on the door. Jenrette, who was at his winter home in St. Croix when his caretaker phoned with the news, speculated that the burglar had some kind of inside connection, or had at least visited the mansion. Edgewater was occasionally open to tour groups, and Jenrette had recently held a fund-raising party for Hillary Clinton that drew several hundred people. He wondered if perhaps one of the guests—or, more likely, some guest's hard-up nephew or brother-in-law who had been told of the party—had broken into the grand, remote house along the Hudson River.

That night, there was another burglary, ten miles south of Edgewater, at Wilderstein, the former home of Daisy Suckley, who was a distant cousin and close companion of Franklin D. Roosevelt. (Suckley gave the President his famous Scottish terrier, Fala.) Again, the haul was silver, and the job was equally meticulous. The method of entry was the same. Wilderstein had an interior motion detector, which somehow had been evaded.

The state troopers in Rhinebeck realized that they were dealing with a specialist. The burglar left no fingerprints or clues. There wasn't much to do except alert the antiques publications, the auction houses, and the Times, which ran a brief article about the burglaries.

Nearly two weeks later, Cornell Abruzzini, a police detective in Greenwich, Connecticut, was having his morning coffee when a colleague stopped by with the Times article. "Doesn't this sound like the silver guy you nailed?" he asked.

Abruzzini read the article, then called Rhinebeck and said, with barely an introduction, "I know the guy who's doing your burglaries."

Abruzzini told Tom Fort, the trooper who was handling the case, the name of the thief: Blane Nordahl. But Nordahl had in recent years used various aliases, which included David Price and Robert Demiani. Abruzzini advised Fort to check the local motels for all three names. On his tenth try, at a Super 8 several miles south of Rhinebeck, the trooper got lucky. A man called David Price had paid cash for a room. Miraculously, the clerk had done what motel clerks are supposed to do with a cash customer: taken down information on his car—a Cadillac Seville—and photocopied his driver's license. The picture on David Price's license was of Blane Nordahl. He had checked out more than a week earlier.

Several months ago, I drove out to Greenwich to talk with Cornell Abruzzini about Nordahl. Abruzzini is a well-spoken forty-five-year-old who pronounces his last name with brio, as if it were an exotic dessert. Trim, with deep-set eyes, he is bald on top but has dark hair on the sides and a thick beard, which has an auburn tinge. That night, he wore jeans, a black sweatshirt, and black Reeboks. He was working a freelance job as a night watchman for an antiques show at Greenwich's aging civic center.

I arrived after midnight, and we sat in the lobby at a card table, shivering a bit, the pipes clanking, as we paged through fastidiously organized three-ring binders that Abruzzini has devoted to Nordahl's case: police reports, crime-scene photographs, silver inventories, copies of phony driver's licenses. Abruzzini is considered the ranking expert on Nordahl, a fact that both pleases and irritates him. He is proud of the investigative work he did that led to Nordahl's arrest, in 1996, for six burglaries in Greenwich. Yet Nordahl seems impossible to stop: after completing a prison term, he inevitably returns to stealing. (He has been arrested more than a dozen times for burglary.) "It's like watching the same bad movie again and again," Abruzzini told me.

Abruzzini had interviewed Nordahl extensively after the arrest for the Greenwich burglaries. The silver thief, I learned, was thought to have stolen at least ten million dollars' worth of silver in more than fifteen states. Though Abruzzini is not the sort of policeman who thinks it fitting to compliment a criminal, he eventually allowed that Nordahl was the most accomplished burglar he had encountered (which, in Greenwich, is not empty praise), and easily the most distinctive.

Nordahl, who is forty-three, had a standard method. He scouted his locales through Architectural Digest or the Robb Report, or by calling real-estate agents. He'd tell them that he was hoping to buy a big old home in a settled neighborhood, and ask where he should look. During a daytime drive, he took note of houses that were set back from the road. After a nap at his motel and a light dinner, he set out at about midnight.

He parked in unremarkable locations. As Nordahl once told Abruzzini during an interview, "You have to park where it fits in. If it doesn't fit in, then you can't park there." He often walked several miles through forest or back yards, and considered several dozen houses before choosing one.

Nordahl carried two nylon duffelbags: an empty one for the silver and a smaller one filled with screwdrivers, a carpet knife, wire cutters, a wood chisel, nail pullers, a flashlight, a white cotton rag, duct tape, and a Wonder Bar—a piece of thin black steel that can pry open almost anything. Nordahl was good with his tools, Abruzzini told me, and he was patient. One night in Greenwich, he said, Nordahl spent two hours creating a hole in the door. His reward: flatware for a hundred and ten people, and an exquisite tea service.

All the while, Nordahl wore nipple-tipped cotton gardening gloves to avoid leaving fingerprints. After collecting the silver, he passed the two duffelbags through the door opening, then climbed out. He examined the silver for maker's marks, discarded anything that wasn't worth carrying, and hid the bags near a road—under a bush, if possible—on his way back to his car. "One job he did here, he parked four or five miles away," Abruzzini said. "How he finds his way to and back, it's amazing. If I gave the same task to seven-eighths of the cops in town, they couldn't do it."

Within hours of a burglary, the silver was on its way to Nordahl's fence, in New York. He preferred to deliver it himself, to insure top dollar, but whenever he was beyond driving distance of New York he sent it by U.P.S.

Malcolm X, who as a young man was a burglar in Boston, offered an account of his former trade in his autobiography. "I had learned from some of the pros, and from my own experience, how important it was to be careful and plan," he wrote. "Burglary, properly executed, though it had its dangers, offered the maximum chances of success with the minimum risk. If you did your job so that you never met any of your victims, it first lessened your chances of having to attack or perhaps kill someone. And if through some slip-up you were caught, later, by the police, there was never a positive eyewitness."

The average burglar, however, is lazy, sloppy, haphazard, unimaginative, and thus unsuccessful. Nordahl was none of these, but over time his methodology had become as distinctive as a signature. That's why Nordahl became the prime suspect in the Rhinebeck burglaries the moment Abruzzini read about them.

No thief was born as good as Nordahl, Abruzzini told me. A thief had to evolve—and foul up—along the way. If I wanted Nordahl's complete history, Abruzzini said, I should speak with a retired detective in central New Jersey named Lonnie Mason.

He had known Nordahl for twenty years, Abruzzini added, and he still lived a few miles from where Nordahl began his career.

Lonnie and Mary Mason, their four children, and a stout German shepherd named Lexy live in a yellow clapboard house in Avon-by-the-Sea, New Jersey. Mary is an accountant with the United States Treasury Department; Lonnie, fifty, is now a stay-at-home dad. He keeps his old police files upstairs in dog-eared brown folders. He has a thick neck, a bulky chest, and a bristly brush cut, and he wears steel aviator glasses. While we spoke in the living room, Mason's ten-year-old son, Chris, sat worshipfully at his father's feet. Mason, sunk deep in a big corduroy recliner, occasionally yanked the lever, a nervous habit.

Mason was a cop for twenty-eight years, the last fourteen of which were spent as an investigator in the Monmouth County prosecutor's office. Monmouth is a pastoral coastal area known for horses, old money, and Colonial tastes: perfect for a silver thief. Mason has arrested Blane Nordahl twice. He spoke of him the way someone might speak of a roguish relative—general disapproval moderated by grudging admiration, mixed with a sense that you can never be rid of him. The first thing Mason told me about Nordahl was that he had once tried to help him reform: "I said, 'Blane, if you ever want to use your knowledge in a positive way, I'd work with you.' I said, 'You could work in the insurance industry in the area of silver. You could work with alarm systems. If you want to team up, go into a business, we could turn this into a crime-prevention program.'"

"What did he say?" I asked.

"He said, 'I don't think so.'"

Nordahl grew up in Minnesota and Wisconsin, Mason told me, and his parents divorced when he was young. His father, David, became a successful artist who moved to Santa Fe, painting realist Apache scenes. (His work has been collected by Steven Spielberg and Michael Jackson.) His mother, Sharon, held waitressing and office jobs, and now lives in Indiana. As a boy, Blane was shuttled between the two of them.

Initially, he was a good student—his family thought that he might become an architect—but sometime in high school he lost interest. He began cutting class and smoking pot. More than anything, he was in a hurry to make money. So he quit school during the eleventh grade, in 1978, to take a construction job. But he couldn't stay out of trouble. His family gave him two choices: become a cop or join the Navy.

In his early naval training, Nordahl won a series of awards, and spoke of becoming a Navy seal. He was eventually posted to Earle Naval Weapons Station, in Colts Neck, New Jersey. But in 1983 he was arrested for his first burglary. The Navy later charged him with desertion, and he was discharged.

Nordahl's first crimes were undisciplined, Mason told me, and bore little resemblance to his mature work. He was a common house thief, taking whatever was available. He usually worked during the afternoon, and he visited the same towns repeatedly. Worse yet, he had partners. "He tied up with a group of guys and started doing jobs," Mason said. "After he did the jobs and they rolled over on him when they got caught, he decided to go solo."

Nordahl came to consider burglary both a profession and an art. He once told a detective that an alleged accomplice "doesn't have the brains or the talent or the ambition" to be a good burglar. Taking crime seriously had a bracing effect on Nordahl. He stopped using drugs and gave up alcohol, cigarettes, and even caffeine. He tried to eat well, and he worked out constantly. Only five feet four inches tall, he built himself a gymnast's body: strong shoulders, a skinny hips, muscular legs.

He began to focus on sterling silver. This was perhaps Nordahl's smartest move, Mason told me. In terms of risk versus reward, breaking into a home to steal a television set is foolish. Stealing jewelry requires venturing upstairs, into the bedroom. But silver is kept downstairs, in the dining room or in a butler's pantry, far from sleeping homeowners. Nordahl started spending hours in the library, studying the makers, vintages, and hallmarks of antique silver.

Like a baseball scout, Lonnie Mason liked to keep track of emerging criminal talent. When Nordahl was arrested in 1985 for some burglaries a few towns over, Mason tried to interview him, but Nordahl wouldn't talk. So Mason began to investigate him, and Nordahl—the closest thing Nordahl had to a fixed address was Camden, New Jersey, a ragged city across the river from Philadelphia, and an hour's drive from Monmouth County.

In the spring of 1991, there was a rash of silver burglaries in Rumson, New Jersey, and Mason was called in to consult with the local police. At the time, most of Nordahl's robberies took place on Thursday nights. So on the following Thursday evening Mason had sixteen men assigned to him for an overnight stakeout. They blanketed a two-block area of Rumson. By Friday morning, with no sign of Nordahl, Mason was relieved. "I thought, Thank God," Mason told me. "Maybe he saw one of our guys and called it off." Just after Mason got home and went to bed, his boss phoned. "He said, 'Can you tell me why I authorized all this overtime? Because he hit three houses last night.' And I said, 'Well, what section? Because I know one section he didn't hit.' My boss gave me the addresses, and it was the two-block radius we were in."

Mason learned to recognize the signs of Nordahl's presence. If someone climbed a telephone pole and snipped the alarm wires, that was Nordahl. (Later, when he got better at evading alarms, he abandoned this method.) If a burglar had somehow stolen the silver without disturbing the pair of Rottweilers inside a house, that was Nordahl. (It is the whiff of a person's sweat, triggered by adrenaline, that agitates a dog, but Nordahl—whose mother had bred Alaskan malamutes—was oddly affectless.) From soil samples taken outside victims' homes, Mason learned that Nordahl sometimes used a chemical solution to determine whether the stolen silver was sterling or plate.

Several months after the failed stakeout in Rumson, Mason was sent to investigate a burglary in the town of Little Silver. The burglar had entered an unlocked kitchen window, and taken only the sterling. Mason called for a tracking dog and his forensics man, even though he had little hope of finding anything. But beneath the open window lay a soft garden bed. The burglar had stepped in the dirt, climbed through the window, and landed on the kitchen counter. The result was a muddy sneaker print on the counter. "I know you can't lift it," Mason told the forensics man. "But I want you to photograph that thing for the next three hours until you get a good picture."

An arrest warrant for Nordahl was issued. Thanks to Mason's earlier legwork, he knew that Nordahl was staying at a motel in Camden. "We went down there that night, found out what room he was in, then called and pretended we were the manager—you know, 'Are you checking out tomorrow?'" Mason told me. "We knew he was in there. I had the Camden County fugitive with me, and they look like the front line for the Eagles. We went and we hit the door—and he wasn't in the room. Finally, I see Blane hiding behind the door. So I reach around with my left

hand-I have my gun out-and I grab him. I go to holster my weapon, he comes out from behind the door. He grabs my arm, and now we're wrestling. Well, we flipped, and we went over the TV. It looked like something out of a cartoon. He went skidding across the rug with me on his back-he got this big rug burn on his cheek. And we came to rest on a pair of sneakers. I said, 'Nah, couldn't be.' We rolled over the sneaker, and it had the same tread."

Persuaded by the sneaker print, Nordahl accepted a plea bargain. He served two and a half years of a five-year sentence. When he was released, he returned to stealing, but he added an important precaution to his routine. After each night's work, he would take his sneakers, his clothes, his gloves, and his tools and toss them into a lake or a Dumpster. Mason told me that Nordahl had made him a better cop; Mason had clearly made Nordahl a better burglar. Sometimes he now wore shoes two sizes too large, with extra socks, so the police couldn't even match his size.

In December, 1994, Nordahl stole nearly a quarter of a million dollars' worth of silver from four homes in Essex Fells, New Jersey, a tiny town about twenty-five miles west of Manhattan. In the coming months, he continued to work in New Jersey, the old-money fringes of Philadelphia, and Westchester County, in New York. But according to Lonnie Mason, and to police in various jurisdictions, he also began to travel more extensively: the outskirts of Boston and Baltimore (much of the loveliest Colonial silver is in those areas); Grosse Point, Michigan; Kennebunkport, Maine; New Castle, Delaware; and Winnetka, Illinois. In the winter, he could be found in Miami and Palm Beach.

He couldn't help boasting about his abilities, and spoke openly of the wonderful movie his life could make, starring Bobby (never Robert) De Niro. Mason had tried to warn Nordahl that he wouldn't be so quick and nimble forever. "He said he didn't have to be quick anymore, because he was so good," Mason told me. "He said, 'By the time you get to the scene, I'm out of the state.' " Nordahl continued to rob homes in Monmouth County; on one job, he took the silver but left behind a thousand dollars in cash that lay on the dining-room table. Mason took this as a taunt.

If an economist were to analyze Nordahl's operation, he might well be impressed. Economics is, at root, the study of incentives, and Nordahl had rationally concluded that the incentives for stealing silver easily trumped the incentives to stop. He was essentially a one-man economy, and he had pinpointed a valuable yet abundant commodity. Perhaps most important, Nordahl had found a weakness in the criminal-justice system. Robbery was a shrinking discipline-burglary rates have fallen by half since the early nineteen-eighties-and the jail sentences were light.

A psychiatrist, however, might argue that Nordahl was driven by an irrational compulsion. One former girlfriend of Nordahl's told me that he was fixated on stealing every night. "He got high off it," she said. "He liked going into houses when people were sleeping. He said it's more exciting to go into a house when people are there and get away with it." Lonnie Mason also described Nordahl's behavior as an addiction: "This is what he exists for, and it's all about his infatuation with money." Mason argues that silver was particularly appealing to Nordahl because it connotes the sort of family that passes along precious things from one generation to the next-a family that was distinctly unlike Nordahl's own. As Mason sees it, Nordahl remained embittered by his parents' divorce; he resented his father and became extraordinarily close to his mother. (When Mason got hold of Nordahl's phone records, he was astonished by the number of calls between the two.)

Nothing gave Nordahl greater pleasure, Mason believes, than stealing a rich man's silver and turning it into cash that he could shower on his mother-who, while unhappy about her son's calling, appreciated his devotion.

Converting silver into money was the most inefficient part of Nordahl's scheme. According to Mason, Nordahl once revealed that his fence paid him between ten and twenty per cent of the silver's book value. For many years, he fenced his silver to a man who lived in Weehawken, New Jersey, and kept a small jewelry shop in the diamond district of Manhattan. The former girlfriend I spoke with said that Nordahl earned "about seven thousand dollars a day," which seems high until one considers that he rarely took a night off.

The size of Nordahl's assets is unknown. A proper assessment would require help from the I.R.S., which Mason once tried to enlist, unsuccessfully. Nordahl is clearly not a miser: a 1995 receipt trail constructed by the F.B.I. showed that he once spent nearly twenty-five thousand dollars in just three months. And this was only a fractional report, covering some of Nordahl's credit cards, but no cash.

In "To Catch a Thief," Cary Grant plays a retired cat burglar who lives in a mountainside French villa. While serving an elegant lunch to an insurance agent, he explains why he stole: "Oh, to live better; to own things I couldn't afford; to acquire this good taste, which you now enjoy." To judge by his receipts, Nordahl's spending was more prosaic. Much of his discretionary spending took place at Wal-Mart and Walgreen's; during one six-week stretch, he spent \$2,462.51 at Wal-Mart alone. His clothing came from Men's Wearhouse and Today's Man; there were charges of \$79.34 and \$132.24 for adult-video rentals; and a bill for \$47.40 from Al's Pawn-a-Rama, in Lake Park, Florida.

The ex-girlfriend told me that Nordahl could be remarkably generous. She had lost custody of her young son, and Nordahl paid her legal fees to try to get the boy back. Nordahl tended to take up with junkies from the Camden area-women who had children but no job, someone who could travel with him. According to Lonnie Mason, Nordahl often supplied a woman with drugs to keep her compliant. She never accompanied him on his late-night work, but the next day he might drive her past the grand gated houses that he had robbed.

Early one Sunday morning in May, 1996, silver valued at \$151,399 was stolen from Ivana Trump's house on Vista Drive in Greenwich. A few nights later, a house on Peckslund Road, several miles to the north, lost \$202,829 in silver, most of it Francis I by Reed & Barton. The community was rattled by these burglaries, and the police felt pressed to catch the thief. Cornell Abruzzini, who had been on the Greenwich burglary squad for two years by this time, was placed on the case. He immediately recognized these break-ins as the work of the thief who had committed three other robberies in Greenwich the previous summer. Abruzzini had never seen such clean crime scenes. At one house, the burglar made a tidy stack of the door molding he had pried off to gain entry.

Abruzzini learned that similar burglaries had recently taken place in East Hampton; the police there put him in touch with Lonnie Mason, who told the story of Blane Nordahl and guessed that the Greenwich jobs were his work. The stack of door molding was classic Nordahl, Mason told Abruzzini: he was a neat freak, and kept his socks arranged perfectly in their drawer. Mason was eager to help Abruzzini catch Nordahl, but warned that it would be difficult to gather sufficient evidence to arrest him. Nordahl was so practiced that he was virtually untouchable, unless he was caught in the act.

A week after the Ivana Trump burglary, Mason called back. Nordahl was staying at a Super 8 in Stamford, he told Abruzzini, with a longtime on-and-off girlfriend from New Jersey named Luanne. Mason knew this because, after years of chasing Nordahl, he had managed to turn Luanne into a confidential informant. She was not always a reliable informant-at the time, she was a drug addict who regularly went back on her word-and she had returned to living in motels with her cat-burglar boyfriend. But at least she had checked in with Mason. Now Mason suggested that it was time to scare her into submission.

The Greenwich police staked out the Super 8 in Stamford. One night, they saw Nordahl and Luanne packing up the car. Although they didn't have enough evidence to arrest Nordahl, they confronted the pair, and handed Luanne a cell phone. Lonnie Mason was on the other end.

"Oh, shit," she said.

"Luanne, you have two choices here," Mason told her. "You can either stay on tour with Blane and get indicted down the road, or you can go with these cops and cooperate."

Luanne started to cry. Nordahl glared at her. Mason told her that Luanne had a ten-year-old son back in New Jersey, and he told her to think about him, not Nordahl. She cried some more, then ended the phone call and climbed into the police car.

"What are you doing?" Nordahl said. He warned her that she'd be in trouble without him, Luanne told me, since he had her heroin.

"I'll get it from the police," Luanne said. A few months later, on August 24th, Nordahl did one more silver burglary in Greenwich-just for spite, he later admitted to Abruzzini. Luanne, meanwhile, had started to talk. Mason used a clever ploy to cement her cooperation: he drove to her house and showed her a photograph that had been in Nordahl's possession-a picture of a blond woman in a white dress posing in front of the Manhattan skyline.

"That son of a bitch!" Luanne said. She dug out a picture and showed it to Mason: an identical image, except with Luanne in it. Both photographs were taken on a promenade in Weehawken, she told Mason, just down the street from the home of Nordahl's fence. Now Luanne began to provide the Greenwich police with many details about Nordahl: how he obtained fake I.D.s, for example, by placing counterfeit documents in a toaster oven to artificially age them. With the promise of Luanne's testimony, Cornell Abruzzini was able to get a warrant to arrest Nordahl for six Greenwich burglaries.

Nordahl must have realized that he was aggressively being pursued, because Mason couldn't track him anywhere in New Jersey. He wondered if perhaps Nordahl had sought safe haven with his mother, in Indiana. He asked the F.B.I. to put her home under surveillance. Mason soon got word that Nordahl had been spotted driving toward his mother's home, his truck full of drywall. Apparently, he was renovating her house. F.B.I. agents told Mason that they would take Nordahl into custody, and Mason tried to warn them that they were dealing with an escape artist.

"I'll never forget it," Mason recalled. "It was a rainy, nasty day. They said, 'We chased him in the front door of his mom's house and out the back, and he's in a wooded area. We have him cordoned off. We have helicopters up, we got dogs here. It's nineteen degrees, and it's going to snow. He cannot survive in the woods for any length of time.' I said, 'How long have you been out there?' He said, 'Oh, about forty-five minutes.' I said, 'I'm telling you right now: Blane is gone. Blane is probably ten miles away right now. Call me back when you find out I was right.' Next day, I get a call: 'You're not going to believe this. He was at a bank withdrawing money by the time we were talking to you on the phone.' "

The F.B.I. flagged the credit card that Nordahl had used to buy the drywall-it was issued to one of his aliases-and began tracing his movements. He made it to Wisconsin and did some shopping in Sparta, the town where he went to junior high school, and the last place where he'd lived within the law. The police issued a teletype describing Nordahl's vehicle, which an off-duty officer spotted at a Wal-Mart. Inside, Nordahl was buying fourteen Sterilite storage containers and two boxes of trash bags. More police officers arrived in the parking lot, and they arrested him as soon as he stepped outside.

The police inventoried Nordahl's belongings in his vehicle and in his motel room, and found, among other items, nationwide motel directories, a video titled "How to Create a New Birth Certificate," a rubber stamp that read "original document," and a book called "How to Launder Money." He had been travelling with two cats, one white and one black, named Romeo and Juliet; a series of receipts from various animal clinics suggested that he was a devoted pet owner. Not surprisingly, he had no sterling silver and no piles of cash.

Nordahl spent only three months in a Wisconsin jail before his extradition back East, but it was long enough for him to earn a bad reputation. He was always shouting for the TV to be turned up louder, and other inmates complained that he kept the water in his cell running all night. This was because he was trying to escape. At night, he used a spoon to try to dig through his cell wall, then patched the growing hole with toothpaste. He told a prisoner named Dennis that he had three or four million dollars waiting for him in prisoner banks, and promised to pay Dennis fifty thousand dollars if he'd help him break out. Nordahl explained that he planned to make his move on a Sunday afternoon, because the Green Bay Packers were on a playoff run and the guards might be distracted by the game. He also said he would kill Dennis if he tried to stop him. Instead, Dennis ratted him out, and Nordahl was moved to a new cell.

Nordahl's arrest was big news in the towns that he'd visited during his most recent spree. Ivana Trump had not been the only high-profile victim: in Palm Beach, Nordahl had robbed the home of Curt Gowdy, the retired sportscaster. In East Hampton, police suspected that he had made a run at Steven Spielberg's house but was put off by a motion detector. (It was also widely reported, erroneously, that he had burgled Bruce Springsteen's home in Monmouth County.) Some newspapers began calling Nordahl "the burglar to the stars," although Nordahl never knew or cared when he got back to his entering. He discovered that he had stolen from Trump only when he got back to his motel and found her last name stamped on two dinner plates-which turned out to be pewter.

It soon became evident that, despite the efforts of Lonnie Mason and Cornell Abruzzini, Nordahl wasn't going to be spending much time in prison. None of the cases against him were strong. The police had no forensic evidence, no silver, no heroin addit as the star witness. Nordahl also knew that some three dozen police departments in nine states were anxious to shift their unsolved burglaries from open- to closed-case files. Robert Eisler, a criminal attorney in Deal, New Jersey, represented Nordahl at the time. "If you're in law enforcement and you've got some cold cases," Eisler told me, "you'll give your kidney just to get somebody to say, 'I did that.' "

Eisler, whose clients are typically biker-gang members, armed robbers, and sexual predators, saw an opportunity to craft a deal that would make everyone happy. "Blane harms nobody, aside from the fact you'll never see your great-great-great-grandfather's knife and fork again," Eisler said. The people who lost their silver felt violated, but most of them were adequately reimbursed. It was really the insurance companies that suffered most-and who can work up much sympathy for them?

In September, 1997, Eisler and Nordahl signed off on a deal with federal prosecutors that encompassed, according to Abruzzini, a hundred and forty-four recent burglaries. Nordahl agreed to hold proffer sessions with police officers from the various jurisdictions and describe his burglaries so that they could officially clear their cases. In exchange, Nordahl pleaded guilty only to the interstate transport of stolen property.

Nordahl's plea agreement called for him to help the F.B.I. trap his fence-who, Nordahl hinted, might have Mafia ties. Nordahl, now free on bail, was supposed to visit the fence in New York while wearing a wire. But he could not get the F.B.I.'s attention, nor could Eisler, Mason, or Abruzzini. "I'm getting collect calls from Blane saying, 'These guys ain't using me, what's the deal?'" Abruzzini told me. "Meanwhile, Blane goes back to his old tricks, and starts clobbering them in Baltimore. He may have been working for the feds during the day, but he was doing his own work at night."

In November, 1998, Nordahl was arrested again, in Baltimore (with burglary tools but no silver), and was finally sent to prison. He was released in April, 2001, and placed under federal probation. Abruzzini and Mason assumed that Nordahl would resume his burglaries, but there wasn't much they could do about it.

It was only in February, 2002, after Abruzzini learned of the Rhinebeck burglaries, that he suspected Nordahl was active again. He began helping the Rhinebeck troopers track Nordahl. As it turned out, the United States Marshals in Camden, Nordahl's home base, were also looking for him, because he had failed to report to his probation officer. The Marshals soon captured Nordahl outside a Dunkin' Donuts shop in Mount Laurel, driving a green Cadillac Seville, and he was sent to a federal prison in Elkton, Ohio. He intimated to the authorities that he had intentionally violated his probation: a man like him could hardly be expected to take a nine-to-

five job and report regularly to a probation officer. Now he would max out his prison term and be set free with no constraints.

Last November, after nearly two years of refusals, Nordahl agreed to be interviewed. He was due to be released from the Elkton prison in ten days, but he had recently received some bad news: a grand jury in Poughkeepsie, New York, had indicted him for the two Rhinebeck burglaries. A helpful document had been found in the Cadillac: handwritten directions to one of the Rhinebeck mansions. That document, along with the photocopy of Nordahl's fake driver's license from the Super 8, had given the police enough information to move forward. Still, there was no forensic evidence. Tom Fort, the state trooper in Rhinebeck, told me to expect a "signature crime" prosecution. "One of our arguments is the fact that Blane and only Blane could have committed these burglaries," he said.

Nordahl seemed to view the indictment as more of a nuisance than a threat. "They're grabbing at straws, hoping to make a bale of hay," he told me. "My belief is that, basically, I've been charged based on my past." We were sitting on blue office chairs in a concrete-block conference room. Nordahl was not handcuffed-Elkton is a minimum-security prison-and he wore all khaki, including an insulated jacket several sizes too large. His hair was thinning, but otherwise he looked surprisingly boyish: he was buff and trim, with good color, smooth skin, clear blue-green eyes. But he sat stiffly, hands in his pockets, and didn't smile once during our conversation.

As Nordahl sees things, the police are as deceptive as criminals. "Society as a whole always thinks that cops are being honest, and the truth is they're very dishonest," he said. "Police say things to cover their own ass. Or they'll say things to go ahead and establish something if that's the piece that they need. They won't lie about everything-just about one thing or two things."

When I mentioned Cornell Abruzzini, Nordahl said, "This fucking guy's a clown." He had surmised that it was Abruzzini's grand-jury testimony that resulted in the Rhinebeck "signature crimes" indictment. Nordahl reminded me that his 1997 guilty plea was for the transportation of stolen property, not for the hundred-plus burglaries he had spoken about in his proffer sessions. In his view, it was improper for Abruzzini to establish his "signature" by citing those discussions. "Those negotiations, that process, is not a public record, and that paycheck was necessary to pay for food." He added, "I don't commit crimes where someone walks up to an old lady who collects welfare and she's getting twenty dollars out of her A.T.M. That's absurd." He said of his crimes, "There certainly have been times probably I felt guilty, and there have been other times I probably didn't."

I asked him about his childhood. "When I was really young, I was basically athletic," he said. "But then once my parents got divorced my mom kind of moved around a bunch. That kind of stopped everything." He added, "I learned to work with my hands in school. I took drafting and sheet metal and carpentry and things like that, and I built great big tree forts. . . . If you learn at a young age, then you have an ability to visualize things, you have a natural ability-a natural balance, you know, a coordination."

He said that he had never been afraid during a burglary. "To be honest with you, I don't think anybody who breaks the law, no matter what it is, is really thinking about the other side of the coin," he said. I asked Nordahl if he took particular pleasure in stealing from the wealthy. "A lot of this stuff they don't even use," he said. "It's more of a trophy, almost. Not trying to rationalize it, but I can see feeling sorry for somebody who gets robbed of their paycheck, and that paycheck was necessary to pay for food." He added, "I don't commit crimes where someone walks up to an old lady who collects welfare and she's getting twenty dollars out of her A.T.M. That's absurd." He said of his crimes, "There certainly have been times probably I felt guilty, and there have been other times I probably didn't."

I wanted to know what became of the silver he stole. I told him that, as I understood it, the better pieces were exported to Europe for resale, but lesser pieces were melted down. "Well, that would be speculation," he said. "I wouldn't know."

Lonnie Mason had told me that Nordahl would sometimes lose himself, eyes bugged out, when he discussed his burglaries in detail. But the story that made his eyes bulge on this day wasn't really about his skill as a thief. It was something that happened in Monmouth County in 1984.

"This was in my younger days of doing things differently-in the daytime," he told me. He had robbed two homes but had found little of value. As he was approaching another house, he was spotted by a police car; Nordahl ran a few blocks and jumped into a thick row of hedges. He took off his white shirt, curled up, and covered himself with dirt. Police officers swarmed the area; Nordahl could hear them close by. "The one thing you never do is look at somebody if you know they're coming by," he said. "I close my eyes, and I don't think about them." The police finally left several hours later, at 9 p.m. Nordahl broke into a few more houses, but came up empty. "So I'm, like, 'Well, fuck this. I'm going to make some money still.' " He found a big house on the edge of a marsh and decided to camp out until everyone was asleep-but Nordahl dozed off. When he woke up in the morning, he decided to break in anyway. But, as soon as he came out into the open, police cars arrived. He doubled back toward the marsh and could hear police officers chasing him, and a helicopter in the near-distance. The ground was mucky and flat, but he found a small ridge and burrowed underneath it. Policemen were stomping all around him, and the helicopter was overhead. "I'm thinking, They've got to be able to see me. Time goes by and nothing happens." One cop stepped on Nordahl's leg. "I thought, Now he's going to say, 'All right, buddy, get up.' Nothing happened." Nordahl stayed hidden until it was dark again, and the police left. "At that point, I decided, well, I'm not going to do anything more tonight. I went to the train station and caught a train to New York."

He leaned back and sighed. I began to think that perhaps it wasn't the stealing that was the thrill for Nordahl so much as the escaping. He said, "If you were being chased by a bear, your adrenaline's going to be pumping, you know what I mean? Later, you might not really say, 'Gee, that was fun.' But, at the same time, if nothing else really was going on, it might have added flavor to the day. As long as you got away from the bear. But, of course, if you got caught by the bear, you know, it's another story."

Nordahl later said that he was tired of living on the run. "My whole plan was to go on with a real life now," he said. "I have no visions of being some criminal for my life. That's not cool. My whole thing is I want to get into real estate, remodelling homes, things like that." He added, "Of course, I want to be married. Of course, I want to have kids of my own someday. I've been distant from my own family, and I need to reconnect. You need to be a part of their lives and so forth. And this doesn't let you be a part of someone's life." Earlier, I asked if anyone visited him in prison. "No," he said.

Mason and Abruzzini had warned me that Nordahl always talked about changing his ways. "Blane couldn't go straight if you snapped a chalk line for him," Abruzzini said. Luanne, his ex-girlfriend, had also told me that he would never stop. "He'll be seventy-eight with a goddam cane, walking down the street stealing silver," she said.

Nordahl insisted that if he could leave jail tomorrow he would not return to burglary. "I really don't think so," he said. "I think I've got to put all that behind me. I guess when you're young and so forth, if your life is mundane, a burglary can throw something in there. But then you start to realize that the mundaneness of life sometimes has value."

Three weeks later, Nordahl did walk out of jail, the beneficiary of bureaucratic oversight. He had been moved from the federal prison to a nearby Ohio county jail to await extradition to New York for the Rhinebeck burglaries. But before the extradition was arranged a judge allowed him to post bond. The Ohio authorities apparently had not been informed of his recidivist history, or of his propensity for flight.

In Rhinebeck, Tom Fort sent a sheepish e-mail to the Dutchess County assistant district attorney who was prosecuting the case: "On 12/06/03 at 12:09 a.m., Nordahl posted a \$50k bond and was released from the Columbiana County Jail in Ohio. He is scheduled for a 12/17/03 hearing at the Ohio court, but I think we can probably forget about him appearing." Fort's guess was right.

Abruzzini and Mason were both furious at how sloppily the case had been handled. The bail bondsman tried calling the phone number that Nordahl had given him, but it was a fake. Nordahl's mother-who had wired the cash required for bail-swore to the bondsman that she was as shocked as he was by her son's disappearance.

Robert Eisler, the lawyer, suggested to me that Nordahl would tap into his savings and disappear, perhaps to a tropical island. Mason and Abruzzini predicted that he would go looking for silver immediately. "My gut feeling is he's back in Camden," Mason told me. "He's got a number of safe houses there, criminals, and junkies. He throws them money when he's around so they can buy their stuff, and they let him stay." He added, "Blane is a creature of habit. In my opinion, he'll have done a job by this weekend."

On a Friday morning less than two weeks after Nordahl jumped bail, the police in Princeton Borough, New Jersey, were called to investigate a meticulous burglary of sterling silver. A week later, several similar thefts were reported in Bergen County, just across the river from Manhattan. These were followed by burglaries in Concord and Wellesley, Massachusetts.

Neither Mason nor Abruzzini had any reason to get involved. Abruzzini had no more Greenwich cases to clear; Mason was no longer a cop. But, just as Nordahl left his signature on his crimes, Mason and Abruzzini wanted to leave their signatures on the Nordahl case, and the detectives went back to work.

Their collaboration had not always been easy. Abruzzini, as smooth and fastidious as Greenwich itself, approaches his job like a clinician. He likes to draw diagrams and flow charts depicting a criminal's activity. Mason is more intuitive, a believer in street smarts and grunt work. But now the two men combined their strengths: Mason became the lead general in the Nordahl manhunt, while Abruzzini coordinated the efforts of various detectives. Police officers in several states looking for any paper trail that Nordahl might have generated-a rental car, parking tickets, motel check-ins. They studied surveillance tapes from motels near the various silver burglaries; they watched the homes of his girlfriends around Camden.

Mason suggested a replay of the flip-the-girlfriend trick. The police caught up with Lisa, the blond woman in the photograph that Mason had shown Luanne back in 1996. Lisa had recently violated probation herself, so the police picked her up in Camden for questioning. The manhunt had by now yielded a motel surveillance video of Nordahl with another woman. When the police showed a photo still of the video to Lisa, she cursed: the woman was her best friend. Lisa began to talk.

Nordahl had stayed with her after jumping bail in Ohio, and he had gone back to stealing days flush with cash. She told the police that Nordahl was now fencing his silver with some Russian mobsters on Canal Street.

"Once we have that exact location, we'll go in there, show Blane's picture," Mason told me in mid-January. "We'll say, 'We know he's fencing here, and when we arrest him he's facing a life term and he'll turn on you.' Within a week, we'll find Blane in a drum in the East River, because that's how these guys play." Mason said he would be comfortable with that outcome. "I'm cold and calloused," he said. "The bottom line is, Blane's gotten away too many times. Maybe this would be the fitting end to a life in crime."

Mason's reply stunned me: he had never struck me as remotely hard-hearted. I knew that he had grown tired of pursuing Nordahl. I began to think, too, that Mason, who had offered to help Nordahl turn straight, was disappointed in him. Months earlier, I had asked Mason what other kind of work Nordahl might be suited for. "With his mind?" Mason said. "I honestly don't think there's anything Blane can't do."

If Mason was right about the Russian mobsters, then it was the police who saved Blane Nordahl's life. Lisa told them that Nordahl had occasionally stayed in Philadelphia with her sister and her brother-in-law. The police had Lisa and her sister set Nordahl up-call him, tell him everything was O.K. there, and invite him to come by.

Nordahl drove up that night in a black Ford Explorer and circled the block. He parked, approached the house, and once inside was set upon by three cops. A dozen more waited outside. He fought hard, and wound up in a Philadelphia jail cell with a face like a smashed tomato and the sour knowledge that the police had been helped by his close friends.

In the coming weeks, various police jurisdictions began to fight over the right to prosecute Nordahl. He entered his jailhouse-lawyer mode, hoping once again to roll up the assorted charges into a single light plea. But on March 23rd he was finally extradited to Poughkeepsie. At his arraignment, the Dutchess County prosecutor said he planned to argue that Nordahl should serve twenty-five years to life if he convicted for the Rhinebeck burglaries. Nordahl flushed when he heard this. Later, after he was photographed and fingerprinted at the trooper barracks, I tried to ask him a few questions. "Now is not a good time for me" was all he would say.

For months, I had put off calling Nordahl's mother, Sharon Fitzsimmons, who now works as an accountant in a state prison in Indiana. The police warned me that if Nordahl found out that I had called her he would stop talking to me-and that Fitzsimmons would never talk anyway. But now I tried her.

"He's not a completely bad person," she told me. "He's a very likable person. I think his big problem was intelligence and no common sense. I just wish this would all come to an end. The last time I talked to him about what he was doing-this was a few years back-his response was that it's an excitement thing. He said he got bored. So I said, 'Well, why don't you take up skydiving?' I said, 'We're not wealthy people, but we'll back you up. We'll support you morally, we'll be there for you.' "

Lonnie Mason once told me about his hunch that Nordahl had walled up his savings inside his mother's house when he renovated it, and I asked Fitzsimmons if this was true. She laughed hard. "I've heard it all. 'You've probably got cans of money buried in your back yard!' You think with six dogs they wouldn't have dug something up?"

She told me what a good and smart and interesting kid Blane had been, but mostly she talked about how disappointed she was. "What I've had to do is basically realize these are his decisions," she said. "I've told him I can't help him anymore. He's over forty now, and his decisions are his own."

Although Blane had always written to her regularly, Fitzsimmons said, he rarely discussed his troubles. But his recent letters "have a different edge to them," she told me. "He's concerned that it's going to be a life thing. I think basically he's scared. He's saying he wants to get on the right path now, for good."

Then she opened a recent letter and read me a bit: "I don't want to die in jail, and I don't want you or dad to pass away without seeing my life change." She paused, then said, "I've never heard that from him before." The letter was only a slightly different version of the story that Nordahl had pitched to me recently-and to Cornell Abruzzini, and to his lawyer, and probably to half a dozen others. But I didn't need to tell that to his mother. She sounded as if she didn't believe him, either.