

The Tarski Captivity (3,300 words)
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Tara sat her Barbie on our stoop, rang the bell, and slipped her paperwork through the mail slot: birth certificate and receipt for the doll, letters of reference, parents' three most recent tax returns. I admitted Tara and filed the documents, while Meg inspected Tara's backpack and Molly took Barbie to the bathroom for a full-body search.

All was in order. I issued Tara's Visitor badge and Molly pinned a V-badge to the doll, one she'd made from crayons and construction paper. (Kids get a kick out of stuff like that. They appreciate security.)

And a tea party was soon underway, making three little girls—and their dolls—very happy. The system worked.

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Transitioning to the secure facility wasn't always easy on the girls. The photo ID thrilled Meg (2'10", 40 pounds, blonde/blue, small scar left cheek, US national), but Molly (US national, 3'9", 62 pounds, brown/green) resisted. I tried logic, a parent's last resort.

"How else could we know if a stranger was in the living room? How could we be sure? We've all got badges—in the facility I wear mine at all times—and people without them don't belong here. It's easy. And it's fun."

"But what if somebody doesn't have a badge? What if I'm watching TV and somebody comes in here when one of my programs is on and they don't have one?" Huge drops wobbled at the corners of her eyes. I'm awed by the way Molly cries: exhaling like a siren, recharging with ratchety gasps.

"Then, Moll honey, Mommy will shoot them. That's why Mommy has a gun."

"What if *I* lose *my* badge? Will Mommy shoot me?"

"You won't lose it," I said. "You're a big girl." The rules of engagement weren't yet finalized and I didn't want to trouble her with technicalities.

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I did what I could to make the transition seamless. Wherever possible, security functionality was retrofitted to household appliances already in place. A toaster did the badge scans. (Insert badge into one-slice aperture, depress and lock lever.) We upgraded our dispose-all to a shredder and handled cryptography through the cable TV box.

For emergencies, such as a takeover situation, the facility was enhanced with a self-destruct (S-D) capability. The protocol for this function employed multiple safeguards, including a two-key interlock. Mom and I carried our keys at all times: Mine (blue) fit the lock in the kitchen, behind the garage door opener; and Mom's (red) fit the lock disguised as a dimmer switch for the dining room chandelier. These locations are line-of-sight. Should either of us see any funny business at the other station—we've got our weapons and know how to use them.

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Meg was singing to herself and toying with a barrette when she should have been paying attention to my briefing on codes for the front entry—random alphanumeric, changed monthly. She was young enough to have I/O problems even under ideal conditions, so I felt obliged to caution her.

“Those of us who don't yet know all our letters and numbers will have to upgrade our skills very soon.”

And that set *her* off. Meg was not like Molly, not a wailer. She trembled, and when she did a faint sheen spread beneath her eyes, as though tear vapors had escaped and were condensing on her cheeks.

Molly said, “Shoot him, Mommy. I don't see his badge.”

I was glad to see Molly getting with the program.

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There's no way we're going to “oops” ourselves to oblivion: Facility safety consciousness is zero defect. S-D is armed by tuning the VCR to channel 4 and entering the day's codes on the microwave keypad. Arming opens a 60-second window in which immolation can be triggered by emptying the ice-maker. The interval between the trigger and the actual holocaust is programmable, and keyed to Meg's personal best in the 40-yard dash.

During training Meg was the picture of childish concentration. Her little brow creased when she punched in arming codes; and strands of hair glued themselves to her stuck-out tongue. (Meg is going to be a heart-breaker.) She looked a little worried, too. However clear you think you've made their job descriptions, kids get things mixed up. Meg got it into her head that a training mistake would engulf her family in a deadly curtain of flame. Which made S-D an excellent motivational tool: Meg's knowledge of letters and numbers has taken a quantum leap (though Mom thinks she trembles more than she used to). And, at the same time, the kids sleep better just knowing self-destruct is there.

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Tara's family came to dinner during Security Awareness Month. The Tarskis were new in the neighborhood but Mom (an Efficiency Mentor) already had their paperwork on file. So badges were waiting when our guests arrived, collectibles embossed with this year's Awareness Slogan, *Shoot First*. Mom had cleared the visitors, on a need-to-know basis, for the forward sector of the facility: kitchen and pantry, living room, dining room, and the bathroom off the pantry. Sensors operating through the smoke detectors would alarm if an unbadged or a V-badged individual entered a restricted area.

A comic misunderstanding arose when I began the full-body search of Tara's dad, but I straightened things out by unholstering my sidearm. We had a good laugh and that broke the ice.

Tara's brother Gottlob was spending the night at a sleepover. Tara, a child with modern ideas, felt free to make an unannounced substitution by bringing not only Barbie (already cleared) but Ken. The Ken-for-Gottlob switch was highly irregular, but I overlooked it. Call me a softie: this was a social occasion.

Before dinner, as usual, we paused for grace and loyalty oaths. Prayer, I inferred, was not a regular occurrence in the Tarski household. I noted later that the optional "religious preference" box on their visitor questionnaire had not been filled in.

Meg, still confused about self-destruct, could get hysterical when she heard the microwave run. I sent her from the room after G-and-Os so that Mom

could heat the lasagna in peace. We told the Tarskis that Meg had a pacemaker.

At 614 Elm Street, I'm happy to say, the art of conversation is not dead. The Tarskis, who maintained a fleet of late-model garden tractors, waxed eloquent about competitive and formation lawn-mowing, a family recreation they hoped to introduce to our leafy subdivision. I screened some old viewgraphs on self-defense. After lasagna and salad—one of Mom's better efforts in the dinner arena—we took dessert into the living room and watched videos from the perimeter security cameras. I'd made a highlight film that showed off advanced functionality, such as zooming in on the neighbors' living room and bedroom windows, on the license plates of the cars in their driveways, and so forth.

The Tarskis did not linger. Another misunderstanding occurred as they left. Guest departure clearance protocols obliged me to confiscate Mrs. T's purse, as Mom had failed to search it on entry. Once I explained, and Mom and I unholstered our weapons, all was copacetic.

We decided to entertain more often.

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The Arctic Ken affair was a turning point.

The facility had been locked down for the evening when, rummaging for a frosted mug to keep the chill on my midnight brewski, I observed an unbadged individual (later determined to be A. Ken) beside the ice-maker, an area of extreme sensitivity. Mom and Meg, the panel tasked with reviewing the incident, determined that my subsequent armed response was appropriate and recommended that this activity be considered for a recognition award, up to and including Family Member of the Month. The collateral damage, though regrettable, could not be helped. None of these findings mattered to Molly.

“Arctic Ken just liked sleeping in the cold. That's why he wore a fur coat.”

The first part of her story could not be confirmed, but the last was consistent with forensic evidence: a fur- or fluff-like substance recovered from bullet holes in the compressor. I replaced Ken gratis but decided to give Molly a

lesson in personal responsibility. The replacement refrigerator would come out of her allowance.

Meanwhile, lacking self-destruct capability, we were naked to our enemies. Mom and I worked hard to keep the neighbors from perceiving this degradation of readiness. Disinformation efforts were especially timely in light of disturbing insights surfaced by the post-lasagna-dinner debriefings: The Tarskis had shown inappropriate interest in our ice-maker.

Molly was not satisfied by the review board's report. Her attitude began to deteriorate. She lost her reticence about security functions. (I caught her playing "house" with Gottlob: she'd show him our S-D if he'd show her theirs.) She flaunted disrespect for the entire security arena. I worried about the effect on Meg's morale.

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Another incident followed, this one during an S-D refresher course. Meg was often shaky at the start of these sessions, even if she remembered to take her pills; and right off the bat she flubbed. The microwave, in training mode, signaled her error by running 30 seconds of "defrost."

Something in the chamber sizzled and acrid smoke leaked out the vents. Meg froze. No trembling, no vapory tears. She may have guessed what this meant. I opened the microwave door and (as noted on my self-evaluation form) engaged in possibly inappropriate levity. Confronted by a half-melted, hideously disfigured doll with patches of singed blonde hair, I said:

"Barbie-Q."

Meg still didn't move.

"Shoot him, Mommy," Molly said. I found this remark incomprehensible, since my badge was in plain view. But, as already noted, Molly's opinions about security were becoming more and more erratic.

Meg held a funeral and buried her doll with the microwave tray (to which it was fused). Mom thought Meg's trembling showed a slight increase in amplitude.

The incident report remains open, as the panel (comprising Molly and Mom) was unable to assign responsibility for the unauthorized presence of a human figurine in a microwavable area. But the panel's straw vote—one

ballot censuring me and one abstention—was a troubling index of family strain.

I bought Meg a new doll, once she acknowledged in writing that the purchase would not be an admission of wrongdoing; and I decided not to bill her for the microwave tray.

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I felt compelled to confiscate the children’s weapons, a blow to both their self-esteem and their popularity at school. My hand was forced by one of Molly’s Mommy-and-Daddy games.

Molly stood beside my self-destruct interlock, doing her best imitation of a grownup voice, while Meg stood beside Mom’s. “Shooting Arctic Ken was *so* much fun. And cooking Barbie was even funner.” No response from Meg. “And now I will pour fiery flames over us all.” Meg kept silent. “Daddy is turning his key now, Mommy. Turn yours or Daddy will shoot.”

“Not if I shoot you first.” Meg began to wave her firearm in an inappropriate and hazardous manner. Molly ratcheted up the DefCon by slipping the safety catch on hers.

“And who’s here?” said Molly/Daddy, when (as stated in my deposition) I entered the kitchen. “We all must die in the fiery flames.” The girls pointed weapons in my direction.

Mom responded to the alarm on her pager by sprinting down the hallway to disarm Meg from behind. (Mom is damn good.) Molly, circling for a clear shot at her mother, took her eye off me—a lapse that allowed me to lock her in a pain compliance hold.

But the panel (Mom sitting alone, after Meg recused herself) found that I had overreacted. It dismissed the girls’ behavior as “playful” and grossly overstepped its mandate by recommending return of the confiscated weapons. (I refused.) Where, I had to wonder, did Mom’s true sympathies lie?

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Stepped up security sweeps began to net quantities of contraband, especially after Barbie teas. I wondered how the children could afford these shipments. Subsidies from Mom (a whiz at laundering her household allowance)?

Or were they paying Tara and Gottlob in kind? I had to admire the regime of strict deniability under which the transactions took place. Age-inappropriate sidearms, for example, would never turn up in the toy box. Instead, drops were chosen with a twisted whimsy: such as under Mom's pillow or in my golf bag.

Questionable lawn-care publications, their address labels excised, soon began appearing, well hidden, in bundles approved for the shredder. The once-merry roar of Tarski Lawn Boys—and the answering echoes from neighbors in training for the mowing leagues—acquired sinister overtones.

I set up road blocks outside the living room, but Mom got them quashed on constitutional grounds. Tightened visitor procedures had to be scrapped when Mom threatened further legal challenges. Her loyalty oaths were starting to ring hollow.

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Our game of cat and mouse continued.

Meg lost any gratitude for, or even recollection of, her debt-forgiveness in re the microwave tray. Molly, still paying off the refrigerator, remembered and resented it. Flouting the guidelines on delivery of sexual favors, Mom bought a sleeping bag and moved out of the master bedroom. She randomized her whereabouts with a nightly coin toss: heads she slept in Molly's room, tails in Meg's.

As documented in performance reviews, discipline continued to deteriorate: badge violations, unexplained laughter, ironic behavior in surveilled areas. I suggested counseling. And I downgraded clearances, though Mom was able to keep the red key while her appeal went through channels. This impacted family life, as most members were now denied unescorted access to large parts of the facility.

We ceased to entertain.

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I should have anticipated that the time might come, a 10 o'clock when I wouldn't know where my children were. Or my wife. But an empty house, with no one signed out, came as a shock. I feared—and is this not every

father's nightmare?—that my family had defected, that it had sought political asylum with arms smugglers across the street.

But procedures would be followed nonetheless. I commenced the nightly sweep. Tuck in restless sleepers first—after disarming them, of course. I knew the beds would be empty, but surprises were still in store. A badge lay on each pillow: all that was left of Molly, Meg, and Mom. And a tableau in the dining room said good-bye: Ken with arm stretched toward the interlock, a pistol beside him, the red key inserted but not turned.

I longed for life as it used to be: midnight, the kids asleep or unborn, and Mom and I at our stations—weapons trained on one another, looking deep into one another's eyes, burning with desire.

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My fears were confirmed when a videocassette rattled through the mail slot: surveillance of my facility conducted from angles available only to cameras in the Tarski compound. Zooms on the kitchen and dining room showed Ken and me at our interlocks, weapons drawn.

The Tarskis, a pack of lawn jockeys, should have been years away from deploying these capabilities. Mom and the girls must be spilling their guts. I unholstered and peeked through the blinds, hoping for a shot at one of them.

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Next day, another tape: me, peeking through blinds. Astonishing detail, resolution good enough to verify the photo on my badge. Luckily, I'd kept the defectors' IDs and could now put them to good use. Every day, to disorient enemy analysts, I wore one chosen at random.

Some days I wore no badge at all.

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The next envelope was flat: a hard copy log of my previous day, in 15-minute increments, with an appendix itemizing grocery purchases and pickups at the dry cleaners.

A firm response was called for. I pried the heads off Ken and Barbie and, at midnight, slipped across the street. I dropped Barbie's head through the Tarskis' mail slot and impaled Ken's on a railing beside their back door. The ease with which I evaded their defenses would send a message. Despite the transfers of advanced technology, their training and readiness lagged at third-world levels.

Next day came videos filmed through a night-scope: My trajectory had been acquired within seconds of launch and tracked all the way, the screen splitting when I MIRV'ed the dollheads. Counterforce weapons could have locked on at any time (though attempts to paint me with radar would have registered on my passive electronics).

I responded unprofessionally, flinging open the front door and emptying my service revolver at the Tarskis' split-level. The bullets bounced harmlessly off their kevlar siding.

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Another day, another tape: of a silent film clown, hand twitching with each flash from his pistol's muzzle, his bullets (like all clown ordnance) flying harmlessly.

My study of this tape was interrupted by a sound and a silence—the sputter of two-stroke engines and an unsettling absence of perimeter alarms. Four Lawn Boys idled ominously in the street, facing my property's frontage. I yanked open the kitchen blinds, nearly ripping them from the wall. I wanted to show myself. I wanted to defy.

When I did, three faces appeared in windows of the attic apartment above the Tarski's multi-car garage.

The engines revved and the tractors advanced across my front lawn side by side, clipping faint parallel swaths. They criss-crossed, right-side pair veering left and vice versa. They made tight circles and criss-crossed again. They turned downlawn in a chevron formation that glided back across the street and disappeared behind the remotely-operated garage door. A slicker piece of mowing would be hard to find.

My admiration could not evade an appalling fact: Those parade ground maneuvers had tripped no alarms. My sensors picked up nothing. I faced a

nightmare threat scenario—Lawn Boys with Stealth technology, able to cut my grass at will.

The three faces could not but know that the correlation of forces had altered, that I had sunk to a position of technological inferiority. I retained sovereignty over just one thing—and even that required someone else, someone who would sit with me and watch with me and turn the red key.

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Night fell. I sneaked out to measure my grass but was unable to verify new penetrations. Throughout the subdivision mowers fired up. A squadron of six Lawn Boys roared down the Tarskis' drive.

Across the street an attic window lit, framing just one face. I rushed to the kitchen and showed myself. Mom lingered at her window until I closed my blinds.

I worked all night. By sunrise reconfiguration was complete: an operational kitchen-based command center. From there I could eyeball monitors, aim cameras, release weapons—and show myself whenever and however I chose.

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Which brings us up-to-date. We have evolved a reproducible routine, and that's the main thing. With sufficient training, I'm sure, zero defects can be attained.

When the sun has set and the tractors have disappeared down Elm Street, I show myself and zoom in on the girls' rooms. Molly and Meg won't be there, but checking is part of the drill. They do send me their surveillance tapes—their Mom insists—which I enjoy.

I retarget cameras and draw up a chair to my interlock. On the monitors I watch Mom at hers. Our weapons are drawn. Not unlike old times, with a few technical discrepancies. Intangibility, for instance: I can neither touch Mom nor shoot her. But I feel certain that a zero defects regime is within reach.

Every moment I must decide: Keep my eyes on the screen or turn my face to the window, toward the camera she trains on me. In other words, Watch

her or look at her? Mom makes that choice, too. Some nights sooner, some later, our movements synchronize and we fall into a kind of dance. And we take turns, burning with desire, looking deep into one another's eyes.