

Bill Rea ? Homeowners on guard

Being a homeowner is not all it's cracked up to be.

I will grant there are some advantages. It's nice not having to pay rent to have a place to hang your hat or to rest your head at night. There's also a certain pride of ownership, especially in the early going. It wears off after a while, especially when the realization sets in that you're the one responsible for maintenance.

That last bit would not be much of a bother for some. My late father was very handy with tools, and rather enjoyed tinkering. He also held his own as a carpenter. I can make no such statement. Our lawn is a mess (thank God the snows of winter cover that up) and there are a wide assortment of handyman jobs that need doing around here that I can't even guess about. And all of this work is predicated on me finding time to do it ? easier said than done when dealing with a workaholic like Your Humble.

And then there's the security.

I got a quick and uncomfortable lesson about those implications last Tuesday.

Of course we have a security system in our home, and have had it since the day we moved in. It's one of those monthly expenses we tend not to think about, if for no better reason than we don't want to. We don't want to have to make use of the service, any more than I want someone making use of my life insurance.

I was in my car shortly after noon last Tuesday. I was heading back to the office after picking up some lunch to eat at my desk when my cell phone went off. I pulled onto the shoulder (please note, officer) and answered the phone to hear my wife's strained voice on the other end. She had received a call at her office from the security service that monitors our system, reporting there had been an alarm activation reported at the door at the rear of our house.

Since I was on the road anyway, I assured Beth I would head straight home and check things out.

This was Tuesday, which is also Deadline Day in my job. That's when I have to have all my stories ready to go in time for production Wednesday. In other words, it's a busy day for me.

No matter, I had been told by a reliable source (I think I'm supposed to regard my wife as reliable) that there might be trouble in our home, so that suddenly became top priority at the moment.

All of a sudden, I had lost my appetite for the roast beef wrap I had collected from the Foodland in Caledon East, which I was planning to eat when I got back to the office.

All of us who drive have run into the frustrating experience of being in a hurry to get someplace and catching just about every red light along the way. This was one of those times.

But I did finally get home and trotted to the rear of the house to investigate. The ground was very soft, wet and squishy, as I learned the hard way, thanks to my non-waterproof shoes. But apart from the aforementioned state of the lawn, everything appeared to be in order. There was no sign of forced entry. The back door was locked, as were all the doors, as well they should have been. I went into the house, and all seemed to be in order.

I didn't do a thorough check of the entire house, as I probably should have. There was a lot of work waiting for me back at the office, and the travel time to home and back to work had not been factored into the day's agenda. Putting it another way, I was too damned busy for any more fooling around.

Later in the day, I learned there had been a power outage at some point at our home. I don't know exactly when that would have happened. Beth got home first that evening and had noticed that both our clock radios were flashing the indication of a power disruption. Of course I would have noticed something had I tried to turn on lights when I was home in the middle of the day. But since it was broad daylight at the time, I can't remember if I bothered with the lights.

In short, the power outage could have been the cause of the false alarm. Or maybe they were two, unrelated, coincidental events. Who's to know?

This is actually not the first time something like this has happened in the almost 13 years we have lived in this house. There have been a couple of other such occasions, although they have occurred, for the most part, at more convenient times. The worst was over a weekend that Beth and I spent in Muskoka. It was very early Sunday morning when the phone rang. It was Beth's brother Paul, telling us he had received a call from the alarm company about a reported activation. There are a list of numbers for the company to call in such an event, and Paul is on it, which explains why he was answering his phone at 6 a.m. and making long-distance calls. Paul was good enough to ho into his car to make the quick trip to our place to look around. Although he found nothing wrong and reported same, the damage had been done. There was no way I would be able to relax until I had personally checked things out. We had planned a leisurely drive home that Sunday morning, stopping for breakfast along the way. Instead, we packed things hastily piled into the car and headed for home, hoping the cops would be liberal when it came to enforcing speed laws.

That all ties into one of the big problems with home ownership; namely who does the guarding when your guard is down? As a kid, I sometimes got jealous that so many of my parents' friends had cottages and we didn't. It took many years and homeownership to appreciate why that was. I know my father would never have been able to get a decent night's sleep always wondering if some stranger was doing mischief in his cottage. Friends who had a cottage near Orillia were broken into when I was just a little kid. The ringleader was eventually sent away for life for murdering his mother. It's not the fear of being robbed that worries me too much. I think most of us have had the experience of being ripped off by thieves, and while it's not very nice, one can recover. I think it's more the feeling of being violated. I will never forget the sick feeling I had almost 20 years ago, when I arrived home from work and found my apartment had been ransacked. The amount stolen came to very little ? less than \$100. My main emotion was anger that someone had so brazenly encroached on my home behind my back. My mother used to say that she didn't much fear possessions being taken if our house was ever broken into. She worried more about the damage that might have been done. It's pretty much the same with Beth and I. Most of what we have in our house is of sentimental value. Most of our appliances are basically worthless. I paid a TV repair bill about a year ago, and the guy who fixed it told me if the estimate had been any higher, he would have advocated getting it replaced. Thinking about it in those terms, if a thief wants my TV that bad, he can have it. It's all the other bad things that could be done that make my stomach hurt.

