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The good, the bad and the pugly

A recent west-end dognapping proves that there is a cost to being too cute

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A week ago Tuesday, Candice Litigio left her pug, as she often does, in the backyard when she went to work. It was window-cleaning day, and when the window cleaners were done, they left the backyard gate open and the dog got out.

In her search for the dog that evening, several neighbours in the tightly knit community in High Park told her they'd seen the dog at the local Gino's Pizza. When she got there, she was told that a woman (with dyed blond hair, aged 25 to 30) had taken a liking to the dog, convinced the chef behind the counter it was hers and walked off with the friendly 2½-year-old.

Though Ms. Litigio has some leads, and the police have been informed, the dog is still missing. And while it's a scary idea to dog lovers, this pug theft isn't the first one reported in the neighbourhood.

"I'm not surprised it's pugs," says Gillian Ridgeway, owner of the dog-training company Who's Walking Who. "Pugs were touted to be the dog of the new millennium. Especially in the downtown core, it's a very, very popular breed."

And pugs represent a perfect target for potential thieves, Ms. Ridgeway explains. They're small and therefore easy to pick up and easy to hide under a jacket or in a bag. And they're extraordinarily friendly and trusting. They might not even bark when a stranger picks them up, she says. They're also fairly expensive: Breeders charge anywhere from \$500 to \$1,000; pet stores charge as much as \$2,000. But the most singular thing about them, and the thing that may tip the scales toward dognapping, is their faces.

"They're the most like a human baby in their face," says Ms. Ridgeway. "They don't have a muzzle and their eyes are circular, and are on the front. It's quite like a human baby, and it attracts people toward the breed; there's something maternal [about it] and it attracts them to them." Young women especially seem to be unusually attracted to the dogs, she says.

According to both police and dog experts, dog thefts are incredibly rare. "I don't remember even one from all the time I was working on the streets," says Constable Isabelle Cotton of the Toronto Police, who now works in the communications department.

Yet, in 2005, another High Park area resident had her nine-year-old pug taken from her porch, on a day when garage sales on her street attracted a large pool of strangers.

"We had a neighbour who said they saw a couple of suspicious guys around, walking around the corner [of the house], looking at the porch, and then doubled back to look again," she says. She suspects that the motivation for the theft might have been a gift for a girlfriend. Among the many sympathy calls she got was a call from a woman who'd also had her pug stolen, only to see it months later in an antique store in Alliston, Ont., in the possession of a woman who said her boyfriend had surprised her with it one day. (A scuffle apparently ensued, but the dog stayed with its new owner.)

According to Larry St. Aubin, president of a Toronto pug owners' association and rescue operation called Pugalug, pugs are also very adaptable, settling in with new owners much more smoothly than other breeds. "If there's food, there's a bed, they're fine," he says. His advice to the 800 pug owners on his mailing list? "Don't tie up your dog outside, don't leave them unattended for any length of time, and make sure your gate is locked."