

The Beep and the Darkness

How the Free Market Saved My Sleep



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There are catastrophes that reshape civilizations—the fall of Rome, the eruption of Krakatoa, the random Tuesday afternoon when someone decided to put raisins in perfectly good oatmeal cookies.

And then there is what happened to me on a Monday in June, amid the killing heat an Alabama summer, when the smoke detector at the top of my stairs declared war.

But I am getting ahead of myself. Every epic deserves its scene-setting, its *In the beginning*, its establishing shot of a world not yet ruined.

The day had been long in the way that only summer days with a two-year-old can be, which is to say, it lasted approximately 47 years. There was the pool. There was the sunburn, a rose-petal pink that announced to the world *I am a man who did not reapp*

There was Caleb, my son, age two, who operates at a metabolic frequency that I call *uranium*, and who approaches every moment of existence as though it were both the first and the last ever to occur in the history of the universe. A puddle. A Cheerio. A ceiling fan. *My God, look at it go.*

By 7:30 in the evening, I had achieved the goal, the singular, magnificent goal of every parent with a small child: he was asleep, and I was not yet dead.

I was due on television the following morning to discuss the American economy, a subject requiring at least the appearance of a functioning human mind. Sleep, I understood, was not optional. It was infrastructure.

I slipped into bed like a decaying empire: gradually, decadently, with a kind of submission that had grief in it.

And then.

The beeping began as all great disasters do: suddenly, unexpectedly, proud of its destruction.

Beep.

I ignored it.

Beep.

I renegotiated my relationship with it.

Beep.

At 1 AM, I rose from bed like a man answering a summons from a court he does not recognize but cannot refuse. Caleb, I knew, was a grenade with a hair trigger. If he woke up, I would be not merely sleepless but *actively besieged*, and I had an on-came obligation to the gross domestic product in approximately five hours.

I walked through the house in the dark, a middle-aged man in blue pajamas, following the sound of my own undoing up the stairs to the uppermost reaches of my home, where the ceiling looms at a height that is, let's say, *architecturally optimistic*.

I retrieved the ladder from the garage. I carried it through the house. I climbed it at that godforsaken hour with the solemn determination of a man storming a very small, very annoying Normandy.

I removed the battery. *It kept beeping*. I went to the laundry room. Found a battery. Came back. Reinstalled everything. *It kept beeping*.

And here is where the narrative accelerates into genuine tragedy: I could not go to Walmart.

To go to Walmart meant waking Caleb, which meant the car seat, which meant the fluorescent aisles of a superstore at what was now almost 2 AM, with a furious toddler who would not understand why the cosmos had been reorganized around a nine-volt battery. He would have opinions about this. Loud, continuous opinions.

So, I did what any reasonable man does when confronted with the impossible: went back to bed and lay there listening to it.

Beep.

Beep.

Beep.

At 4:30 AM, I worked out. I showered. I dressed. I sat in front of a camera and discussed inflation and labor markets and the Federal Reserve with what I can only hope was the appearance of coherence, the beeping faintly audible behind me, a kind of Greek chorus for the collapse of my dignity.

Then I put Caleb in the car. Then I drove him to daycare. Then I came home.

Now the story transforms from tragedy into something more complicated, something that Charles Darwin and Adam Smith might have recognized, had either of them been standing in my kitchen with a disassembled smoke detector in hand.

I took photographs of the device. I opened ChatGPT. I typed my questions into it as a Roman general might consult an oracle, except that this one answered without requiring a sacrifice, only a decent Wi-Fi signal. Three beeps per minute, it told me means the unit itself has failed. The battery is innocent. The machine must die.

Think, for a moment, about what just happened. A software program trained on the accumulated written knowledge of human civilization diagnosed my smoke detector while I stood, sleep-deprived, in my kitchen. Julius Caesar never had this luxury. Charlemagne didn't, either.

I tried to order a new contraption from Lowe's online. An inexplicable error message materialized, which is the modern equivalent of a plague of locusts, so I drove there myself and found the smoke detector aisle with the help of a real, actual, carbon-based human employee. I felt almost nostalgic.

I photographed the package. I ran it through ChatGPT to confirm compatibility with the unit still in my hand. I swiped my card at self-checkout. I drove home. I installed the thing with a screwdriver in roughly four minutes.

Silence.

Beautiful, enormous, cathedral-like silence.

Alas, this is the conclusion to this ridiculous episode, this *Odyssey* of the nine-volt battery: Nobody built the ChatGPT I consulted at two in the morning because they were required to; nobody invented self-checkout, or same-day delivery, or the smoke detector itself, because a government commission identified the need and issued a directive.

These things exist because innumerable people, somewhere I couldn't even name, looked at their particular problems in their specific contexts and thought: *I could so that and be rewarded for solving it.*

And they did, and they were, and the chain of those decisions—billions of them, over decades and centuries—is why a sunburned man in Alabama with a sleeping toddler and a television lit at dawn did not have to despair helplessly in the dark.

We swim in this abundance so completely that we have forgotten that it is abundant. The beeping was a small misery. The tools I used to end it were miracles. We just don't call them that anymore—which is, perhaps, the most remarkable thing of all.



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