# GHETTOSIDE

## A True Story of Murder in America

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# A CIRCLE OF GRIEF

Los Angeles Police Det. John Skaggs carried the shoebox aloft like a waiter bearing a platter.

The box contained a pair of high-top sneakers that once belonged to a black teenage boy named Dovon Harris. Dovon, fifteen, had been murdered the previous June, and the shoes had been sitting in an evidence locker for nearly a year.

Skaggs, forty-four, was the lead investigator on the case about to go to trial.

At six foot four, he was a conspicuous sight in Watts, the southeast corner of the vast city of Los Angeles, a big blondish man with a loping stride in an expensive light-colored suit.

He stepped out of the bright morning light, turned down a narrow walkway along a wall topped with a coil of razor wire, and approached a heavy-duty steel "ghetto door"—a security door with a perforated metal screen of the kind that, along with stucco walls and barred windows, represented one of L.A.'s most distinctive architectural features. He knocked and, without waiting for an answer, pushed the door open.

On the other side of the threshold stood a stout, dark-skinned woman. Skaggs walked in and placed the open shoebox in her hands.

The woman stared at the shoes, choked and speechless. Skaggs's eyes caught her stricken face as he walked past her. "Hi, Barbara," he said. "Having a bad day today?"

This was Skaggs's way, disdaining preliminaries, getting right to the point.

His every move was infused with energy and purpose. In conversation, he jingled his keys, swung his arms, or bounced on the balls of his feet. The movements were not fidgety so much as rhythmic and relaxed, like those of a runner warming up. Forced to hold still in a court proceeding or a meeting, Skaggs would freeze in the posture of a man enduring an ordeal, a knuckle pressed to his lips, a pose that conveyed his bunched-up vigor more than any restless tic.

Now, having deposited the shoes in Barbara Pritchett's hands—and having received no answer to his question—he came to a halt in the middle of the living room carpet. Pritchett remained silent, head bowed, eyes fixed on the contents of the shoebox.

She was forty-two, in poor health. She had recently been diagnosed with diabetes, and her doctor had urged her to get out and walk more. But her son had been shot to death a few blocks away, and Pritchett was too frightened to venture out. She spent days lying in the dark, unable to will herself to move or speak. That morning, as always, she was wearing a big loose T-shirt with Dovon's picture on it. All around her, in the tiny living room, were mementos of her murdered son. Sports trophies, photos, sympathy cards, certificates, stuffed animals.

With great care, Pritchett perched the shoebox on the arm of a vinyl armchair by the door and slowly lifted one shoe. It was worn, black, dusted with red Watts dirt. It was not quite big enough to be a man's shoe, not small enough to be a child's. She leaned against the wall, pressed the open top of the shoe against her mouth and nose, and inhaled its scent with a long, deep breath. Then she closed her eyes and wept.

Skaggs stood back. Pritchett's knees gave out. Skaggs watched her slide down the wall in slow motion, her face still pressed into the shoe.



She landed with a thump on the green carpet. One of her orange slippers came off. On the TV across the room, the Fox 11 morning anchors pattered brightly over the sound of her sobs.

Skaggs had been a homicide detective for twenty years. In that time, he had been in a thousand living rooms like this one—each with its large TV, Afrocentric knickknacks, and imponderable grief.

They made a strange picture, the two of them: the tall white cop and the weeping black woman. Skaggs, like most LAPD cops, was a Republican. He would vote for John McCain for president that year. His annual pay was in the six figures, and he lived in a suburban house with a pool. It might be said of him that he was not just white, but a Caucasian archetype with his blond-and-pink coloring and Scots-Irish features. Watts had twice risen in revolt against such an icon—the white occupier-cum-police-officer—and so Skaggs's presence in this neighborhood was all the more conspicuous for the historical associations it evoked.

Pritchett had a background typical of Watts residents. She was the granddaughter of a Louisiana cotton picker. Her mother had followed the path of tens of thousands of black Louisianans who migrated west in the 1960s, and Pritchett was born in L.A. a few months after the Watts riots. She lived in a federally subsidized rental apartment, and she was a Democrat who would weep in front of CNN later that fall when Barack Obama won the presidential election, wishing her mother were still alive to see it.

Despite their differences, they were kin of a sort—members of a small circle of Americans whose lives, in different ways, had been molded by a bizarre phenomenon: a plague of murders among black men.

Homicide had ravaged the country's black population for a century or more. But it was at best a curiosity to the mainstream. The raw agony it visited on thousands of ordinary people was mostly invisible. The consequences were only superficially discussed, the costs seldom tallied.

Society's efforts to combat this mostly black-on-black murder epidemic were inept, fragmented, underfunded, contorted by a variety of ideological, political, and racial sensitivities. When homicide did get attention, the focus seemed to be on spectacles—mass shootings, celebrity murders—a step removed from the people who were doing most of the dying: black men.

They were the nation's number one crime victims. They were the people hurt most badly and most often, just 6 percent of the country's population but nearly 40 percent of those murdered. People talked a lot about crime in America, but they tended to gloss over this aspect—that a plurality of those killed were not women, children, infants, elders, nor victims of workplace or school shootings. Rather, they were legions of America's black men, many of them unemployed and criminally involved. They were murdered every day, in every city, their bodies stacking up by the thousands, year after year.

Dovon Harris was typical of these unseen victims. His murder received little media attention and was of the kind least likely to be solved. John Skaggs's Watts precinct kept records of scores of such homicides dating back years—shelves and shelves of blue binders filled with the names of dead black men and boys. Most had been killed by other black men and boys who still roamed free.

According to the old unwritten code of the Los Angeles Police Department, Dovon's was a nothing murder. "NHI—No Human Involved," the cops used to say. It was only the newest shorthand for the idea that murders of blacks somehow didn't count. "Nigger life's cheap now," a white Tennessean offered during Reconstruction, when asked to explain why black-on-black killing drew so little notice.

A congressional witness a few years later reported that when black men in Louisiana were killed, "a simple mention is made of it, perhaps orally or in print, and nothing is done. There is no investigation made." A late-nineteenth-century Louisiana newspaper editorial said, "If negroes continue to slaughter each other, we will have to conclude that Providence has chosen to exterminate them in this way." In 1915, a



South Carolina official explained the pardon of a black man who had killed another black: "This is a case of one negro killing another—the old familiar song." In 1930s Mississippi, the anthropologist Hortense Powdermaker examined the workings of criminal justice and concluded that "the attitude of the Whites and of the courts . . . is one of complaisance toward violence among the Negroes." Studying Natchez, Mississippi, in the same period, a racially mixed team of social anthropologists observed that "the injury or death of a Negro is not considered by the whites to be a serious matter." An Alabama sheriff of the era was more concise: "One less nigger," he said. In 1968, a New York journalist testifying as part of the Kerner Commission's investigation of riots across the country said that "for decades, little if any law enforcement has prevailed among Negroes in America. . . . If a black man kills a black man, the law is generally enforced at its minimum."

Carter Spikes, once a member of the black Businessman Gang in South Central Los Angeles, recalled that through the seventies police "didn't care what black people did to each other. A nigger killing another nigger was no big deal."

John Skaggs stood in opposition to this inheritance. His whole working life was devoted to one end: making black lives expensive. Expensive, and worth answering for, with all the force and persistence the state could muster. Skaggs had treated the murder of Dovon Harris like the hottest celebrity crime in town. He had applied every resource he possessed, worked every angle of the system, and solved it swiftly, unequivocally.

In doing so, he bucked an age-old injustice. Forty years after the civil rights movement, impunity for the murder of black men remained America's great, though mostly invisible, race problem. The institutions of criminal justice, so remorseless in other ways in an era of get-tough sentencing and "preventive" policing, remained feeble when it came to answering for the lives of black murder victims. Few experts examined what was evident every day of John Skaggs's working life: that the state's inability to catch and punish even a bare majority of murderers in black

enclaves such as Watts was itself a root cause of the violence, and that this was a terrible problem—perhaps the most terrible thing in contemporary American life. The system's failure to catch killers effectively made black lives cheap.

To that unseen problem, John Skaggs was the antidote.

Had Dovon's case been assigned to another detective, it might easily have gone unsolved like hundreds of others—just another blue binder on a shelf. But in Skaggs's hands, it had become a relentless campaign for justice.

And Dovon's mother knew it. That was the basis of their kinship.

So now Skaggs stood with one hand in his pocket, one on his hip, regarding Pritchett on the floor, and did what years of homicide work had taught him to do: he waited, silent and unhurried.

Not the least embarrassed, Pritchett closed her eyes as if she were alone, pressed her face into the shoe of her dead son, and sobbed.

This is a book about a very simple idea: where the criminal justice system fails to respond vigorously to violent injury and death, homicide becomes endemic.

African Americans have suffered from just such a lack of effective criminal justice, and this, more than anything, is the reason for the nation's long-standing plague of black homicides. Specifically, black America has not benefited from what Max Weber called a *state monopoly on violence*—the government's exclusive right to exercise legitimate force. A monopoly provides citizens with legal autonomy, the liberating knowledge that the government will pursue anyone who violates their personal safety. But slavery, Jim Crow, and conditions across much of black America for generations after worked against the formation of such a monopoly. Since personal violence inevitably flares where the state's monopoly is absent, this situation results in the deaths of thousands of Americans each year.

The failure of the law to stand up for black people when they are



hurt or killed by others has been masked by a whole universe of ruthless, relatively cheap and easy "preventive" strategies. Our fragmented and underfunded police forces have historically preoccupied themselves with control, prevention, and nuisance abatement rather than responding to victims of violence. This left ample room for vigilantism—especially in the South, to which most black Americans trace their origins. Hortense Powdermaker was among a handful of Jim Crow–era anthropologists who noted that the Southern legal system of the 1930s hammered black men for such petty crimes as stealing and vagrancy, yet was often lenient toward those who murdered other blacks. In Jim Crow Mississippi, killers of black people were convicted at a rate that was only a little lower than the rate that prevailed half a century later in L.A.—30 percent then versus about 36 percent in Los Angeles County in the early 1990s. "The mildness of the courts where offenses of Negroes against Negroes are concerned," Powdermaker concluded, "is only part of the whole situation which places the Negro outside the law." Generations later, far from the cotton fields where she made her observations, black people in poor sections of Los Angeles still endured a share of that old misery.

This is not an easy argument to make in these times. Many critics today complain that the criminal justice system is heavy-handed and unfair to minorities. We hear a great deal about capital punishment, excessively punitive drug laws, supposed misuse of eyewitness evidence, troublingly high levels of black male incarceration, and so forth.

So to assert that black Americans suffer from too *little* application of the law, not too much, seems at odds with common perception. But the perceived harshness of American criminal justice and its fundamental weakness are in reality two sides of a coin, the former a kind of poor compensation for the latter. Like the schoolyard bully, our criminal justice system harasses people on small pretexts but is exposed as a coward before murder. It hauls masses of black men through its machinery but fails to protect them from bodily injury and death. It is at once oppressive and inadequate.

America has long been more violent than other developed nations, and black-on-black homicide is much of the reason. This is not new. Measurements are problematic, since few official efforts were made to track black homicide before 1950. But historians have traced disproportionately high black homicide rates all the way back to the late nineteenth century, and in the early twentieth, "nonwhite" homicide rates exceeded those of whites in all cities that reported federal data. In the 1920s, a scholar concluded that black death rates from homicide nationwide were about seven times white rates. In the 1930s, Southern observers also noticed startling rates of black violence, and in the 1940s, a Philadelphia study found that black men died from homicide at twelve times the white rate. When the U.S. government began publishing data specific to blacks in 1950, it revealed that same gap nationwide. The black homicide death rate remained as much as ten times higher than the white rate in 1960 and 1970, and has been five to seven times higher for most of the past thirty years.

Mysteriously, in modern-day Los Angeles, young black men are murdered two to four times more frequently than young Hispanic men, though blacks and Hispanics live in the same neighborhoods. This stands out because L.A., unlike well-known murder centers such as Detroit, has a relatively small black population, and it is in decline. By Skaggs's time, there were few solidly black neighborhoods left; most black residents of South Los Angeles lived in majority-Hispanic neighborhoods. Yet black men died here as they died in cities with large and concentrated black populations, like New Orleans, Washington, D.C., and Chicago—more often than anyone else, and nearly always at the hands of black assailants. In L.A., it was strange how all those bullets seemed to find their black targets in such an ethnically jumbled place; it was, as one young man put it, as if black men had bull's-eyes on their backs.

Violent crime was plummeting in Los Angeles County, as it was across the country, by the spring of 2007, when Dovon Harris was murdered. But the disparity between black male death rates and those of everybody else remained nearly as large as ever. No matter how much



crime dropped, the American homicide problem remained maddeningly, mystifyingly, disproportionately black.

Despite so much evidence of a particularly black homicide problem, however, there was relatively little research or activism specific to black-on-black murder. That gruesome history of Southern racism made the topic an uncomfortable one for many Americans. One of the enduring tropes of racist lore had been the "black beast," the inferior black man who could not control his impulses and was prone to violence. By the early twenty-first century, popular consensus held that any emphasis on high rates of black criminality risked invoking the stigma of white racism. So people were careful about how they spoke of it.

Researchers describe skirting the subject for fear of being labeled racist. Activists have sought to minimize it. "When the discussion turns to violent crime," legal scholar James Forman, Jr., has pointed out, "progressives tend to avoid or change the subject." Privately, some black civil-rights advocates describe feeling embarrassed and baffled by the stubborn persistence of the problem. "Like incest," is how one L.A. street activist, Najee Ali, put it, talking of the shame and secrecy the issue evokes. Other concerned blacks cite their fear of inflaming white racism: Why emphasize what seems sure to be used against them?

Yet the statistical truth was undeniable, and most Americans understood it intuitively even if they didn't talk about it in polite company. There was something in the way the nation acquiesced in shootings and stabbings among "inner city" black men that suggested these men were expendable—or, worse, that perhaps the nation was better off without them.

To John Skaggs, the nation's collective shrug toward homicide was incomprehensible. He sensed also that public indifference made his job more difficult. He might have found some support from none other than the black legal scholar Randall Kennedy. "It does no good to pretend that blacks and whites are similarly situated with respect to either rates of perpetration or rates of victimization. They are not," Kennedy wrote. "The familiar dismal statistics and the countless trag-

edies behind them are not figments of some Negrophobe's imagination."

Explicitly confronting the reality of how murder happens in America is the first step toward deciding that it is not acceptable, and that for too long black men have lived inadequately protected by the laws of their own country.

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# A KILLING

It was a warm Friday evening in Los Angeles, about a month before Dovon Harris was murdered.

Sea breezes rattle the dry palm trees in this part of town. It was about 6:15 P.M., a time when homeowners turn on sprinklers, filling the air with a watery hiss. The springtime sun had not yet set; it hovered about 20 degrees above the horizon, a white dime-sized disk in a blinding sky.

Two young black men walked down West Eightieth Street at the western edge of the Los Angeles Police Department's Seventy-seventh Street precinct area, a few miles away from where Dovon Harris lived. One was tall with light brown skin, the other shorter, slight, and dark.

The shorter of the two young men, Walter Lee Bridges, was in his late teens. He was wiry and fit. His neck was tattooed and his face wore the mournful, jumpy look common to young men in South Central who have known danger. His low walk and light build suggested he could move like lightning if he had to.

His companion, wearing a baseball cap and pushing a bicycle, appeared more relaxed, more oblivious. Bryant Tennelle was eighteen

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# SCHOOL OF CATASTROPHE

Wally Tennelle was born in the coal-mining region of Jasper, Alabama, in 1954. Family lore held that an ancestor had been the illegitimate daughter of a house slave and a white plantation owner; that's where the family got their copper brown skin and hair.

His mother Dera's family was originally from Mississippi, but she spent her childhood in that Alabama coal country, always in near-complete segregation from whites. Wally's father, Baron Tennelle, aspired to better things. He and Dera were high school sweethearts. They married, had two sons, and headed out west in 1963, just before John Skaggs was born, part of the second great black migration from the South. Tennelle's father was high-energy, a hard worker and a natural salesman. In California, he parlayed a low-level job in the airline industry into a sales post. The family prospered. A third child, a daughter, was born in L.A.

From earliest childhood, Wally, the middle child, was decisive and organized, a stickler for neatness. To his mother's surprise, he would fold all his clothes, or tidy his room, without being asked. Dera felt deprived of the opportunity to nag him as a mother was supposed to.



Wally's cleanliness sprang from an inward orderliness of spirit that would define him all his life.

Wally finished high school and decided not to go to college. Instead, he joined the Marines and set his heart on a combat post in Vietnam. It was the last days of the war. He missed the window for combat deployment when his mother—not by accident, he realized later—took too long to send him the required certificate of baptism. He took another Marine post: a position as a guard at the U.S. embassy in Costa Rica.

Three weeks after he arrived in San Jose, Costa Rica, he entered a coffee shop across the street from the embassy and made one of the snap decisions that typified his life.

The Costa Rican girl at the counter was sixteen years old. Yadira Alvarado was from a farming family. Tennelle, then eighteen, spoke no Spanish, she no English. One of her coworkers had to ask her out for him. That first night at the movies, Yadira's thoughts were spinning. How to fill the silence? But Tennelle didn't seem to care. At the end of the evening, he dropped her off at the bus stop at her request. The next day, two dozen red roses were waiting for her at the coffee shop. On their next date, Tennelle surprised her with a few words of Spanish. They dated three years, and by the end of their courtship, he spoke Spanish fluently. She was nineteen when they married. He was twenty-two.

Their first home together was a military base in Cherry Point, South Carolina. Costa Rica had a racial context different from that of the United States. Yadira had no sense that she and Wally were what was called in the States a "biracial couple" until she noticed strange looks when they went out together. It was her first lesson in what she would later sum up as "this whole thing"—race in America.

After his run in the military was over, Wally and Yadira returned to his hometown, Los Angeles, where he found work as a Kmart security guard. He got a better job with his father's employer, United Airlines,

lost it in a strike, and devised a new way to get by. He enrolled in El Camino Community College mainly for the financial aid check—he had little interest in being a student—and used the check to pay the rent and buy a lawn mower. He began working as a gardener.

Wally Tennelle would later say his decision in 1980 to become a police officer was just to earn a living. But Yadira remembers it differently. While she was still in Costa Rica, she said, Wally warned her that he wanted to be a police officer. He was giving her a chance to object. Yadira knew nothing of murder, nothing of the black asphalt war zone of South Central Los Angeles. But she probably wouldn't have objected anyway. Years later, their eldest daughter would observe that Wally and Yadira's mutual respect and independence were hallmarks of their very successful marriage. At home, they passed companionable hours, he more often outside, she within, each immersed in their separate occupations.

Wally and Yadira's first house in South Los Angeles was like their marriage: orderly and idyllic. In Costa Rica, Yadira saw young women courted by charming men who revealed a domineering side after marriage. Not Wally. Many people who knew him would remark on his consistency of character: he was the same person no matter the situation. Their house was pleasant and uncluttered. They never fought. Their daughter, named Dera for Wally's mother but known as DeeDee, knew how unlikely this sounded. But it was the truth: never had she seen her parents quarrel.

There were three children in all. After DeeDee came a son, Wallace, Jr., and then Bryant, born in September 1988. Yadira took a job in the kitchen at a Kaiser Permanente Hospital, working from 5:00 A.M. to 1:30 P.M. She remained there year after year, rising in the dark to put on her kitchen aide's smock. To her friends, it seemed a start-up job. They urged her to get her nursing degree. But Yadira loved the work, loved cooking, loved keeping busy.

The kids teased their parents for being boring. Privately, though, DeeDee had another word for them—*wholesome.* The word made her cringe. But



it fit. They were like the Brady Bunch. Or, no, DeeDee corrected herself with a laugh: like "the Cosbys." After all, they were black. Sort of.

Racial identity was rarely discussed in the house. Wally Tennelle had somehow managed to grow up in South Central without ever having had a brush with violence or a negative encounter with police. He had been prevented by his mother from even wearing an Afro—and almost never talked of race. His conservative views on personal responsibility and self-improvement were typical of LAPD officers. To hear Wally Tennelle talk of the African American U.S. Rep. Maxine Waters, a frequent LAPD critic, was to hear the same frustrated grievances aired by just about every other cop in the city. In this respect, Wally Tennelle was blue before black.

In appearance, all three children bore strong resemblances to both their parents. But they looked different from one another. DeeDee was porcelain-skinned, with a dusting of light brown freckles over her nose, huge brown eyes, full lips, and wavy brown hair. She looked so white that, alone among the family members, she deliberately mispronounced her last name as "Te-NELL" instead of "Te-NELL-ee." That way, people would not assume she was of Italian descent.

Wally Jr. was darker-skinned, "copper tan" like his father, with clear dark eyes and dark brown hair. He spoke Spanish well and considered himself half Latino. "But if I'm in a hurry, I just say I'm black," he said.

Bryant was lighter than his brother, not as light as DeeDee. He was tall and slim, and his smooth complexion was the envy of his brother, who battled acne. But like Wally Jr., Bryant generally identified as black on the fly. In the end, because of where they grew up, because of some unspoken comprehension of a complex racial history, and because most of the biracial kids they knew did the same, all the children considered themselves black.

After a brief LAPD apprenticeship in Southeast, Wally Tennelle "wheeled" to jail division, then to narcotics, spending less time in patrol

than is typical for new officers. He ended up in the Central Bureau CRASH unit in the early eighties. CRASH stood for "community resources against street hoodlums," a name that belonged to a bygone era of the LAPD, before reform efforts attempted to scrub out hints of wildness and bravado. The progression of gang squad names charted this evolution: an early special team of this type in the Seventy-seventh had been called PATRIOT. Then came the citywide units dubbed CRASH. Then, after a federal civil rights consent decree, they were relabeled with the anodyne GIT—"gang impact teams."

Tennelle's stint as a gang officer came in the midst of the great American homicide wave of the early eighties. It was the era of crack cocaine and rock houses and open-air drug markets. The young Marine veteran was in heaven. There could be nothing better than wearing that dark blue uniform, driving fast cars, and chasing gangsters around all night. He didn't want to do anything else—certainly not detective work. Everyone knew detectives were "a bunch of slugs," Tennelle recalled. He and his peers had a motto: "P-2 forever," for Police Officer II—that is, the die-hard street cops.

Then, in 1984, Tennelle was among a group of gang officers loaned out to the homicide unit to handle the high murder caseload, and he got his first homicide.

The qualities that make great homicide detectives are different from the qualities that make great patrol cops. But they are related. Wally Tennelle had a baseline of attributes that steer many young people toward police work. Although he was not college-educated, he was smart and energetic. Police work can be a haven for brainy, action-oriented people who do not, for some reason, gravitate toward formal education—the type afflicted with what DeeDee Tennelle diagnosed in her whole family as "a touch of ADD."

It made them uniquely suited for a job that was carried out almost entirely out of doors and involved sleepless nights, relentless bursts of activity, and the ability to move from one situation to the next quickly without leaving too much behind. A great cop—or a great detective—needed to be smart and quick, but not necessarily bookish or terribly



analytical. A good memory, a talent for improvisation, a keen interest in people, and a buoyancy of spirit—one had to like "capering"—ensured that the hyperactive flourished in a job that left others wilting with stress.

Wally Tennelle had all these traits. But he had a few others that gave him an edge on even the better class of south-of-the-Ten cops. They were the same qualities that his mother had once noted: the preternatural neatness, the ability to control himself and the space around him, and the quiet certainty of his whole mien. Tennelle was an orderly thinker; he loved detail and was almost pathologically hardworking. He was also happy and had few if any personal demons. This latter trait was especially important. It gave him steadiness of purpose and stamina. Not surprisingly, when he worked that first homicide case, he was swept with the sense of certainty people experience when they discover what they were meant for in life. *Yeah,* he thought. *This is what I want to do.*

Tennelle worked as a homicide detective for Central Bureau CRASH until the late 1980s, and then he transferred to a divisional detective job in Newton. He worked as they all worked in those days—hammered by new cases, trying to slam together investigations that would stand up in court before the next one overwhelmed them, hoping they wouldn't founder in plea deals, which were much more common then. One weekend in the late 1980s, Tennelle was called to four murder scenes. Only at the fifth, he recalled, did the brass agree to summon a fresh team.

Along the way, Tennelle learned the homicide detective's creed from an early partner standing over the body of a murdered prostitute. "She ain't a whore no more," he said. "She's some daddy's baby." Wally Tennelle loved that philosophy. Whatever the wider world's response, the homicide detective's call was to treat each victim, no matter how deep their criminal involvement, as the purest angel. The murdered were inviolate. They all deserved the same justice. They were all *some daddy's baby.*

The city was entering what veteran detectives would thereafter refer to as "the Big Years." Homicides hit a high point in 1980, waned, then

surged to a second peak in the early 1990s. In raw numbers, nothing like it had ever been seen before (though per capita rates of homicide were actually higher during the previous decade). In 1992, the homicide death rate for all Americans exceeded nine hundred per hundred thousand people. That is higher than in almost any other developed country. Among blacks, the picture was even starker: they died at about six times the rate of whites—just as they had in earlier eras and as they would after the Big Years. At the peak, the rate for the highest-risk blacks was off the charts. In 1993, black men in their early twenties in Los Angeles County died by homicide at a rate of 368 per 100,000 population, similar to the per capita rate of death for U.S. soldiers deployed to Iraq in the aftermath of the 2003 invasion.

Wally Tennelle earned the detective rank in 1990, right on the shoulder of the great wave. To "work homicide" in South Central L.A. in those days was to dwell in a demimonde the outside world could not comprehend.

It's one matter to contemplate what the scholar Randall Kennedy calls the "dismal statistics" related to black homicide—war zone death rates ten minutes from peaceful suburbs. It was another to watch the catastrophe unfold firsthand, as Tennelle would over the ensuing decade.

South Central then felt like another city, enclosed in invisible walls. The very air bore a tincture of grief. "Indescribable" was a word people used a lot: "So hard to describe, and even then, you can't smell it," a Watts detective said.

Choked silence, accompanied by that flat gaze one police chaplain called "homicide eyes," was perhaps the signature response people offered when asked to describe their experiences with violence. Eyes would stray midway through an explanation of a father's sudden obliteration, or a husband's slow, excruciating demise. An apologetic shake of the head would cut short an account of a son's maiming. Survivors who escaped gunfire trailed off into vanquished silence when talking of the friends who didn't. "There are no words," people often said.



Karen Hamilton, a bookkeeper from Jefferson Park, had still not spoken of her son's murder seven years after his death. She tried, drawing deep breaths, her hands shaking, but no voice came. Homicide grief may be a kind of living death. Survivors slog on, diminished, disfigured by loss and incomprehension.

For many family members, the nightmare begins with experiences most Americans associate only with war: the sudden, violent death of a loved one on the street outside your home. Parents and siblings are often first on the scene.

When eighteen-year-old Jamaal Nelson was shot, his mother ran outside, fell on her knees, and lifted his shirt to see his torso riddled with bullet holes. He rasped loudly and died in her arms.

Bobby Hamilton found his teenage son unconscious on the ground in a nearby park. The boy was breathing heavily, a bullet in the back of his head. Hamilton scooped him up like a baby and drove him to a fire station, where he died.

Other loved ones learned of the deaths from phone calls, or visits from police. A friend called Wanda Bickham to tell her that her nineteen-year-old son, Tyronn, had been shot and killed. Bickham slammed down the receiver, unable to hear it. Lewis Wright learned of his son's murder when an official at the coroner's office slid a photo across the table to him facedown. Heart pounding, he flipped it over to see his son's face. Sharon Brown spent the last moments of her thirteen-year-old son's life sitting still on a park bench outside the recreation center where he'd been shot, staying out of the paramedics' way. Later, she regretted it.

Immediately after the murders, many of the bereaved describe feeling mechanical and numb, their minds spinning, reflexively pushing agony away. At a funeral, one mother walked from her pew to her son's open casket like a robot, lifting each foot as if it carried a hundred-pound weight.

Realization comes slowly. Some people describe their worst spells of grief two, or five, or twenty years after the murder. "It's after. It's after.

It's after," Barbara Pritchett said, clenching her fists with anguish two years after Dovon's murder. Many people report being consumed by anger. "The whys," one bereaved father called it.

Some give in to despair. In the months after forty-two-year-old Charles Yarbrough was murdered, his mother, Anita McKiry, spent entire nights lying facedown, spread-eagled, on his grave. A Compton woman who had lost not one but two sons to homicide described herself as just "waiting to die." Carlton Mitchell, whose brother Paul was killed, took to walking dangerous streets hoping that he would be struck by gunfire like his brother.

Homicide could make pariahs of the bereaved. Family members described being shunned, as if their misfortune were catching. Sometimes it seemed that the closer people were to the problem, the more potent their distancing mechanisms. This distance could be heard in the evasive and often callous language used in black South Central to describe the phenomenon. One almost never heard the word "murder" on the streets. Euphemisms served instead: "puttin' in work," to "serve" someone, to "smoke" him, to "lay him out," to "light him up," to "take care of business"—the list went on. Bloods, Crips, and Hoovers had their own trademark verbs for attacking and hurting other human beings—"swoopin'," "movin'," "groovin'." The ubiquitous "whoopdee-woo-woo" and its many variations were all-purpose ellipses equally applicable to a minor spat or a massacre, depending on the context.

Chaotic public scenes of grief on streets and sidewalks were common. Mothers and grandmothers tried to bust through police tape. They threw themselves on victims' bodies, pummeling officers who held them back. Mini-riots sometimes broke out at crime scenes. Use-of-force cases erupted when police officers tussled with hysterical family members. In one case in Watts, a woman's son and relatives pressed around the car where she lay dying from a gunshot wound; officers pushed the mourners back by force, striking several with batons.

Outside the walled city, there prevailed a blander yet even more virulent form of callousness. It permeated officialdom, the media, the public rhetoric surrounding homicide. Very few of the bereaved were spared



the sense that a wider world viewed their loss indifferently. "Nobody cares" was a universal lament south of the Ten during the Big Years, and for many years after. A threadbare, dismal, bureaucratic sense of routine surrounded the handling of homicides and related crimes. Officials were rushed and overburdened. One mother described learning of her son's death from a clerk in the hospital's property room who wordlessly handed her his shoes.

Very few murders were covered in the media. Television stations covered more than the papers, but without any particular consistency, and many, many deaths received no mention by any media outlet, especially if the victims were black. It rankled deeply. The lack of media coverage seemed to convey that black-on-black homicide was "small potatoes" in the eyes of the world, said a father who lost a daughter. "Nothing on the news!" a mother cried, weeping, at the sight of a journalist the day after her son was murdered. "*Please* write about it! *Please!*"

Even when cases got some public attention, the tilt often seemed off. Gangs were a big topic, but atrocity, trauma, and lifelong sorrow were not part of the public's vocabulary about black-on-black violence. Somehow, mainstream America had managed to make a fetish of South Central murders yet still ignore them. The principal aspect of the plague—agony—was constantly underrated.

Here, too, language was a battleground. More than one bereaved parent objected to terms such as "gang violence" as euphemistic, its purpose being to label their loved ones as throwaway people or otherwise diminish their standing as "innocent victims." Homicide activist LaWanda Hawkins, whose son was killed, summed up the objection: "'Gang member' is the new N-word," she said. Phrases such as "at risk" were worse, rolling victims and perpetrators into one indistinguishable mass. Vicky Lindsay grew so tired of palliating terms that she had a sticker made for her rear windshield: "My son was *murdered*," it declared.

Det. Brent Josephson, who worked in the Seventy-seventh Street station through the Big Years of the late 1980s and early 1990s, gave a name to the syndrome that ravaged the lives of many residents of South Bureau: he called it "the Monster." The name supplied a shorthand for

the whole mess—not just the pileup of homicides among a small group of people, mostly black, and the unseen savagery of these crimes, but also the indifference with which the world seemed to view them.

LAPD detectives had probably never been staffed adequately to handle the high levels of violence south of the Ten. But during the Big Years, caseloads swelled to the point of ridiculousness, with so few detectives handling so many cases that the job came to resemble battlefield surgery. Caseloads were at least twice what experts recommended for many of those years, and ten times what RHD detectives would be assigned a decade and a half later. What detectives such as Tennelle did during those years would never be repeated; his generation of homicide detectives remains, to this day, unique in their exposure to the Monster.

They toiled ceaselessly, racking up overtime and divorces. Strokes and heart attacks proliferated in their ranks. One detective in South Bureau in the 1990s collapsed in the office. Yet the mountain of backlogged cases kept growing. "New cases piled on, and new cases piled on," a detective named Jerry Pirro recalled a decade after the Big Years peaked. "It got to the point where we were pretty much living at the station. The phone would ring, and you'd cringe."

It was hard not to take it personally. Detectives felt they were fighting an invisible war. By then, the notion of a lot of black and Latino drug dealers and gangsters shooting each other down in the 'hood had become normal. It was often not news. "I remember a banner headline in the *Los Angeles Times* one weekend," recalled a detective named Paul Mize. "A bomb in Beirut had killed six people. We had nine murders that weekend, and not a one of them made the paper. Not one." It was aggravating, crazy-making. "You were dealing with problems and people that the majority of society doesn't want to think about—doesn't want to deal with their tragedy and grief," a detective named John Garcia recalled in the early 2000s, talking of his years in the Newton Division and South Bureau. "They are not the ones who have to knock on that front door at two A.M. and say, 'Your loved one has been killed.'"

No one seemed to care. Mize recalled writing "poison-pen activities reports" to superiors, begging for more resources. "I used to fly off the handle and throw stuff around the room," he said. "I couldn't believe the decisions being made in Parker Center" by top police officials.



But to brass, detective work was "strictly reactive," as one high-ranking officer called it, dismissing the whole function. Crime prevention was seen as more progressive, and so competing priorities always seemed to win out over investigations: preventive patrol projects, gang sweeps. "Just all upside down," said a Newton homicide detective named Johnny Villa.

Law, of course, isn't like hygiene, and crime "prevention" inevitably leads to stereotyping people as potential threats. But "proactive" patrol work sounded better. Prevention carried an added bonus, as legal scholar Carol Steiker has noted: it gave police wide latitude, since the Constitution places many constraints on legal procedure *after* a crime, far fewer before it.

Despite the obstacles, many detectives brought battlefield dedication to the job in those years. But it was inevitable that the work would suffer. Cases were butchered; investigations were rushed, cursory, abandoned midway through. "You could have cases with viable leads, but you didn't have time to work them because fresh stuff was coming in," said a detective named Rick Marks, whose career spanned more than 160 cases.

The only thing that can be said for the crush was that it created a few unrivaled experts. Only a select number of homicide detectives in the country could claim the familiarity with homicide that the LAPD's South Bureau and Central Bureau "homicide experts" could. There were perhaps such detectives in New York, Detroit, Washington, D.C.—people who had learned their trade over years and scores of murders. Such detectives were experts less because of the variety of cases they worked than their sameness.

High-homicide environments are alike. The setting is usually a minority enclave or disputed territory where people distrust legal authority, as in South Los Angeles, where law had broken down in the Big Years and murder flourished. The killings typically arise from arguments. A large share of them can be described in two words: *Men fighting.* The fights might be spontaneous, part of some long-running feud, or

the culmination of "some drama," as Skaggs would put it. These male "dramas," he observed, were not so different from those among quarreling women of the projects. In fact, they were often extensions of them. "Women work through men by agitating them to homicide," observed an anthropologist studying Mayan villages in Mexico. The observation fit scores of killings in L.A. that cops chalked up to "female problems."

The smallest ghettoside spat seemed to escalate to violence, as if absent law, people were left with no other means of bringing a dispute to a close. Debts and competition over goods and women—especially women—drove many killings. But insults, snitching, drunken antics, and the classic—unwanted party guests—also were common homicide motives. Small conflicts divided people into hostile camps and triggered lasting feuds. Every grudge seemed to harbor explosive potential. It would ignite when antagonists met by chance, gunfire erupting in streets or liquor stores. Vengeance was a staple motive. In some circles, retaliation for murder was considered all but mandatory. It was striking how openly people discussed it, even debating the merits from the pulpit at funerals.

From antiquity, the "men fighting" problem—men killing one another to settle disputes or exact revenge in the absence of a trusted legal authority—has confounded thinking people.

It would be too sweeping to assert that lawless peoples are all alike. But it's impossible to ignore that across historic and cultural settings, there appears to be a common palette of adaptations to lawlessness.

Loose talk and rumors are particular aggravators. Canadian Inuits fought over "chronic lying," the Sudanese over "volatile conversation," and Jim Crow blacks over "gossip and whispering." Revenge and jealousy murders are standard. So are reprisals against snitches who serve a distrusted state—"touts" kneecapped in Northern Ireland, informants necklaced in South Africa. Gangs that declare an order-keeping role—like the murderous neighborhood watches of Ghana—are another sure sign that a vacuum of legitimate authority has been filled by extralegal violence. So is the habit of grabbing one's friends from police, as people do in South African townships.



Witnesses in such contexts are scared. Men act touchy. They fixate on honor and respect—a result of lawlessness, not a cause. Petty quarrels grow lethal, and may mask deeper antagonisms. And arson, for some reason, gets a starring role—in czarist Russia, gold rush settlements in Alaska, and the sharecropping regions of the South.

In the dim early stirrings of civilization, many scholars believe, law itself was developed as a response to legal "self-help": people's desire to settle their own scores. Rough justice slowly gave way to organized state monopolies on violence. The low homicide rates of some modern democracies are, perhaps, an aberration in human history. They were built, as the scholar Eric Monkkonen said, not by any formal act, but "by a much longer developmental process whereby individuals willingly give up their implicit power to the state."

There are many challenges to this viewpoint, and many variations on it. But history shows us that lawlessness is *its own kind of order.* Murder outbreaks, seen this way, are more than just the proliferation of discrete crimes. They are part of a whole system of interactions determined by the absence of law. European history offers a panoply of rough justice systems based on personal vengeance, blood feuds, shaming rituals, and sundry forms of retributive and clan violence. Frequent homicide was a part of this picture. High homicide rates have also been recorded among hunter-gatherer peoples and other societies without elaborate legal structures.

Tellingly, the syndrome also crops up among isolated minorities alienated from the state, frontiersmen, and occupied peoples—any place, really, where formal authority is patchy or distrusted. Thus, some Indian tribes in Canada and the U.S. have disproportionate homicide rates, as do ethnic and immigrant enclaves in Switzerland, England, Wales, and Italy. In the peaceful Netherlands, non-Dutch ethnics suffer many times the homicide rate of their Dutch compatriots. Eighteenth-century rates among settlers on the wild edge of the American colonies were almost exactly those of South Central blacks in the twenty-first century. In the town of Tira, Israel, today, Arab citizens of Israel also suffer a homicide rate similar to that of black South Central. They

blame the Israeli police in terms that would sound familiar to John Skaggs: "As long as it's Arabs killing Arabs, they just don't care," one resident said.

It's like a default setting. Wherever human beings are forced to deal with each other under conditions of weak legal authority, the Monster lurks. The ancient Greeks wrote of the Furies, hideous black gorgons who held grudges and rasped, "Get him, get him, get him." They could be subdued only by law.

To solve cases in such contexts, homicide detectives had to be schooled in folkways. They had to understand secret slang and symbolic affronts and maneuver through the endless nicknames and aliases. They had to understand people's fear of being labeled "snitches." They had to be able to unravel the tangle of relationships surrounding each case—that dense weave of homeys, "fiancés," baby daddies, and road dogs.

The homicide detectives had to learn how to pull bureaucratic levers rusted shut from years of indifference, had to work fast and effectively, juggling multiple cases. Putting together a ghettoside murder case wasn't a linear task—one clue leading to another, then another, like in all those TV shows. It required investigators to move side to side and backtrack, like spiders weaving webs. Witnesses lied, recanted, or disappeared. Their stories were usually inconsistent. Successful cases were spun from intersecting points of corroboration, not straight-line narratives.

Finally, the detectives who learned their craft in those years came to know the profound grief of homicide, the most specialized knowledge of all. They knew the way the bereaved struggled to function hour by hour. They knew about good days and bad days. Good detectives said to family members, "I can't possibly know how you feel." The best didn't have to say it. Years of such work endowed practitioners with an almost spiritual understanding of their craft. A detective named Rick Gordon, for example, still working in South Bureau as of this writing, had come to view the moral dimensions of his cases so profoundly that he talked of them in almost religious terms, talked as if their outcomes were predestined. Something *put* witnesses there, Gordon would say—something bigger than themselves. Humility was his doctrine—the ability to remain open, to let evidence speak. To discern liars but also to trust those who appeared to be lying but weren't.



Wally Tennelle would become one of this elite, the small, unrecognized cadre of superdetectives schooled by catastrophe.

At Newton, Wally Tennelle was paired with Kelle Baitx, a gruff black-Irish midcareer man from Orange County.

Baitx and Tennelle established a division of labor. Baitx would process the crime scene. Tennelle, with his fluent Spanish, would melt away into the crowd, migrating to the fringes of the crime scene or into adjoining streets. Inevitably, he would talk to someone the patrol officers had missed, would hit upon some tidbit of information that everyone else had overlooked. Baitx thought Tennelle's ability to canvass was uncanny. He would hardly notice his partner's perambulations, but somehow, at the end of the day, witnesses would be flushed from the brambles.

Tennelle projected competence without being intimidating. He was compact, not tall but broad-shouldered, with guileless brown eyes and a lined forehead. The lines formed a series of arches to his hairline and lent his whole face a kindly look. Altogether, in a job that was all about people skills—finding witnesses, persuading them to talk—he excelled.

The dizzying homicide peak of 1992 was upon them. Baitx and Tennelle worked an astonishing twenty-eight cases that year, almost three times the recommended caseload. Tennelle thrived on it, loving the adrenaline, loving the hard work. Baitx noticed something else about Tennelle: when other cops went out drinking after work, Tennelle would go home to his family. Baitx and Tennelle were close, but Baitx only rarely saw Tennelle's wife and his three young children. Baitx understood that when Tennelle wasn't working, he preferred his home life, wanted to be with Yadira and the kids, puttering around the house. Tennelle rarely talked about work. At home, DeeDee Tennelle was hardly aware that her father was a homicide detective until once, as a child, she made a secret discovery of autopsy photos in a drawer.