

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," Detective 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 Detective 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," Detective 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."

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, 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 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 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. They were experts less because of the variety of cases they worked than their sameness. *Start Here*

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, the result of a 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 quar-

reling women of the projects. In fact, they were often extensions of them. "Women work through men by agitating them to homicide," noted 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. "Grudges!" Skaggs would exclaim: to him the word summed scores of cases. Every grudge seemed to harbor explosive potential. It would ignite when antagonists met by chance, in the street or in 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 across historic and cultural settings, there appears 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, such as the !Kung of the Kalahari, 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. *End Here*

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. They developed an almost spiritual understanding of their craft. A detective named Rick Gordon, 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, as if their outcomes were predestined. Something *but* 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 only appeared to be lying.

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 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 find some tidbit 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. 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, 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, pattering 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.