NOTHING LEFT TO PROVE - SAMPLE

A LAW ENFORCEMENT MEMOIR

DANNY R. SMITH

I

BEGINNING OF THE END

1

WEST LOS ANGELES

DECEMBER 2003

The end came the day I rushed to investigate a human head hanging in a tree. It would be my 143rd death investigation as a homicide detective with the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, and normally, just another day at the bureau. Dead kids. Dead cops. Human fucking heads. At some point, everyone breaks.

A nurse had taken my vitals, asked a few questions, and jotted some notes in my chart. When she left me alone in the room, I fixed my gaze on the drab wall across from where I sat and pondered my destiny. In my heart I already knew, and the doctor would confirm it moments later.

Doc entered the room with my chart in his hand and a somber expression I hadn't seen on him before. He rolled a stool close to my chair and lowered himself onto it, and then he asked me to describe what had happened earlier that day. He wanted details, not the highlights which I had already relayed to his nurse. If that brief summary had bothered him—which it obviously had—wait until he heard the particulars.

I began by telling him about that morning in the office, how I had been greeted with stacks of reports and subpoenas, a revised on-call schedule that now showed my partner and me first up for murders—again—and half a dozen phone messages along with scores of emails to

answer. It was the normal burden of working Homicide in the County of Los Angeles, a job that turned healthy young cops into worn-out men and women with broken hearts and tormented minds. Before I finished my first cup of coffee, we had an assignment: a human head had been found hanging in a tree. I gathered my gear and got a refill of coffee to go. With it I washed down the first pain pill of the day, something that could normally wait until lunch.

Doc waited, his stoic gaze revealing nothing about his thoughts. But I knew.

I continued: Then, while doing seventy on the Long Beach Freeway and talking on the phone with my partner, discussing this forlorn head, I glanced over my shoulder to change lanes when it happened again—my neck froze. Each of the previous four or five times it had happened had been during times of tremendous stress, and it was always preceded by a throbbing headache and tightening muscles. This time, the intense spasm surprised me, and it left me stuck looking behind me while traveling in the other direction at a high rate of speed.

Doc took a breath and let it out slowly, the sound amplified in the relative silence that now hung between us.

I broke his gaze and looked around the room, suddenly aware of the antiseptic smell of cleansers. My mind flashed to the coroner's office, images of cadavers on stainless steel gurneys populating its colorless hallways, a dreadful place that I hoped never to visit again. Like a runner who can see the finish line, there was relief in knowing it was almost over, and in my mind I certainly knew that to be the case. No more autopsies. No more bloody scenes. No more dead kids and murdered cops and women hacked and slashed and strangled by hands they had trusted.

The muffled sounds of a busy office permeated the walls, stirring me from my contemplation: ringing phones, chattering staff, hasty footsteps moving purposefully as doors were opened and closed up and down the hallway outside, medical staff tending to the needs of others. I could feel Doc's gaze still upon me, perhaps waiting for me to come back to him. But was I ready to hear his words? I wasn't sure. After a moment, I took another breath and looked him in his eyes.

"You're finished," he said. It was unequivocal and not negotiable.

For a moment I sat silent, digesting the reality of my career ending. For cops, it's so much more than leaving a job. It's leaving behind a family. It's the loss of loved ones. It's losing your identity and stepping into the abyss, where you can only hope that you'll someday find your footing, realize that you'd done enough and that it was okay to hang up your gun and badge. But getting there—to that point of knowing it was okay to walk away—would be a long journey for me.

As I sat and absorbed the harsh words—*You're finished*—a dark fog rolled over me and began smothering me. I saw myself standing at the bottom of a gorge, looking up at the first light of day, stranded and alone with no hope of climbing to safety. Lost and cold. Hopeless. And I wept uncontrollably. Like an inconsolable child, but also like a broken man. The latter, I would eventually realize, I was.

2

THE LOS ANGELES RIOTS

APRIL 1992

Black soot floated down from the heavens, covering buildings, streets, and cars throughout South Los Angeles. With darkness came desolation: the streets, alleys, and parking lots vacated in response to a curfew. All that remained were violators of the law—those striking with violence and destroying property in the name of justice—and those who were there to stop them. The peacekeepers. I was one of them.

It was Wednesday, April 29, 1992, five weeks from the day I would marry my one and only bride, and ten weeks shy of my turning thirty. I was nine years into my 21-year law enforcement career with the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, and six months into my assignment as a detective at Firestone station in South Los Angeles. Just weeks before, we had buried a colleague, Nelson Yamamoto, a young Firestone deputy gunned down in the line of duty.

The verdicts in the case of four LAPD officers involved in the Rodney King incident were announced as I drove home from work that Wednesday afternoon. I arrived home in time to see Los Angeles mayor Tom Bradley's press conference wherein he denounced the verdicts, using what many considered inflammatory language. His words stoked anger among some elements of the black community, many of whom

were upset that the cops had been acquitted by a mostly white Simi Valley jury, and some who would use the occasion to riot and loot and to act out with violence upon their fellow man.

My fiancée and I went down the road and had dinner at a little Mexican joint, successfully pulling ourselves away from the news for a while. I had a feeling I would be called back to work that night, but until then there was nothing I could do other than to wait for the phone to ring. Shortly after dinner, that call came.

I spent the next half hour collecting weapons, food and water, and assembling these things along with extra underclothes in what is now referred to by preppers as a bug-out bag. My wife-to-be helped load rifle magazines with ammunition, and then I drove her to my childhood home—a place far from South Los Angeles. There, she wouldn't be alone, and I wouldn't have to worry about her safety. The man who had raised me and shaped me would protect the family while I put myself in harm's way. Dad had seen his share of action long before as a paratrooper in the Korean War; now it was my time to serve.

From the Santa Clarita valley I descended into the City of Angels on empty freeways in my old GMC pickup, something I didn't normally use to commute, but a vehicle I would be able to use as a ramming device if needed. Gang members were known to set roadblocks using furniture and cars in order to capture their prey. Cops who worked in areas like Watts knew never to stop to clear a roadway; rather, to go around, over, or through said barricade, and to have a weapon in hand, prepared to fire.

The extra weapons I had brought to the station remained with me on patrol for the next several weeks. Like many others at Firestone, I was qualified to carry an AR-15 rifle, but the station armory had a limited supply of these weapons and the .223 caliber ammunition they required. We had learned from our predecessors who had experienced events such as the Watts riots of 1965, the East Los Angeles riots of 1970, the SLA (Symbionese Liberation Army) shootout of 1974, and scores of civil unrest incidents, that it was imperative to carry extra weapons and ammunition when working in volatile and violent communities.

My first encounter occurred before I exited the freeway. A carload of Hispanic youths pulled alongside me, carefully appraising me. These

weren't hardcore gang members, just boys not old enough to legally buy liquor who were caught up in the flood of emotion that had quickly swept through the poorer communities of Los Angeles, while everyone else sat glued to their televisions behind locked doors.

"Why do you have to go down there?" my sister had asked. *Down there*. To the parts of the city most citizens dared not journey—South Central Los Angeles. The beginnings of gentrification were yet a decade away, the prettying up of this area and making it sound nice by renaming it "South Los Angeles." I was headed to South Central; it was hardcore and there was nothing pretty about it. She said, "They should just let them kill each other and burn down their own communities."

The images of a bloody and beaten Reginald Denny writhing on the pavement in the intersection of Florence and Normandy had horrified her. A group of black men—later to be called "The L.A. Four"—had savagely beaten the unsuspecting truck driver after seizing his rig and pulling him from it. The four men—there were others, but primarily these four—viciously assaulted Denny. They punched him, they kicked him; one man beat him with a claw hammer, while yet another bounced a brick off his head. They robbed him, rifling through his pockets as he lay unconscious, this working man who knew not the evil of his fellow citizens until that very moment. It was a time before YouTube when few knew what we knew, that an element of our society embraced violence beyond most people's level of comprehension.

The conversation with my sister had taken place not twenty minutes before the carload of hooligans pulled alongside me. She had called, emotional and scared, uncharacteristically indifferent to the plight of her fellow humans while fearing for the safety of her baby brother, the smart-alecky little redhead who had grown into a man and who now drove into the abyss with a shotgun on his lap. She was but one of millions who had been unable to turn away from the images on TV: the bloody trucker, groups of thugs looting, shooting, burning their communities to the ground. And it had terrified her.

I answered her question about why I had to go. There were a lot of good people in that community too, decent people who lived in fear behind security screen doors and windows, and who counted on us to be

there for them at times like this. We were their only hope. My sister already knew this, of course, but it had been lost on her in the moment.

And it was true; there were many kind and caring citizens in South Central Los Angeles, a place where liquor stores and churches were prominent, but which lacked grocery stores and strip malls and parks that were free of thugs. Most of the good people had lived there all of their lives and were unable or unwilling to leave. It was their home, battered though it might have been.

I watched in my sideview mirror as the carload of young men, which had backed off for a moment, now came roaring up beside me again. I feared they had prepared a weapon and were now ready to try me. But I wouldn't give them the chance. As they arrived, I leveled the business end of a short-barreled shotgun at them, prepared to light it off. They must have been outgunned, or perhaps surprised to see me prepared for battle. Either way, they slammed on the brakes and then faded away. I continued my journey toward the battlefield.

Normally, an encounter like that would require an off-duty incident report. But by the time I reached the station, that incident seemed insignificant, so I never bothered to mention it in any formal report. As I continued toward my reporting district, I hit the Harbor Freeway and snaked through downtown, and then south into a blanket of thick smoke. My standard route to work would have me exit onto Florence Avenue and drive through the intersection of Florence and Normandy, Ground Zero. Not only did I avoid that intersection, but many times I was forced to abruptly change directions to avoid roaming groups of angry mobs. It was nearly ten when I slid into the station parking lot, safe at the plate, as if I had stolen home for the winning run. And for the first time in my career, I found our station to be fortified, locked down, guarded by heavily armed deputies who were posted at the doors and driveways and on the roof. In the following days, military personnel took over these positions. A pair of camouflaged Marines sat concealed in the bushes just feet from the front door, armed with automatic weapons. A scout/sniper team had been stationed on the roof. No, I didn't need to report pointing my shotgun at a carload of punks.

Throughout that week there were many "incidents," both on- and off-duty, that occurred across the southland and would never be

reported. It was as if we had gone to war and everything had changed. Civility had vanished, and martial law was the result. There were exchanges of gunfire that, when no injury had resulted, sometimes went unreported. No harm, no foul. At times it seemed surreal.

Inside the station, deputies moved with purpose and urgency. Radios crackled and sirens wailed as radio cars and other emergency personnel regularly came and went. Helicopters streaked through the skies, appearing and disappearing through patches of smoke. Gunshots rang out in the night, regularly accented by bursts of automatic gunfire. It was a war zone.

Within days there were federal troops stationed at all major intersections as we rode four-deep in black and white patrol cars, clad in riot gear. When we weren't racing from call to call, we prowled the streets, blacked out at night, looking for looters. Twelve-hour shifts and no days off turned into 16-hour shifts and short periods of rest in the station bunkhouse.

The presence of the military helped us take control of our jurisdiction; they were primarily used to hold the areas we had secured. Previously, we would sweep a block and arrest looters, who would then be replaced by new looters once we moved on. With the military in place, we secured our area one block at a time while soldiers and Marines held the ground behind us. The National Guard had been the first military assistance to arrive. Most of these troops had never seen combat; they were bankers and plumbers and regular citizens who drilled once a month and a couple of weeks each year. Some of them were visibly frightened being in Watts with their unloaded weapons.

A call for assistance came over the radio. The National Guard was "taking rocks and bottles" at Santa Fe and Florence Avenues. We raced over, but as we did, I said, "Aren't those the guys in tanks?" meaning, why would they have to call the cops for help.

One of the guys in our car, ex-military, said, "Humvees aren't tanks, dumbass." Still, I argued, they had cool shit and they should've been using it.

But they hadn't. When we arrived, they pointed out the problem location, a shithole apartment from which gangsters would pop outside and throw something at them before retreating. We weren't the types to

retreat, so we came up with a plan. One particularly big, fast, and tough deputy sheriff snuck around the apartments and positioned himself just ten feet from the door, hidden behind a car. The next time a gangster popped out, he was mugged before he could launch another missile in our direction. He and a few others inside went to jail, and *that* problem was solved.

I walked into the station wearing a bandolier filled with shotgun shells across my chest, a shotgun in my hand. A lieutenant—one with whom I never saw eye-to-eye, and not only because he had barely passed the height requirement when hired—snapped at me to remove the bandolier from my uniform. "Why?" I asked, sincerely, but also in my ever-challenging-authority way.

"Because it looks too aggressive," he said.

I didn't hesitate in my response: "Maybe you haven't noticed, Lieutenant, but we've got tanks out there driving up and down Compton Avenue."

His nostrils flared, and he restated his order. I removed the bandolier until I departed the station, at which time I promptly replaced it and added a second one for spite. I hadn't even bothered to argue that a curfew was in effect and that no citizen was to be on the streets lest they be subject to arrest. The furious lieutenant wouldn't have cared; he had butter bars on his collar and a stick up his ass.

There were many exciting moments during the riots: foot chases, shots fired, fights. One night, my partner and I were patrolling along Firestone Boulevard when we spotted an unmarked sheriff's unit abandoned in the street. It was a far nicer car than those driven by our detectives, but clearly a sheriff's vehicle, nonetheless. We sped to the location and skidded to a stop, bailing out of the car with our attention directed to the burned and looted liquor store in front of which the unmanned car sat. Moments later, one of the two assistant sheriffs for the County of Los Angeles strode out of the smoldering ruins with a handcuffed prisoner. The third-most senior-ranking man of a 10,000 sworn officer department, the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, a former Firestone deputy himself, had observed a crime and made the arrest. He was accompanied by his driver, but it was only the two of them. They hadn't called for backup and it hadn't been staged

for any cameras. I have never been prouder of any department executive.

One of the best lieutenants we worked for at the time was Sid Heal. And that was really saying something because, other than the lieutenant who had worried about appearances during a riot, and one or two others over the years, we at Firestone always seemed to be blessed with great lieutenants and sergeants. Sid had served with the Marine Corps and had seen combat in Vietnam, and again in Desert Storm, having remained as a reserve for more than twenty years while serving the county of Los Angeles as a deputy sheriff. With the sheriff's department, he had been a member of our SWAT team, and later returned to SWAT as a captain. Sid stopped me as I strolled through the station hallway during a brief respite from the action outside and said, "Smith, who are you working with?" I could tell that he and the two army intelligence officers who stood with him had been engaged in a strategy session.

"Okamoto," I replied. Geody Okamoto was a good friend and a great cop, and he also happened to have been one of my codefendants during a federal lawsuit not long before. This night we had been teamed up and tasked with handling a special detail in which Okamoto was known to specialize, appropriating supplies from various outside sources.

Lieutenant Heal smiled. "Good. You and Geody take these guys down to the projects and get me a report on the gang activity in the Downs."

We had all heard that the Bloods and Crips had gathered in the Jordan Downs housing project, and that a truce had been made as they united against The Man. At the time, most of us in law enforcement would never have believed it possible. However, we always knew that if the thousands of gang members in Los Angeles County were ever to unite and become organized, they would be a force of considerable power and violence. But the odds were always against that happening, we knew. Until that night.

The Jordan Downs housing project is located in the southeast corner of Firestone's jurisdiction near 97th and Alameda Streets, in Watts. There were industrial buildings along Alameda, and we found one with a high outside catwalk that overlooked the projects. From our elevated position, we watched in amazement as hundreds of Bloods and Crips partied and

shot guns in the air and not at each other. It was more than a bit disconcerting, to say the least. Our position was only a hundred yards or so from the masses, and we knew that if they spotted us, they would shoot at us. My partner and I were armed with AR-15s. The soldiers were carrying some type of automatic rifles, though I don't recall now what they were. Lieutenant Heal showed up not long after we were in position. He had come out to get a report and see the action firsthand, because he wasn't a sitting-in-the-office type of leader. We neither heard nor saw him until he whispered a warning that he was coming up behind us. The five of us watched for a while longer before carefully exfiltrating with the confirmation that there was indeed a truce—however temporary—in place between the largest and most violent black gangs in America.

For the remainder of that first night, my partner and I mostly continued gathering intelligence and reporting to Lieutenant Heal. Our department had sent scores of undercover cops into the various communities and churches to gather additional information on the uprising and its instigators and participants. We met with several of these operatives and learned that a few politicians had been observed stoking the flames of hatred and unrest. A particularly vocal Democrat congresswoman was among the instigators of violence. I shall refrain from naming her, but most who read this will know her. She has a history of corruption, connections to the radical Nation of Islam leader, Louis Farrakhan, and she has been an outspoken supporter of murderous dictator Fidel Castro. It is said that she stood among the gun-toting gangsters that night in the Jordan Downs housing project, though I did not personally see her there.

After a couple of nights, we had mostly regained control of our jurisdiction with the assistance of deputies from other stations, the National Guard, and federal troops. On about the third night, it was decided we would be staged in a parking lot near our station, and from there we would be given assignments. A sergeant and two radio cars, each containing four deputies, would respond together to any situation. None of us liked the arrangement. We felt we should still be out prowling the streets, hunting for looters, arsonists, and killers.

And the arrangement did come to a screeching halt when a broad-

cast came over the radio announcing that firefighters were being shot at in the vicinity of Firestone Boulevard and Maie Avenue.

I led the charge, primarily because my vehicle was closest to the exit, and partially because I had more seniority than almost all of the other deputies there that night. Also because I didn't hesitate. None of us did. We sailed out of the lot, car after car, a parade of lights and sirens and armed men ready for battle. The shooting had stopped by the time we arrived, and the firefighters had little information about the origin of the attack. We searched the area but never figured out who had shot at them.

The lieutenant, John Martin, would later say I nearly ran over him on my way to the call. He had come from the station and was crossing the street to where we were staged, hoping to keep a handle on the recently instituted policy of coordinated responses. I had worked for John for a long time by then, and we had a good rapport. Privately, he said he had expected nothing less from a group of Firestone deputies. He also said if I did it again, he'd choke me out. John Martin easily could have, so I told him yes sir and that was the end of that.

After about a week of not seeing much of me, and with no end to the unrest in sight, my bride-to-be started to fret over the wedding plans. In the best of circumstances, planning one is stressful; imagine having a wedding date a few weeks out when the would-be groom and almost everyone on his guest list were engaged in a fight against civil unrest. Should we postpone our wedding? Cancel it? When was the madness going to stop? As April turned to May and the date drew nearer, these were our concerns. Hers more so than mine, but still. The decision was made not to cancel nor postpone the wedding; we were holding out hope that order would be restored by June 6 (D-day).

Eventually, I returned to my regular duties working day shift as a detective. We were still working twelve-hour shifts with no days off, and we needed those extra hours to get caught up; we had quite a mess now that the smoke had cleared. Firestone personnel, and those who had been sent to assist us, had arrested hundreds (if not thousands) of people in the first days of the rioting. Looters, vandals, arsonists, and an assortment of other lawbreakers had been rounded up and stacked like cordwood in booking vans and hauled off to the pokey. Once we had—for the most part—gained control of the situation, the judicial system returned

to normal operations. All of those arrests had to be filed with the court, so we detectives were busier over the next couple of weeks than we had been during the riots, and not nearly as entertained.

Soon thereafter, we were all back to working semi-normal hours. Days off and vacations had been restored, and the wedding was on!

3

A DUMB WHITE BOY FROM NEWHALL

JANUARY 1987

"You read their expressions. It's the way they look at you, or sometimes the way they don't. But a dumb white boy from Newhall probably won't know what he's looking at. Now if we were hunting lizards or snakes," he started, then glanced over from behind the wheel and grinned.

The words were an answer to a question I had asked of a tough and savvy street cop named Sal Velazquez: "How did you know they had dope?" Sal, who had grown up in a barrio himself, hadn't the learning curve that I and others with backgrounds like mine had had when we hit the streets. Sal knew the streets, and he knew the players. He had instincts you didn't get growing up in Newhall or Torrance.

This conversation took place when I was a trainee at Firestone station, and Sal and I were patrolling on a street just outside of the Jordan Downs housing project in Watts. It was during the eighties when the use of crack cocaine had spread insidiously throughout the nation like a cancer, and the ghettos of South Los Angeles were Ground Zero. Gang members were killing each other daily, in deadly competition for their shares of the market. The question I had of Sal had come a short time after he had slammed our dented and scratched black and white Chevy Malibu into park, bailed out, and pulled a man from the driver's

seat of a parked car. I jumped out and rushed to the other side of this parked car to detain the passenger, while Sal, his big hand clamped around the man's throat, commanded of the man, "Spit it out! Spit it out!"

The two men in the car had been preparing to smoke rock cocaine (crack) when we happened upon them, but I had been oblivious to it. The driver had eaten the evidence before Sal could get to him. Possession was a felony; being under the influence was only a misdemeanor. We detained both men and searched their car, finding a crack pipe and some liquor, but no additional cocaine. By then I had learned that misdemeanors were often overlooked in this high-crime district, so I wasn't surprised when Sal kicked them loose, telling them to get their asses out of the area or they'd go to jail next time. We drove off, and a few minutes later I had asked the question. I had no idea what he had seen that made him jam *those* two. There were guys just like them everywhere —on the sidewalks, in parking lots, sitting in cars, riding bikes. Most of these men and women were openly drinking alcohol in public and carrying on in ways that would draw the attention of cops in Newhall and communities like it. But this was a different world than the one I knew. This was Watts, and I had a lot to learn about it.

4

NEWHALL, CALIFORNIA

CHILDHOOD

Throughout the sixties and seventies Newhall was still small-town USA, mostly white, and relatively free of serious crime. As a boy I could ride bikes or play football and baseball on the streets with my friends, or I could go to the nearby elementary school to play basketball with little concern for my safety. Other than the occasional schoolyard fistfight, no part of my childhood had prepared me for a career in law enforcement, at least not one in Watts, a place where violence and death were rampant, constant, and abiding.

I grew up on Atwood Boulevard, which was a dirt road during my early childhood. As a young boy, I played in the street with my sturdy metal Tonka trucks until the construction crews arrived to pave it and bring us into the modern world. It wasn't long after that everything north of nearby Lyons Avenue, which had remained as agricultural land through the sixties, began giving way to a sprawling housing development called Valencia. Much later, the entire region would be incorporated as the City of Santa Clarita and become home to nearly a quarter-million residents. The days of six-year-olds playing with Tonka trucks on Atwood Boulevard are but a distant memory, as are the sprawling fields of carrots and potatoes and hay for livestock.

But even with the growth that Valencia brought to the Santa Clarita

Valley, my high school class was relatively small and unburdened by crime and gangs and clashing cultures, all of which were reported and rumored to have been commonplace in the San Fernando Valley, not far south of us. It wasn't that we had no diversity; there was a large Hispanic population, as one might imagine from the region's history of agriculture, and there were black families also in our valley, though few. But race was never counted as a contributor among any problems we may have had—at least none of which I was aware. One of my high school friends was a black kid who drove a lowrider and had a reputation as a tough guy, but I never saw him in a fight. In fact, he was one of the most popular kids at school, as were the few other black students.

At that time, Santa Clarita was unincorporated Los Angeles County, and it was policed by both deputies from the Newhall sheriff's station and traffic officers from the California Highway Patrol. I maintained the same healthy respect and fear of them as I had for my father. If I didn't screw up, there was nothing to worry about. But on those occasions when I would cross some boundary...

THANK YOU!

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Thank you.