Reading Between the Lines

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Riot Diary, Part II

Between midnight and three in the morning, the Los Angeles Fire Department received a call per minute. The police department received 1,700 calls by midnight. Police Chief Daryl Gates held a press conference. He told reporters that the department "had not anticipated it blowing up this quickly." He said he spent the early morning hours "yelling at my people, trying to get them going." We emerged from our motel just after eight a.m. Thursday. A pall of smoke thicker than smog draped the city.

The photographer and I set out for South Central again. Our editors wanted a story on business owners and residents. We agreed, knowing the day would send us turning and twisting as events unfolded. A copy of the Los Angeles Times sat astride the cellular phone between us. In the backseat: a large envelope containing virgin notepads; printouts of stories about race relations in Los Angeles and of the King trial; maps and empty Styrofoam coffee cups.

We knew looting had continued through the night. Before we left the motel, television had shown us color footage of young men hurling chunks of concrete at motorists in South Central. The jittering image of a quartet of young men hauling a truck driver from his eighteen-wheeler and caving his head in with a volley ball-sized rock replayed itself in my mind.

The photographer and I wanted to see the intersection of Florence and Normandie avenues, the street corner rapidly emerging as an icon of the disaster. We exited the freeway on Normandie Avenue and traveled south. We were developing a feel for the area, and daylight revealed landmarks that night had concealed. Wide residential streets connected the commercial corridors of South Central. We rolled slowly along the avenue, slipping off Normandie from time to time whenever something caught our attention. The homes on the side streets were single-story and low slung, bungalows with wide porches. I had not been to South Central before this. I was not sure what I expected to find.

Like many San Franciscans, I viewed Los Angeles as distant and unimportant, a place that spawned Mickey Mouse, motion pictures and unsavory contributions to our lexicon like "drive-by," "gang-banger" and "Smog Alert."

As a young adult, I made trips to Los Angeles infrequently, usually to visit friends in Venice Beach or Santa Monica for a few days at a time. But I knew that thousands of blacks had settled in Los Angeles after World War II, and that their relationship with the city's white power structure had been by turns quietly and explosively volatile. Over the years, thousands of jobs vanished from the area as tire companies, garment businesses and other industries bailed out of the area and headed for Los Angeles' ever-expanding fringes.

Without jobs, the American Dream became a mocking refrain to many blacks in urban Los Angeles. The police department became an occupying army, feared and grudgingly obeyed, at least until one heavy August night in 1965. I knew that Watts and Compton had come creeping back slowly from the 1965 civil disturbance. Looking at the wide, sun-splashed streets, I wondered about those residents who had lived through that conflagration 22 years earlier. Were they out there now, smashing store windows and grabbing television sets?

At 36th Street and Normandie Avenue, we spotted a corner mini-mall that seemed alive with quiet activity. Across the street from us, a liquor store smoldered, its darkened neon signs tilting slightly. A trickle of people moved in and out of an open side doorway.

Nearest us, a laundry mat, liquor store and narrow restaurant framed a wide asphalt parking lot. We pulled to the side of the complex and got out of the car. A water vending machine in the center of the parking lot stood with its change box open. At the building, beneath a sign that read "Coin Laundry – Launderia," we found John Ham kneeling at a metal grate.

Ham told us he had arrived in Los Angeles from Korea twelve years earlier. During the late 1980s, he bought first the laundry at this small mall, then the adjacent liquor store and restaurant. He had recently installed the water machine in the parking lot.

Ham said he had closed his business late afternoon Wednesday, preferring to return to his home on the outskirts of the city as night fell and the streets became noisy. "Everyone was just excited," Ham said. I questioned him slowly, watching his eyes moisten as he considered his words.

He believed that outsiders had hit his businesses. "Everyone around here, all my customers like me," said Ham. "Those who did this are not from here." While we spoke, he ran an index finger over the place in the metal grate where a gunshot had given looters entry to the business. Nearby, the restaurant was partially burned, the liquor store stripped of its goods and cash register.

Inside the laundry room, the coin boxes on most of the washing machines were smashed open. The photographer listened for a few moments, then began carefully snapping Ham's photograph. I asked Ham how much he thought it might cost to repair the damage at his three businesses. Tilting his head slightly and looking out over the parking lot, he paused. "Maybe three, maybe three-hundred and fifty thousand dollars," he said. A car pulled up, and another Korean man got out. He greeted Ham, and led him into the laundromat, pulling closed behind them the broken glass door. We crossed the street.

I stopped a black man who carried a crate heavy with bottles of Wild Irish Rose. The looted liquor was in the same family of "fortified wines" popular in many low-income neighborhoods — Night Train, Cisco and Mad Dog 20/20. John Simon told me he was 38 years old, and that he had lived in the neighborhood since 1961.

He looked invigorated with the morning, and wore a baseball cap, khaki pants and a T-shirt. He hesitated before answering my questions, stalling my queries by questioning me. Where was I from? Did I work for a television station? He didn't want to have his picture taken. I assured him his name would not appear in any local publication, and that we would not take his photo. He loosened up.

Hoisting the crate onto his shoulder, he told me his garage at home was filled with boxes of goods. "I'm going to hit every liquor store between here and La Brea Avenue," he said lightly.

Did he care about the verdict, I wanted to know. Simon told me he did. Los Angeles had become a bad place in which to be black. Between the white cops, the Korean merchants and the Mexican immigrants, a brother couldn't seem to get a break. The verdict angered him, and he intended to direct anger in such a way to benefit himself, Simon told me.

"I don't mind getting the stores around here, because they're mostly all owned by them Koreans," he said. Did I know that just last year a Korean shop owner up at South Figueroa had shot to death a young sister named LaTasha Harlins? Just because the shopowner thought the girl was trying to steal a bottle of juice? I told Simon I had heard of the incident. Playing it straight down the middle was important; I didn't indicate to Simon how I felt about the Harlins shooting, only that I was aware of it.

Complete objectivity is unrealistic on most stories, and the best a reporter can do is to present to readers a range of information, a detailed examination of all sides of an issue, absent loaded language and the reporters' personal opinion. And given the volatile circumstances of this story, I had to concentrate on cloaking my feelings when interviewing sources, too. By instinct and training, I knew I had to appear understanding and non-committal at the same time. Reaching this balance in the best of circumstances takes the skills of an actor and the smiling patience of a Sunday school teacher. Under these wartime conditions, with sirens echoing, smoke billowing, glass shattering and hundreds of people breaking dozens of laws, it required almost more than I could muster in my sleep-deprived, vaguely hungover state. I held a weak smile on my face as Simon continued. He said he had nothing against an immigrant merchant trying to make a living. But the Koreans didn't always respect their black patrons, and Simon had no problem with taking their merchandise now.

I wanted to know more about him, but restlessness afflicted us all. The photographer motioned to me, and I told Simon goodbye. We continued south in the car.

At the intersection of Florence and Normandie, dark brown, oily smoke drifted over the four corners. In wide lots on either side of us, several parked cars smoldered. Two cars, smashed and blackened, sat abandoned in the middle of the streets, their doors lolling open as if the occupants had bolted — or been pulled — from them quickly.

At one corner, Tom's Liquor store was agape, its windows blasted out as if by explosion. Sirens whined around us, with emergency vehicles and police cruisers roaring up and down the streets every few moments. Police and television helicopters thudded overhead.

Small klatches of young people walked or congregated on the sidewalks, a few periodically slipping into Tom's and into a store across the street. Down each avenue, people moved in and out of stores and shops. A few motorists aimed video cameras from car windows as they sped through the intersection.

We parked in a tiny lot to one side of Tom's. I was revving, and wanted to find residents or merchants willing to speak with us. I knew the photographer faced a more difficult task. He had not yet captured the surreal danger of the events, and his frustration was evident. In general, reporters can be much less obtrusive in their work than photographers, and in this instance I had another important advantage: I was a black woman, and seemed familiar or at least non-threatening to the residents and business-people we approached. I also knew that approaching them with open respect and without criticism went a long way toward easing any doubts they may have had about talking on the record. And working for an out-of-town newspaper certainly helped.

A few shops west of the intersection we found Carl Price, a 54-year-old African American man. He owned a small storefront appliance repair shop, and stood just inside the space where its picture window should have been.

The shelves were almost bare. Shards of glass crunched under our sneakers as we walked into the store. Resting against a broom he held, Price told us he had bought the business six years earlier. He was a heavyset, dark-skinned man with a shock of white in his beard and hair. He had shuttered his shop last night, and returned to find it shattered this morning.

'This is so dumb," Price told us. He thought the police who beat Rodney King were wrong, and that the jurors who acquitted them were foolish. But these young people out here burning and looting were also wrong and foolish, Price said.

"Everything that Martin Luther King stood for, and wanted us to stand for, is going up in smoke," he said. No, he couldn't put a pricetag on the damage, he said, shaking his head at the question. I wrote down what he'd said, followed by the words ''Emotional toll," which I circled. We wished him luck and moved on.

Across the street, in the 1300 block of Normandie Avenue, Jose Alvarez stood in the doorway of his janitorial supply company. It was housed in a small warehouse, its massive garage door rolled open. Huge balls of stinking smoke gusted out. Inside, aerosol cans of cleaning product made hollow thumps as they exploded. Alvarez said he had called the fire department several times already, to no avail. It was eleven a.m., and he had been there a ha1f hour, watching his enterprise incinerate.

Next door to Alvarez, a young adult black man leaned casually against a sports car parked in the driveway of an autobody shop. He said his name was Andrew ("Just Andrew"), and that

he had spent the night inside his business. Armed with a shotgun, he had waved away several would-be looters. "This is what a man has to do to keep himself together," he said, shrugging. A young black woman drove up in a compact car, and he turned to greet her.

We spent the next few hours riding through the streets of South Central, with Vermont, Manchester, Western, Crenshaw and Martin Luther King Boulevards rolling beyond the car window.

Traffic thickened the main streets. Carloads of people stopped at corner stores and mini-malls. On every block, it seemed, loose bunches of people moved in and out of stores, some carrying armloads of clothing, boxes of goods, television sets, radios and VCRs. We passed dozens of buildings that were completely gutted, their singed remains sending tendrils of smoke into the early afternoon sunlight. We stopped from time to time, and got out of the car to get as close to the action as possible.

Gunshots sounded periodically, always far enough away to keep us from ducking but close enough to send our hearts knocking in our chests. Small teams of police officers gathered at major intersections. They appeared preoccupied with directing traffic, while stores all around them experienced the ultimate firesale.

At one corner, we watched as two black women hoisted a couch between them, its cloth upholstery shiny and deep blue beneath plastic wrapping. We were low on gasoline, and so headed out of the area. We knew that even before the devastation, banks and gas stations were few and far between in South Central Los Angeles.

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