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Only A Mile And A Big World Separated Us

An All-American Story Of Two Boys From The East Side Of Baltimore.

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This is an All-American story about two kids from the east side of Baltimore.

There's me, D., a Black man straight *outta* the guts of systemic poverty, smothered by racism, educated in a stereotypical collection of dilapidated schools and nourished in a literal food desert where salads for dinner meant a four mile trip from home. I was raised in the crack era, where I learned to cook up, package and slang crack in and around a city that was occupied by a militarized police force that harassed everybody, even the non-crack *slangers*.

The other is Danny Hersl. He was one of six kids, and he lost his father when he was only 7. He took it rough, but he had four brothers and a sister and, with the support of their tight-knit community, the Hersls made it through.

Even though his family was far from wealthy, Hersl still grew up white in white America, in a system that traditionally rewards mediocre whiteness. But although Hersl could still bask in the mighty gift of whiteness, he didn't have a lot of financial options in the new economy, with the closing of the steel mills in Baltimore which had supported generations of uneducated working-class white people. His big break came when he was accepted into the Anne Arundel County Police Academy. He spent three months there before being accepted to the Baltimore Police Department.

Hersl had joined the drug war, and now it wasn't just his whiteness that set him apart, but also the blue uniform and the silver badge that helped him flex that whiteness. In the largely Black neighborhoods where he policed, his word was literally law. "I'm the police. I can do what I want," he often told people he stopped on the streets.

Nearly two decades later, you wouldn't be crazy to assume he'd gone on to become a police chief or captain, with a beautiful career and a cushy retirement, while I ended up dead on the street or cutting and stabbing my way through a life sentence in some federal prison for racketeering and narcotic possession with the intent to distribute. That's how these stories normally work out, right? Well, our story is the complete opposite: It is 2020; I am a respected author and university professor, while Hersl is a convicted felon, federal inmate 62926-037 doing hard time in MCFP Springfield, Missouri.

Hersl was one of seven Baltimore cops indicted by the U.S. Attorney's office in March 2017. Most of his squad, the five Black and two white officers that made up the Gun Trace Task Force when they were arrested, were charged with robbery, racketeering and numerous related charges after the feds got a wiretap on one of their phones and discovered that, instead of arresting dealers, they were robbing them—and in the case of the white sergeant, Wayne Jenkins, reselling the drugs.

“This was a great abuse of the public trust,” Judge Catherine Blake said at Jenkins' sentencing. “It strikes at the foundation of our entire criminal justice system.”

Eventually, a few more cops were charged as well. But only Hersl and one other detective decided to stand trial and maintain their innocence. Both men were found guilty and sentenced to 18 years.

Initially, like most people from my neighborhood, I celebrated Hersl's demise. I hated Danny Hersl. He stood for all the abuses and evils the BPD committed against me and my family. I thought the judge was too kind—he should be doing 70 or 80 years. Still, a crooked cop finally went to jail, and I knew he would get a chance to experience the same pain he had brought to so many innocent people. That alone gave me a reason to toast.

But, then, as I continued to try to make sense of my own life through writing, I started looking at Hersl more closely. I didn't think he was a victim—I wasn't a victim either—but I did start to think more about the failed drug war and the reasons why we both played a game that cost him his freedom, and could've cost me mine. I've always said that people needed to understand my environment before judging my past as a dope dealer. Didn't I owe the same thing to him?

Back in 2001, when the best basketball games in Baltimore still took place on the jagged, stained blacktops of city parks and project courtyards, you could catch us at one of three playgrounds.

We balled for clout over at Patterson Park, balled for money at Bocek's, and we always, always ended our nights at Ellwood, the only court that had lights. It wasn't strange to see 20 or 30 people by the gates after the sun dipped and faded, running whole court games to 16, by 1's. Everybody loud, everybody the best and, when they lost, the blame normally went on everybody else. I'd normally be in the mix, but I'm thinking of one night when I could only spectate because I was nursing a slight ankle injury.

Still, I stood there beside the court, running my mouth and clowning anybody who touched the basketball. “Yoooo! You a bum, you can't shoot!”

Cop cars rolled up and down Jefferson Street and past North Ellwood all the time so we didn't pay attention to them—honestly, if you played ball, and only played, police officers circling the court was a no-thought. Unless they rushed.

“One time yeroooooo! One time!” someone yelled as a couple of police cars skidded clouds of dust across the top of the hill by the baseball diamond and a mix of plainclothes and uniforms quickly blocked both exits. “On the ground now!” they yelled.

I didn't have hooping clothes on because of my injury, so I really wasn't in the mood to lay on the concrete. “Get on the fuckin' ground!” they yelled before I reluctantly complied.

These kinds of searches, where the police jumped out on a crowd of Black men, waving batons and flashlights, clutching pistols and screaming, were beyond unconstitutional and extra-illegal since they had nothing like probable cause. But we didn't really have a choice—if we allowed them to search us and we were dirty, they might only take our goods. But if we were clean and didn't allow them to search us, they might plant something on us anyway.

I can't put a face on every cop who was there that night, but one *uni* really stood out—he wasn't old, but he wasn't young like us either. He was of medium build but probably a little thicker with his bulletproof or padded shirt on, thinning dark hair cutting across his meaty white head and a mouth that wouldn't stop running.

As I lay down on the ground, that cop kept talking. I don't remember everything he said, but I recall that he said we were “nothing.”

“I'm better than you,” I said back.

That cop's corny police boot said hello to my rib. I tightened my chest, bracing for another blow that never came, and then tilted my head to the side to get a really good look at his face. I focused enough to notice his expression switch from anger to blankness to laughter in a blink. Who was this clown?

We had nothing for those guys that night, so they trotted back up the hill and I got up and brushed off my clothes. Business as usual.

I didn't know it at the time, but the cop who kicked me was named Daniel T. Hersl. His boot in my ribs would mark the beginning of a 17-year relationship between two guys who had more in common than anyone would have imagined, especially us.

I grew up on North Robinson—the black side of Fayette street. Hersl grew up in Highlandtown, part of the lower-middle-class, so-called hard-working white section of East Baltimore. Only a mile and a big world separated us.

Hersl is 10 years my senior, and we attended the same elementary and middle schools (Highlandtown and Hampstead Hill, which I was kicked out of). He went to Patterson High, like some of my older cousins. By 10th grade, truancy police regularly brought Hersl home—school wasn't for him, so his mom allowed him to drop out, providing he got his GED. He played pick-up basketball at the Highlandtown Boys and Girls Club in Patterson Park, just like me.

The club wasn't particularly Black-friendly when I played ball back there in the early '90s, a decade after Hersl ran the halls. My friends and I never would've even attended the center if it wasn't for a coach named Thurman “Roe” Johnson who recruited guys from our side of Orleans Street. “I need that Black speed,” he would always say. “These white boys can't cut it!”

Roe was the only Black coach at the rec center and he didn't have his own van, so if we missed the last ride home, my friends and I had to walk through Patterson Park, a hangout for skinheads. All of the older dudes had stories about the chain-swinging, prematurely bald, young, white racists with tattered Doc Martens, sleeveless denim, leather gloves with the fingertips cut off and an appetite for conflict, mainly with Black kids, because they couldn't fight men. As a small child, I remember pointing to a lamppost and asking my older cousin Kevin what those little red flags were that I saw everywhere. “Yo, that's a *swat-sticks* sign,” he said, totally fucking up the pronunciation of “swastika.” “You see those, you know it's racist people near.” I don't think Hersl was one of those skinheads, but in 1999, he found a home with a gang that did far more damage to Black Baltimore than any Nazi ever did.

Hersl joined the BPD a year after Kurt Schmoke, the city's first elected Black mayor, announced he would not seek a fourth term. Schmoke was an extremely popular mayor, loved by many in the community and the establishment. He gained fame from introducing progressive ideas like the decriminalization of drugs and a needle exchange program in an effort to fight HIV. But when announcing he would not run, Schmoke went on record saying he didn't have any fresh ideas to address the 300-plus annual murder rate—a problem we still have, with a record-breaking 348 murders in 2019. (He is now the president of the University of Baltimore, where I work.) Schmoke's exit cleared the path for a young, ambitious white city councilman named Martin O'Malley—who soared to the top of his 16 Democratic opponents with a plan for zero tolerance and broken windows policing he'd cribbed from New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani.

Everything I had going against me, Hersl had going for him.

The result, according to a 2016 report from the Department of Justice, was “a massive increase in the quantity of arrests—but a corresponding decline in quality.” O'Malley's zero tolerance policy increased the number of stop-and-frisk searches and discretionary arrests for pointless crimes like loitering and disturbing the peace. Anybody and everybody around us was going to jail for anything and everything. Walking down the street while making eye contact with a cop, riding a bike on the sidewalk, having an open container—you name it, somebody got booked for it.

A disproportionate number of African Americans were mistreated, overpoliced and imprisoned. And it worked. O'Malley rode those “tough on crime” stats from the mayor's office to the governor's mansion. That's the climate that Hersl, who joined the force in 1999, learned to police in.

Like him, I succumbed, a couple of years later, and volunteered to play my part in the war. On the other side.

Before 2001, I'd flirted with the drug game. I knew the dealers, corner stragglers, nickel shavers and block bosses all the way to the dudes who were juggling enough weight to sedate small towns. These were all people who hung in and around the neighborhood, my house even. I tried my hand, made a few transactions, but wasn't committed because I never wanted to cop out to being just another dope dealer. It wasn't a moral thing, really, I just looked in the mirror and saw a computer engineer or a lawyer staring back, not a criminal. But by the end of 2001, like many people in my age group and from my block, I sat stiff at the end of an IKEA two-chair kitchen table set, putting packages of \$3, \$6, \$10, \$20 and \$50 blast together.

My best friend—who I'll call Nick to protect his family and children—worked with me, but he couldn't get the crack in the vial as quick as I could because his fingers were too fat, he talked too much and dude had a serious problem focusing. Really, nobody around me during that particular time could cap as fast. I was in a rush to get to the money, but patient enough to follow the necessary steps.

“We the next millionaires comin' out of Baldamore, Dee!” Nick would yell, flopping his truck-wide frame all over the room, bouncing off of the damaged drywall, constantly knocking dishes off table edges with his huge ass. “Look at all dis work!”

We had some quick success down on Curley Street with a product we branded as “Yeah Buddy.” The cash poured in with steady traffic on a block that no one really paid attention to. Our little drug shop ran from about 4 p.m. to 8 p.m. Peace is held when you split up times—some other guys hustled during the same shift as us, but they were heroin dealers. We sold crack, so our clientele was completely different. The only other crack guys came out around 10 p.m., older dudes who had day jobs or something. Everything was smooth until I found out some of them were calling their crack Yeah Buddy, pretending to be us.

“It's mainly Clarence,” Nick said, looking at his reflection in a chrome pistol. “We handle him, the problem over.”

I honestly didn't care if Clarence and the rest of those dudes made a couple of dollars off of the Yeah Buddy name. But the streets don't work like that—if one person ripped you off on Monday, you'd wake up to a million lined up to get you on Tuesday. It's probably the same way the cops feel when they patrol together and run up on dudes like us.

I tucked my pistol in my dip and hopped shotgun in Nick's car. A wooden bat rested in the back seat, not an official baseball bat, but the mini-sluggger they give you as a gift for attending Orioles home games. We drove down to Curley, just in time to see Clarence closing down his shop.

"Yo, Clarence!" I said. "You still selling Yeah Buddy?"

"Fresh out, youngin'," he replied. "What the fuck y'all want?"

I was going to tell him that he couldn't sell it no more, and I was going to follow with a threat and some shit talk and maybe a joke because I wasn't really trying to beef with him. But then Nick swung the bat, cracking Clarence in the side of his head.

I stopped the third blow and kneeled down next to Clarence.

"We not asking you no more," I said.

Clarence got up holding his head. Nick cracked him again—and this time the bat broke.

The whole Clarence situation was a boost to our reputations. Everyone ran around telling the story of how Nick and I cracked Clarence's head in half like a sunflower seed over some money. But that rep also had a downside. Working people in that neighborhood had known that Nick and I dabbled and dabbled, but we weren't looked at as violent drug dealers until that incident. We had traded the love we earned from being goofy, fun kids for the same type of fear cops like Hersl used on the streets.

Like those police, we now had zero allies, and that's why Curley Street dried up—people started calling the cops, little fights started breaking out and the whole thing just became a mess. Nick and I built a small crew and set up shop a few minutes away on Madeira Street. There were no drug crews when we built the spot, but we still ended up catching static from this kid named Dress-Code.

I didn't flinch as he squeezed the trigger, but shut my eyes as the hammer clicked.

We caught Dress-Code one night after taking the women we were dating to an R&B concert in D.C. He was on the corner sharing jokes with his crew, a little drunk. I told my date to pull the car over, reached in the glove box and pulled out my pistol.

"Dress, what's up, man?" I said, getting out.

He said he was looking for me, before landing a hard right across my jawline, hard enough for me to feel my teeth rattle. It dazed me and I gathered myself, squaring up and dipping my chin. Nick got out of the car and sparked a blunt. Dress-Code charged at me, I grabbed his shoulders and used the momentum to sling him to the ground—his fist or elbow hit my lip again, it burst, I felt blood and spit welling up in my mouth.

After a pretty even fight, I got the upper hand. I pulled the gun out and slapped Dress across the face with it. He hit the ground, barely catching himself. I stood over him, placing both of my knees on his arm, and used the butt of the gun to beat some teeth out of his mouth. I beat him until his blood covered my shirt, until our blood mixed, until he was unconscious, until Nick pulled me off of him like, "Chill, D Watk, you gonna kill him!"

Looking back, it was probably in that moment that I was closest to Hersl. We were both defining our territory—drawing our lines in blood and being rewarded for it. Nick and I locked down Madeira Street for a while; however, our time there didn't last long because of another cop, who worked with Hersl. "I know exactly who you are, Lil Dwight!" he said once, after slamming me against a wall and then his car.

"I don't know you, man—wrong guy," I said, turning my face away. He dug in my pocket, pulled out a couple of dollars, kept them, kicked me up my ass and told me to be on my way.

"Nick, we gotta get off this block, it's too hot," I warned.

"You worry too much, D. We good."

We weren't. By 2004, Hersl was 34 years old and had been moved into working with some plainclothes units. The plainclothes cops, who are also called knockers and jump-out boys, were all about "proactive policing" and stats—how many people you can throw in jail. The Maryland Judiciary Case Search shows that Hersl alone made hundreds of arrests in 2002. The next year, BPD made more than 100,000 arrests—that's roughly one-sixth of the population and a staggering 274 arrests a day.

They were patting everybody down, even the women, pocketing what they found and throwing the n-word around like it was our official title. I never carried large amounts of cash—doing so was like begging to be robbed by cops or stick-up kids—but Hersl and cops like him definitely got a few come-ups of \$100 to \$400 off me.

Hersl and a partner once clipped me for a few dollars at a bar called High Hats, probably one of the few lounges in America where customers actually have to bring their drink of choice to the establishment. We young dudes drank Belvedere, Rémy and Hennessy, but High Hats only had Ripple, Old Grand-Dad 100 and other brands that the elderly enjoyed. So we grabbed the bottles from cut-rates and left them at the bar with our names attached.

Some of us young hustlers would chill there before going to work our blocks, and others would wind down with a sip after our shift. I was pregaming for a date when Hersl and another cop came in the bar, shouting the routine even though we already knew it, making all of us exit through the side door. Against the side of the building, we assumed the position: facing the wall with our hands pressed against it, legs spread and, of course, our pockets open. Hersl and his buddy patted all of our pockets, tipping themselves with whatever they found. I didn't have a lot of cash on me, \$200 or \$300 at most. I was upset, but not too upset because I sold drugs and paying cops like Hersl was just a tax. In those years, the cops were so fucked up, and they rolled us so much, that I didn't think that much about being robbed by a person who gets paid to protect people. A normal person would be scared, terrorized even, but because this was all part of the game we were playing, it hardly left an impression on me. Now it's hard to separate it from all the other times I'd been held up. When the cops finished being crooks, we went back inside and finished drinking.

But I remember another time, when Hersl caught me at CC's carryout with a small amount of weed. I was walking out of the store with my chicken box and a half-and-half, just in time for Hersl to line me up against the wall with the rest of the people hanging out in front of the store. He took my grass and my cash and let me go, which was cool because those dudes were locking people up for anything.

Everything I had going against me he had going for him. Us young Black dudes who were slanging were hated, hunted and haunted for our role in the drug war. He was praised and honored and rewarded with overtime. Eventually I got tired of dealing, jaded even, and after a few of my friends were arrested and or murdered, I quit. Nick begged me to return, but I was done.

Our neighborhood and our industry were crumbling under the weight of the drug war, and so was Nick. He had a serious pill problem, popping Oxys like Tic Tacs. Everyone knew the pills were eating at him, but it still hurt when he developed a heroin addiction. Then he pulled a gun on me.

I didn't flinch as he squeezed the trigger, but shut my eyes as the hammer clicked. It clicked. He said, "Bow!" I opened my eyes, and it clicked again. He looked down the same barrel, said, "Well, damn," put it in his dip and bumped my shoulder as he walked past me. The gun was empty. At this stage of his addiction, his swollen-bloated caramel cheeks that used to wobble when he laughed at his own jokes had completely evaporated until you could see the shape of his jaw bone. I probably could've taken the gun and beat welts onto his head, but I let him go. I started staying away from the block he was stuck to. In 2006, he was gunned down by some dudes he was robbing with and eventually stole from.

In 2007, I enrolled in the University of Baltimore—a college in the middle of the city that was known for catering to older students and helping its graduates find jobs, exactly what I needed. I was a street guy and didn't really know what to major in. I guess my background was business, but classes on that seemed boring. So I took the basics and decided to figure it out. I spent the rest of my time wandering around the city looking for a job. I had no real connections or traditional work experience—just a bunch of time and the will to submit 20-plus applications a week. Now that I was out of the game, I wasn't even really talking to my friends who were still dealing. I forgot about Hersl. But he didn't quit.

The same year I started college, a judge remarked on the 46 complaints that Hersl and his partner had racked up between them. Even though they'd each only had one of those complaints sustained, the judge noted the prevalence of the pattern. "Misconduct, sometimes when it's frequent enough, it indicates a lack of desire to tell the truth," the judge said.

In May 2007, Hersl and another notorious cop—who was also an MMA fighter—spotted a 50-year-old cafeteria worker named Lillian Parker selling raffle tickets. Hersl asked her what she was doing, and she said she was waiting for a friend to come pick up her ticket. They charged her with selling drugs. She spent two days in jail, but prosecutors dropped the charges against her. When she sued the city, they settled the case for \$100,000.

Three months later, Hersl and his sergeant stopped several women in the Joy Garden CarryOut restaurant and tried to search them. When one of the women got smart with them, Hersl reacted violently, as he had with me. In a deposition, the woman said the cops broke her arm. "He punched me in the arm," she said. She heard a loud pop and fell onto the floor. The city settled the lawsuit for \$50,000.

A few years later, a guy named Charles Faulkner said he fled from Hersl, who then broke Faulkner's jaw and nose with his fists and a police radio. He sued Hersl; the city settled the lawsuit for \$49,000. At this point, Hersl had already cost the city close to a quarter of a million dollars in settlements.

That was around the same time that I really fell in love with reading and began to make sense of the world around me through critical thinking. It was also when I started to develop an understanding about how Baltimore works. In 2011, I felt like I might be able to change that narrative, as the first dude on my block and in my family to graduate from college. I hustled up tickets from every student I knew so that I could have my own mini-cheering section in the auditorium when I walked the stage.

In October of that year, Hersl also walked across the stage in the BPD auditorium and received the Medal of Honor for some shit that went down at 25th Street and Harford Road. Hersl and his partners saw a dude riding a bike in a leather jacket, and when they rolled up on him, he shot one of the partners in the neck. According to the cops, Hersl jumped up on the car and shot the man, Gerry Gough, who later got sentenced to life in prison. Hersl was a hero.

After those accolades, it seems like we both hit a hard stretch. In 2013, I was in grad school at Johns Hopkins University School of Education, sitting in the back, watching aspiring teachers from as far away as Korea discuss strategies on teaching Black kids like me from Baltimore. I was the only Black kid from Baltimore in the class. Some people feel empowered by being "the only Black guy," but it

depressed me. I thought about guys I had to bury while I was in college, guys like Dip, Ro Ro, Free, Light Skin Kelly and especially Nick, who were just as smart as me, if not smarter. They should have been in these classes with me, not dead.

Hersl was dealing with the pain death carries as well. That year, his brother Matthew Hersl, 45, a city employee and lover of the Orioles, was standing in front of City Hall when he was struck by an out-of-control Acura that was being chased by a cop. Danny and Matt were a lot younger than their older siblings. They hung out and went to ball games together, where Matt was a regular and chased after fly balls. Hersl took that death extremely hard.

In 2014, our worlds came together again. I had graduated from Hopkins and was taking night classes to earn my MFA at the University of Baltimore. During the day, I worked as a substitute and then a resource teacher at Friendship Academy of Engineering and Technology, where one of my students introduced me to Young Moose.

Young Moose, whose legal name is Kevron Evans, was a rapper from my neighborhood. My students bumped his music religiously. It excited me that he referenced the same blocks and neighborhoods that Nick and I used to run. Most rappers from the city kind of pretended to be from New York, but Moose was all Baltimore, all day. I downloaded his tape “O.T.M. 2” (Out The Mud) and fell in love with the music, especially “F**k Da Police” where he called out Hersl’s corruption during the intro: “Muthafuckin’ whores man! Yeah nigga fuck the police —Lil Head, Mike Fries, Hersl ... I want all you bitches to die. They keep fuckin’ with us, they keep on harassin’!” He went even harder on “Tired” from his 2015 mixtape, “O.T.M 3,” saying, “Detective Hersl, he a bitch, I swear to God he ain’t right. Heard about my rap career, he tryin’ to fuck up my life.”

I became interested in writing about Moose almost immediately after hearing his music, and even more after I heard the Hersl connection. I remembered what Hersl thought about people like me: “nothing.” I could still hear the word from our first encounter. However much we hated him, it seemed, he hated us more. After reaching out to Moose’s girlfriend, who was a student at Coppin State University where I was now an adjunct professor, we started talking.

In 2014, Hersl used Moose’s lyrics and the video from his song “Posted” as a piece of the evidence to get a search warrant to raid his house, writing that he had been “advised by numerous police officers that Kevron Evans has numerous rap music videos” on YouTube in which , Hersl claimed, he observed Moose and his associates “in possession of multiple firearms.”

Hersl locked up Moose’s whole family: his mom, his dad and his two brothers. But Moose wasn’t home. In his bail review, Moose’s lawyer claimed Hersl told the rest of the family that he was aware Moose was scheduled to perform with underground rap legend Boosie Badazz and that “he would make sure that Kevron did not have any chance to perform at that concert.” The show could have been career-changing for Moose, but instead he was sitting in a cell. Hersl made \$111,271.73, almost half of which came in overtime, that year.

Young Moose’s lyrics landed because his experience was so common. And now that cellphone videos had begun to capture police abuse in the Black community, white people were finally paying attention. On April 12, 2015, Freddie Gray, a 25-year-old unarmed Black man, was chilling with his friends in West Baltimore when he was harassed, chased and arrested for having a knife that is sold in corner stores and gas stations all over the city. Gray was killed by the negligence of Baltimore police officers, who threw him into the van headfirst. He sustained a neck injury. If they had taken him to the hospital when he asked, he could still be alive; even if they had just followed their own protocol, he could still be alive. But they didn’t.

We all knew that could have easily happened to me, to Young Moose or to any other young Black man in Baltimore. Suddenly, people were interested in hearing about our experiences, while Hersl, who was filmed showering protesters with pepper spray and pulling a reporter to the ground, became one of the most prominent faces of police violence. Hersl’s colleagues have said they noticed his spirits were low after that. Like a lot of cops used to ruling the city, he felt betrayed by the police command that told them to stand down as the CVS burned. Shortly afterward, Hersl was transferred out of the Eastern District and into the Gun Trace Task Force—a group of so-called elite plainclothes cops

responsible for getting weapons off the streets and targeting the community's most violent criminals. The gang, led by Wayne Jenkins, included Hersl, Evodio Hendrix, Maurice Ward, Marcus Taylor, Jemell Rayam and Momodu Gondo. Later, two more Baltimore police sergeants, a detective and an officer in Philadelphia pleaded guilty to related charges.

But just so you don't think this is a story about how we are finally getting justice in America, it's important to say that the feds never would have done anything about Hersl if they hadn't been targeting the GTTF's Detective Momodu Gondo, a Black guy from Northeast Baltimore who they suspected was working with a drug crew.

Antonio Shropshire and Glen Kyle Wells, a lifelong friend of Gondo's, weren't selling crack like I had. Things had moved to heroin, and they were selling dope out of the Alameda Shopping Center to white users from a nearby county. When white kids started overdosing, law enforcement got interested and traced the drugs back to Baltimore. After they got a wiretap on Shropshire's phone, they heard him call Gondo for advice in March 2016 and tapped Gondo's phone as well. Almost immediately, the cops realized it wasn't just that Gondo was working with dealers—the cops were robbing suspects daily.

All of that got worse in June 2016, when Jenkins, another rowdy white boy, took over the squad. Jenkins, a sergeant, was an ambitious criminal mastermind who later admitted that he had robbed more than \$100,000 from one dealer shortly before taking over the squad. Hersl didn't have that kind of ambition, but he had known Jenkins for a long time—in 2008, a suspect claimed in court that Jenkins and Hersl crashed into his car, broke his window with a pistol and pulled him out through the broken glass. The judge did not believe him.

The GTTF was robbing, stealing and dealing. They were also getting roughly a gun a night, earning tons of overtime, and garnering all sorts of praise. In October 2016, the police department newsletter praised the work of the GTTF, which is funny because the feds later showed that during that whole month, Hersl hardly showed up for work and spent his time working on his house while charging the department overtime.

In January 2017, Hersl and Jenkins took a young cop named James Kostoplis on a ride and asked what he thought about stealing money from big drug dealers. "That's a fucking terrible idea," said Kostoplis, who they called K-Stop. He failed the test and was transferred.

Hersl got a transfer, too. His family says he'd been trying to get out of the GTTF for a long time and that he finally got a post in the Citywide Shooting Unit a few weeks before everything fell apart.

On March 1, 2017, Daniel Hersl went to a meeting at the headquarters of the Internal Affairs Division. When he got off the elevator, he was arrested by FBI agents and charged under the RICO Act, which had been created to bring down mobsters.

Reading about Hersl's indictment on my Twitter feed was transformative. I started texting all of my friends with Hersl stories and joking with Moose's manager on the phone. I'd learned from the Freddie Gray incident just how difficult it was to convict cops, but this was still a moment. Arguably the most hated cop in Baltimore was going down, and I lived to see it.

Hersl was one of two GTTF members to plead not guilty, even though he was facing more than 20 years in prison. He had long ago lost the dark hair he had when we first met, and when he sat at the defense table, the court lights bounced off of his gleaming head. His equally bald lawyer, William Purpura, had also represented El Chapo. Hersl's defense was brilliant and hilarious. Purpura argued that Hersl may have stolen but he did not rob, because, as a cop, Hersl had a right to take the money from people and just failed to return it.

Hersl's family, all looking just like him, came in every day with a cooler for their lunch. One of the prosecutors played a tape from a bug they had in Gondo's car. This one night in August 2016, GTTF was chasing a dude through downtown, and he crashed into another driver when he ran a red light. This was right by the hospital, but instead of getting help, the cops sat there and worried about getting caught. "These car chases, it's a crapshoot, you know," Hersl's recorded voice said. He actually laughed. Cold-blooded, especially knowing that his brother died in the same way.

Steve Hersl had stood in front of the TV cameras, wailing and crying when Matt Hersl died. In 2018, when the jury convicted Daniel Hersl of robbery and racketeering, Steve did the same thing. "Let's talk about the corruption on top. Everybody starts from the bottom, the little guy," he said, weeping outside the courthouse. "My brother Danny Hersl wasn't part of this gang."

That second part was bullshit. But Steve wasn't lying when he talked about corruption up top. Detective Sean Suiter had been killed the day before he was supposed to testify to the grand jury about the GTTF. His death has been the source of much controversy, with an official review board calling it a suicide and the medical examiner ruling it a homicide. Then Deputy Commissioner Dean Palmere resigned in the middle of the trial, after Gondo testified that Palmere had helped cover up a fatal police shooting—Palmere said he'd been planning his retirement for some time and that the announcement was unrelated. Apparently, he had some beef with the new commissioner, Darryl De Sousa, who was later sentenced to almost a year in prison for failing to file individual federal tax returns. This past November, Catherine Pugh, who was the mayor at the time of the trial, was indicted on 11 federal charges related to a children's book scam that netted her nearly a million bucks. She caught just three years with the feds.

So, Steve Hersl had some kind of point. Like me when I was on the streets, Daniel Hersl was part of a larger culture. Steve seemed kind of unhinged, but I thought I should try to talk to Hersl's family, so I got in touch with his brother Jerome.

I instantly recognized Jerome Hersl because he looks like an older version of Danny—the way Danny will probably look after his first 10 years in prison. He asked if we could meet at the University of Maryland downtown, which isn't too far from the University of Baltimore, where I teach. He brought his wife, and the three of us shuffled into a quiet conference room. I wanted to talk about his brother, but he wanted to wait for a professor who he said would be joining us. "She's an African American woman, and is aware of the work I'm doing in Harford County," he said. He opened a folder and handed me a collection of pamphlets he'd published, titled "African-American History of Harford County, Maryland. A Weekly Publication."

"You do these every week?" I asked.

"We were," he replied. "But it became a lot to handle, so now I publish biweekly or monthly."

Jerome explained that the Black people of Harford County would take more pride in their community if they knew how their people contributed to its history. He was so passionate that he went on about it for almost two hours.

Jerome had a clear mission in elevating Blackness in a weird, unintentionally racist way. Who is he to say that Black people who commit crimes—or in general—don't take pride in Harford County? Most people, Black or white or whatever, commit crimes or damage property because they are poor. His pamphlets could not cure the ills of systemic poverty.

But even so, I was sort of impressed. It was bizarre that Danny Hersl, a person who I envisioned as super racist, had a brother with such an interest in Black history.

He assured me that Daniel was not a racist. I pretty much knew the professor wasn't showing up, so we had to get to business. Jerome said he didn't want to talk about the case because he believed his brother was innocent and his appeal was still pending, but he told me some things about Danny's childhood. How he was a rough kid but had a good heart and how he was a great athlete and dreamed of making it as a professional baseball player. I laughed because it sounded like my childhood bio. And, like me, Hersl started having run-ins with the law early on.

I was seen as a superpredator while Hersl got to be a superhero.

Jerome couldn't help but giggle when he told the story of how Danny tore the butt of his jeans out while running from the cops as a teenager. And how he was proud when Danny got his head on straight, earned his GED and got a job at Northern High as a school police. Danny made the family even prouder when he graduated from police academy. Jerome became emotional, pounding his hand into his fist and pausing for breath when he told the story of how Danny saved his partner's life and was honored by the department. The unexpected death of their brother Matt tore Danny to pieces, Jerome said, but he dealt with the pain by becoming a better father and officer.

"He was grouped in with the Gun Trace Task Force, but he wasn't one of those guys," Jerome said.

"But he stole money!" I interrupted.

Jerome's wife, who had been sitting there silently, started shaking her head.

"That's all hearsay," Jerome said.

I asked him about the case of [April Sims](https://www.baltimoresun.com/news/crime/bs-md-ci-gttf-canton-victim-20180214-story.html) (https://www.baltimoresun.com/news/crime/bs-md-ci-gttf-canton-victim-20180214-story.html). Hersl, along with detectives Gondo and Jenkins, went into her house because they thought she had tens of thousands of dollars there. Jenkins laid out the plan for entering her unit and stealing the cash. According to Gondo's testimony, Hersl replied, "I can use the money. I'm in the process of buying a house."

There wasn't any cash in the condo, but Hersl was convicted of stealing designer handbags he gave to Gondo.

"I don't think that is true," Jerome replied. "Gondo saying it doesn't make it true."

He repeated that if his brother had done anything wrong, or got caught on tape participating in a crime, it was because Jenkins had made him do it.

I leaned in, looked Jerome in the eye and told him that his brother had stolen from me, personally, before he got with Jenkins.

"I never got too upset because he probably could've taken me to prison," I told Jerome. "But he didn't." Jerome maintained his position, saying he believed his brother was 100 percent innocent.

"So, all these people, including me, are lying?" I asked.

"The sad truth is that Hersl had to grow up without his dad, and now his son may have to do the same," Jerome said.

That was a bullshit deflection, but as I left, I thought about what he said. I had a great relationship with my father and still ended up in the streets, because he wasn't my only influence. Many people attribute most of my past to the culture I was raised in. Like Hersl, I lost a brother. I lost a best friend, and plenty of other people as well. Those deaths sent me crazy, but ultimately didn't make me into a criminal—my greed

did.

On one of the federal wiretaps, Gondo can be heard talking with Jemell Rayam, a GTTF co-conspirator, about getting someone to sign their overtime slips. “Dan probably at the bar, yo,” Gondo says.

I’d been wondering about the other influences on Hersl’s life, so I figured I’d better go to the bar, too. I spent the next several weeks crossing over to the other side of Patterson Park and into the world that made Danny Hersl. On the first night, I rolled up there with one of my white friends. He’s a reporter who has covered Baltimore for a long time and has extensive knowledge of GTTF. Angle Inn is in more of a lower- to middle-class white area, so I figured a Black guy with a white friend might make the locals more comfortable.

It’s a nice-looking bar—TVs on the wall, dartboards and a cool outdoor area in the rear. We sat at the end of the bar. I ordered whiskey, he ordered a beer, and we both got steamed shrimp and codfish cakes. There were about 10 people lingering around the bar—all white, and they all appeared to be regulars. They seemed pretty cliqued up, so I didn’t bother talking to them. I just ate my shrimp and plotted on my next visit.

The bartender told me they only had happy hour on Fridays, so I pulled up the following Friday and took my same seat. This time, it was crowded—the patrons were looser and it was easier for me to spark conversations. I made a point to not bring up police or politics—just the Ravens, the O’s and how drunk I was. I wasn’t really that drunk, but the guys around the bar were really into exclaiming, “I’m so hammered, man! I’m tanked!” So I just joined in.

Soon, I was used to these bars and I started asking around about Hersl.

“Aye, you guys know Danny Hersl?” I asked a group of three white guys. “You know, the cop?”

One of the guys got up and left. The other, who had a deep red tan, said, “I miss that asshole!” He told me they’d often bumped heads—and about the time they had gotten into a fight with each other when they went to Ocean City with a bunch of other Highlandtown guys.

But, he said, later the same night when some Delaware dudes came for them, Danny was there for him. “Of all the Baltimore dudes who knew me in that place, Danny was the only one who had my back. Even though we were mad at each other, we kicked those guys’ asses,” he said.

“My whole section of East Baltimore always just saw him as a racist cop,” I said.

The tan dude, who didn’t want to be named in a story, laughed and said Danny was a whole lot of things, but he didn’t have a racist bone in his body. “He was extra friendly to this little cute Black stripper over at the Ritz!” he said. “That’s where we need to be!”

“Pressing down on a Black stripper doesn’t mean you not a racist. It means you are horny,” I pointed out.

“Look at the crew he went down with, they were all Black except the boss, plenty of Black guys come through the neighborhood and they were all his friends. They are all our friends,” he said. “Danny’s a firecracker. He’s a follower. Danny isn’t the smartest. He’s loyal, which probably got him into trouble. But he’s no racist. If he racist, then I’m racist!”

I'd never voluntarily sat down with a cop before. But I thought Larry Smith Jr., a former Internal Affairs detective, might be able to help me understand how Hersl got away with it for so long or what it was about police culture that made him who he was. Like me, Smith had gotten out of the game and was trying to make a living as a writer.

We met at a nice cafe in Southeast Baltimore, not too far away from where Smith had once patrolled. Smith had a neatly shaved salt-and-pepper beard and a gray sports coat coupled with boot-cut jeans that evenly blanketed his shoes. Real clean and polished—he didn't look like a former cop, I guess in the same way people say I don't look like I teach at a university.

Like Hersl, Smith became an officer in 1999. "Making the transition from civilian to cop was overwhelming," Smith told me. "I wasn't accustomed to exerting any type of authority," he [wrote in an article](https://gen.medium.com/i-was-a-cop-for-18-years-i-witnessed-and-participated-in-abuses-of-power-8d057c18f9ee) (https://gen.medium.com/i-was-a-cop-for-18-years-i-witnessed-and-participated-in-abuses-of-power-8d057c18f9ee) published on Medium, "and now, after six short months, I was given the power to take away someone's freedom and the instruments to take someone's life."

Smith explained the culture of the department to me. "Cops were being praised and rewarded for making 30 arrests in a month, but no one was talking about how half of those arrests were for things like public urinating," he said.

He didn't break the rules like Hersl did—but he still didn't feel like what he was doing, what the rules told him to do, was right.

In 2013, there was an opening for a detective in the Internal Affairs Division, and Smith thought having the power to punish crooked cops could be way more honorable than arresting people for nuisance crimes on the street. The system was screwed up; in IAD, he thought, he might be able to change that. He was wrong.

"Internal Affairs is just cops investigating cops," Smith said. "That's the reason why nothing gets done."

He said they needed a whole separate unit to deal with complaints against Hersl, but the investigations were rarely taken seriously. If IAD detectives weren't friends with the cops they investigated, they were bullied and intimidated by them and had almost no power. If he felt omnipotent when dealing with the public, he felt powerless when it came to other cops.

After years on the job, Smith couldn't take it anymore. He suffered from PTSD, and he told me he'd tried to kill himself and felt abandoned by the department. "The 18 years of murders, shootings and whatever you can think of has affected me," he said. In his eyes, I could see the same thing I saw in the eyes of friends like Nick who had stayed in the game too long—except Smith made it out of the drug war and Nick didn't.

Smith was one of the nicest guys I ever met. He knew I wanted to question him for my story when I invited him to dinner, but he still offered to pay—even though he was unemployed at the time. He now works in retail management and writes.

Like Hersl, he had once been a cop who prided himself on arresting as many people as possible. If Smith could grow and see the mistake of ruining people's lives to bring in small stats and overtime, then doesn't he deserve to be judged on that growth?

I can say the same for Hersl and myself. We are all products of the culture we lived in, but we still have the ability to make choices.

I had no interest in selling drugs until the opportunity intertwined with my need for money. But I learned from my mistakes and I work at being a better person. Even though Larry Smith didn't steal, police culture made him lock up people to maintain petty stats—and when he recognized that he was wrong, he stopped. Hersl was also a product of the climate he learned to police in, but he coupled it with greed, and

now his young son is growing up without a father.

At his sentencing, Hersl's lawyers read some of the letters he wrote to his son and other members of his family. "Hi, little boy. I hope you're doing well and being a good boy for Mommy," he wrote in one letter. "I also hope your summer vacation is going good. I bet you like sleeping in and going to bed late."

But to the rest of his family, he wasn't so cheerful. "I finally got to go outside yesterday for the first time in over two months," Hersl wrote to his family when he was put on lockdown. "I have to admit that I actually had tears in my eyes as I walked around the yard for the whole hour I was allowed to stay out."

I don't feel sorry for Daniel Hersl. He separated scores of fathers from their sons, ruined families and sucked up overtime money from a city that can't even keep its schools heated. But my lack of sympathy doesn't come from a place of bitterness. I didn't expect him to feel sorry for me when he kicked my ribs or took my money, and I wouldn't expect him to feel sorry for me if I'd been gunned down in the streets during my hustling days, or even now as I try to pull kids off the corner. Aside from race, as far as I can tell, the difference between us two all-American East Baltimore boys is that I know I did some pretty bad things, realized it before I got caught and now spend my days trying to make it right, and he didn't.

In November, Hersl lost his appeal. He still refuses to accept responsibility and continues writing letters and proclaiming his innocence. If he doesn't get it by now, then part of me thinks he never will. I even wrote Hersl a letter, asking for his side of the story and offering him a chance to explain why he robbed me and other people and why he is still trying to deny his role in the crimes he was convicted for. He didn't respond.

If you ask why I changed and why he didn't, the answer lies in the nature of the system. On my side, we were constantly reminded that we would either end up dead or in jail—society's Black boy mantra. Many of us hustled because we lacked options, but we knew it was a bad choice, even though, at times, we loved it.

For Hersl, I imagine it was different. He chose a profession that allowed him to be praised, defended and protected. He carried with him all of the power of the state. And when he fucked up, the state had his back, to the point where it bent the law to cover for him. The laws were on his side. Many of the citizens, judges and prosecutors who allowed him to function were on his side. I was seen as a superpredator while he got to be a superhero.

It's not at all remarkable that Hersl didn't change, because he never had to be held accountable. America didn't give me any tools to change, and it didn't give Daniel Hersl any reason to change. But instead of addressing these problems, it treats us both as exceptions, rewarding me and locking him away, so that it can forget about these particular East Baltimore boys and let the game go on.

Credits

Story

D. Watkins is an Editor at Large for Salon. He is also a lecturer at the University of Baltimore and the author of the New York Times best-selling memoirs “[The Beast Side: Living \(and Dying\) While Black in America](#)” and “[The Cook Up: A Crack Rock Memoir](#).” His latest book, “[We Speak For Ourselves: A Word From Forgotten Black America](#),” is out now.

Photography

Devin Allen is a born-and-raised Baltimore artist. He gained national attention when his documentary photograph of the Baltimore Uprising was published on a Time Magazine cover in May 2015.

Editing

Baynard Woods is a writer and editor living in Baltimore. His book about the Gun Trace Task Force, “[I Got a Monster](#),” will be released by St. Martin's in July.

Research

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