

Abductions, Once Targeting The Rich, Have Turned Into “Lazy Man’s” Felony—A Chilling Third-World Echo

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DETROIT—When a gunman toting an AK-47 and another man with a metal baseball bat barged in to the Coney Island Diner on this city's crime-tossed east side, patrons at first thought it was a robbery. Everybody dove for cover but, in fact, the men weren't looking for money.

They were looking for 17-year-old Carl “Bart” Simpson.

Bart, who was playing a video game, skidded in panic under a table.

“Pull him out,” one of the men growled.

Bart tried to claw his way deeper into a corner.

A skinny jokester of a kid whose idea of fighting was to switch on a game of Mortal Kombat, Bart was no match for his pursuers. They dragged him out kicking and shaken, stuck the gun to his head and marched him to a waiting car, where he was roughly thrown into the trunk.

Bart's ride would get rougher over the next week, as he was held captive in an abandoned building, brutally beaten and starved.

The ransom demanded? The return of an allegedly stolen gun.

This is the new face of kidnapping.

A crime once reserved for those trying to extort riches from the wealthy, kidnapping has taken on a grim, disturbing twist on the gritty ramparts of urban American life, mutating into a common " street crime, " says William Rice, chief inspector of the Detroit Police Department's homicide division. In many U. S. cities, it has come to resemble kidnapping in some Third World countries, where it long has been a choice way of gangs and toughs to exact quick cash from average citizens or, as commonly, money or revenge from each other.

Anecdotally, at least, few urban areas seem immune. Exact nationwide numbers are difficult to track, in part, police say, because traditional kidnapping statistics, like those kept by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, tell only part of the story. The crime has become popular precisely because, when criminals are preying upon criminals or their relatives, as is often the case, kidnapping usually goes unreported, says Inspector Rice, whose division has investigated a number of such crimes.

Indeed, at a time when robbing a bank has become a technological challenge and no crime-savvy, big-city fast-food joint has more than \$100 in cash after midnight, kidnapping has surged in popularity as the lazy crook's crime of choice. " They'll grab your niece, girlfriend or mother—it's just triflingly lazy, " says Detroit police Sgt. Rodney Jackson. " All the kidnapper has to do is demand money and you pay. "

The cops are often only called after kidnappings devolve into violent disasters—when ransom isn't paid, isn't enough, or when things just go awry. The Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, for example, recently closed a case in which 17-year-old Chad MacDonald was abducted from a social gathering while accomplices held his 16-year-old girlfriend hostage.

When the boy's ATM cards didn't work because the accounts had been canceled, he was strangled and his body dumped in a South Central Los Angeles alley. His girlfriend, whom police declined to identify, was also strangled, shot and left for dead in a canyon outside of town

but miraculously recovered and was able to testify against her assailants, who were recently sentenced to life in prison without parole.

Other cases in Detroit point to the perils of being related, even unwittingly, to criminals, or to the perils of kidnapers, correctly or not, believing a target is sitting on a pile of extortable, ill-gotten cash.

When Gena LaShawn Wright, a popular school receptionist and junior varsity basketball coach, was found shot to death in an alley here on a frigid February day five years ago, police figured it was a robbery gone awry. But after a lengthy investigation, police concluded that Ms. Wright had been kidnapped and forced to raid a series of ATMs before she was murdered. The cops now think she died because her live-in boyfriend, 28-year-old Lamaah Carter, lived a parallel life darkly different from that of his day job as a utilities clerk.

Antoine " Tone" Caruthers' misfortune was having been pegged by a street snitch as a guy who, along with a partner, had large sums of drug money stashed away at the record store he co-owned. Mr. Caruthers had no drug-peddling history, but he was marched out at gunpoint by masked abductors shortly before midnight some three years ago. The ransom calls started around 1 a. m., but he would never be seen alive by friends and family again.

Drugs are unquestionably a major factor, since drug dealers and their families are even more reluctant to call the police than other run-of-the-mill criminals, police say. New Orleans, until about five years ago, found itself in the midst of a virtual kidnapping epidemic largely linked to drug dealing—even children were being snatched as pawns, says Capt. Donald Curole, a district commander with the New Orleans Police Department. When the city got serious about a drug crackdown five years ago, its kidnapping spate abated, though Capt. Curole says police would be naive to think it isn't happening at all.

Back in Detroit, Bart Simpson, for one, learned the hard way about the volatile mix of drugs, guns and kidnapping.

The Coney Island Diner, in a rough and tumble part of East Detroit, isn't the kind of place where genteel folk hang out. But even its toughened crowd was rattled by what happened there on a warm June evening almost three years ago.

In the presence of about a half-dozen witnesses, say police, David "Skip" Watson, 27, burst in toting an AK-47 assault rifle. His accomplice, Rynell Davis, 18, had an aluminum bat.

Their eyes fell on Bart, rapidly working the buttons of a video-game machine.

Antonio L. Jones was there and saw it all. "Everybody scattered like roaches," he recalled from the witness stand during a criminal trial of the case last October. The story of what happened to Bart has been pieced together from interviews and police records, and from testimony and trial transcripts on file in the criminal division of Detroit's Third Judicial District Court.

Bart, when he realized they were after him, scrambled beneath a table.

He was like a lot of 17-year-old boys; he loved those super-violent video games like Killer Instinct.

This was no game.

"Come here, you little mother," Skip Watson yelled.

As directed, Rynell handed Skip his bat and yanked Bart out by the arm. They marched him out into the parking lot.

Skip put the AK-47 to Bart's head and ordered him into the trunk of a black Pontiac Grand-Am. Skip climbed into the driver's seat. Another man with braids was already in the car. Rynell climbed into a second car and they all drove off.

Witnesses saw the Grand Am lurch forward, then brake suddenly. Bart was in for a rough ride, and it would get worse.

Some Coney Island Diner workers called the police, but by the time they got there, Bart and his abductors were long gone.

The first real inkling anyone in Bart's family had that he was in serious trouble was when Skip Watson showed up about an hour later at the house shared by Bart's older cousin, Vita Davis, and her boyfriend Dawonne Gloster. Vita, more than ten years his senior, was more like a doting aunt to Bart than a cousin.

There was a pounding at the door and Skip was screaming.

"You got my bitch!" he yelled, over and over again.

Dawonne, also known as Juan, came downstairs to see what the fuss was about. Vita, who had been washing clothes, joined him at the door.

People in the neighborhood, Dawonne and Vita included, had seen Skip around but nobody knew much about him. At first Dawonne thought Skip had come looking for a dog. Why not? Dawonne has a lot of nicknames. One of them is Dogman, because he keeps Rottweilers.

But it was a lot more sinister than that. A few hours before, Rynell Davis would later tell police in a sworn statement and again at Skip Watson's murder trial in Third Judicial Circuit Court, someone had broken into an abandoned house at 763 Phillip St. where Skip stashed guns and drugs. The place had been ransacked; some drugs were missing and so was a gun called a Calico. It was 34 inches long, half of it barrel. A semiautomatic, it held a hundred rounds of ammunition. Skip called it his "bitch."

When Rynell discovered the theft and beeped Skip, Skip came over in a rage. "He was mad and out of control," Rynell told police and later testified during the trial. "You better get my gun back," he recalled Skip saying. "I don't care if you have to kill someone, but you better get it back."

ere was Bart's first misfortune: Rynell had shown the gun to Bart a few days earlier. Vita Davis, his cousin (and no relation to Rynell Davis) lived with Dawonne, aka Juan. No sooner had the theft occurred when word got around the neighborhood that Dawonne had been spotted coming out of the house.

Rynell had related these events to Skip, who believed Bart had told Dawonne about the gun, and that Dawonne had stolen it. They'd snatched Bart as a chip to get the gun back, Rynell later said at trial.

Dawonne, now 31, works as a handy man. He once built a house from scratch. Skip seething at his doorstep didn't terrify him, he later told the cops.

"What are you talking about?" Dawonne recalled telling Skip, during trial testimony, as he stepped outside. "Calm down."

Skip went nuts. "You think I'm playing!" he screamed. He ran to the Grand Am and pulled out the AK-47. Soon it was stuck in Dawonne's chest, Dawonne said in his sworn testimony. He repeated the demand for his gun, then walked briskly back to the car and popped open the trunk.

There was Bart, hands tied behind him, lying on his side, the back of his head crammed into a corner. They couldn't see his face, but both Vita and Dawonne recognized Bart by the clothes he was wearing, particularly the red laces in his sneakers.

A heated exchange followed. Dawonne told Skip he didn't have the gun. To this day, in fact, he denies that either he or Bart had anything to do with the missing Calico.

Skip wasn't buying it. He slammed the trunk lid down and declared, "I am going to kill your whole family if you call the police or don't give me back my gun," Dawonne later testified at Skip's murder trial.

Skip drove off. Soon, phone calls followed—Bart, pathetic and pleading, alternating with Skip repeating his threats.

Unbeknownst to Vita and Dawonne, the kidnapers had already made one stop with Bart. They'd dragged him into the drug house and worked him over with the aluminum baseball bat, Rynell would later testify at Skip's trial.

"He was like my baby," says Vita Davis of Bart. He'd call her "auntie" and she'd call him nephew. As he grew older, people even mistook Bart for her son. Bart got along OK with his real mother, Sherrice Arnold, but when he was in a jam, he usually turned to Ms. Davis. Plus, he hung out with Dawonne a lot and they were like kids together.

"I'd see someone and they'd say, 'I saw your son' or tell your son 'Thank you'," says Vita, remembering how Bart was always willing to help others. He'd carry groceries for people at the local food stores. He'd pump gas for people and cut grass. Dawonne's and Vita's two children loved him.

Bart was always working at something. When a tire company offered 25 cents for abandoned tires in a recycling effort, Bart scoured the neighborhood with a shopping cart. He racked up \$157. Even Dawonne was amazed.

He was a prankster, too. Once he filled up Dawonne's shoes with peanut butter. Another time he lit matches between Dawonne's toes as he slept. (Dawonne got him back by squirting mustard in Bart's mouth while Bart snoozed.)

Bart was also a kid at loose ends in a rough neighborhood. He'd been kicked out of school a

few times for low-grade stuff—shooting off firecrackers in the school restroom or popping the bras of girls in his class. But things turned serious when he was busted for riding in a stolen car. He was convicted in juvenile court and sent to a Detroit-area juvenile-detention facility.

For a while, he kept in touch with Vita and Dawonne. What they remember most is a letter he wrote over Christmas—he'd devised a plan to break out of the joint. "You steal this van, come to this window and there's a rope. Pull up the van and I'll jump out," he wrote.

The letters stopped and Bart got out—exactly when, it isn't clear, after serving his time. He didn't tell Vita and Dawonne, and they only knew it when Dawonne spotted him the morning of his abduction across the street from the Coney Island. They talked awhile, then Dawonne phoned Vita to tell her.

"Guess who I got? Bart," Dawonne told her.

"Put him on the phone," Vita demanded.

"I told you if you were to get out, you could come stay with me," she recalls telling Bart. Bart promised he'd show up soon.

He did—in the trunk of Skip Watson's car.

The telephone calls continued for a week, Dawonne and Vita told police. They were always the same—Bart himself called the first time, desperate and pleading. Later, they were always the same: Skip Watson angry and demanding his gun, Vita and Dawonne denying they knew anything about it.

Then the calls ominously stopped and, among the crack addicts and dope users in the neighborhood, the rumors started circulating, each one getting progressively more ominous.

Bart's been beat up bad.

His hand was cut off and sent to his auntie.

By this time, the police had questioned Vita and Dawonne and were on to Skip Watson. But he and Bart were nowhere to be found. Vita, frantic, called hospitals every day asking about injured or dead young men fitting Bart's description. She called jails as well. No luck.

A week faded into two and it was as though Bart had vanished.

Rynell Davis, for one, knew where Bart was.

And Bart's situation was a lot worse than the rumors.

The little stunt outside the diner—Skip speeding up and then slamming on the brakes—had a purpose, Rynell later told the cops in formal statements and in testimony during Skip Watson's trial. It was to jog Bart's memory. Bart was connected to the stolen gun, Skip was convinced. He just kept denying it.

He denied it again, Rynell said, even after they stopped at the crack house and worked him over with the bat before carting him to show Vita and Dawonne. "Come on man, I didn't have anything to do with it," Bart pleaded as he lay tied up on a dingy couch.

After they lugged Bart to Dawonne's and Vita's, Skip told Rynell he planned to find an abandoned building where he could hold Bart until Dawonne caved in about the gun. They made a stop at a friend of Skip's and that's the last Rynell saw of Bart for a week, he said during Skip's trial.

Skip found the building he was looking for, a boarded up, crumbling apartment complex near Minden and Westphalia on the east side, about five miles from the Coney Island Diner. Based on statements that Skip later gave to the police and obtained by this newspaper, Bart was already in tough shape.

Skip tried to get him to eat—Vienna sausages he'd bought at a nearby convenience store. Bart was bleeding from the mouth and couldn't swallow. Skip had brought duct tape with him. He taped Bart's hands and legs together and left him in the middle of the kitchen floor. It was about 100 degrees in the apartment, Skip told the police.

Skip told Bart he would be back the next day, but it was two or three days before he actually returned. When he finally showed up, Bart had managed to wriggle into another room. Skip was outraged but Bart was such a mess he decided he couldn't stay long in the stifling, stench-filled apartment. Just a few minutes there and he was drenched in sweat, Skip said in his statement to the cops.

Bart begged for water. "I'm hot, I'm hot," he pleaded. Skip said he took the duct tape off Bart's mouth and gave him water and tried to feed him the end of a moldering Vienna sausage. He poured more water on him to cool him off. "I taped his mouth back up and I left Bart in the apartment. I went back home and prayed," Skip said in his statement to the police. He made another call to Vita, demanding his gun. Vita again told him they didn't have his gun.

One night, 11 days after Bart was abducted, Skip said he went back and Bart was gone. "It was dark in that apartment. I didn't check the apartment good. He could still be in there somewhere. I thought maybe some crackhead might have moved his body," he said in his statement to the police.

Bart's charred remains were found by a school kid peeking in the shell of a burned out Buick Rivera on June 28, behind an elementary school on Detroit's west side.

The break in the case came when the police arrested Rynell Davis, who later implicated Skip

Watson. In October 1999, Rynell pleaded guilty to charges of second degree murder and kidnapping, escaping a first-degree murder charge in exchange for his testimony against Skip. He was sentenced to 15 to 25 years in a Michigan prison. Skip went on trial last October but the trial ended in a hung jury. He is being held in a Detroit jail and faces a new trial April 23 on first-degree murder and kidnapping charges.

Though Skip gave a detailed confession—including an apology—to police, it was later ruled inadmissible as evidence by a Third Judicial Circuit Court judge who determined that the police had obtained it after holding him for questioning beyond a permissible procedural period.

Skip Watson, through his lawyer, now says he is innocent and that his confession was given under duress.

The mystery of the missing Calico has never been solved.

Defining Kidnapping Down: A Shocking Sampler

Detroit, February 2001: A 43-year-old real-estate developer is abducted and murdered by assailants seeking some of his real-estate earnings.

Santa Barbara, Calif., August 2000: A teenager whose brother allegedly owed money to a drug-dealer is kidnapped and murdered.

Long Beach, Calif., June 1999: A woman and man are kidnapped from a local restaurant. The woman is fatally shot but the man escapes when he wrestles a gun from his abductors. Police blame gang rivalry.

Philadelphia, June 1998: Police investigate a rash of kidnapping and assaults in the city's Brewerytown section said to be related to gang violence.

Portsmouth, Va., October 1996: A man is abducted, tortured and eventually murdered in a crime police link to drug trafficking.

Los Angeles, January, 1996: Two kidnapping suspects driving to pick up a ransom are shot to death when they open fire on detectives closing in for an arrest. The kidnapping victim is rescued.

Renton, Wash., January 1995: A man is kidnapped and held blindfolded for 14 days in a Los Angeles house before being released. Police say he was targeted because of his relationship to an alleged drug dealer.

Lancaster, Calif., February 1995: A seven-month-old baby is kidnapped and later killed in a car crash. Police blame a dispute over a drug debt.

East St. Louis, Ill., August 1993: An 18-year-old is abducted, shot and killed. Police think the kidnapers became angry that the ransom paid for her return—\$700—wasn't enough.

Paramount, Calif., July 1993: A 17-year-old boy is kidnapped and eventually killed after his kidnapers don't get the \$100,000 ransom demanded. Police suspect drug traffickers.

Fenton, Mo., November 1993: A man said to be a friend of a man allegedly owing money to drug dealers is snatched and held for a \$4,500 ransom. He is released unharmed.

New Orleans, February 1993: Two men kidnap a 21-year-old woman and a baby, then demand \$85,000 and a kilogram of cocaine from the boy's father. Mother and child are released unharmed.

Philadelphia, February 1992: The girlfriend, son and two other relatives of an alleged drug dealer are kidnapped and later released.

Oakland, Calif. November 1992: A 22-year-old man is robbed and abducted from his home, then shot to death and dumped in the bushes near a local high school. Police blame drug dealers.

Atlanta, February 1991: A four-year-old boy is snatched from a car after a ski-masked man rear-ends the vehicle. He is later released. Police blame drug-dealing.