

THE MANTLE OF DEATH

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Willa Hart paid \$200 for the jacket, and even as she counted out the bills she knew she was buying trouble.

It was a black sheepskin, three-quarter length, with a bushy fur collar. Lamar Hart never asked for much, but he pleaded for that coat, and his mother could not bring herself to say no.

This was a child who gave more than he took, tossing money into the family pot from his part-time job at a day-care center. His mother had called him "Man" since he was born -- his twin sister is "Lady" -- and at 16, he wore the nickname as a mantle.

They bought the jacket at Northland. "If anyone wants that coat from you, Man," his mother warned, "you take it off and give it to them."

"I will," he said. But on the April night five years ago that he stood sneering at a thug with a gun, he broke his promise.

Lamar had pleaded for the sheepskin, but he would not plead for his life. In the face of such impertinence, a 17-year-old acquaintance felt his only option was to shoot.

The acquaintance was neither poor nor cold, and he was looking not so much for a coat as for something intangible, something they don't sell at malls. The prisons are full of young gunmen seeking the same thing. So are the streets.

Willa Hart does not know where Lamar's beloved sheepskin hangs today, not that she wants it anyway. She does know where to find Lamar; she visits him two or three times a year at Forest Hills Cemetery. And she knows where to find the boy convicted of shooting him. John Germany is in prison, serving life, making grandiose plans for a release that may never come.

A sheepskin jacket. One boy thought it was worth dying for, another that it was worth killing for. Two families have been devastated, two lives destroyed. And for all the impact the tragedy has had outside those few households in Detroit, it might never have happened.

The bullets keep flying and the parents keep grieving. The lawyer who defended Germany does not even remember him; when it comes to teenage killers, he says apologetically, "I've just seen too many of them."

No one keeps an official tally of teenagers shot for their clothing. There have been dozens of cases since Lamar's, a steady flow of police reports and blood. It is hot now, and jackets are put away, but that only guarantees different excuses, not fewer shootings.

Silk shirts. Tennis shoes. Fila, Max Julian, Nike, 8 Ball. The clothing changes with the season, the brand names with the fashion. Otherwise, nothing changes at all.

Question: "Did there come a time that Mr. Germany did something besides just talk?"

Answer: "Yes."

Q: "What did Mr. Germany do?"

A: "He shot the boy."

-- Testimony of witness Patrick White

From the outside, the Standish Maximum Correctional Facility looks like a small private college, its handsome brick buildings almost lost amid the greenery. From the inside, with its soft gray carpets and whitewashed walls, it looks like an insurance office.

Nearly everyone who lives there is a killer.

John Germany was transferred to Standish in November when he accumulated too many demerits to be housed in less secure surroundings. In early June, after yet another fight, he was banished to what the prison calls "segregation." He leaves his 7-by-12 cell only for showers and five hours a week of solitary recreation.

In his last battle at the other prison, a brawl in the kitchen, he had help from five friends. Still, he says, "It's hell in here, every man for himself."

Germany turned 23 in May. He has grown a few inches in prison, to 5 foot 6, about the height of Lamar Hart. The jacket would fit him better now.

The years have permitted him a wispy moustache, but there is a childlike roundness beneath his eyes and above his mouth. Around his neck, in a clear plastic rectangle, hangs a picture of Elijah Muhammad; he has joined the Nation of Islam. The kite-tail tips of his braids poke from beneath a black, crushed velvet fez.

On the outside -- "the World," prisoners call it -- he had a taste for finery, he says. By prison standards, his red, white and blue Adidas sweat suit is dapper. It is contraband, the product of an illicit trade with another inmate.

"When you see all the material things," Germany explains, "you want to hang around the person who has it. You do just about anything to get it."

He adopted that philosophy in his early teens, before he decided that ninth grade was sufficient education. By then, he says, he had been working in dope houses for two or three years.

The strategy was devised by Young Boys Inc., once the leader in the field: Use 13- and 14-year-olds to run drugs, and if they're caught, they can't be jailed.

Germany, who worked for a rival operation, says he was never caught anyway. "I was too quick." Nor, he says, was he detected by his father, mother or stepfather, even as he invested his earnings in jewelry, clothes and a black-and-gold Honda Elite motor scooter.

"Gotta have that stuff," he says. "I think that's every little kid's dream, to have money."

Q: "Then what happened?"

A: "Then they was talking again . . . John said, 'Take off the coat.' Lamar said, 'Man, no! I know you!' Like that. He said, 'I know where you live at; you my boy.' "

-- Testimony of witness Dawn Williams.

Lamar Hart wanted to join the Navy.

Sometimes, when he let his imagination soar, he talked of playing in the NBA. But he always came back to earth, and when he did, he wanted to go to sea.

"He didn't bother nobody," says Willa Hart, 46. "He was always real helpful, mowing lawns and stuff. The neighbors were crazy about him."

Hart still lives on Stansbury, in northwest Detroit. The front door of her yellow-trimmed bungalow hangs open on a steamy afternoon. An electric fan, sadly overmatched, leans against a leg of the glass-topped table where she sits next to a crumpled pack of Kools.

"You know, it's funny. I was just thinking about him," she says. "I wish this young man that shot him could change his life and try to be a better person, because he took a lot away from me."

Lamar was always cheerful, always up. He had the appetite of a backhoe, but he never gained weight. He loved ketchup- and-relish sandwiches with sugar. His mother says he made the best pancakes in the world.

Like John Germany, he had one younger brother and three sisters. He would be an uncle now; Lady's 2-year-old, Ebony, and her 7-month-old, Ivory, are asleep in the living room.

Lady, 21, "is still a very quiet child," says Hart, a husky woman with a soft, throaty voice. Lamar used to do her talking for her. "Whenever she wanted something, she would never ask me. Lamar would always say, 'Mama, Lady wants this.'"

"We talk, Lady and I. I say, 'Who's going to ask me for what you want, because Man is gone?' She still won't come to me and ask me for what she wants."

Lady arrives home from the grocery store, and Hart takes inventory as her daughter empties the bags. Cheez Whiz, Chips Ahoy, Popsicles, lunch meat . . .

"Junk," Hart scolds. "Nothing but junk."

Q: Did there come a time that Mr. Hart was laying on the ground?

A: Yes.

Q: After he was laying on the ground, did Mr. Germany ever try to fire the gun again?

A: Yes.

-- Testimony of witness Jerome Gross

Willie Mills tried to raise a good son. He still can't find the words to say he didn't.

"John was a good boy," he says. "He wasn't basically a violent guy. Just an average child."

Germany was 1 year old when his parents married -- he carries his mother's maiden name -- and about 12 when they divorced. Though he lived with his mother, Predemsia Embree, and his stepfather, he saw Mills two or three times a week.

The visits were nothing special. They would ride around in Mills' car, or just sit up late and talk. But Mills made sure to be there.

"We had a good relationship," he says. "An honest relationship."

Mills, 44, grew up in Black Bottom, the only boy in a family of nine children. He was spoiled, he says, but he was straight. The closest he ever came to trouble was when he was 9 or 10 and he stayed too long with his fishing pole on Belle Isle.

Sprinting to beat curfew, he passed through the same area where a woman's purse had just been snatched. Police accused him of the crime. Decades later, painting a vivid portrait of the terror of that night, he told the story to young John, assuming that the fear had been struck in his son as well.

Within a few years, Germany was rolling dope.

"At first, I wanted to be like my father," Germany says -- an auto worker, a family man, a churchgoer. "As I got older, I grew out of them ways."

The only lessons the son absorbed from the father concerned guns, and even then something was lost in translation.

Mills is a second-generation hunter, raised to treat weapons with respect. As an officer of the Spiritual Israel Church & Its Army, entrusted with taking the collection money to the bank, he has a permit to carry his .38 or his .357 Magnum.

The first time Germany squeezed a trigger was on a hunting trip to Belleville. He was only 10, and the rabbits were in no danger, but he liked the feel of the rifle in his arms.

"I had to show him and the other kids," Mills says, "so they'd be safe."

Mills has four or five handguns, locked in a metal cabinet in a closet. Germany claims to have owned 15 or 20, plus a sawed-off shotgun. He kept them under his mattress, spaced carefully so they would not disturb his sleep.

Q: "Did the person on the ground say anything?"

A: "He had got up, and he was asking them not to leave him there, that he was hurt bad."

-- Testimony of witness Rodney Smith.

The temperature when Lamar Hart left the house was 55 degrees. He didn't need the sheepskin to stay warm that April 24, but he wore it anyway.

It was Thursday, a school night, around 10. He was walking to the grocery store.

A few blocks away, John Germany sat on a porch, sipping from a 40-ounce bottle of beer.

Germany was supposed to be house-sitting on the east side for his father, off to Alabama for a church assembly. A mix-up with the key had left him back with his mother and free to roam. He wound up on Lesure Street, where they had lived until a few months before.

The others on the porch knew him as "John Boy."

Germany had spent most of the day with his friend Patrick White, drinking beer and cognac and smoking marijuana. Eventually, they gravitated to the home of White's girlfriend, Dawn Williams, who lived with her grandmother just south of Midland Street.

Half a dozen people wandered on and off the porch, sharing alcohol and marijuana and trading insults. The oldest of them was 19. Around 10:45, they saw a boy in a black sheepskin jacket walking their way.

Accounts of what happened next vary with the teller. All agree that at some point, Germany confronted Lamar Hart, that they crossed to the west side of Lesure and then walked north across Midland.

Then, says Germany, "I let it rip."

Q: "Did Mr. Hart give him his coat then?"

A: "No. He took it off and showed John the coat. He said, 'If you are bad, come and take it.' "

-- Testimony of witness Jerome Gross

The best that John Germany can say for himself is that he aimed for Lamar's head and missed.

The gun was his, he says, a steel blue pistol with brown grips that he had plucked from beneath the mattress that morning. But his shooting touch had gone up in smoke and beer: "My vision wasn't right."

He claims that he and Patrick White made a game of killing, passing the gun back and forth. He says White's bullet was the one that found its mark. But others say White was a belated peacemaker, racing across Midland to knock the weapon from Germany's hand.

They say Germany gave the standard armed robber's command: "Check it in." They say that Lamar refused, that he went so far as to hold the jacket out and challenge Germany to take it away. Then, they say, they heard the oddly muted pop of a small-caliber weapon.

The fatal bullet entered through Lamar's left flank and burrowed into his pelvic cavity, tearing through his bowels and the main blood vessels. He sank to the ground at Lesure and Midland, between the sidewalk and curb, beneath a street sign that says "Yield."

He was conscious only briefly, just long enough to give up the sheepskin jacket and beg for help that came too late.

Q: "What did you do with the coat?"

A: "Put it in my doghouse . . ."

Q: "Why did you put it in your doghouse?"

A: "It seemed like a good place to put it."

-- Testimony of witness Willie Lee Murray

John Germany did not testify at his trial. His friends did. The judge said guilty, of second-degree murder, and sent him away for life.

The jacket was in his possession, witnesses said, for perhaps five minutes. He grabbed it, walked away and handed it off to a friend he met on the street.

It was no great loss, Germany says: He already had two others, a blue and a brown, obtained in trade at a dope house.

The black one was just for . . . what?

Money? He might have sold it, but not for much. Spite? He knew Lamar, but not enough to like or dislike him.

No. The black jacket was just an excuse.

"It was about respect," he says. "That's all." Lamar died because a 17-year-old high school dropout was trying to impress his friends, playing peacock for a band of drunken teenagers on the porch of a house with holes in its aluminum siding.

Lamar died because Germany was looking for respect. And he has yet to find it.

Sisters Dawn and Deshawn Williams, two of Germany's friends from the porch, suggest that he exaggerates his exploits as a dope dealer. He trumpets his skill on the basketball court: "I'm another Isiah." He dismisses school as beneath him, but the prison system says he reads at a sixth-grade level; counselors recommend remedial education.

Germany sees himself as a victim of peer pressure, a good kid made bad by the temptations of the streets. He says that all he needed to turn himself around -- all any young blade needs -- was a lecture from an older, wiser criminal. Then a few minutes later, his lip curls, and he tells how he would have responded the advice. "I'd have laughed in his face."

Germany will be eligible for review by the parole board in 1997. Murderers find paroles hard to come by these days -- as prison spokeswoman Gail Light puts it, "Life pretty much means life" -- but Germany and his father are already making plans for his release.

Willie Mills has a cousin in Florida who runs an auto repair shop. Germany would do just fine there, his father says. It's all set.

Germany only shrugs. "Maybe I'll try it." But who snaps to attention for some guy in greasy overalls?

His goals are more lofty. "I want to be a great legend," he says. "I want to leave something behind the whole world can read about. I want everyone to say, 'That was a great man.' "

A: "The gun came from his side, like his left side."

Q: "Can you tell me what was said by Mr. Germany?"

A: "He said -- oh, he just said, 'How do you like me now.' "

-- Testimony of witness Patrick White.

Lamar Hart had a younger brother, Jermaine Anderson. He is 17 now, a senior at Cooley High.

He wants to join the Air Force and learn telecommunications.

Two winters ago, as he walked back from the grocery store, a man with a 12-gauge shotgun leaped from a van and demanded Anderson's Triple FAT Goose parka.

Anderson hesitated, then thought of his brother, writhing on the grass. He took off his coat and walked away, somehow more angry than scared.

Before he left, he asked the man with the shotgun a question:

"Why?"

It hung unanswered in the cold night air.

Caption: Drawing JOHN LABBE/Special to the Free Press Photo ALAN KAMUDA

: John Germany is serving a sentence of life in prison for the murder of Lamar Hart. Willa Hart, right, often visits the grave of her son Lamar Hart, who was murdered for his sheepskin jacket. Her son Jermaine Anderson, left, two years ago gave up his coat to a shotgun-wielding man who demanded it.

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