

# Black Killers, Black Corpses: A Survivor's Story

By JUDY BELK

Earlier this year, I was almost murdered. If I had been killed, I would have been the third homicide victim laid to rest in the Belk family in less than 10 years. I, like my other two relatives, would have also been one more example of the increasing rise in black-on-black crime.

In 1979, my sister Vickie, 28, was abducted on her way home from her government job in Washington, D.C. Her body was found a few days later with a bullet in the head. Although her case is still officially unsolved, law-enforcement investigators strongly suspect she was one of several victims randomly killed by two black men on a rampage while high on drugs.

More recently, my cousin Darryl, 23, was murdered in a spray of bullets outside of my aunt and uncle's home in Alexandria, Va. His brother Dino miraculously survived with 11 bullet wounds. Their assailants, who were black, were packing machine guns and were after Dino, who had quarreled with them earlier in the day. Darryl just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

My brush with death took place on a Sunday evening this past January. I was driving my friend Joel home. Joel lives in a predominantly black neighborhood in Oakland, Calif., often referred to as the "flatlands" in contrast to the city's affluent and largely white hill areas. When Joel's mother died a couple of years ago, Joel and her sister purchased their childhood home from their other siblings. They saw it as a chance to break into the expensive Bay Area real-estate market while keeping an important part of the family tradition intact. Although every now and then Joel would complain about how the neighborhood was changing, we both felt relatively safe until that Sunday evening.

As usual, we were talking nonstop as I steered the car onto Joel's street—a street I've driven a hundred times. Suddenly a car crowded with young black men came charging toward us, weaving dangerously on two flat tires. I struggled to get out of its way. As the car sped passed us, a gun was fired. There was an explosion of glass and my window shattered around us.

I couldn't move. Joel thought I was

dead. For a moment, I thought I was too. Somehow she managed to stop the car and pull me into her house. By the time the police came, I was curled up on the floor in a corner sobbing hysterically. I felt little consolation when a policewoman told me how lucky I was that the bullet fragments were embedded in my car door frame and dashboard rather than my head. "Probably gang related," she said.

During the next few days as I related the incident over and over again—to family members, police, reporters, co-workers, insurance adjusters—I couldn't help but think about Vickie and Darryl and a computer printout that had landed on my desk about 10 years ago.

That's when I was required to participate in an annual personal health assessment at work. Each manager completed a lengthy questionnaire that was then fed into a computer. The result was a printout detailing, among other things, the three most likely causes of your death. The hope was that if your profile predicted death by heart attack, lung cancer, or some other possibly preventable illness, it would scare you enough to take the appropriate preventive steps.

I was taken aback to find out the computer had identified homicide as one of the most likely causes of my demise. Why? Because I was a healthy black woman between the ages of 18 and 35. "Don't take it

personally," I remember the programmer saying. "It's all based on statistics."

"Any suggestions for prevention?" I remember asking sarcastically. At the time, I dismissed it all as just another racist experience. A month later Vickie was dead. Another tragic statistic.

Well, I can't dismiss statistics any longer. No black American can or should. We're losing ground in the worst way. According to a report earlier this year from the National Center for Health Statistics, in 1986, for the first time in this century, the life expectancy of U.S. blacks fell in two successive years while that of whites continued to increase. The declining rate for blacks is linked to two factors: homicides and traffic accidents. The two could present great possibilities for a public-service announcement: "All right—brothers and sisters—buckle up and duck!"

If only it could be that easy. I'm afraid. I'm afraid to visit my best friend's house. I'm afraid for my family and friends. It scares the hell out of me that because my two-year-old son is black, his chances of being killed are higher than those of his white playmates. Mostly, I'm afraid for the black community. I know what ails us, but I'm groping for the answers and the role I can play.

The solutions must involve a re-emphasis of the values that have helped many blacks succeed: respect for the family, for the community, for one's self. Some will say you can't generate respect without first addressing the broader social ills such as drugs, unemployment, AIDS, poor education, racism. Maybe you can't, but in the meantime we're killing off our young men and women.

It was a brother I befriended in the body shop where I took my shot-up car who said it the best. As he was pulling the last bullet fragments out of the door frame, he stopped, turned to me and said, "You know sister, this s--- has gotta stop."

Ms. Belk lives in Oakland.

## Notable & Quotable

*Andrew Nagorski, longtime correspondent in the East bloc, writing in the Oct. 2 issue of Newsweek:*

The East German exodus brought home the fact that years of West German economic support—massive payments for transit, postal and other "fees" along with bargain-basement financial deals—have not produced a kinder, gentler East Germany. Erich Honecker's regime has allowed a dramatic increase in legal emigration and family visits to West Germany. But in effect, Bonn's generosity has allowed Honecker to resist reforms, claiming ideological purity while milking the West Germans at every opportunity.