



DOWN BY LAW

BY SAMUEL HUGHES

Alice Goffman C'04 was deep into her field research when the door got kicked in. She was staying at the Philadelphia row house of a woman she calls Miss Regina, watching *Gangs of New York* with two young men she has named Mike and Chuck. Having fallen asleep on the living-room couch, Goffman didn't realize what was happening at first; in her dream the fists pounding on the door just added a harsh percussion to the film's soundtrack. Then:

The door busting open brought me fully awake. I pushed myself into the couch to get away from it, thinking it might hit me on the way down if it broke all the way off its hinges. Two officers came through the door, both of them white, in SWAT gear, with guns strapped to the sides of their legs. The first officer pointed a gun at me and asked who was in the house; he continued to point the gun toward me as he went up the stairs. I wondered if Mike and Chuck were in the house somewhere, and hoped they had gone.

The second officer in pulled me out of the cushions and, gripping my wrists, brought me up off the couch and onto the floor, so that my shoulders and spine hit first and my legs came down after. He quickly turned me over, and

Alice Goffman was a Penn undergraduate when she began doing the fieldwork for the project

that became *On the Run: Fugitive Life in an American City.*

It's an important, unsettling exploration of a serious issue.

Just try not to focus on her.



my face hit the floor. I couldn't brace myself, because he was still holding one of my wrists, now pinned behind me. I wondered if he'd broken my nose or cheek. (Can you break a cheek?) His boot pressed into my back, right at the spot where it had hit the floor, and I cried for him to stop. He put my wrists in plastic cuffs behind my back ... My shoulder throbbed, and the handcuffs pinched. I tried to wriggle my arms, and the cop moved his boot down to cover my hands, crushing my fingers together. ...

A third cop, taller and skinnier, blond hair cut close to his head, entered the house and walked into the kitchen. I could hear china breaking, and watched him pull the fridge away from the wall. Then he came into the living room and pulled a small knife from its sheath on his lower leg. He cut the fabric off the couch, revealing the foam inside. Then he moved to the closet and pulled board games and photo albums and old shoes out onto the floor. He climbed on top of the TV stand and pushed the squares of the drop ceiling out, letting them hit the floor one on top of another.

I could hear banging and clattering from upstairs, and then Miss Regina screaming at the cop not to shoot her, pleading with him to let her get dressed. All the while, the cop with his foot on me yelled for me to say where Mike was hiding. It would be my fault when Miss Regina's house got destroyed, he said. "And I can tell she takes pride in her house."

—From *On the Run: Fugitive Life in an American City*.

“I never expected anybody to read this book,” Goffman is saying. It’s a rainy autumn morning at the end of her whirlwind visit to Philadelphia, and she’s looking both wide-eyed and a little dazed as she sits in my office. In the short time we have before her mother (Gillian Sankoff, professor emerita of linguistics) takes her to the airport, she talks openly and thoughtfully about her experiences in the field, the social issues she’s raised, the reaction to her book, and her unique family legacy. But once she catches that flight back to the University of Wisconsin-Madison—where she’s an assistant professor of sociology with a dizzying schedule of talks and lectures around the country—she disappears completely. Ten weeks later, when she slips in to give a talk at College Hall, I stake her out, at which point she agrees, quite cheerfully, to another interview. (Turns out she had been criticized for figuring too prominently in news stories about her book, so she basically cut out the press interviews.)

The book that Goffman didn’t expect anyone to read is *On the Run: Fugitive Life in an American City*, published last year by the University of Chicago Press. It chronicles, in gritty and granular detail, the six years that she spent embedded near a tough African-American neighborhood she refers to as “6th Street.” (All names of people and places have been changed.) There, starting as a sophomore sociology major at Penn and into her graduate years at Princeton, the five-foot-two-inch Goffman lived and hung out with young black men who were trying to dodge the many arms of the criminal-justice system. Though the problems are complex, she notes, the “sheer scope of policing and imprisonment in poor Black neighborhoods is transforming community life in ways that are deep and enduring, not only for the young men who are their targets but for their family members, partners, and neighbors.”

The reviews were mostly glowing, even before the police killings of unarmed black men in Ferguson, Missouri and Staten

Island sparked a renewed interest in the subject. *The New York Times* called Goffman “a rising star in sociology” and *On the Run* a “remarkable feat of reporting.” In the *New York Review of Books*, Harvard social-policy professor Christopher Jencks called it “an engrossing book that should also become an ethnographic classic.” Penn political-science professor Marie Gottschalk, author of *Caught: The Prison State and the Lockdown of American Politics*, described it as a “chilling portrait of how the expansive systems of policing and surveillance have upended life in poor urban neighborhoods.”

There is a downside to all the media attention, much of which focuses on the material in the lengthy appendix, in which she describes her methodology and explains the backstory of “how a white young woman came to spend her twenties with Black young men dipping and dodging the police.” For one thing, it perpetuates what Goffman calls the “Intrepid White Girl in the Hood trope.” (And yes, I’m contributing to that trope, since much of her fieldwork took place when she was a Penn undergraduate; she has a compelling family legacy at Penn; and in her case, *intrepid* is an understatement.) It also shifts the focus away from the issues she’s trying to address—the “other side of the coin of mass incarcerations, this fugitive existence, and a whole community organized around suspects and fugitives and informants and the threat of capture.”

“I really wrote this book in resistance to that kind of narrative, which is a longstanding narrative in ethnography,” she says. “The ethnographer comes in, doesn’t know anything, bumbles around, gets in, triumphs—is accepted, leaves, writes a book. And what I wanted to show was that there was never acceptance. I was always uncomfortable. I was always making people uncomfortable. There was no triumph.”

***On the Run* opens with Chuck teaching his 12-year-old brother, Tim, how to run from the police**, listing all the people he should *not* seek shelter from because it might bring down retribution upon them. The young men in question were not always successful in their attempts to evade the law, and the arrests were not always peaceful. At least once a day during her first 18 months there, Goffman saw the police stop and search pedestrians or drivers, run their names for warrants, ask them to come in for questioning, or arrest them. On 52 occasions she witnessed cops searching houses and questioning, chasing, or arresting people, sometimes breaking down doors to do so. She saw them “punch, choke, kick, stomp on, or beat young men with their nightsticks” 14 times.

Yet *On the Run* is not an anti-cop screed, and while Goffman is quite sympathetic to the plight of the 6th Street characters, sees the world through their eyes, and takes pains to show their full humanity, she doesn’t paint them as angelic victims: “The problems of drugs and gun violence are real ones in the 6th Street community, and the police who come into the neighborhood are trying to solve them with the few powers that have been granted to them: the powers of intimidation and arrest. Their efforts do not seem to be stopping young men like Mike and Chuck from attempting to earn money selling drugs or from getting into violent conflicts; whether they are helping to reduce overall crime rates is beyond the scope of this study.”

Given that the “street trade in drugs, neighborhood rivalries, and their potential for violence are all deeply woven into com-

munity life,” she wrote, “the role of law enforcement changes from keeping communities safe from a few offenders to bringing an entire neighborhood under suspicion and surveillance... Thus, the great paradox of a highly punitive approach to crime control is that it winds up criminalizing so much of daily life as to foster widespread illegality as people work to circumvent it.”

While it’s probably safe to say that some law-enforcement personnel didn’t appreciate Goffman’s take on policing in Philadelphia, the reaction from the upper levels has been remarkably supportive.

“She’s shined a light on valid concerns that are ongoing issues—in a way that I think is real productive and has positive values,” says Philadelphia managing director Richard Negrin. Noting that the book was published before the recent violence in Ferguson, he adds: “All those issues she touched on are at the forefront of the national conversation now, and we’re an important part of it in Philadelphia.”

Negrin pointed to the December appearance on “Meet the Press” by Mayor Michael Nutter W’79 and Police Commissioner Charles Ramsey in which they discussed their efforts to improve the public’s trust in the police. (Ramsey was recently appointed by President Obama to co-chair the Task Force on 21st Century Policing.)

“We’re not just blind to this whole thing,” says Negrin. “We understand there’s a human element on both sides. It cuts both ways. Our citizens need to see our police officers as human beings, and police officers need to see all our citizens as human beings. And there needs to be that mutual respect.”

Goffman is not the first to raise concerns about the nation’s swollen, voracious criminal-justice system. Former Penn (now Yale) sociology professor Elijah Anderson has been calling attention to various aspects of this problem for years, including in his 1990 book *Streetwise*, and other scholars ranging from Michelle Alexander to Loïc Wacquant to Marie Gottschalk have ramped up the discussion substantially. But Goffman’s book represents a new level of *being there*.

“It’s a very, very important contribution to the literature,” says Anderson, who supervised Goffman’s undergraduate thesis at Penn. “I think we as a field are in her debt, because we don’t have this experience in the literature. We need more firsthand accounts. That’s how the field moves forward.”

IF

there is such a thing as a typical Penn college experience, Goffman did not have one. It began normally enough; as part of her freshman urban-ethnography class, she got a job working in a Penn cafeteria, where she met a supervisor she calls Miss Deena. She volunteered to tutor two of Miss Deena’s grandchildren: a high-school senior named Ray, who was applying to college, and his cousin Aisha, a high-school freshman.

Miss Deena’s family was warm and welcoming, she noted, though Goffman had some early trouble connecting with Aisha, who “seemed to have little experience outside Black Philadelphia” and spoke “in what linguists refer to as African American Vernacular English.” Goffman knows a thing or two about that subject, since her stepfather, the legendary Penn



KATRINA QUISUMBING KING

linguistics professor William Labov, basically pioneered that field, but at first she couldn't always understand what Aisha was saying, and would either ask her to repeat herself or pretend to understand, which inevitably backfired. She eventually became more fluent in the vernacular, and after taking Elijah Anderson's urban ethnography class the following year, she learned "about the tension between *decent* and *street*" people, at which point the socio-economic divides between Miss Deena's and Aisha's households "began to make a lot more sense." Goffman, incidentally, added her own classification: *clean* and *dirty*, which she defines as "those able to make it safely through a police stop, and those likely to be seized."

Goffman "was just a very able, bright, and curious student," recalls Anderson. "She was very interested in the subject matter, and she got turned on by it. We read St. Clair Drake's *Black Metropolis* and a number of ethnographic works. She wanted to make a contribution to this literature."

Her classroom achievements didn't always help her on 6th Street, where she often felt like "an idiot, an outsider, and at times a powerless young woman," she wrote. "The act of doing fieldwork is a humbling one, particularly when you're trying to understand a community or a job or a life that's far away from who you are and what you know."

Things got particularly awkward when a friend of Aisha's mother asked why she was spending so much time with these teenage girls—a pointed suggestion that Goffman's interest in them might be sexual. As a result, "the next time someone

offered to set me up with a guy, I instantly agreed." The guy was Mike, a "thin young man with a scruffy beard and an intense gaze" who on first meeting her asked if she wanted to see the scar from his gunshot wound. Though she had no intention of getting romantically involved, the group date to a movie turned out to be a comically humiliating disaster. Mike and Aisha and their friends thought she talked weirdly, didn't know how to act, had unkempt hair, and that her clothes were "all wrong." Plus, "I had a bad habit of staring at people, which was rude, especially since I was a white girl."

Mike had a warrant out for his arrest on a shooting charge, "though he vehemently denied any involvement," she wrote. He was also entangled in two other cases. But he stayed in touch, and began introducing her to people as his godsister or just his sister—which not only gave her a "good deal of legitimacy" but also signaled that she "wasn't available for sex or romance." After she got an apartment near 6th Street, Mike moved in with her, and even though their relationship was non-romantic, "now my presence in the neighborhood made sense: I was one of those white girls who liked Black guys."

The police came to the same conclusion, she wrote:

I hate to see a pretty young girl get passed around so much. Do your parents know that you're fucking a different nigger every night? ... What is your Daddy going to say when you call him from the station and ask him to post your bail? Bet he'd love to hear what you're doing. Do you kiss him with that mouth?

CRIME AND PUNISHMENT REVISITED

"The best single proximate explanation of the rise in incarceration is not rising crime rates, but the policy choices made by legislators to greatly increase the use of imprisonment as a response to crime," concludes a massive new study titled "The Growth of Incarceration in the United States," published by the National Research Council's Committee on Causes and Consequences of High Rates of Incarceration. (Among the members of that committee was Penn political-science professor Marie Gottschalk, author of *Caught: The Prison State and the Lockdown of American Politics*.)

The United States now has "2.2 million people in prisons and jails, and an additional 4.8 million on probation or parole," wrote Goffman in *On the Run*. With three percent of the adult population under correctional supervision, she added, "only the forced labor camps of the former USSR under Stalin approached these levels of penal confinement." In her conclusion, she noted that the "fivefold increase in the number of people sitting in US jails and prisons

over the last 40 years has prompted little public outcry. In fact, many people scarcely notice this shift, because the growing numbers of prisoners are drawn disproportionately from poor and segregated Black communities."

But since she wrote that, there have been hints of a shift in American opinion toward mass incarceration and highly aggressive policing. Consider two views by *Washington Post* columnist George F. Will. The first is a 2008 column titled "More Prisoners, Less Crime," in which he wrote: "For many reasons, including better policing and more incarceration, Americans feel, and are, safer."

The second was written this past December, after Eric Garner died at the hands of New York City police over his illegally selling untaxed cigarettes. "Overcriminalization has become a national plague," wrote Will. "And when more and more behaviors are criminalized, there are more and more occasions for police, who embody the state's monopoly on legitimate violence, and who fully participate in humanity's flaws, to make

mistakes ... The scandal of mass incarceration is partly produced by the frivolity of the political class, which uses the multiplication of criminal offenses as a form of moral exhibitionism."

"There's an incredible conservative coalition now pushing criminal-justice reform and decarceration and ending over-policing," Goffman was saying last fall, noting that their ranks include fiscal conservatives, libertarians, and evangelicals. "I gave a talk at the Cato Institute a couple of weeks ago, and we were right on the same page. It's like, 'Yes, let's end this. How can we do this?'"

While the *lock 'em all up* mindset may be easing with regard to some crimes, such as drug possession, she notes, the biggest question is "How do we help people get out of violent situations and also deal with the trauma of violence?"

"We really need to approach violence in a bigger, more systemic way, rather than a kind of 'Individuals who do it should be punished,'" Goffman says. "We need to think about helping people heal from violence and from the

The cops didn't know that Goffman's father was the eminent sociologist Erving Goffman, who died in 1982 when she was a baby. A Penn professor whose books included *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, his ideas “hung in the air of my childhood household, and I had read some of his books by the time I entered college,” she wrote. As a result, coming to Penn was, in a good but sometimes unsettling sense, like coming home.

“There was a point where I just stopped taking sociology classes because we were reading so much Goffman that it was becoming emotionally overwhelming,” she says. “People who knew him told stories about him, and I felt a kind of personal connection to him because he had taught here. I just loved the books. But as a person, that was hard for me.”

Labov (“my Bill dad”) has always been a “total fieldworker” as well as “someone who’s spent a lot of time working on issues of racial injustice,” she says, while her mother, Gillian Sankoff, is a retired anthropologist-turned-sociolinguist whose fieldwork ranged from Papua New Guinea to Montreal—and a pretty engaged person herself.

As a result, “a lot of the conversation around the table when I was growing up was about American racism,” says Goffman. “Studying the criminal-justice system for me felt like a continuation of that. This is the major institution producing unequal groups of people—reinforcing a racial caste system after it supposedly is no longer legal.”

She certainly wasn’t coasting on her academic lineage. “The working-really-hard-at-it and being obsessive was partly

because I don’t want people to think that I’m trying to get by on my family name.”

In fact, she knew early on that she wanted to do serious, interaction-based fieldwork. And in that world, she wrote: “The shadow of my late father may have pushed me to go further than was safe or expected.”

IN 2003, Goffman asked Mike about the possibility of writing about his life for her undergraduate thesis, due the following spring. He agreed, provided she changed the names and other details and agreed to take out anything that he requested. (Considering what stayed in, he can’t have requested much.) From that point, the ride began to get wilder. She found herself in some very dicey situations—like the party where an accusation of theft prompted one guy to pull out a gun and threaten to shoot whoever had just picked Mike’s pocket. (Goffman quietly slipped out the door, at which point the would-be shooter ran after her—and apologized.) She also spent hours visiting guys in prison and observing the workings, official and otherwise, of that system. Though she decided to learn the young men’s “techniques of evasion,” she began to think that the odds of her going to prison herself were “about equal to the chance I would make it to graduate school.”

At Penn, despite taking extra courses each semester and attending summer classes, “things were deteriorating at a rapid pace.” She missed several meetings with professors, and

trauma of violence and getting out of the kind of situations where violence becomes part of what you do.”

For the hardened cynic—or someone who has just been assaulted—this may sound naïve. But having lived in that world, she has seen how hard it can be for even the perpetrators of violence to escape it. In *On the Run*, a young man named Anthony comes home from prison knowing he will be the target of some guys from another neighborhood with whom he had tangled before. As soon as he gets back, they start shooting at him, “assuming that he’s going to shoot back at them for a previous thing two years ago,” Goffman explains. “And he comes home from prison sick to his stomach with worry that he’s going to die out there because of the neighborhood that he grew up in—this ongoing thing. It’s just so much bigger than him, and no amount of saying, ‘I’m not going to retaliate’ is going to change that. So when he gets, illegally, a gun to protect himself or maybe shoot someone in that context, I can see where he’s coming from.”

Goffman also sees a direct link between post-prison programs, employment, and violent crime.

In New York City, “violence is down, and incarceration is down hugely,” she points out. “But when you come out of prison there, there are all these programs, and you get linked up with employment. A lot of people coming out of prison in New York have jobs. You come out of prison in Pennsylvania, well, good luck to you. So going back to the drug trade after a prison stint in Pennsylvania is an option that I can understand.” (Philadelphia managing director Rich Negrin listed some of the programs the city was implementing for returning offenders, adding: “You can’t ask someone to go back into society and be a returning citizen if you’re not willing to look at them and give them opportunities.”)

In *On the Run*, “I was trying to show readers the humanity of people who are arrested for violent crime, and to show the context of violent crime in communities like this,” Goffman explains. “So one of the hurdles in get-

ting out of mass incarceration is the failure of the American public to see people who are in prison for violent crime as worthy of dignity and respect and a decent chance at life.

“It’s not like this is entirely driven by the drug war. We’re not going to get out of these historically globally high rates of incarceration if we end the drug war but don’t address violent crime—and if we don’t change how we’re arresting, convicting, and then sentencing people for violent crime.”

On the other hand, “you can’t deny that there’s a level of violence in poor minority communities that is distinct and higher and very troubling,” she adds, though even in those neighborhoods, violence is down.

“So at a moment in American history where violence is at historic lows in every community, we have the greatest number of people behind bars for violent crime that we ever have had in world history,” she says. “And we also know that locking up this many people has not had that much of an effect on the crime rate. So are we OK with that?” —S.H.

was alarmed to realize she didn't really care. After putting off the required statistics and science courses, she finally registered but didn't attend classes—with predictable results. Her efforts to make herself not just a fly on the wall on 6th Street but a "participant observer" had a price.

"Some of the ways in which I gradually became more like Mike and Aisha and their friends and family were deliberate and planned," she wrote. "Others, like my appreciation for hip-hop and my fear of the police, developed organically over time."

The idea of grad school became Goffman's lifeline, and while parts of her undergraduate transcript were a mess, no one could doubt her talent or commitment to her chosen field. On the night that Mike turned himself in to begin a three-year stint at Graterford State Prison, she found out she had been accepted to Princeton. Her new academic home was close enough for her to continue the work on 6th Street that she would use for her doctoral dissertation. There, working with sociology professor Mitchell Duneier and others, she began to see what the book could be: "an on-the-ground look at mass incarceration and its accompanying systems of policing and surveillance."

During that time a friend of Chuck's was shot and killed getting out of Goffman's car. One of the bullets hit her windshield, she wrote, "and the man's blood splattered my shoes and pants as we ran away."

When Goffman and Chuck conducted a household survey in the 6th Street area, they found that nearly half of the 308 young men who responded had had warrants issued for their arrest, either because they hadn't paid court fines and fees or had failed to appear for a court date within the previous three years; 119 had had warrants issued for technical violations of their probation or parole, such as drinking or breaking curfew.

Just how many of the original arrests were for serious offenses (as opposed to, say, possession of marijuana) is not clear, and that blurring raises questions. But then, the whole dynamic of 6th Street sometimes feels like a dysfunctional Greek tragedy, a vicious circle of violence and unemployment fueled by frustration and crack.

A few personal stories:

■ Chuck was a senior in high school when he got into a schoolyard fight with another boy, who had called his mother a crack whore; the boy's injuries were not serious, but because of the school's zero-tolerance policy, Chuck was charged with aggravated assault, convicted, and sent to county jail. Released after eight months, he was then told he was too old to re-enroll in school. After applying at numerous stores for a job and getting no callbacks, he and some friends began selling crack. (He "frequently articulated his distaste for crack and for selling it to people who, like his own mother, had been ruined by the drug and couldn't help themselves," Goffman wrote.) Later, after one of his friends was arrested for a parole violation at the hospital where his girlfriend was giving birth, Chuck—who also had an outstanding warrant for breaking curfew—decided to stay away from the hospital when *his* girlfriend was giving birth.

■ Tim was first arrested when he was being driven to school by Chuck. The car was owned by Chuck's girlfriend, and when a cop stopped them, the car came up as having been stolen in

California. Tim, then 11, was charged with being an accessory. He got three years of probation.

■ Mike was first arrested for having a small amount of marijuana when he was 13. He was put on probation and finished high school by taking night classes, though by the time Goffman met him, he was 22, wanted on a charge of attempted murder, had just finished a trial for another criminal case, and had completed probation on a third. He also once paid a woman a bag of dope to beat up the antagonistic mother of his children.

Though the police are usually after young men, their apprehension techniques include putting intense pressure on girlfriends, mothers, and other family members to turn in the fugitives. Sometimes that means threatening to have them evicted or to take away their children; sometimes it means showing a woman phone records to prove that the man in question had been cheating on her—or to remind her that they can show that she had been cheating on the man.

Though in Goffman's hands her subjects' humanity comes through, they are still actors in a grim and often violent world. Not everyone appreciated the portrait.

Her "unrelenting focus on criminality is just as likely to encourage *more* arrests and surveillance than to convince people that mass incarceration should end," wrote Dwayne Betts in *Slate*. If she wanted to reveal the abuses of a surveillance state, "why not focus on characters that aren't so entrenched in the worst criminal activity?"

In fact, she does have a strong chapter chronicling the lives of "clean people" in the neighborhood, those "who keep relatively free of the courts and the prisons, who go to school or work every day as the police chase their neighbors through the streets." Those include Lamar, who worked as a security guard at Penn and spent a lot of his free time playing video games with his friends and doing his best to ignore the guys who hung out on the corner. His good behavior seems even more remarkable when we find out that his crack-addicted mother had given him up for adoption when he was a small boy and that his father was a continuing crack user.

The fact that some managed to stay on the right side of the law leads me to ask Goffman a very middle-class question: How does personal responsibility and decision-making factor into communities like 6th Street, where the divide between "clean" and "dirty" people can be murky, and where even some of the more likable characters have committed violent crimes? She gives a long answer that is worth quoting at length:

"The idea of a meritocracy—that if you've ended up in bad shape it's because you've made a series of decisions that put you there, and if you've ended up doing really well in life it's because you made a series of good decisions—is so deep in the American ethos," she says. "Sociology as a discipline is reminding people that there are larger forces at work shaping their lives, and that the chances we have in life are not equally distributed."

On top of the formidable challenges already facing young people in these neighborhoods—violence, poor schools, grim employment prospects, and a long history of exclusion and segregation—"we're adding intense policing, arresting people for low-level violations, probation violations, strapping people with court fees and warrants," she says. "Everybody has choices that they can make. What we're doing right now for young

people of color is saying, ‘We’re not going to give you very many good choices, and you’re going to pay dearly for your bad choices’—as opposed to rich young people, where we’re giving you a lot of great choices, and we’re going to protect you from your bad choices.

“The fact that some people are able to beat those odds is incredible. To me, the default is not beating them. I mean, when you’re a senior in high school and a student calls your mom a crack whore, and you push his face into the snow, and then you’re charged with aggravated assault—you know, that’s not aggravated assault in my neighborhood. What does personal responsibility mean in that context?”

When a man “loosely associated” with the 6th Street Boys killed a man from 4th Street (another pseudonym) during a botched robbery at a dice game, everyone knew blood would be spilled. Goffman, by then regarded as the neighborhood chronicler, got a call from Reggie (Chuck’s younger brother) insisting that she come to his uncle’s basement. There, she wrote, “I sat on top of the washing machine for four hours and listened while five men berated the shooter for his thoughtless actions, discussed what the fallout would be from this death, and whether and when to shoot at the guys who they knew without question were now coming for them. In those four hours I learned more about gun violence than I had in my previous three years in the neighborhood.”

In the end, they did nothing, but in the following weeks, the 4th Street guys “drove through the 6th Street neighborhood and shot up the block. Chuck took a partial bullet in the neck, and Steve took a bullet in his right thigh. Neighbors stopped going outside and instructed children to play indoors. From prison, Mike sent heated letters home to Chuck and Reggie, voicing his outrage that they’d allow me to be on the block during these dangerous times.”

For a while, things settled down. Goffman continued to live near 6th Street, hanging out and driving to Princeton two or three times a week. Mike came home from prison in 2007. One night that summer he called her with terrible news: Chuck had just been shot in the head while walking to a Chinese takeout store with Tim. He died that night in intensive care.

It’s a wrenching conclusion to the book, which is dedicated to Chuck’s memory. Goffman, like the rest of Chuck’s friends and family, was devastated. Her worries about making mistakes at the hospital and the funeral only heighten the tension and sense of despair. Though she was never questioned by the police, she had a “pretty good idea” who had killed Chuck, and probably could have helped narrow down the list of suspects. (For years she worried that they would subpoena her field notes, and finally felt free enough to burn them last year.)

After things calmed down and the extra cops had left, Mike invited her to join him on his late-night drives around 4th Street, hoping to spot Chuck’s killer or someone who knew

him. One night he thought he saw a 4th Street guy go into a Chinese restaurant, and he got out of the car with his gun and hid in an adjacent alley. Goffman waited at the wheel, “ready to speed off as soon as Mike ran back and got inside.” But when the man came out with his food, Mike “seemed to think this wasn’t the man he’d thought it was.” Had he concluded otherwise, Goffman’s life would almost certainly have taken a very sharp turn for the worse.

“I don’t believe that I got into the car with Mike because I wanted to learn firsthand about gun violence, or even because I wanted to prove myself loyal or brave,” she wrote. “I got into the car because, like Mike and Reggie, I wanted Chuck’s killer to die.”

Looking back, she was “glad” to learn what that felt like at a visceral level. But even then, and even more so in retrospect, she concluded, “my desire for vengeance scared me, more than the shootings I’d witnessed, more even than my ongoing fears for Mike’s and Tim’s safety, and certainly more than any fears for my own.”

When she returned to my office in December, Goffman had just come from 6th Street, where she had been catching up with Aisha and some of the others—the few who were alive and not in prison. On the whole, she said, they were pretty excited

by the book’s success. For one thing, it was about *their* lives and deaths and grievances—their youth, really—even if the names had been changed. None of them had thought she would ever finish writing it, let alone see it published; certainly no one—Goffman included—thought it would make any money. But in fact, the book has sold well enough to provide substantial royalties, which she is splitting 18 ways.

“That brings up new challenges—like, what happens with Chuck’s royalties?” she was saying. “He’s got two daughters—should their mother get those royalties? Should *his* mother, Miss Linda, get the royalties? To have a conversation with the mother of your dear friend who is no longer with us about who’s going to get the money that her dead son should have gotten from a book that he helped to write—

I mean, it’s a horrible conversation to have. But it’s mostly been great.”

The book has also sparked some new thinking. Last June, when she gave a talk at the Free Library of Philadelphia, Reggie was in the audience. He was no choirboy, having been involved in armed robberies despite Chuck’s attempts to talk him out of them, and he had spent several years in prison. And personal connections aside, *On the Run* probably didn’t meet his standards of a good book. But after hearing Goffman talk about the huge nationwide increase in police surveillance and incarceration, its political causes and history and its effects on 6th Street, he began to see it in a new light.

“He just thought it was a story of his life before,” Goffman said. “Now he was like, ‘This is political. It’s wrong what they’re doing. This could be a movement, you know?’” ♦

