Chapter 13: Black Day in July: A Family United in Crisis

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, our family lived in a series of rental homes in Detroit. As a single parent raising her children, my Mother faced immense challenges with limited means. She had little initiative or wherewithal to improve her lifestyle and that of our family. Although resources were scarce and we depended on public assistance, our home was never lacking in love. We were a tightly bonded family, raised to protect one another, to step in when help was needed, and to do what we could to lift each other up.

By the summer of 1967, I was a graduate student completing my master's degree when alarming news surfaced: chaos and violence had broken out in Detroit—right in the neighborhood where my mother and my four younger siblings, Eleanor, Jude, Bernadette, and Margaret, lived. Our family home, a middle-row house on West Warren near Twelfth Street, had suddenly become the center of an escalating national crisis.

The neighborhood had undergone significant changes over the years. Once a stable and prosperous area, it had become a mix of cultures and communities—Black, White, Mexican, Native American, Gypsies, and more—each struggling to find stability amidst growing poverty and inequality. It was also just blocks away from the epicenter of what would later become known in history as the Detroit Rebellion of 1967, also known as the 12th Street Riot.

Canadian folk singer Gordon Lightfoot captured the turmoil in his haunting ballad, *Black Day in July*:

Motor City madness has touched the countryside
And through the smoke and cinders, you can hear it far and wide
The doors are quickly bolted and the children locked inside
Black Day in July

Inside our home on West Warren, my teenage sister Eleanor was paralyzed with fear. Then, a senior in high school, she faced hostility just stepping outside. Black teens confronted her, hurling racial slurs, calling her "cracker girl" and "whitey." When she ventured to the front porch she encountered threats, "Whitey, y'all better get your white butt out of here."

She told me over the phone, her voice trembling, "Rose, military tanks are going up and down Warren, and the National Guard patrols the streets day and night. Buildings are on fire, gunshots ring out, and we're not allowed outside after nine. We're scared to even look out the window."

Our place was the middle of three row houses.
Ernie Kidney's tiny grocery store left of the homes.

As tensions intensified, Mayor Jerome Cavanagh imposed curfews, but the violence spread rapidly. Fires engulfed businesses and homes. Firefighters, targeted by snipers, were unable to control the flames. Over a thousand buildings were destroyed in a matter of days.

In the face of danger, our older siblings did what we had always been taught: take care of the family. Tom and his wife, Elaine, acted quickly, bringing Mom and the younger kids — Eleanor, Jude, Bernadette, and Margaret —to their home in Dearborn Heights. It wasn't just about shelter; it was about reassurance, safety, and love.

Ted and his wife, Fran, responded with incredible generosity. Although they lived with Fran's parents after their recent marriage and were saving for a house of their own, they searched and purchased a modest home in Taylor, Michigan, where Mom and the younger children could start anew. It was a financial sacrifice they made without hesitation—one that spoke volumes about their character and compassion.

As for me, I had just landed my first teaching job at Adams Junior High in Dearborn, and had very little money to spare. Still, I wanted to help. I opened my first credit card and used it to buy a stove and refrigerator for the Taylor home. It wasn't as large a contribution as my siblings', but it came from the same place: a desire to ensure our family was safe and supported.

The riot itself lasted less than a week, but the scars it left were deep and lasting. For me, the experience was a defining moment. I learned not just about the dangers of unrest, but about the power of family unity, sacrifice, and care. Ever since that week, I've made it a personal

priority to live in neighborhoods that offer peace and stability—not just for myself, but for those I love.

Gordon Lightfoot's words still resonate when I think of that time:

The streets of Motor City now are quiet and serene
But the shapes of gutted buildings strike terror to the heart
And you say how did it happen and you say how did it start
Why can't we all be brothers? Why can't we live in peace?
Black Day in July

What got us through that time wasn't the absence of fear—but the presence of love.