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English A101

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5 Days in Detroit

Portfolio Assignment #3

I have lived in a big city all my life, but it wasn't always Brooklyn. I am actually from Detroit and I wish I could have stayed there. Before I became the town drunk here, I had a job working for Ford Motor Company. I really enjoyed working there, it was by no means easy, but for a black man it was about as good of a job as one could find. Then, the long, hot summer of 1967 happened.

I did not attend the homecoming of two of our neighborhood's soldiers returning home from Vietnam—normally I would never miss such an event having served in World War II myself, but for an unknown reason I just did not feel up to it. I would have never known how this homecoming would change my life and America forever. The party was being held at our version of a speak easy, known as the Blind Pig. I was awoken by the commotion; screaming could be heard three blocks away from my apartment. I got out of bed and stood at the front steps of the complex while police cars drove past endlessly. Jeffery, the corner shoe shiner, must have seen my face of confusion as he yelled “Da Mayor, they’re coming to get us!”

“What do you mean they’re coming to get us Jefferey! Get back inside,” I snarled.

“The police! they raided the Blind Pig!” he exclaimed as he ran off.

The Blind Pig was just around the corner on 12th so out of curiosity I began to walk over. Once I turned the corner I couldn't believe my eyes: there must have been 100 of my neighbors

sitting on the curb with their hands tied. As they were being thrown into various police cars and vans an uneasy crowd began to form. Once the police left a riot ensued and soon after the Blind Pig was on fire. It was hours before any more police officers returned. The crowd grew even larger and people began looting nearby stores. The scene was pure chaos and there appeared to be no end in sight. I stood right in the middle of the riot with my brothers, but I did not loot, and I did not damage any property. The next day the rioting was continuing to grow as police finally arrived, doing nothing but escalating the situation. Willie Horton, the Detroit Tigers left fielder, stood, still in his game uniform, on the roof of a car as he begged for the crowd to stop the rioting. The rioting wouldn't stop for five more days.

Three days after the beginning of the riots I returned to the mob with my best friend, Crazy Chris—a name he earned in the army. We walked around the corner just like I did three days prior, but it was far from the same sight. Now the Michigan National Guard had arrived with armored vehicles along with two military units. We had never seen anything like it since we left the Philippines. Crazy Chris wanted to join in the riots, but I urged him not to as the police tried to regain control. We walked past an apartment complex as a National Guardsman threw a black man out of the front entrance. The Guardsman then stabbed him with his bayonet as the man screamed for help. Crazy Chris began to move towards the Guardsman, but I held him back.

“That feel good? You dead yet?” screamed the Guardsman, who then shot the young black man.

Infuriated by what we had witnessed we soon found ourselves participating in the riots. We stormed into Joe's Record Shop and threw chairs through the window as the fire department sprayed us with their hoses, knocking us down instantly. We ran out of the building and found

another crowd, this time destroying the inside of a restaurant. Crazy Chris turned to me proclaiming excitedly, “Let’s go to the next one!”

We began to leave the restaurant when I tripped over some of the debris. Crazy Chris didn’t notice and continued running out the front door. I stood up and began after Crazy Chris when the sound of gunshots overpowered the rowdy crowd. I looked out the window to see six bodies lying in the street. One of them was Crazy Chris: face down in a pool of blood. I turned him over and saw the three gunshot wounds in his chest. He was dead.

“You’re next!” a voice screamed as I looked up. A line of National Guardsmen had formed outside the restaurant and executed them in a firing line. I held my hands up and ran off back to my house where I did not leave for four more days.

In total 43 people died during the five day Detroit Riots of 1967—all of them preventable deaths. I moved to Brooklyn the following summer of ‘68. I couldn’t walk on the streets of my neighborhood without having to relive that night with Crazy Chris. I wish I could move to a smaller town where I won’t have to worry about riots, but I simply can’t afford it. I have vowed to do everything in my power to never let another riot happen in my neighborhood. The young kids don’t understand yet and they may never understand until they experience what I did. Now I’m just the town drunk that isn’t respected. I haven’t told my story to anyone in Brooklyn and I hope I never have to. All riots have done in my lifetime is relocate me and take my best friend. It is no wonder why I am not a fan of rioting anymore, but I too was once an angry young black man and understand why they happen. However, I have gained the experience to learn that rioting does not advance our position. Do I know what will? No, but I can say for sure it is not rioting. Lord knows I pray that the police in Brooklyn don’t give these kids a reason to riot.