

ZE'EV CHAFETS

DEVIL'S
NIGHT
AND
OTHER
TRUE
TALES OF
DETROIT

cative... anyone... who wants to fathom the social calamity that is
t Detroit history, and what that may portend for other cities, will have to
to this book."

—*Washington Post*

DEVIL'S NIGHT:

And Other True
Tales of Detroit

ZE'EV CHAFETS



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DOUBLE VISION

HEROES AND HUSTLERS, HARD HATS AND HOLY MEN

MEMBERS OF THE TRIBE

FOR KIM WESTON, WHO WANTS TO SAVE THE WORLD.

Personal Note

This book was written in Detroit, where I lived during the last half of 1988 and, again, for several months of 1989. It is a personal account, based on people I met, things I saw and events in which I participated.

During the course of my stay in Detroit, I interviewed hundreds of people. In most cases it was impractical to use a tape recorder. I took notes or, on some occasions, reconstructed conversations from memory. Thus, the quotes in this book are not, for the most part, stenographic reproductions; some have been edited for length, others are close approximations. In every case, however, they are accurate reflections of what people actually said.

This book could not have been written without the help of a great many people. Foremost among them are two good friends: Arthur

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DEVIL'S NIGHT:

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Introduction:

DEVIL'S NIGHT

It was in the fall of 1986 that I first saw the devil on the streets of Detroit.

We were introduced by a friend who works for a local radio station. “Spend the evening before Halloween with me and I’ll show you something you’ve never seen before,” he promised. “People try to burn down their own neighborhoods. They call it Devil’s Night.”

I vaguely remembered Devil’s Night. When I was a kid growing up in Pontiac, a grimy industrial clone of Detroit ten miles north of the city, it had been a time of harmless pranks—window soaping, doorbell ringing and rolls of toilet paper in the neighbors’ trees. But it had been twenty years since I lived there, and a lot of things had changed. One of them was Devil’s Night.

Three years earlier, in 1983, for reasons no one understands,

America's sixth largest city suddenly erupted into flame. Houses, abandoned buildings, even unused factories burned to the ground in an orgy of arson that lasted for seventy-two hours. When it was over the papers reported more than eight hundred fires. Smoke hung over the city for days.

What at first appeared to be a bizarre outburst turned into an annual tradition. By 1986, Devil's Night had become a prelude to Halloween in Detroit in the way that Mardi Gras precedes Lent in New Orleans, or the Rose Bowl parade ushers in the New Year in Pasadena.

Even my friend's dramatic description did not prepare me for what I saw that night. From early evening, fires flared throughout the city. The scent of burning wood in the crisp Michigan autumn evening filled me with an incongruous nostalgia for the homecoming rallies I once attended at the University of Michigan. On the streets of Detroit I could sense the same rush of energy, the same sense of excitement that always accompanies nocturnal action. Police helicopters circled overhead and fire trucks, sirens blaring, raced from one conflagration to another. Cops guarded the firemen as they fought the flames. It was only when I saw the faces of the neighborhood people, mostly older blacks with long coats over their bathrobes, standing grimly on their porches, armed with shotguns and garden hoses, protecting their property, that I realized that this was no homecoming rally; on Devil's Night, they use homes for kindling.

At each fire there were crowds of onlookers. Some were black neighborhood kids in stocking caps and high school jackets. Others were white adults—professional fire fighters from surrounding townships on a busman's holiday and civilian thrill seekers from the suburbs, many of them on their one annual trip into the city. The crowds were augmented by people who had come from all over the United States, Europe and the Far East to participate in Devil's Night, the fire buff's Superbowl.

My friend's car was equipped with a police-band radio, and as he drove from fire to fire he gradually became the leader of a motor-

cade. At every stop, people gawked at the flames and passed around bottles of whiskey and thermos caps of steaming coffee. The suburbanites talked with bittersweet nostalgia about their old neighborhoods in Detroit, pointed to childhood sites now sunk into decrepitude and shook their heads. The message was tacit but unmistakable—Look at what *they're* doing to *our* city.

The biggest blaze of the evening was in a lumberyard. As fire fighters worked to put it out, a television crew from Tokyo suddenly appeared. The cameraman and reporter jabbered excitedly in Japanese and broken English, trying to find someone who could explain what was happening. They interviewed a man from Dallas, “Ah come up here every year,” the Texan said happily. “There’s nothing like it. Ah never miss a one.”

Detroit that night seemed like some grotesque urban horror film. At the lumberyard, a patrol of Guardian Angels, pasty-faced kids in berets and sweatshirts, happened by. They had come down from Grand Rapids, two hours away, to help the fire fighting effort. The white spectators cheered them, and some of the blacks booed. The Angels took a break, watching the flames shoot into the dark night as they munched on candy bars.

At every stop there were rumors and speculation. Someone who had just come from dinner at the Summit, a posh restaurant atop the downtown Renaissance Center, said that suburbanite patrons were cheering the fires as they dined alongside revolving glass walls. A fat man with a droopy mustache claimed that a family was trapped inside a burning house on the east side, and led a party of sightseers off to look for them. A debate broke out about who was setting the fires—teenage hoodlums, wealthy slumlords after insurance money, feuding neighbors trying to settle old scores. The spectators swapped tales of previous Devil’s Nights and watched the fire fighters’ work with practiced eyes.

The fires raged on and on, more than two hundred that night (and, I later learned, almost four hundred in the three-day Halloween period). Detroit is a city of one- and two-story homes, most of

them built on narrow lots. During the past thirty years, the city has lost almost half its population, and there are entire blocks where all but one or two of the houses are boarded up and vacant. Some parts of the city look like pasture land. Flames raced through the brush and into abandoned wood buildings. The gawkers cheered the firemen and jostled one another happily. Devil's Night 1986 was judged a resounding success.

At dawn, on the way home, I asked the reporter what it was all about. "Fuck if I know," he said in a weary tone. "Frustration, anger, boredom. I only work here. I stopped trying to figure out this city a long time ago."

So had I. In 1967 I moved to Israel, and in the intervening years I had rarely thought about Detroit at all. I knew in general terms that the auto industry was in bad shape; that the 1967 riot had sent whites fleeing to the suburbs in droves; that the city was now mostly black, and had a black mayor, Coleman Young; and that the national press referred to it as "Murder Capital, USA." Beyond that, Detroit held little interest for me.

But the fires of Devil's Night sparked my curiosity. Approaching forty, I found myself unexpectedly drawn to my old hometown, a place that had gone in one generation from a wealthy white industrial giant to a poverty-stricken black metropolis. I resolved that night to come back to the city, and to write about it.

For me, this was the closing of a circle. As a small boy I had always been fascinated by black people. In the gray monotony of a Michigan car-town they seemed like vivid, foreign strangers. I can still remember my earliest glimpses of the black section of town, ripe with intimations of exotic vitality and mystery.

There was one intersection in particular, Bagley and Wesson, known as The Corner, that captured my imagination. It was nothing special—a few country-looking stores, a small hotel, LaRoaches Tea Room, the Big Six Republican Club pool hall—but whenever I passed it I longed to leave the safety of my parents' Chevrolet and find out what was going on. I wanted to taste the food at LaRoaches,

hear the musical banter of the poolroom, touch the dark flesh of the laughing women who stood on the street in front of the shabby hotel. I wanted to peek into people's homes and lives, find out why they were different from me, so different that they inhabited a separate world of their own.

Of course I never did, at least not then. The Corner had a fearsome reputation—Pontiac people claimed with perverse pride that it had once been listed by *Time* magazine as the most dangerous intersection in America—and I was afraid. Besides, I was too young to go wandering around strange neighborhoods, black or white, by myself.

And so, like other white kids drawn to the black world, I found safe substitutes. I listened to radio stations out of Detroit and learned the names of esoteric r&b artists, traded Ted Williams for Willie Mays even up, and practiced a loose-limbed ghetto strut in the mirror behind my bedroom door.

Then, when I was thirteen, something happened that gave a new dimension to my feeling about blacks. That year, my grandfather Max was beaten to death.

Max Chafets left Russia to escape the Czar's army and wound up first in Windsor, Canada, and then in Detroit. He was a gentle little socialist who raised three children, read the Yiddish papers every day and rooted for the good guys when he watched wrestling on television. For years he made a modest living with a small mom-and-pop store in a black neighborhood. When he opened the store he knew nothing about blacks, and unlike me, he was never fascinated by them. But he did care about people, and sometimes he had nightmares about the Ku Klux Klan chasing and hurting the children who bought Popsicles and Maryjanes in his store.

Max's daughter, Ruth, married a man named Jack Fine, who had his own grocery on the corner of Linwood and Grand, a neighborhood that went from Jewish to black in the mid-1950s. When Max retired, and sold his little store, he went to work part-time for his son-in-law. On Saturday mornings, when Jack went to the Eastern Market to buy produce, Max would take over, humming Yiddish

melodies to himself as he stood behind the counter, next to the cash register.

On one of those Saturday mornings, only a few days after my grandfather celebrated his seventieth birthday, two black men entered the store. They pulled guns and demanded money. Max gave it to them. Then, for some reason, one of them pistol-whipped him. An hour later, he died in the emergency room of Detroit's Receiving Hospital.

My grandfather's death traumatized our family. For a full year afterward, my father and uncle got up at daybreak to say the prayer for the dead in synagogue. They mourned in the traditional way, refusing to go out for pleasure, or even to watch television. I recall that year as a harsh, painful time, made worse by my private sense of guilt.

Beyond a generalized liberalism, my parents had no special feelings about blacks. It was I who filled the house with the sounds of Ray Charles and Bo Diddley, insisted on being Elgin Baylor in neighborhood pickup games, demanded to be driven, time and again, past The Corner, for yet another glimpse of the exotic black world. And now two black killers had beaten my grandfather to death. For a time I was full of fear and bitterness and a strange sense of complicity. I had wanted to know the dark secrets of the ghetto; now they had invaded my own family in a way I hadn't imagined.

At about this time I met Charles. I was shooting baskets with some friends at a nearby playground when he turned up. For a while he stood silently and watched. My friends and I were all white, and pretty good, but from time to time we heard him emit a contemptuous snort.

The game ended, and playground court etiquette demanded that we allow him to pick a team for the next one. He was five-nine or so, broad across the shoulders but thin and very dark. His hair was cut close to his skull, his nose was narrow and flared sharply at the nostrils, and he had thin, cruel lips. There was something regal and

fierce-looking about him, like the leader of a slave rebellion. I guessed he was a year or two older than us, probably fifteen or so.

Somebody tossed the ball to Charles and for a moment he stood there fondling it. Then, with the quickest move I had even seen, he faked his head upward, took several powerful dribbles to the basket, flew into the air and dunked the ball. No one had ever come close to dunking in one of our games, and we stood there frozen in amazement.

Charles chose me as one of his teammates, and we stayed on the court for the rest of the afternoon, unbeatable. I remember playing harder that day than I had ever played before, and once or twice I made a move or hit a shot that elicited his approval. But it wasn't until I had a rebound snatched out of my hands that he seemed to really notice me. "Man, you gotta use your 'bows," he said angrily. "You can't 'bound unless you use your 'bows." That was the first, but by no means last, admonition I heard from Charles; typically, it was sound advice.

That day was the beginning of a friendship that lasted for many years and ended badly. It was a friendship made up of mutual envy and curiosity, boyhood competitiveness and more than a little hero worship on my part. For in a town of runners and jumpers, Charles could leap higher and sprint faster than anyone else. He could also dance cooler, talk sweeter, fight tougher and make love to more girls than anyone I had ever met. Naturally, I hoped that some of these attributes would rub off on me.

Although we were friends, the balance of power between us was clear: I was Tom Sawyer to Charles's Huck Finn. He accepted his role of mentor naturally and with grace, and imparted wisdom with generosity. Once, when some bigger kids tried to coerce me into "loaning" them my lunch money, Charles found out and forced me to fight one of them. "You can't let nobody hold your money but you," he said, a sound fiscal principle that remained with me long after the swelling on the side of my face receded. After the fight, Charles inspected the damage with dispassion. "You ain't always