

The Detroit Blackout

Power without Power

William Boyer (Bill Boyer)

2003

Our backyard bonfire crackles, dimly lighting the faces of neighbors and their dogs emerging from the shadows. Secure with our bottled water, red wine and campfire grill, over a dozen of us trade clumsily barbecued chicken, whitefish, and green peppers, along with vignettes of the worst power outage in American history.

It's almost midnight, Thursday, August 14, in the heart of Detroit, an anachronistic darkness has descended, draping the area with an oddly nervous calm. We're quietly chatting only three houses away from the usually noisy, cavernous Lodge Freeway, yet now, only an occasional car, siren or barking dog interrupts the eerie stillness.

The desolation is disconcerting. Only Henry Ford Hospital oddly flickers (through generators) in the fading distance, like a faint lighthouse over a vast concrete desert. This is the first time anyone can recall seeing a star-bright sky here, of noticing Orion and Taurus instead of the street light glare, that incandescent blur of the typical urban night.

Detroit feels like a frontier ghost town. A blanket of quiet restlessness envelops the patter of our voices and a lone transistor radio. As we consider sleeping under the stars or roaming the deserted streets, a crashing bang suddenly jolts us into action. We venture cautiously out into the surrounding darkness, armed with only flashlights and baseball bats. Intruders have just broken into a neighbor's house, kicking in two doors, before mysteriously vanishing into the night. This incident becomes part of our accumulating blackout stories that range from ecstatic partying in the darkened neighborhoods to the fear of burglars and car thieves.

We later learn of sporadic looting of gas stations, pharmacies, and sadly, a small neighborhood restaurant, but most deserving targets (such as Target, and other corporate community-killers) have long since bypassed this depressed community. The smashed windows in our part of town give the lie to the false pride in the unctuous "good citizen" speech given by Detroit's mayor. Tonight, we are more preoccupied with our proximity to each other: we're more spontaneously unified, and more concerned about sharing, at least temporarily, our downshifted lives.

Hours earlier, stranded motorists and homeless street people volunteered as traffic cops at the city's busiest gridlocked intersections. A state of emergency and general 10 o'clock curfew has been imposed by Michigan's governor, yet depleted police patrols now remain confined to select businesses, such as closed gas stations to prevent looting.

Most of our curious group decides on a late night walking tour of the neighborhood. An unmarked patrol car pulls up along side us. Their bullhorn blares, "I see you," but the cops seem more wary of us, and they soon lurch away. We wander past the local grocery store parking lot. A truck covers the store's entrance, and several family members obviously connected to the grocer suspiciously greet us. We assume they are heavily armed.

Despite the ongoing reassurances from state and local government officials, particularly the premature proclamations about low crime during the blackout, we know they are blanket fabrications serving as attempted crowd control.

When we finally make it across the major streets, to the Woodbridge area, the nearest extended neighborhood, we notice assorted groups of people, black and white, children and elderly, cavorting together by candlelight on

porches. These darkened streets softly reflect a smiling, neo-primitive celebration, an ongoing toast to community as necessity. We eventually reach a friend's above ground pool, which becomes a skinny-dip oasis, as we strip and plunge from this strange day's heat and social disruption.

A young companion points beyond the tree line surrounding the water. "What's that bright light shining through the trees?" Someone mentions that Comerica Park is awash with massive generators, that a stage and light show are being prepared for a (soon-to-be-canceled) Kiss/Aerosmith concert, that maybe the glow is from the idiotic bombast of the stadium set-up.

A friend replies, laughing, "No, look again. Can't you tell what that light is?

It's the moon."

* * *

Governor Jennifer Granholm made a statement commending Detroiters for "no reported incidents of looting that we know of." Someone from Detroit posted the following message on infoshop.org:

"I don't know what Detroit she's keeping tabs on, but I listened to the frequencies that the Detroit police department uses to communicate (the squad cars, dispatch, headquarters etc.) and they were running around like crazy on numerous reports of looting throughout the entire city!"

There was in fact looting, shooting and stabbing homicides, assaults, breaking and entering, armed robberies, hit and runs, fatal collisions, pedestrians hit by vehicles, car jacking (in one incident a parking lot attendant was held hostage while multiple cars were jacked as they entered the lot), missing children reports, and sexual assaults all over the airwaves. And I only scanned the police bands until around 11:30 p.m.

I don't know how she could go on the air and proclaim a night of calmness when I was thinking it was approaching a declaration of martial law.

fifth Estate

William Boyer (Bill Boyer)
The Detroit Blackout
Power without Power
2003

<https://www.fiftheestate.org/archive/362-fall-2003/the-detroit-blackout>
Fifth Estate #362, Fall, 2003

[fiftheestate.anarchistlibraries.net](https://www.fiftheestate.org)