

NEW YORK CITY BLACKOUT

By Jessica Phippen *

The New York City Blackout of 1977

"These late eclipses in sun and moon portend no good to us. Though the wisdom of Nature can reason it thus and thus, yet nature finds itself scourged by sequest effects. Love cools, friendship falls off, brothers divide: in cities, mutinies, in countries, discord..." - King Lear, Act I, ii, 103-8

One lightning strike at Buchanan South was all that was needed to trip two circuit breakers that set off a chain of events. It all started at 8:37 p.m., with the first lightning strike, and then there was another and then another at 8:55 which took out two transmission lines. Only one of the lines could be restored. Con Edison reduced the load on another generator - on the East River-, and at 9:14 Con Edison reduced the power in New York City by 8%. By 9:19, a substation tripped because of thermal overload. By 9:36, the entire Con Edison power system shut down, just about an hour after the initial lightning strike, the lightning strike that sparked the New York City blackout of 1977. For two days, the city was paralyzed. Under the cover of darkness, chaos broke out. 1,616 stores were damaged due to rioting and looting. 1,037 fires were started - two blocks of Broadway were on fire. 3,776 people were arrested. I was not among them, but I came very close.

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What is it about the darkness? I continue to ask myself this. New York City was in the middle of a horrible financial crisis and an equally severe heat wave, and all that was needed was a single lightning strike to trigger complete disorder. Financial crisis, unbearable July weather and darkness. This combination was enough to plunge the city into even deeper debt, and to provoke in its inhabitants a barbaric spirit. I can still remember the heavy darkness that weighed on the eyes and the heart that tempted the savagery in us all to emerge, to act, to destroy.

The New York City blackout flashed on the television screens of the entire nation. It ravaged the city's image, already a dark one, and even succeeded the people against themselves, including myself. I had imagined myself to be a certain type of human, a certain type of man. Certainly reliable, certainly decisive - I had to be, considering my work - and perhaps more importantly, a man of control. I was somewhat passive in this last aspect, meaning that I allowed the bonds of law and of common civility to bind me, to regulate my actions. This characteristic of mine was something that my wife resented in me, it was unspoken, but constantly between us. She was in Miami with our two daughters visiting her parents during the blackout.

On July 13th, 1977 at 9:36 p.m. the lights went off in my apartment. For a moment, I sat alone in the darkness, the brightness from the television still flashing in my eyes as they struggled to become accustomed to the darkness. We must have blown a fuse, I thought wearily. Trusting in the super's ability to fix the problem, I moved towards the window, thinking that I might as well enjoy this brief moment of solace from modern convenience and enjoy a view of the city. But I found, as I took those first few steps towards the window, that it wasn't just my building that had blown a fuse, but the entire city.

The usual cool yellow lights of the city were gone - the silhouettes of the city's tall, perpendicular structures were hardly visible against the black sky. My eyes still flashed with the lights from the television. I blinked and gazed down at the street below me and noticed the sparkling lights of the cars below - so much more apparent now that they were the only source of illumination. The city, from street-level up seemed to be resting. It all looked so peaceful from up here, perhaps the calm before the storm, so I remained where I was.

It was a long time before I even began to consider the consequences of this darkness. There could be no traffic lights, no street lights, no light whatsoever. We were in complete darkness. New York City is controlled by its traffic lights, they are the only thing that contains the mad taxi drivers, they maintain and regulate the order of the city. I couldn't help but think about the traffic lights in the loneliness of my apartment.

I was torn between my curiosity to explore the city during this most miraculous of occasions and my natural inclination to stay in the safety of the apartment. I stood up and moved towards my briefcase, that I had laid on a table beside the door. I found my cell phone, the battery almost dead, and called my wife in Miami. I was sent straight to her voice mail.

"Hi Katherine, it's John. There seems to be some sort of blackout in the city. I'm all right, but my phone is almost dead, so don't panic if you can't reach me. I'll give you a call as soon as I can."

As the screen on my phone turned black, I realized that I was completely alone. There was no way for my wife to reach me, for anyone to reach me at all. I stood in the darkness of the apartment, my mind racing to find some sort of occupation. The curiosity rose in me again, and I couldn't restrain it. I had to go outside. I pulled on my shoes and grabbed my keys and wallet as I headed out of the door. I paused by the light switch, shook my head and left.

The hallway was dark as well, so I pressed the palm of my left hand against the wall, with my right held out in front of me, and felt my way down the hall. My hand alighted on door cracks and doorknobs, and numbers - getting increasingly smaller. I pressed the button to call the elevator, but then I remembered the blackout. I pressed my hands against the wall and felt my way towards the stairs. The darkness was starting to lift a little as my eyes grew accustomed to it, so I managed to find the stairs faster than when I had navigated my way through the halls towards the elevator.

Moving down the stairs, I began to wonder what where I should go once I reached the ground. This strange new curiosity of mine gave no indicators. Broadway I thought would be a curious thing to see. That street is so defined by its shining advertisements and dazzling myriad of neon lights, that it would hardly seem so miraculous without them. I wondered if those dark silhouettes that I had seen before were the true New York, and the lights just the glittering curtain drawn across the dark stage behind.

I reached the ground floor and pushed open the door out of the stairwell. It was a little lighter out here, for some odd reason, and I was able to make it to the doors without using my hands as guides.

"Hello Mr. Pitzer."

I jumped. I had completely forgotten about Tom - the doorman - behind his large mahogany desk. "Hold on," he said. I heard him fumbling with something, and then he turned on a flashlight. He moved towards me, pointing it at my chest, his polished shoes reflecting the light that danced off the tiled floors. "Sorry Mr. Pitzer, didn't mean to frighten you."

"That's all right Tom," I replied. "Do you know what's going on?"

"Some sort of blackout," he said. "Whole city's been knocked out."

"Not just Manhattan?"

"No, everywhere. Are you leaving?"

"I thought I might take a walk."

"I wouldn't recommend that Mr. Pitzer."

"Why?"

"Well, everyone becomes a bit agitated in these sorts of situations. No lights, nothing at all really. It's just not natural."

"You think that people will take advantage of the blackout?"

"Of course they will. And the worst of it is, that we won't know what's going on. There's no way to know what's out there unless you're caught in the middle of it."

"What? Riots?"

"Yes. Fires too, I'll bet. It'll be chaotic. Best not to go out."

"I'll be very careful Tom, don't worry. I'm just a little curious, that's all."

"Well, as they say, curiosity killed the cat."

"Thank-you Tom."

"You're welcome, Mr. Pitzer."

I turned to leave, but he called me back. "Would you like a flashlight, I've got an extra."

"I'll be fine, thanks Tom."

"All right, goodbye Mr. Pitzer."

"Goodbye Tom."

I stepped out into the warm July air and noted that it was lighter outside than it had seemed from above. I looked back at Tom behind me. He turned his flashlight off again - probably to save the batteries - and sat in the darkness. Several police cars drove by, their sirens were on and the red lights atop their cars were flashing. I moved in the direction they were travelling, curious about their destination. I walked by a 24-hour convenience store, with a "Closed" sign on its door and glimpsed the owner inside, moving between the aisles. I found that I was unconsciously moving towards La Perla, my favourite Italian restaurant. If it was open, I might sit and have a drink at the

bar.

I walked by another convenience store, a Dunkin' Donuts, a Duane Reade, a wine store, all of which were closed. Finally I reached La Perla, which was open, and I hurried in. The restaurant usually employed very dim lighting and candles, but tonight was forced to rely solely on the latter. The natural light from outside shone through the large windows, but was still hardly enough, even when coupled with the candles, to provide enough light for its occupants to function efficiently. I asked the maître d' to seat me at the bar and I ordered a whiskey from the bartender. A waitress whom I hadn't seen before came over and handed me a menu and a large candle, but there really was no need for either. I had the menu memorised. I asked for a few starters, but had to redefine my order somewhat when I was reminded that because of the blackout, they could only serve cold meals. The waitress moved off to attend to the other customers, and I noticed that in her hand she was carrying several extra candles which she placed at various locations around the restaurant.

"Hello," said a voice to my left. I turned to see a young man with flushed cheeks and shining blue eyes. "Matt." He held out his hand to me. It took me a moment to realise that this was meant to be a greeting. I took his hand and replied equally tersely, "John."

He nodded his approval and took a long gulp of his drink. He ordered another from the bartender and turned back towards me. "Strange, isn't it?"

"What is?" I asked, twirling the whiskey glass in my hand.

"This whole thing. This whole city. Everyone." He flung his arm around, indicating everyone in the restaurant as if they were meant to represent everyone. He narrowly avoided hitting me in the head.

"Are you talking about the blackout?" I raised a brow at him.

"Well, of course," he looked surprised that I needed the clarification. He slammed his hands down on the table. "What would I be talking about under the circumstances. That's what everything's about. This darkness," he took another drink from his glass and almost emptied it. He must be drunk, I thought.

"What do you do Matt?" I asked, changing the subject to something, perhaps, a little more concrete.

"I am an actor," he said, over enunciating each syllable and making yet more flourishes with his arms. He took a moment before he politely asked me what I did.

"I work at J.P. Morgan," I replied.

"What's that?" he slurred.

"It's a bank."

"Oh," he paused, then looked at me hopefully. "Do you think you could loan me some money?"

"No, I'm afraid that's not really how it works. You need to apply for a loan, come in..." I lost his interest the moment I had said "no", so I moved on. "Would I have seen you in anything?"

"Are you sure you couldn't loan me something? You see, I've got this friend who just wrote a brilliant screenplay. He wants me to be in it. If we could just get a bit of funding..."

"I'm sorry, but I really can't help you," I replied. I took a sip of my whiskey and hoped that he would end the conversation here.

"Not even a little bit? Just a deposit really is all he needs..."

"No."

He was silent. He finished his drink, but didn't order another. There was along silence between us, and eventually the waitress brought out my appetizers. I began with a small mozzarella and tomato salad. Matt kept glancing at me, but I pretended not to notice.

"I suppose you get paid quite a bit of money over at J.D. Corgan's," he said.

"I suppose," I replied, not correcting him. I continued eating my food.

"I don't suppose you'd want to come to a party that this friend of mine is having, the one who wrote the screenplay. If you could just meet him, perhaps read a few pages, you would agree that it is going to be a hit."

"Sure," I nodded. I just wanted him to leave me alone and I assumed this was the best way to do it. "Where is it? I'll try to stop by."

"Here, I'll show you." He stood up and grabbed my arm.

"I'm not finished yet. I'll just meet you there."

"No, you should come now," he insisted.

"No," I asserted. "I need to finish this and then pay for my food. Just write down the address and I promise I'll stop by."

Just then Marco, a waiter I knew very well, came over, having noticed the commotion, and placed a hand on Matt's shoulder. "Is there a problem, John?"

"I think this man has had a bit too much to drink, that's all," I replied politely.

"Sir, why don't you just pay for your drinks and we'll call you a cab," Marco turned to Matt.

"No, no, no. I'm fine. How much do I owe you?" his eyelids were beginning to close, but he reached into his pocket to pull out his wallet.

Marco consulted with the bartender. "Seventy-three dollars."

Matt swore and, once again, slammed his hands down on the bar. The place went quiet, we had almost everyone's attention by now. "That's ridiculous!"

"Sir, I must ask you to calm down..." Marco soothed him.

I was getting tired of this whole scene, so I went up to the waitress and asked her for my bill. I paid and left. Marco and several other waiters were still with Matt - whose flushed face was contorting into various expressions of anger. I left La Perla behind me and began to wander aimlessly up and down the streets. Every store I passed was closed. Everyone I walked by on the street came in and out of focus in the darkness. Most of their eyes were set on the ground behind their feet and they seemed to be moving very quickly away from the direction I was heading. Their expressions were grim, some almost fearful.

Just then, there was a crash behind me. I saw the window of a jewelry store shatter and a man come flying out. For the briefest moment, I stood absolutely still, staring at the man now lying on the street, face flat against the pavement. Then I rushed towards him. I turned him onto his back, but before I could do anymore, someone came and stuck a knife to the back of my neck.

"Where's your wallet?" the man behind me hissed.

"In my back pocket," I replied. I felt him reach it and take it out.

"Thanks, old man," he lifted the knife from the back of my throat. I turned around and saw him sprint away. The man beneath me was unconscious. There was blood on over his face - he must have broken his nose -, but he was breathing, if somewhat erratically.

"Are you all right?"

There was a woman standing beside me with long red hair that she nervously shoved behind her ears. "Yes, yes, I'm fine. This man needs help, do you have a cell phone?"

"Yes, I'll call 911," she fished it out of her purse and punched the numbers into the phone.

I remembered a first aid class I had taken years before and turned the man into the recovery position. Legs bent awkwardly, the right side of his face flat against the concrete. As I was doing this, the woman called an ambulance. When she was done, she knelt down beside me and surveyed the damage. "He has broken his nose."

"Yes, but he doesn't seem to be too badly hurt."

"It might be a while,"

"For what?"

"For the ambulance," she said, resting a gentle hand on the unconscious man's shoulder. "Apparently the city's gone mad."

I nodded. I surveyed the damage behind us. Whoever had mugged me must have been robbing this jewellery store. But why would he have pushed the owner out of the window? It seemed like such an unnecessary act of violence.

I saw something out of the corner of my eye and turned to see smoke rising from building further up the street. The whole place was lit up, fire licking the air, and black smoke rising in curls above it - disappearing into the darkness.

"You might want to call the fire department," I muttered to the woman.

Her jaw had dropped, she seemed in shock. Then we both heard shouts coming from behind us. We turned to see a group of men moving up the middle of the street. There must have been several dozen of them, and they were chanting in loud voices. They had taken off their shirts, since the heat had settled uncomfortably around the city, and some had tied them around their heads.

"Oh God," the woman whispered.

"Come on, let's move him off the sidewalk, before he gets trampled."

She nodded, but it took her a moment to register what I had said. Finally, she helped me move him across the sidewalk and we leaned him against the wall of his store. I checked his breathing again while the woman stood and watched the fire. "I hope no one's in there."

"Call the fire department," I instructed her. She nodded and picked up her phone again. She seemed to work best when given specific directions.

I stepped away from them both and moved further up the street towards the fire. The mob was moving closer to us now. Some of them had gotten a hold of pipes and other crude weapons and were using them to knock side mirrors off of cars and break windshields. They continued to chant something that I couldn't understand, their voices were discordant, and their words muddled and riotous. Soon, they were no more than a few feet away from me. One began to attack the car nearest to me and I backed away from them, glancing at the woman. She had made the call and was now sitting on the ground next to the shopkeeper, her hands shielding her eyes. She could hardly be seen in the darkness.

The mob began to move onto the sidewalk beside me and soon I was swept up with them. Their words were still unfamiliar to me, and that frightened me. The tone of their voices, the violent sweep of their arms as they aimed at not only cars now, but shop windows. They smashed the windows. I tried to look back to find the woman and the unconscious man but I couldn't see anything other than the naked torso of the man behind me. His eyes were wild, and he was sweating all down his hairy chest.

We passed by the fire, which was growing. I could hear screams, I thought I saw faces within the flames, but I couldn't have been sure. I heard sirens but couldn't tell if they belonged to an ambulance, a fire truck or a police car. The noise was deafening, my arms ached where they were being shoved by others. I had no choice but to move with these men, these mad, demoniacal men who seemed to control the environment around them. What once must have been a peaceful street was turned into a scene of abject destruction. I found that the man beside me had handed me a twisted metal pipe. He glanced at me and our gazes met, and soon not only had I lost control of my body, but my mind as well.

I swung my pipe at a shop window and felt a rush of adrenaline as the glass cracked into a thousand delicate pieces but refused to shatter. I hit it again, but was soon rushed off with the rest of the group. I thought I saw more buildings on fire. I thought I saw the man who mugged me, moving through the mob. I thought I saw the red-haired woman. I was sure I saw Matt somewhere, with his shirt tied around his head with this darting blue eyes. But everything that we passed soon disappeared, the only places of illumination were the various fires behind. They burned like fireflies in the night, flashing and disappearing in the blackness surrounding them.

I cracked a windshield. I smashed a car door. I gripped the metal pipe tighter and swung at another glass window. The men around me continued to make their odd noises and I joined in,

contributing my own meaningless gibberish. Soon I began to understand them. Their anger. Their sense of injustice. Their rabid enthusiasm.

I realized that we were moving closer and closer towards Broadway and, as we did, I could hear the sirens getting even louder. I saw police cars ahead of me. The riot police were out, their plastic shields were held out in front of them, and they wore heavy metal helmets upon their heads. The mob began to slow down as it hit the barrier formed by the police. As I saw them, and felt the surge behind me begin to slow, I began to regain my control. I felt the pipe in my hand and realized how ridiculous it all was. I dropped it quickly and then turned around. The bodies were pressed tightly around me, everyone was sweating, still yelling, but less forcefully, they were less certain now.

With a sudden burst of energy, I managed to push my way through them, parting the mass around me. I pushed until I reached a tiny side street that I managed to slip down. I ran down it, my breath heavy, my feet pounding on the ground. I still felt the cool metal of the pipe in my right hand even though I had discarded the thing itself. The darkness enveloped me, until I emerged onto a larger street. People were running up and down the sidewalk, but there was a different energy to their movements. These people were terrified.

For the second time that night, I allowed myself to be carried away by the masses. They dragged me down, away from Broadway and back home. I ran with them, feeling the pressure of fear around me. I could see more fires, I could still hear the sirens, but they were fading slightly. It was all becoming hazy. I ran past La Perla, a wine shop, a Duane Reade, a Dunkin' Donuts. I glanced at a closed convenience store, I moved as quickly as I could until I saw the familiar doors of my apartment building. I slammed myself into the revolving doors, out of the stream of people around me and fell into the relative quiet of the building. I heard Tom fumbling around and flashlight shone on my face, blinding me completely.

By 10:39 p.m. on July 14th, 1977, power had been completely restored to the entire city. The fires lay in ashes, the streets were empty. By 10:45 p.m., I had called my wife and assured her of my safety. I did not recount the story of the previous night. Matt. The mugger. The red-haired woman and the unconscious shop-keeper. The riot. The people. I told her nothing of it, except that I was all right. She was coming back in two days and warned me to be careful. By 11 p.m. I had hung up the phone. The lights were in my apartment, just as they had been before the blackout. My phone was charging in the bedroom.

I went over to the window and saw the lights of the city restored. They twinkled, casting a beautiful, romantic glow across the night. The lights of Broadway could be seen, shining and vast, cutting across Manhattan island. The traffic lights have been restored below me. The silhouettes of the Empire State Building, the Chrysler Building, were no longer hidden, but had been illuminated. I turned on the television set and listened to the gentle hum of the newscaster's voice. She was saying something about the blackout - the riots, the fires, the looting. But I could hardly pay attention. I was too entranced by the beautiful lights of the city, the stars that should have been in the sky. They mesmerized me so that I could only admire their splendor, and I forgot the horrors of the previous night. Tom put his flashlight away that night, but I found that I couldn't sleep.