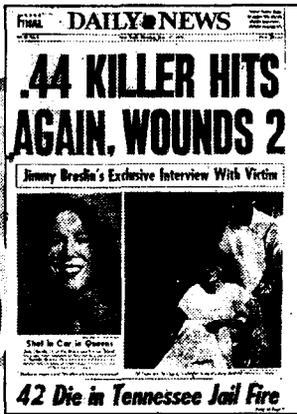
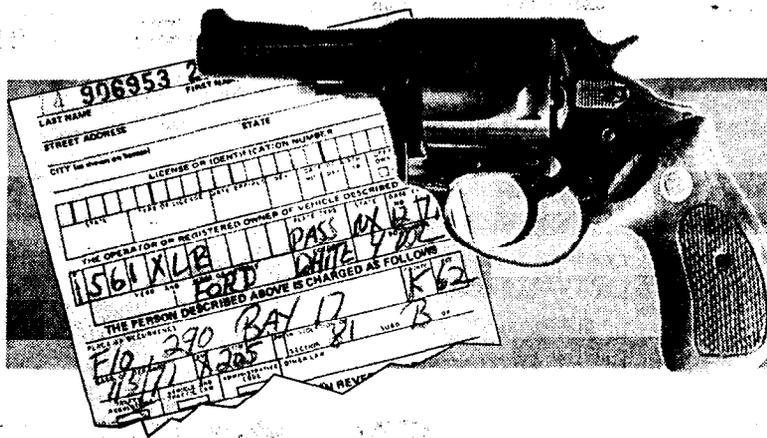


BLACKOUT OF '77



A FRENZY IN



SON OF SAM killer David Berkowitz eluded arrest long enough in the summer of 1977 to drape a blanket of fear over New York City. A parking ticket eventually led cops to Berkowitz in Yonkers.

THAT NIGHT, 20 SUMMERS AGO, when the lights went out, Linda Piscitelli was 18 years old and out for a night at the movies on Queens Blvd. "Everybody started to scream. I said to myself, 'It's the Son of Sam.' I swear, I thought it was him."

Naturally. Son of Sam was everywhere that summer, the invisible third wheel on every date, the shadow that hovered over every kiss between a boy and girl in a lovers' lane.

By July 13, 1977, he had gunned down 11 strangers, killing five of them.

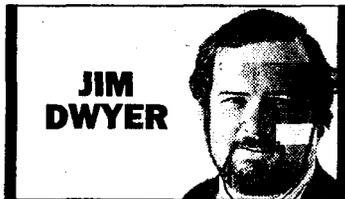
But that night, when all the electricity in New York stopped at 9:34 p.m., David Berkowitz was holed up in his apartment on Pine St. in Yonkers, listening for the bark of a dog that told him when to murder. The dog did not howl that night. Berkowitz stayed inside, out of harm's way.

That was the summer of 1977 for you: During the blackout, the streets of New York City were too frightening for a mass murderer who took his orders from a dog.

If you lived here then, you will never forget that summer or that night. July 13, 1977, was the worst night of the worst summer in the modern history of New York.

It is often said that laws mean nothing unless people decide to obey them. That night, in an instant, all bets were off.

Moments after the lights went out, someone threw the first brick through a store window. Suddenly, New York was owned by mobs—deranged with greed and rage—people, who just minutes earlier, had been peaceably sitting on stoops or standing on corners to escape the mugginess of apartments. Now, the gate to a ladies



Road was tied to the tail of a car, and was ripped away from the storefront with the wrenching, crunching noise of bones being broken. A few doors away, the staff of a Crazy Eddie's mounted the counters, armed with rifles.

All over the city, people rose to gnaw the life from their own streets, from Tremont and Westchester Aves. in the Bronx, to Harlem and Jamaica, Queens, and along Broadway in Bushwick, Brooklyn.

By the hundreds, then the thousands, tiny neighborhood shops were looted and burned. Baby carriages and stereo systems and bottles of liquor, sofas and lamps and the entire contents of an A&P—every last item on the shelves—were carried away.

In Bushwick, Denis Hamill remembers seeing a young kid carrying an air conditioner home.

The 'boy lugged it up three flights of stairs, and proudly

His mother plugged it in, but of course, with the whole city in blackness, nothing happened. In disgust, she pushed the new air conditioner out the window.

"Now go get one that works," she told her son.

It was the same everywhere, people gorging in the dark.

"The only way we're going to get it is to take," said Cherryl Ross, 18, standing in front of Tom Dick and Harry's sneakers near 108th St. and Third Ave. in Manhattan.

"When it's dark, you take everything you can get," said her friend, Jackie House, 16. "Look, dungarees are \$17.99. And sneakers are \$24. Who wants to buy sneakers for \$24?"

Years earlier, during a riot in Harlem, the targeted stores were those owned by "outsiders"—whites, most of them Jews—while black-owned businesses were spared. A Chinese restaurant owner famously posted a sign that said "Me colored too." Now, in 1977, Sonny Robinson, a black man who had been in business on 125th St. for 24 years, saw his camera store stripped clean.

A few blocks south, it was the same for Frank Prescott and Stanley Armstrong; the second minority businessmen

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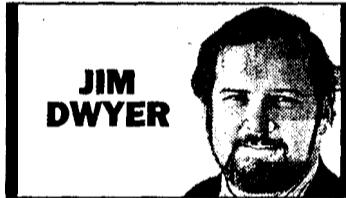
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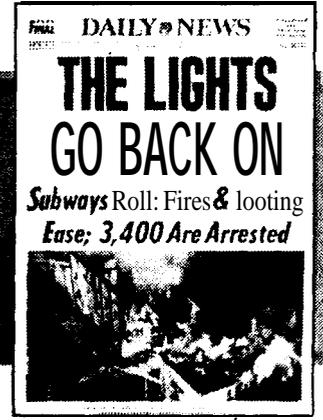
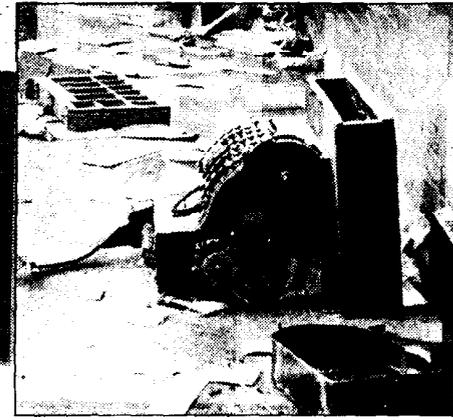
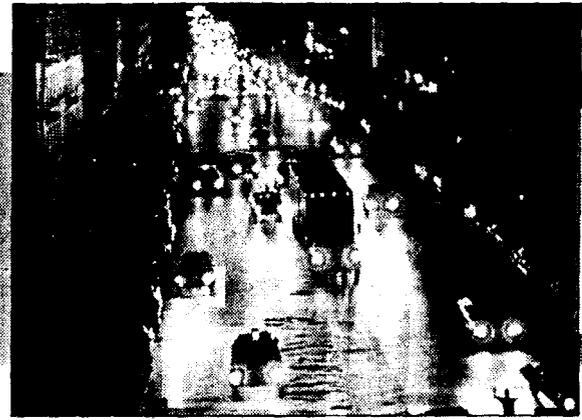
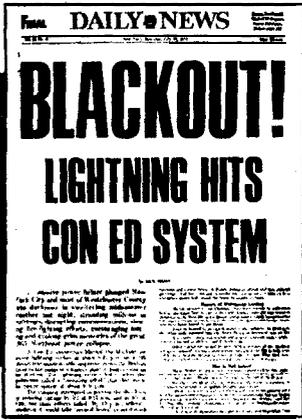
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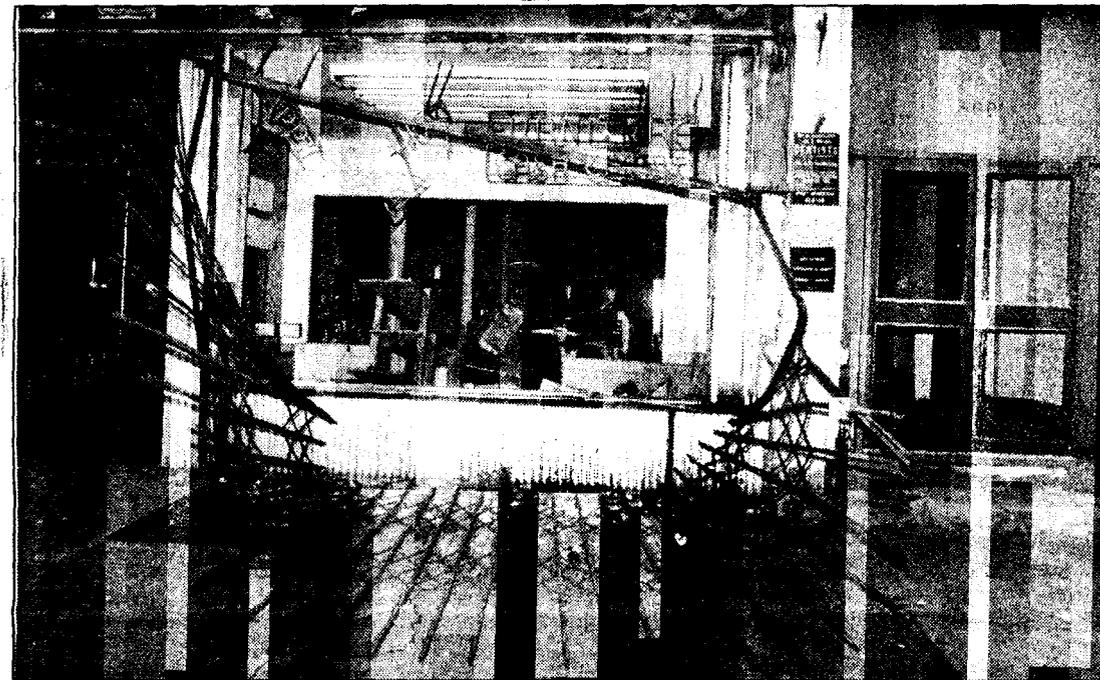
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DREADFUL DARKNESS



RUINS Storefront gates lie twisted and destroyed after failing to keep out looters during the blackout.

Business Administration. When their store — Furniture and Things, at 94th and Columbus — was breached

guilty be sentenced to one year of hard labor, rebuilding the streets and stores that had been gutted.

An excellent suggestion. But by the time the court cases were done, no one cared enough to rebuild those streets, or even to teach those young people what they had done to themselves, to their city, and to their time.

We were ruined, and that was the end of it.

Two weeks after the blackout, Son of Sam would creep up to a parked car in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, and shoot his last rounds of .44-caliber ammunition, killing Stacy Moskowitz and blinding Robert Violante. A woman walking her dog noticed that a yellow Ford Galaxie had been given a ticket for parking at a hydrant. The police would trace the ticket and the car to David Berkowitz in Yonkers, and find the .44 in the car. "What took you so long?" he asked when the detectives grabbed him.

Officially, the Con Edison company blamed the blackout

Business Administration. When their store — Furniture and Things, at 94th and Columbus — was breached, neighbors pointed flashlights at the looters. Normally, looting is a crime done in the shadows, a perversion of ordinary people.

But they could have cared less about the lights shining on them in Furniture and Things.

The chandelier was too much trouble to remove, so someone smashed it. Another early arrival at the party saw a couch that was too big to move. **He slashed** it open with a knife.

"I don't know what I am going to do," said Prescott. "I'm not a gunman. I don't own one, and I wouldn't know how to use one even if I did."

So many fires were set that buildings burned themselves out, with no firemen available.

"I am watching the houses burn down on my block," said a woman on E. 106th St. in El Barrio, who called a radio station to beg for the fire trucks.

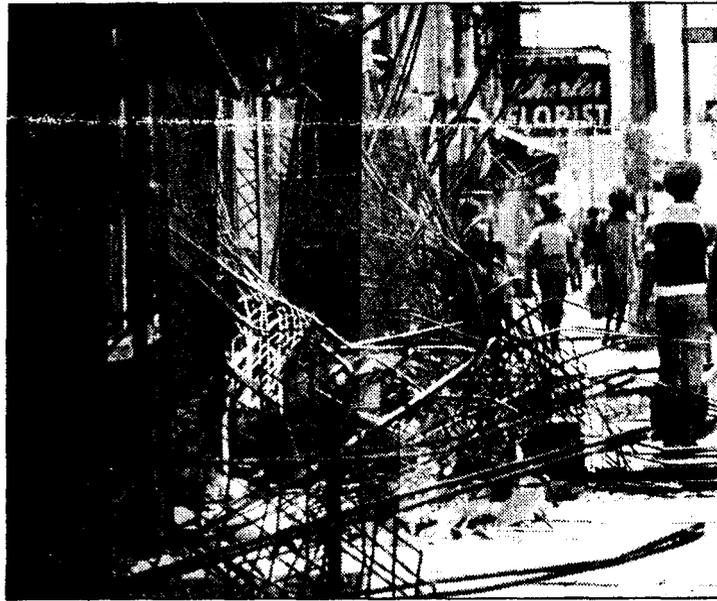
An hour later, she called to announce that another one had burned.

Then another one. "The tires are right next door to my house," she said.

"Don't you think you should leave?" asked the radio host.

"No way — if I do that, and the house doesn't catch fire, they'll rob all my stuff," she said.

All off-duty police were ordered into work. Some 10,000 stayed home. Those who came, for the most part, showed vast common sense



and restraint: On every corner were people committing ugly, vile crimes against their own communities. The police fired no shots.

Not long before, in November 1965, another blackout had hit the city. Citizens directed traffic. The frail were carried up stairs in buildings where elevators stopped. The event became a celebration of decency and heroism, a city of Jimmy Stewarts. A few days afterward, signs appeared in buses and subways, thanking the public for their brilliant response in the crisis.

No such sign would appear in 1977.

Certainly, with the terror in 1977, there also was greatness of spirit. In the Bronx, people in Parkchester sat around the

dark oval and strummed guitars. Windows on the World fed 600 by candlelight. Neighbors checked on old people who lived alone. Emergency surgery was done in a parking lot at Brooklyn Jewish Hospital. An unknown actor was in a movie trailer on 42d St., filming the first of the Superman movies. His name was Christopher Reeve. His movie crew loaned their klieg lights to the Daily News so the people in the office could see the newspaper they were laying out.

But this was the flow of ordinary goodness through a healthy vein in a body suddenly over taken by flesh-eating bacteria.

Far from being a Jimmy Stewart moment, the blackout of 1977 was the perfect sound-

RUINS Storefront gates lie twisted and destroyed after failing to keep out looters during the blackout of July 13, 1977 (above and left). Solomon Altshim (far left) eyes the mess in his shoe store.

track for David Berkowitz and his murderous siege.

Some 2,000 stores were looted. Even to this day, you can see their gutted shells, like gaping skulls, in Bushwick and parts of the Bronx. Nearly 4,500 people were arrested. It turned out that about half of them had jobs.

Why had it gone so ugly? The 1965 blackout happened in the cool of November, not a warm July night. In 1965, the city economy was in pretty good shape, although it was poised for a catastrophic collapse and flight of jobs — leading to a level of idleness among the young that, by 1977, would be close to a historic bottom.

Still, that was no excuse. "It is self-destructive — suicidal — for us to even imply that we accept joblessness as a reason justifying looting," said an editorial in the Amsterdam News, the largest black newspaper in the country. "We cannot accept this behavior of our young people. We love them too much. . . . It has taken us too long to get where we are to accept such destructive behavior now."

As punishment, the paper proposed that those found

Berkowitz in Yonkers, and find the .44 in the car. "What took you so long?" he asked when the detectives grabbed him.

Officially, the Con Edison company blamed the blackout on one man who didn't push a button fast enough to shut down parts of the system before the whole thing collapsed.

But the worker reminded the public, and his bosses, that he had no formal training to handle an overload. And he didn't have a blueprint to tell him where to begin shutting it down. The utility promised to learn from the mistakes.

But if it was only a power system that failed on July 13, hardly anyone would remember it.

We discovered that order and civilization exist behind the thinnest of membranes that people can rupture almost at will.

But from those sad, apocalyptic days, we learned little else. The hard-core poor stayed in the ghettos. As Wall Street boomed in the 1980s, so, too, did the pure capitalism of the crack trade. Three died in the blackout of 1977. Certainly, 10,000 died in crack wars, until they finally burned out in 1992.

Here is a final, weird twist. From 1977 on, the city population has risen. For every middle-class white, black and Latino who fled to the suburbs, an immigrant or two has arrived. For them, July 13, 1977, means nothing.

Those of us who remember that day, and that summer, know that the end of the world has come and gone.