Storytelling is one of the oldest, yet most provocative human art forms. It allows us to learn through the illustration and presentation of events as they happened in real time, through the words of those who participated, allowing the reader to understand and recognize the unvarnished truth. As a means of education and learning, it is innately valuable. Speaking of race and racism, it allows us to underscore our values and principles of social justice. It allows the participants to express their insights and knowledge through their actual experiences.

The author has done just that with Race, Politics, and Basketball – a fascinating story of race, racism, politics, education, and inequality in the early 1970s, told through the voices of those who were there, who witnessed it and were a part of it. It provides the juxtaposition of good and decent white kids with an unparalleled mentor who kept them on the straight and narrow, against good and decent Black and Cape Verdean kids who were forced to face the daily forces of inequality and racial unrest each and every day.

The summer of 1970 was immensely educational for all who experienced it. The Vietnam War, the civil rights movements, Black Panthers, a long, dreary recession with high unemployment – all explained through the voices of white and Black kids and adults who were there, in New Bedford, Massachusetts, living through it, and navigating the ebbs and flows of their daily lives.

In the middle of it all, a 17 year old Cape Verdean kid, standing outside a club in the city’s West End, during a period of unrest, was gunned down by three white kids from the suburbs. They didn’t even know him. To top it off, they were all acquitted at trial, despite the fact that the guy who shot the gun confessed to it.

The book tells a fascinating story of inequality, race, and politics that can help us understand the struggles that we are still going through today, as we try to understand and reconcile our differences, and treat everyone as equals. Anyone interested in the issue of race and racism in America today should read this story.

Gerry Kavanaugh is the Senior Vice Chancellor at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth. He was the Chief of Staff to Senator Edward M. Kennedy in Washington, DC, and now lives in New Bedford with his wife, Colleen.
Race, Politics, and Basketball
Race, Politics, and Basketball

A Cultural Education of Everyday Life

Gerry Kavanaugh
University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, USA

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To Colleen, the love of my life,
without whom this story could never have been told
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prologue</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>xiii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>xv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1: The Summer, the Tensions, and the Park</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2: The Aftermath</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3: The Pre-Season</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4: The Season Begins</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5: The Real Season Begins</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 6: All the Marbles</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 7: The Three Trials</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 8: Mr. O’Brien Leaves Us</td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epilogue</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
PROLOGUE

In April 2014, TMZ Sports released a tape recording of the owner of the Los Angeles Clippers, Don Sterling, making racist remarks to a female friend because she had brought Black men to Clippers’ games. In less than a week, the NBA banned Sterling from the league for life, and ordered that the team be sold.

In June of 2014, Danny Ferry, General Manager of the Atlanta Hawks, read from a scouting report on Luol Deng, with derogatory racial slurs. During the investigation of the matter, an e-mail from an owner reveals that he feels that too many Black people in the arena are scaring away potential white fans.

On July 17, 2014, Eric Garner, a 43 year old African-American father, died when a New York City police officer put a chokehold on him as he was being arrested. Police Department policy prohibits the use of chokeholds. He was being arrested for selling “loosies,” or single cigarettes. Garner’s last words, as he laid face down on the sidewalk, were “I can’t breathe.” He repeated those words 11 times.

On December 3, a grand jury failed to indict the officer involved, the one who put the chokehold on him.

On August 9, 2014, Michael Brown, an 18 year old, unarmed African-American, was gunned down by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, following a physical altercation between the two. Protests, looting, vandalism and curfews followed.

On November 24, a grand jury failed to indict the officer.

At least the Ferguson city manager, police chief, and municipal court judge were fired after the Justice Department released its report on the incident – showing that racist e-mails were commonplace, and citations and arrests of African-Americans for bogus violations of the law were aggressively pursued to generate fines to fund the local government.

On Saturday, November 22, Tamir Rice, a 12 year old African-American boy playing with a pellet gun in Cleveland, was shot to death by a white police officer. Two officers were involved – neither was indicted.

Mostly peaceful protests ensued across the country, in dozens of major cities and on college campuses.

In March of 2015, a video surfaced of students at the University of Oklahoma singing a horrific racist chant, a portion of which had the words – “there will never be a Ni***** SAE. You can hang him from a tree, but he will never sign with me.” SAE refers to Sigma Alpha Epsilon, the fraternity to which the chanters belonged.

In early April of 2015, a 50 year-old Black man named Walter Scott from North Charleston, South Carolina was shot in the back by a white police officer as he ran away after a routine traffic stop. The white police officer involved, Michael Slager, was indicted and charged with murder. In December of 2016, the judge declared a mistrial, and a new trial will take place.
And on April 12, 2015, Freddie Gray of Baltimore was arrested by local police for allegedly carrying an illegal switchblade. While transporting him in a van, Gray fell into a coma and died a week later from injuries to his spinal cord, allegedly caused during his transport when he was not provided with a seat belt. Six police officers were indicted and charged. None of the officers were convicted.

In the middle of all of this, in March of 2015, President Obama and Congressman John Lewis, with thousands of others, commemorated the 50th anniversary of Bloody Sunday on the Edmund Pettis Bridge.

And in June of 2015, a 21 year old white male named Dylann Roof walked into a prayer group meeting at the Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina, and after sitting and listening for an hour, opened fire, killing nine African-Americans, including the church’s pastor and a South Carolina state senator, Clementa Pinckney. The victims ranged in age from 26 to 87. He said later that he wanted to incite a race war.

On July 5, 2016, a 37 year old African-American man, Alston Sterling, was killed by a White police officer in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, while he was pinned down on the ground. The next night, Philando Castile, a 32 year old African-American, was shot multiple times in a suburb of St. Paul, Minnesota, by a police officer during a routine traffic stop, ostensibly for a broken tail light, with his girlfriend and her four year old daughter in the car. The next night, Micah Johnson, a 25 year old African-American shot and killed five White police officers in Dallas during a Black Lives Matter protest against the earlier shootings in Minnesota and Louisiana. All in one week.

More protests occurred as these events took place.

After all of this, Donald Trump was elected president.

These incidents, plus the election, have driven me to complete this book of New Bedford, Massachusetts, where a Cape Verdean teenager was shot down by three white males during a summer of unrest that took place in 1970, only to have all three white kids acquitted the following year. What happened in New Bedford is relevant today because it is an illustration of good, solid citizens who could no longer take the inequities of their lives without reacting with some level of unrest and tension. This is a story of good people who believed they were being treated unfairly, and further believed that they needed to respond.

Almost 45 years later, we have not made much progress, and are still fighting the same battles of the past. In some ways, we have actually regressed. But, there are lessons to be learned from that year – lessons about fairness, equity, and justice – that we can all learn a bit from. Hopefully, this book helps this learning process, so that we don’t end up with good people feeling that they, too, have no other choice than to create civil unrest.

***

I was a senior in high school, during the 1970–1971 school year, when a fellow by the name of Malvin Goode, a national news reporter for ABC television, came to New Bedford to speak at the local NAACP dinner.
Goode had grown up in Pittsburgh. After finishing college, he worked in a steel mill for a while, then got a job at the local YMCA, and ended up spearheading the fight against discrimination in YMCAs there.

Goode eventually got into radio and television reporting, and allegedly landed a job at ABC after Jackie Robinson complained to the network about its lack of Black reporters. In 1962, he became the first Black network news correspondent for ABC, and as a UN reporter, distinguished himself with his coverage of the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Goode coming to New Bedford was a pretty big deal. And he gave a good speech. One piece of it, in particular, was very poignant. Speaking of racism, he told the audience that we needed to destroy the “monsters of bigotry and narrow-mindedness”… who create the “divisiveness” based on the “color of a man’s skin.” He then added that “we do it with athletics, that Blacks and whites don’t behave according to the color of the skin of those they’re playing with or against. Why can’t we do it in the church or in the streets?”

“If the racial climate in New Bedford is going to be changed,” he said with emphasis, “you are going to have to do it, it’s your job and your responsibility.”

Those were powerful statements to make, particularly in the early 1970s, when New Bedford was facing racial tension, and the entire country was on edge about civil rights, the war in Vietnam, and the state of the economy.

I was sixteen years old. And both people and events at this time would affect me dramatically.

This is the story of a two-hundred-day period in my life—in 1970 and 1971—a turbulent time of racial tension, the Vietnam War, a depressed economy, and a search for my own identity. With the basketball courts and gyms as my refuge, this story hopefully provides an interesting and thoughtful story of the intersection of race, sports, community, and politics. And it is my hope that some of the lessons of this story can be used to avoid unrest today and in the future.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To accurately tell this important story, I leaned on the memories of a lot of different people.

For the racial tensions, a number of people were really helpful: George Clark, the City Councilor who represented the West End; Donald Gomes, an activist who was ONBOARD’s president; Joe Finnerty, the chairman of the Human Relations Commission who later became the longtime director of the local housing authority; Judge John Markey, who beat George Rogers in 1971 in the mayor’s race, and served more than a decade, after which he was appointed to a judgeship. These four sat with me in Markey’s kitchen for hours talking with me, and each other, about what happened, from the summer, all the way through the trial of the three white guys who shot the Cape Verdean teenager. They were invaluable.

Kim Holland, one of the Black Panthers shot the night Lester Lima was killed, was extraordinarily helpful, pointing me to people in the community who had been there during the most difficult times, and providing insights and reflections herself on those days. Kim also helped significantly with some of the various themes of the book. And she was right there while it was all happening.

Bill Carmo, the head of the NAACP, sat with me in his living room and recounted the entire summer as he remembered it, including a number of harrowing incidents between him and the Black Panthers. It should be noted that some time after the tensions, Bill changed his surname back to its original – do Carmo – and still goes by it.

Ross Grace, Jr., the son of Ross Grace, spent an enormous amount of time with me, relating his own memories of what his parents went through, even though he was born in only 1973.

John Pieraccini, the owner of the variety store that the Panthers took over, in his mid-90’s, was a pleasure to speak with. His mind was still as sharp as a tack, and he related the story of his entire life, and specifically the days of the unrest, with exact specificity. He was a wonderful human being, and lived in the small cape he lived in during the tensions, until he died in 2016.

Although I have never met her, Jennifer White Gonsalves wrote an extraordinary Master’s Thesis on the urban renewal project in the South End that provided me with a thorough analysis of what went on in the South End just prior to the tensions.

For the aspects of the book about Mr. O’Brien and basketball, I spoke at length to his son, Michael, and to many others who played for him: Jim Ciborowski, Pat Curran, Steve Bastoni, and John Markey. George Milot, a young teacher at Stang when I was there, and a longtime friend of Mr. O’Brien, gave me terrific insights into him. And, of course, Keith Curry, still a special friend whose trust and loyalty I will never forget.

I also spent hours with O’Brien’s wife Jean, probing as many aspects of their life together as I could. It is clear that they had a wonderful marriage and life together,
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

though it was cut short by his death. They were true partners. All of the great work that he did with kids at Stang could only have been done because he had a full, cooperative partner like Jean. She celebrated her 90th birthday in 2015.

Skip Karam drank a bunch of coffee with me while we reminisced about his battles with O’Brien – and the deep level of respect Skip had for him. Of the frequent criticism that O’Brien didn’t know the X’s and O’s of the game the way Skip did, Karam said, “He knew enough, that’s for sure. Otherwise, he wouldn’t have beaten me so often.” Skip was very classy.

Carlin Lynch, the legendary football coach in the region for 40 years who was arguably John O’Brien’s best friend, reminisced with me about John’s innate quality to help anyone and everyone, regardless of whether they were an athlete or not, or regardless of the color of their skin.

Gary Pope spent hours with me relating his time at Voke, the summer of the unrest, his relationship with Kim Holland, and anything else that might have come up in our conversation. He is still the best, just as he was back then.

Eddie Rodrigues and Brian Baptiste filled in lots of the blanks about the rivalry between Stang and New Bedford. And they both confirmed that, despite our many travels together throughout the years, we didn’t like each other very much. As both of them said, “We wanted to win.”

Regarding the trial, Judge Jack Tierney, a New Bedford lawyer who represented one of the white guys who shot Lester Lima, and Ken Sullivan, the prosecuting attorney, walked me through the trial from start to finish. Their recollections of the proceedings, the evidence, and the incident in the West End that caused Lester Lima’s death were remarkable. They both spoke as if they had just finished the case, or had just reviewed the case files.

A special thanks goes to Dean Mitchell, who read the manuscript multiple times and provided valuable insights. Dean was working on Capitol Hill, and was the chief of staff for a congressman from North Carolina. He lived in the basement of our suburban Washington home for almost a year, and ended up spending most of his free time reading the book in different forms. He was particularly helpful as I tried to put together the basketball focus.

I also can’t thank Hugh Dunn enough. A good friend and coworker, Hugh read the manuscript in great detail and gave me some insightful feedback.

My editor, Jeannette de Beauvoir, was outstanding, and took a bunch of stories and turned it into a readable book.

All of the subject matter was so interesting, I could’ve researched it and interviewed people forever. At some point, though, I needed to call it quits and get the book finished.

Finally, my most sincere thanks to the New Bedford Public Library. An accurate recounting of the events of 1970 and 1971 would not have been possible without the countless hours spent reading through their archived copies of the New Bedford Standard Times and New York Times. The staff there was incredibly hospitable. Any information that did not come from one of the numerous interviews and conversations cited above, came from my research at the local library.
INTRODUCTION

The late 60’s were a tough time.

The Vietnam War was continuing, with no real path to victory. The country was in the midst of a long recession. Unemployment was high. The civil rights movement was raging, with Black Panthers building their organizations in cities around the country.

My father was a small businessman in downtown New Bedford, a city struggling with both a lagging economy and the civil rights movement. It hadn’t always been that way. Historically, New Bedford had been an industrial leader. It had the highest per-capita income in the country during the whaling era; and even after whaling faltered, textiles became dominant, and the economy continued to boom. When the textile industry left for the south, and then for other lands altogether, the city faltered again. And it was still trying to recover.

My father ran a furniture store with his brother. Their father had opened it in 1914, and moved it to its current location in 1935, when my father was fifteen. Originally, the store sold office equipment and office supplies, then moved into home furnishings. It was called The Keystone, named after the state—Pennsylvania—where my grandfather had been born. My father had grown up right here in New Bedford; he graduated from New Bedford High School. He fought in World War II in the South Pacific. When he came home, he went into the family business.

Because of the furniture business, we were middle class and able to move to Dartmouth, a nearby suburb. We lived in a comfortable, five-bedroom house with one and a half baths for the nine of us – my parents, six siblings, and me.

But business was not good right now. The country’s economy was bad, and it was even worse in New Bedford. We were going through a long recession. And there didn’t seem to be a light at the end of the tunnel. The entire country was in the midst of the civil rights movement, and the Black Panthers were making their presence felt in cities across the country. New Bedford was one of those cities. In fact, though, New Bedford would be a unique branch, the only branch of the Panthers in the entire country where Cape Verdeans, not just African-Americans, participated.

The troubles and tensions of the civil rights movement were mounting. Martin Luther King, and then Bobby Kennedy, both icons of civil rights in the country, were assassinated. The civil rights battles in the south were broadcast nightly on the news. Tommy Smith and John Carlos made their frustrations known on national television, on the medal stand at the 1968 Mexico City Olympics, with their gloved fists.

Even in basketball, progress was slow. Texas Western, in 1966, had won the national championship with a Black starting five, the first time that had ever occurred. And they beat Kentucky, an all-white team that was a powerhouse in the college ranks.
INTRODUCTION

Not until Charlie Scott began to dominate college basketball for North Carolina in the mid- to late-sixties did the ACC even begin to recruit Black players. In football, even Bear Bryant at Alabama had an all-white team. Despite Bryant’s progressive views on civil rights, coupled with the presence of good African-American recruits, Governor George Wallace would not allow it. And Notre Dame, a national powerhouse, had only one Black player.

In New Bedford, minorities had become frustrated with their lot in life. Jobs were scarce for them, and housing conditions were bad. The local redevelopment authority was demolishing lots of substandard housing, leaving people homeless because replacement homes weren’t forthcoming. These were good people who quite rightly believed that there was just too much inequity.

So, in 1968, minority leaders established the United Front to organize and advocate for their community, and they wanted action.

In the late spring of that year, they invited the mayor of New Bedford at the time, Eddie Harrington, to a meeting at Bethel A.M.E. Church, where 80 different demands would be publicly presented to him (the demands had actually been given to the mayor the preceding Friday). Approximately 150 people attended.

For an hour and a half, the mayor sat and listened as Duncan Dottin, the former head of the local NAACP, led the group in freedom songs, and then went through each and every demand. The mayor, one of the few white people present, sat quietly, tapping his feet, and smiling bravely. The demands ranged from improvements in education, recreation, and housing, to jobs for minorities and better police/community relations.

Then, Dottin added – “We from the United Front are Black. Black in our color and Black in our thinking…We are Black and we are beautiful…We do not delude ourselves in thinking that all the Black people are with us…We have our Uncle Toms and Aunt Jemimas.”

Mayor Harrington was then allowed to speak, and was applauded when he did so. But when he said he wanted to respond to the demands, he was shouted down by the crowd. Dottin told him that he needed to come back on May 19th with written answers.

When the meeting broke up, the mayor walked out, but stood outside shaking hands with people as they left. All around him were a number of buildings boarded up as a result of rock throwing and vandalism a few weeks back.

People were getting angry.

On May 19th, the night that the mayor was supposed to present his response, he refused to attend, saying that he had a scheduling conflict. He was going to the season ending banquet for the New Bedford High School basketball team that had been so successful. They had actually beaten Stang in the tournament.

So Harrington headed over to Gaudette’s Pavilion to celebrate the season.

The United Front, they still got together at the NAACP headquarters, after a march through downtown New Bedford. More than 250 marchers went downtown, circled City Hall, and even left a note in its front door for the mayor.
INTRODUCTION

Cops were everywhere, but they were quiet, and people with signs silently strode by. The signs had a variety of messages – “Black is beautiful,” “The truth shall make us free,” and “Remember Malcolm.”

***

Over the next couple of years, this anger and frustration would build, and in 1970 would wind its way deep into New Bedford, and cause the death of a Cape Verdean teenager, widespread arson, police raids, sniper fire, curfews, and both firefighters and policemen getting pelted with rocks and bricks.

The tensions and disturbances would have a dramatic effect on my father’s business. People became afraid to come downtown during the summer, staying away for fear of getting caught up in the tensions or the looting of stores.

Unemployment was still high around the whole country. And some experts were getting worried about inflation. The economy was even worse locally. The unemployment office in New Bedford would handle more than one thousand claims the day after Thanksgiving. That’s a lot of people newly out of work and looking for benefits. Local unemployment was still rising, and by some estimates would exceed 10% in early 1971.

Major employers in the city were downsizing and laying off workers. The Acushnet Company’s rubber division, a major employer for years in New Bedford, had 400 fewer employees than the previous year.

Unemployment in the garment industry was at thirty-five percent.

Seventeen businesses closed in 1970 alone. The city had just reported that there were one million dollars in unpaid taxes, and it was about to send out demand notices to property owners.

The fishing industry, a staple of the local economy, was struggling with increased regulations and deflated prices. It still brought in one hundred and eleven million pounds of fish in 1970, with a value of nineteen million dollars—the second-largest catch in the country, and better even than in 1969 when it had ranked fourth. But federal regulations would start to hurt the industry badly.

My father depended on all of these local workers and their families to buy his furniture. As a small businessman in an old downtown like New Bedford, his entire life depended on people being able to come into his store and shop. Now there were thousands of families less able to afford a new piece of furniture – a living room set, or bedroom set for the kids, or a dining room table.

And it wasn’t as if he didn’t have any competition. There was Alpert’s, Kaplan’s, Bettencourt’s, Mason’s, Correia and Sons, Golub, and U.S. Furniture, all trying to sell to the same working-class families.

And, of course, he was one of the few furniture retailers located downtown, where parking was scarce; so while he benefitted from all the other activity downtown, he didn’t have the convenience of parking spaces right outside the door.

Downtown was generally doing okay, but the tide was starting to turn. Retailers were all feeling the effects of the recession, and would suffer more with the tension
and its aftermath. Construction would soon begin on a massive suburban mall in Dartmouth that would steal major downtown retailers, and open more than seventy new stores with parking to lure shoppers away.

And the city had started to take steps to make dramatic changes. A recent idea catching on around the country was the concept of pedestrian malls in older downtowns to make them more pedestrian-friendly, and better able to compete with suburban malls. It was being seriously discussed for downtown New Bedford, and my father was an early proponent. He knew something had to be done.

The Vietnam War was on, and President Nixon had more than 400,000 troops in Southeast Asia, lots of them the victims of the selective service—the draft. My mother was obsessed with the war, the draft, and the possibility that any of her five sons would have to serve. My twin brother David and I would both be eligible for the draft in 1973; as far as she was concerned, the war needed to end.

Student deferments were still in place, and we were expected to go to college, so that might shield us. But there was talk that they could be eliminated. In that case, even those of us who were going to college could end up in those heinous jungles and rice patties.

President Nixon kept telling us that the war was winding down, but it was hard to believe. At the end of April, Nixon announced the Cambodia Incursion, an attack on the sanctuaries established by the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong in Cambodia. Our effort included both ground troops and air support, and would last sixty to seventy-five days. With that type of expanded involvement, it was hard to understand how we were really getting out.

It seemed like a day never went by where there wasn’t an article in the local paper about it, and a piece on the national news, with graphic footage of kids marching through the jungles of Vietnam.

We were bombing the Ho Chi Minh Trail and other Viet Cong and North Vietnamese supply routes into South Vietnam non-stop, and the Paris peace talks seemed to be going nowhere. In addition, the trials of those involved in the My Lai massacre were about to begin: Lieutenant William Calley and others were being tried for ordering the killing of more than a hundred Vietnamese men, women and children. There would be very ugly testimony for months.

***

And then there was basketball and John O’Brien. I played a lot of basketball.

I was heading into my senior year at Stang, a parochial school known for its basketball—and its coach, Mr. O’Brien. In fact, I was attending Stang largely because Mr. O’Brien was there. He was an extraordinary teacher of life, in addition to basketball, and had a profound impact on everyone he touched. And my parents trusted him.

Unlike most high school coaches, he was never looking for the next job, or looking to move to the college ranks. He was a high school coach, and always would be.

John O’Brien coached every kid individually, the way he needed to be coached to get the most out of him, and helped each kid excel. He didn’t teach or coach a
team as one entity, but rather each separate athlete on a one-on-one basis. It was a lot harder, but it was the way he wanted to do it. And it worked.

And basketball was everything to me … everything. Without it, I truly believed that I had nothing.

That’s what this book is about: the juxtaposition of basketball, the civil rights movement, the economy, and the war, seen through the lens of a 16 year old trying to grapple with the fairness or unfairness of it all.
CHAPTER 1

THE SUMMER, THE TENSIONS, AND THE PARK

“Who’s got next?” I yelled to no one in particular as I arrived courtside.
“I do,” said Mike Reedy. “You in?”
“Yup.”
“Okay, I got you.”
That was one of the great things about being a regular at Buttonwood Park. You could get on a team, but then you had to keep winning to keep playing. It was a very democratic system, and race didn’t matter (there were white, Cape Verdean, African-American, and Latino kids): you had to win, and then play the next five guys. Keep winning, and keep playing. Lose, and sit down and wait for the next game—if you were good enough to get picked for it.

“Let’s go,” Mike said, as the game ahead of ours finished up, and he threw down and snuffed out his cigarette.
I was playing with a good bunch of guys. Some of them were regulars at Buttonwood, others were from various parks around the city. I hated playing against Reedy. He was big and strong, and had incredibly quick hands. So being on his team was a luxury.

We played full court games of 15. It always took a while for everyone to get warmed up, but once we got going, it was war. And there was a good crowd tonight ringing the court, watching the action.

We got off to a quick lead. Nunu Gonsalves, a lean, quiet Cape Verdean kid from the West End who played for New Bedford High, stripped the ball from Hartmut Andrade—a muscular, brash 16-year-old African-American kid who was entering New Bedford Voke in the fall—and got it out to me on the break. I dribbled to half court, got it to Paul Noonan, a lanky white kid from Dartmouth, who laid it in.

But they came back strong. They had Billy and Paul Walsh on their team. Billy was a phenomenal playground player—strong, tough, and a great scorer who had won the Tech Tourney with Holy Family two years ago. Their first time down, Billy got the ball down low, and hit a nice turnaround jump shot, with perfect spin on the ball. He hit only the bottom of the chains, no rim at all.

But we came right back. We had Tom Barao, so we didn’t need much else. He spun left, spun right, and then drove to the basket, laying it up off the backboard. Nobody could contain him. Barao was the best player in the city. He had taken New Bedford High to the finals of the Tech Tourney a few years ago. And he always dominated. Barao was big and strong, a shooting guard who played great defense, and could really take it to the hoop. I loved playing with him.
We traded baskets back and forth. Then, Reedy passed the ball to me in the left corner. I crossed over with my dribble from right to left, went baseline, and got pushed into the pole by Billy Walsh.

“Foul,” I yelled.

“That was no foul.”

“Give me the ball,” I responded.

“You pussy!”

“Give me the fuckin’ ball!” I repeated.

He threw it at me extraordinarily hard, trying to make a point.

Everyone was getting a little heated up. Nobody wanted to lose and have to sit down.

I took the ball, and passed it to Nunu, who got it to Barao in the right corner. He let it fly. Swish.

We were up 14–13.

Then Paul Walsh, Billy’s younger brother, who was also a good player, brought down the ball. You know they wanted to get it into Billy in the post. They did, and he turned and fired: good. Tied up.

The crowd that had gathered was now starting to pay serious attention to what was going on.

“Take that white boy to the hole,” someone yelled at Nunu, as he brought the ball up court.

He passed off to Buddy Rocha, a Cape Verdean kid who was a few years older than us, who got it to me on the left side, about 15 feet from the basket. I drove to the hoop, and found Reedy when his man dropped off him to help out. He laid it up off the board, but missed.

“Don’t take their shit,” someone yelled, again from the sidelines. “Put these motherfuckers away!” It was Jansen, Mike Jansen, a local guy, a little older than all of us, who was down the park a lot. He was a good-looking guy; he never seemed to have a job, but was always well-dressed. Mike didn’t have much game, but he loved being around. He’d walk the sidelines, giving us all advice. He was harmless.

They came back down against us and got the ball inside to Andrade. He was a big mouth, so you know he wanted to figure out how to score and shut us up. With his back to the basket, he spun to his left, went up for a shot, and it bounced off the back rim.

Nunu grabbed it, dribbled to the middle of the court on the break, and got it to Buddy, who took it all the way to the basket and scored.

We won.

“Next,” someone yelled, and five new guys came out on the court to play us. The other guys had to sit and wait their turn.

Because I was playing with Barao, I knew I’d be on the court for a long time.

At about 9:00, it got dark, and you couldn’t possibly play another game. So I started to head home. I went one way, and most everyone else headed the other way, to different neighborhoods of the city.
“Hey, you want a ride home to Dartmouth?” a couple of guys I didn’t know asked me. There was always groups of non-players who hung around the park. I often wondered what they were doing, why they were there.

“Sure,” I said, and jumped into the back seat of their car.

So off we went.

We drove out of the park, up Hawthorn Street, and then down Slocum Road, toward home. All of a sudden, a police car was behind us with his lights on and siren blaring.

We pulled over. I said, “Were we speeding?”

“No, I don’t think so,” came the response from up front.

The police officer got out of his car and walked up to ours, but on the passenger side, which I thought was odd.

So the guy riding shotgun rolled down his window. The officer drew his flashlight, and put the light on him, then on the driver.

“Open the glove compartment,” he said.

When it was opened, the officer turned the flashlight to it, and peered in. It was cluttered, but you could clearly see a little machine in there that rolled joints. Even I knew what it was, and I had never smoked grass in my life. I’m not sure I’d ever seen marijuana.

The officer turned back to the driver and passenger in front and asked, “What are your names?”

They answered quietly, and then the officer turned the flashlight into the back seat, shining it right in my face. I was petrified.

Shit, I thought. I’m going to be busted for dope, and I don’t even know what it is.

“What’s your name?” the cop asked me.

“Gerry Kavanaugh,” I whispered.

“Yeah, I know you. You go to Stang, right?”

“Yes, sir,” I responded.

“What are you doing with these guys?”

“They were at the park,” I said. “They were nice enough to give me a ride home.”

“Get the hell out of here,” he said to all of us. “You’re lucky I’m feeling generous tonight.”

“Thank you,” I said, and we drove off.

“What was that about?” I asked the guys in the front seat.

“They’re just trying to scare us,” the driver said.

“Well, they succeeded,” I responded.

“Not really,” the other one said.

“What’s that in the glove compartment?” I asked.

“None of your fucking business,” said the driver.

Soon we were in front of my house. I jumped out of the car, said thanks, and tried to forget what had happened.

***
There was a lot happening in the world this summer, but I didn’t really care. Basketball was king with me, the only thing that mattered. It allowed me to have some sense of self, a level of self-confidence unattainable outside the gym, even some swagger in an otherwise swaggerless personality.

My mother used to kid me, telling me that “basketball and fifty cents will buy you a cup of coffee.” In other words, it was worth nothing, so don’t count on it. There were a lot more important things in life, in her mind.

But I didn’t believe it. I felt like basketball bought me everything: self-esteem, an ability to get through each and every day with some self-worth. It was my identity. When I felt like I was failing at it, I felt like I was failing in life. When I felt like I was succeeding at it, I felt that life was a success. When I was playing well, I was happy. When I played badly, I was depressed.

And there was nothing like summer basketball in the playground, and nothing like basketball at Buttonwood Park.

The Park had two good outdoor courts, and was roughly located in the center of New Bedford, so most players could get there. It was very close to the West End, the home of many African-American families, and it was close enough to South-Central and the South End, where the Cape Verdean and Latino population lived.

As a result of that, it was the playground where you could get some of the best games, and race was irrelevant.

So every night at about six o’clock, the best players would start trickling in. Guys who had already graduated from high school and were playing in college. Guys out of college who were trying to hold on. High school kids like me who were trying to make a name for themselves. And even guys from pretty far away, who just wanted to find the best games and competition they could, and play with the best guys in the area.

And we’d play like it was life or death until it got too dark. Game after game, winners stayed on the court, with dozens of players trying to get into a game.

I rarely missed a night. Even Fridays and Saturdays, when other guys were out with their girlfriends, or at the racetrack, or just hanging out: not me. I was down there playing one on one or two on two with anyone I could find. I didn’t know anything else.

I didn’t have my driver’s license, so I would hitch hike down and back sometimes. Or more likely, I ran and dribbled a basketball the three miles each way.

Players came to Buttonwood only because there were good games and good players. Nobody cared about whether we were white, Black, or Cape Verdean. We were all just players trying to find a good run.

***

Because of the bad economy, summer jobs were impossible to find, and there were too many young people hanging around on street corners. Minorities in New Bedford had long been feeling that they were not treated fairly and equally, and they were probably right.
Cities across the country were having problems with unrest. Asbury Park, New Jersey was rioting, with a thousand Blacks throwing rocks and bottles at cops. There were 92 gunshot wounds reported, though the police said they only fired warning shots. And they instituted curfews to try to keep the peace.

Nationally, the Black leadership in the country was getting restless. At its annual convention in Cincinnati, the NAACP sent a number of mixed messages to its members. Roy Wilkins, the executive director, urged integration, not separation. But the chairman, Bishop Stephen Spottswood, said that Nixon was “anti-Negro.” The unemployment rate for Blacks was still going in the wrong direction, and hit almost nine percent in June.

Things were tough.

It was now the end of June, and a quiet storm of events around the Vietnam War was taking place. We pulled out of Cambodia after sending troops there for two months, but my mother was still crazy over the idea that we appeared to be expanding our role in Southeast Asia. It occupied most of her waking moments. The more we expanded, or the longer we stayed, the more likely it would be that one of her sons would get drafted, go to Indochina, and either get killed or captured by the North Vietnamese or Viet Cong. A nightmare scenario in any mother’s eyes.

But we had gone in to stave off Communist domination of the region, and to keep the Cambodian government in place so that the South Vietnamese government could survive, and we could withdraw.

But our troops, at least, had now left Cambodia. We were still providing logistical support, advisors, and plenty of bombing. But no more troops – in Cambodia, that is. In Vietnam, we were still going strong.

At the same time, the U.S. Senate adopted the Cooper-Church Amendment on a 58–37 vote: it would prohibit any more activity in Cambodia unless Congress authorized it. It was a long fight, and never passed the House, so it never became law, but it showed how upset the country was about the expansion of the war.

Most important, July 1st was the day of the draft lottery. This year, it was for all kids born in 1951. That didn’t include me, of course. I was too young, not born until ’54, and would hopefully always get a student deferment, but Congress could decide against deferments at any time.

The student deferments. If you were a middle-class or rich kid who could afford to go to college, you could get out of the draft. But if you were poor, and had no college options, you were going if you got a low enough lottery number.

So, if you were a Black kid in New Bedford, there were much greater odds that you’d be going.

My mother watched these events very closely, terrified of the possibility that any of her kids would have to go to Vietnam. My twin brother and I were born on February 8th, and that date had a number this year of 127. So if I had been eligible, and wasn’t in college, I’d probably be going. They were going to take anyone up to almost two hundred, certainly to one-ninety. My older brother Billy was eligible
this year, and his draft number was one-eighty-six. But he was a diabetic, so he was four-F. It didn’t matter what his number was.

And the war didn’t seem to be winding down. There were over a hundred GIs killed in Indochina in the last week of June alone. And more than eight hundred had been wounded.

***

On weekends and holidays, the best games were during the day. Today, Saturday, was the fourth of July, and it was sunny and hot. I got to the park around noon, and there was only a spattering of guys.

“Hey, let’s go down to Monte,” someone said. “There’ll be some good games down there.”

So four of us piled into a car and drove down to Monte Playground in the South-Central area of New Bedford. It was just south of downtown, in a neighborhood heavily populated with Cape-Verdean families. There’d be some good players there, many of whom played for New Bedford Voke and New Bedford High.

We jumped out of the car, the four of us, all white. The playground was surrounded by a stone-and-concrete wall, which today was filled with kids, boys and girls, just hangin’ around, all Cape Verdean or Black. They sure as hell noticed that we were all white, and we knew that they weren’t, but we both knew we were there for one reason: a good afternoon of games.

“Kavanaugh, what are you doing down here?” someone shouted at me through the crowd.

It was Larry Livramento, a really good Cape Verdean player from New Bedford High. He was a small forward, and could really take the ball to the hoop. He was very aggressive and mouthy most of the time, but a good guy. And because he was so tough, he was fun to play with. His mother worked downtown. She was a sales clerk at W.T. Grant’s, a department store that had been around forever. He lived around the corner from the park on Purchase Street.

I barely responded, just sort of nodded in his direction. He knew why I was there.

And the games had already begun. Larry, several of the Gomes’ brothers and cousins, Nunu Gonsalves, all guys I had been playing against for a while. And they were good, particularly here – on their home court.

There was a game finishing up, so we’d have to try to get into the next one. The winner stays on the court, so you needed to keep winning to stay on for any length of time.

“I got next,” yelled David Grace, another New Bedford High player, and a Cape Verdean.

“Kavanaugh, you’re playin’ with me,” Grace said. David was always really good to me. I was never sure what these guys all thought of me. I didn’t have a lot of self-confidence in many aspects of my life. What little I did have was all about basketball. And once I got out on the court and got it going, my confidence and aggressiveness got going pretty good, too.
Early in the game, I did very little, too nervous to try to do much. After I got a little more comfortable, though, I brought the ball up on the left side of the court, crossed over my dribble from left to right, and then barreled down the lane. I laid the ball up off the backboard, and Livramento came out of nowhere and swiped it away – practically into the street.

“Don’t bring that shit in here,” he said as he glared at me, slapping five with a few of his teammates as I got myself back together.

“Gerry, get in the game, for Christ’s sake!” someone yelled from the sidelines.

“Don’t take that shit!”

I looked over. It was Gary Pope, who had just arrived. Like David Grace, Gary was a terrific kid, and a pretty good friend. We had battled hard over the years. We respected each other. And when he and I went across the region playing for different all-star teams, we tended to hang out together. We were both pretty shy.

Gary’s mother worked for years at Cornell-Dubilier, a plant in the South End. She never graduated from high school. He was one of five kids – three boys and two girls. They moved around quite a bit, but always lived in the neighborhood around Monte Playground. Right now, they were living in the Bay Village project.

There were two Gomes cousins on the other team, Edmund and Mike. With the exception of Barao, or by some accounts including Barao, Edmund’s brother Tommy was the best player in the city. He had a barrel chest, a beautiful touch, and was as quick as a cat … until he got hurt. He had torn ligaments in his knee and had gone under the knife a couple of times, and was unable to excel the way he had in his early teens. Today he was lying in a hospital bed, recovering from his latest knee surgery. But he would still be a force to be reckoned with on the playground when he recovered. Tommy’s Voke team, with Gary Pope, and Edmund and Mike Gomes as teammates, had kept us out of the state tournament last year.

Mike was a big, bulky kid, a good football player, who also had a nice touch around the basket. And he took up a lot of space. Edmund was fast as lightning, super-quick.

After a little while, I got it going, hit a couple of soft jumpers from the top of the key that drew only the sound of the chain net, but they were taking it to the hole and scoring on us non-stop. We couldn’t stop them, and we were off the court in no time. Edmund Gomes and Larry Livramento, over and over again, drove into the lane and either laid it in or dished it off to others for easy hoops.

It was a good lesson, though. I needed to be more aggressive – like them.

We lost, so I sat out, waiting for another opportunity.

***

“Gerry,” my mother said, “Mr. O’Brien called you a little while ago. He wants you to call him back. I wrote the number down. It’s on the fridge.”

My mother loved Mr. O’Brien. He was always very nice to her. In fact, he lost much of his characteristic abruptness when he was speaking with her. I suppose it was because he had an enormous appreciation for mothers himself. He had lost his
during his own birth, so he never even knew his biological mother. And, he had the benefit of a stepmother who raised him as her own, lovingly and with great care.

Mr. O’Brien? I thought. Why would he call? I never hear from him in the summer. Maybe he wants us to go out to his camp and play.

So I went over to the fridge, pulled off the sheet of paper the number was on, and picked up the phone.

“Hello,” I heard as someone picked up the other end.

“Is Mr. O’Brien there, please?” I asked.

“Just a minute,” and I heard the phone drop onto the floor, or a hard surface somewhere. And I waited, and waited, and waited. It seemed like hours, but I didn’t dare hang up. Finally, someone picked up the phone. “Hello,” he said. I could tell it was Mr. O’Brien.

“Hi, Mr. O’Brien,” I said.

“Gerry,” he said brusquely. “What the hell were you doing with those guys?”

“What guys?” I asked.

“The guys you got stopped with. The guys who are peddling dope around New Bedford. Those guys.”

“They offered me a ride home from the park,” I said meekly. “I didn’t know they were selling drugs.”

“Are you hanging around with them?”

“No,” I said emphatically. “I barely know them. They were just around the park, that’s it.”

“Don’t hang around with them,” he said sternly. “That cop could’ve arrested you the other night, you know.”

“I got that impression.”

“So, they’re not friends of yours?”

“No, not at all.”

“Okay,” he concluded. “Let’s keep it that way.”

“Okay,” I said, and he hung up.

How the hell did he know about this?

***

My father and I started downtown at about 7:30 every morning. It was early July. Today was a beautiful day, warm, with a nice breeze. We were headed to his store. I worked for him that summer. Doing odd jobs mostly.

I loved going downtown. There were two places in town with action: downtown, and the park. Sure, there was a deep recession going on, but to the degree anything was happening, I thought it was happening downtown.

And in the summer mornings, there would be seagulls flying overhead, and you could hear them as clear as a bell. The waterfront was at the bottom of the hill that downtown sat on, and the seagulls spent their days trolling for fish coming off the fishing boats there. They were big birds, and they never came close. But they had a sharp, chirping sound that resonated through the whole downtown. Over time,
THE SUMMER, THE TENSIONS, AND THE PARK

I became so accustomed to them that I missed them on days when they weren’t around.

But today, our regular routine would all change quickly.

“There was a melee in the West End last night,” the radio announcer was saying as my father turned up the volume to listen more closely. It even got my attention, despite the early time of the morning.

“Two hundred residents put up a barrier at the intersection of Ash and Kempton Streets, and when the police tried to intervene, they threw rocks and bottles at them, shouting ‘No more pigs in the community.’”

This was not good. My father was horrified. Anything like this in the city was obviously very bad for his business, and, on top of the recession, it would only make things worse.

The announcer continued. “The crowd built the street barrier with a pile of rubble and two overturned cars.” When the police arrived, there were rocks and even a tire iron flying at them in an instant, and it got worse before it got better. And the only way to stop it was to leave. Six firefighters and five police officers were injured.

The cops were in riot gear with long, heavy riot sticks, but they couldn’t control the crowd. Eventually, after arresting three individuals, they left.

We were headed downtown to The Keystone, located right in the heart of downtown New Bedford. It had been opened long ago by my grandfather, who had passed away a few years back. Now my father and his brother ran it.

I wasn’t sure whether I should think this was all very cool, or very dangerous, but my father quickly educated me.

“Dad, this is really bad, don’t you think?” I asked, trying to figure out exactly what was going on in his head.

He didn’t talk much on the way to work. He was always preoccupied, but he was happy to talk today. I think he was truly frightened about what might be happening. “Well, it’s hard to tell,” he said, “but the economy is bad, and people feel like no one cares about them. I think they probably also feel like the government is ignoring them. People are frustrated, and rightfully so.”

“This may have been building for a while. I just hope they can keep it under control. I’m not sure you should go to the park tonight, though. It may be dangerous. What took place last night is half a mile from there.”

Oh, Christ, I thought. This is really bad, if I can’t go to the park.

When we got downtown, it was quiet. The three guys arrested would be arraigned this morning at the downtown courthouse, right around the corner from the store. That could turn into a fiasco.

By midmorning a crowd had started to form around the courthouse and adjoining blocks. I wanted to see what was going on. So I snuck out of the store and walked around the corner, into a sea of spectators, all there for the same reason, to witness the arraignment. The police already had it roped off. No one would be getting into that courtroom today.

All three were arraigned without incident.
CHAPTER 1

No one, though, appeared to know why the trouble last night had occurred. My father hoped that it was a single incident, and not the start of something bigger.
But things would get worse … much worse.

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"Gerry, be home at a more reasonable hour tonight!" my mother yelled as I walked out the door. "You don’t know what it could be like down there, after what happened last night."

"Okay!" I yelled back, paying total lip service.

It was eerie at the park. I was one of the only guys in town who didn’t know enough to stay away. It felt like the lull before the storm. “Hey, Paul,” I said to Paul Noonan, a Dartmouth kid and a pal of mine who hung around there all the time. “Where is everyone?”

“I guess they were worried about what happened last night.”

“Probably.”

So we played a few games of two-on-two and three-on-three with whoever was around, but there were no full court runs to be had.

At about 7:30, Paul and I sat on the bench next to the courts, just shooting the breeze. Then, out of the corner of my eye, I noticed a bunch of Black and Cape Verdean kids, a dozen or so, storming across the baseball fields from Kempton Street toward us. It was unclear what they were looking for. If they were trying to find trouble, they weren’t going to find it with me.

“Hey, Paul, look,” I said, peering at the approaching group.

“Oh, shit.”

At the front of the pack was Joe Delgado, an African-American kid from the West End who went to Voke. He was a terrific athlete, a running back on the football team, and a guard on the basketball team. Quick as a cat.

I actually thought about running, but that was a bad idea. So we stuck around.

“Want to run a little bit?” Delgado yelled to me, without even saying hello.

“Sure,” I responded. I leaned over to Paul. “Let’s go.”

So up we sprang, onto the court with Delgado and a bunch of guys from the West End, all Black and Cape Verdean, who wanted a run. I was glad to accommodate them.

They weren’t players that I knew, or had played with before, but they could play.

We ran up and down, lots of offense, lots of defense, and lots of missed jump shots.

I wasn’t on Delgado’s team. He was so fast, he stripped me a couple of times without the slightest effort and laid the ball in at the other end each time.

But I was able to get a few jumpers off on him, and take it to the hoop a few times, too.
No one was trash talking either, particularly me. The last thing I wanted was to get these guys angry with me. They had come over for a run, and that was what I was going to give ’em. Nothing more, nothing less.

It was a competitive, fair, couple of games with mutual respect on both sides.

***

But later into the night, the tension would escalate just a half-mile away. And it would be worse than the night before.

From nine till three, in fact, there was mayhem. And some of the same guys we played with were probably involved.

Snipers on roofs shooting at folks, rocks thrown at cops – and anyone else who ventured into the West End. A white guy was arrested for walking around the neighborhood with a shotgun. The cops were using tear gas. Molotov cocktails were being thrown.

And then the fires started.

“We’ve got a fire at Williams and Second Street,” the dispatcher said, just before midnight, as he alerted the firehouses. That was the Model Cities building, right in the middle of downtown. Model Cities was the federal program that undertook neighborhood redevelopment and social-service programs in the city.

A bunch of residents had occupied the building for eight hours, looking for more assistance from the program, and clearly hadn’t gotten the answers they were looking for.

As the fire trucks sped to the building, another fire erupted, right in the heart of the West End, at the Masonic Temple. But they couldn’t get anywhere near the fires without police protection; they were pelted with rocks and bricks, and so they were held up until the cops could keep them safe, at one point using tear gas. All the while they yelled for the pigs to get out of their neighborhood.

At the Model Cities fire, five firefighters ended up at St. Luke’s Hospital, almost trapped by a backdraft. The heat actually lifted the roof, and the walls began to split at the seams. It looked like the building might collapse.

Another casualty was Pieraccini’s Variety Store, located right in the heart of the West End. It was a small place, originally located downtown, around the corner from my father’s store. But, after the second generation of the Pieraccini family had owned it, the family moved it into the West End, into the first floor of a residential tenement on Kempton Street.

John Pieraccini, of the third generation, was home late at night, when the phone rang. It must have been after 11:00.

“Is John Pieraccini there, please?” the caller asked.

“This is John,” the owner of the variety store responded. “What the hell’s going on?”

“This is the New Bedford Police Department. Your store has been ransacked and looted. You need to come down right away.”
“What the hell good would that do?” John asked rhetorically. “I’ll come down in the morning.”

John got off the phone, and relayed the message to his wife Shirley, and his father, who had moved the store into the West End, and who was now living with John and his wife.

John went down to the store in the morning, and it was ruined. It was hard to believe that there would be much of a future for the business, at least over the short term.

John stood on the sidewalk and stared blankly. He was 40 or 41, and had already accomplished quite a bit. After graduating from New Bedford High School with my own father, he went to the New Bedford Textile Institute, where he learned how to become a draftsman, and quickly got a job at Acushnet Process, a major employer in the city, and the maker of Titleist golf balls.

After the war broke out, John joined the Navy, and spent a good deal of time on the west coast, with a small tour of duty at Guadalcanal in the Pacific.

When he got back, he went back to work at Acushnet Process, then worked for a short period of time for his father-in-law, and finally took over the family business.

Today, as he stood on the sidewalk out front, he realized that as the third generation owner, it might all be over. It was a shame.

But, Parky Grace had a plan for John’s business.

Frank “Parky” Grace was a local guy who was only 26 years old. He had been to war, too – Vietnam. He’d enlisted at the age of 20, and immediately found out what blatant racial discrimination was. Grace was shipped off to Vietnam in a combat engineering company in 1967, naïve enough to think that the Vietnamese would welcome him and his comrades with open arms. Instead, they received obscene gestures and had rocks thrown at them. Grace said it reminded him of his childhood, when he and his friends threw rocks at cops.

When he came back home, he was disillusioned with the war, joining anti-war rallies, and reading Che Guevara and Malcolm X. The FBI then put Parky under surveillance, and he became more militant, starting a local chapter of the National Committee to Combat Fascism, the organizing arm of the Black Panthers.

Now, he was a leader in the West End, and he and others thought Pieraccini’s would be a good location for their local Panthers headquarters. So they took it over, after they made certain that all the equipment stolen from the store during the looting had been returned to the Pieraccini family. Parky put out a call for the equipment and goods to be returned, and they were – everything.

John Pieraccini had no choice in the transaction. Parky thought it was a bad idea for him to open up again. Deep down, I think John might have agreed.

***

The police were exhausted. Some of them had been up for 24 hours straight. State troopers had arrived to help out, but they were still overwhelmed. As all this went on, groups of older teenagers roamed the city, coming at police from all different angles – backyards, alleys, just hitting and running. Thirteen fire alarms had been
THE SUMMER, THE TENSIONS, AND THE PARK

pulled, and two buses had been set on fire. They broke windows at the high school, threw firebombs, and looted local stores.

I wasn’t down there, of course. I was home by the time it all started. But when I went upstairs to go to bed, just after eleven o’clock, my parents were lying in bed in their room at the top of the stairs, watching the local news, mesmerized by what was being reported. The television cameras were already there, reporting the fires and trouble live. I’m sure my parents were sick over it. Neither one of them said a word. I sat down on the bed silently, and watched with them. It was breathtaking, and scary. All around my father’s store, there was mayhem.

After the news, just before midnight, a guy named Ralph Smith drove through the neighborhood, unaware of the problems going on, and got stuck at a barricade. Kids hanging around the street corners in packs decided that this guy was an easy target. They started throwing rocks at the car, so he got out and ran as they chased him away.

Another guy named Edward Breault, in a convertible with the top down, got stuck, too, and they started throwing rocks at him. He might have been badly hurt or killed, but a firefighter jumped into his car, pushed him into the passenger’s seat, and sped away.

A white guy actually walked through the neighborhood with a shot gun under his arm. He, at least, was arrested.

While all this was taking place, the authorities were trying to figure out what to do, how to respond.

The mayor, George Rogers, had been elected less than a year before. I’m not sure he was a racist, but he clearly had no idea what to do. He held a quick press conference. He didn’t say much of note, though he’d had the courage to go into the West End, even as the trouble continued.

“We’re thinking about mandating a curfew to get people off the streets earlier, but have not made a final decision,” he said. “In addition, we may bring in the National Guard.” A deep breath. “I will be meeting with Black and white leaders tomorrow. In my view, this violence is being perpetrated by outsiders, and will be under control very soon.”

The police chief declared, “It all boils down to this: either the gangs are going to control the streets, or the police are.” The jury was still out on what the verdict would be.

As the night tension quieted down, cops with—and without—injuries milled about the headquarters, trying to get their arms around what was going on.

“It was bad out there tonight,” said one patrolman with a bandaged arm in a sling.

“No kidding,” said another. “This is the worst.” Dozens of people were injured, some were in the hospital.

“Thank God no one was killed.”

Not yet.

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“On the heels of more violence, arrests, and two major fires, city leaders are getting together with their colleagues in the minority community to quiet the city,” said the radio announcer early the next morning as Dad and I started out toward downtown.

“The city was hoping that they had gotten the trouble under control, but that was clearly not the case, so they’ll try again today, first with a meeting at City Hall with the mayor and members of the Urban Coalition.”

This isn’t good, I thought. But my father was silent, so I didn’t say a word. But I knew what he was thinking - that people had had enough, and their patience had run out. Too many promises, and not enough action.

And then it got worse. We drove down Union Street toward his store, and soon realized that this was all getting a little too close to home. Several blocks from the store, we parked in an old lot, and could smell and see smoke wherever we turned. The Model Cities building was right downtown, a hundred yards from my father’s store. The smell of smoke was stale, smoldering. It smelled bad and looked bad. I could tell by my father’s silence that he was distraught.

The two sides were meeting today. The minority community felt they were not being treated fairly in the city: they wanted better housing, more jobs, more neighborhood improvements. These, of course, were all things that would take some time to remedy, but they wanted some commitments now. And they were sick of words that didn’t result in actions.

The minority leadership made it very clear that they would only work with city leaders as long as they felt like they were committed to making real change, not just on the margins. And if things didn’t change, they would take matters into their own hands.

After the meeting, they all – Black and white – marched into the West End to meet with the younger folks who were particularly upset and rebellious. If nothing else, they needed to get the nighttime activity under control.

“Keep the pigs out of here!” a number of younger adults screamed as the leaders attempted to have a discussion.

“We don’t want no cops coming into our neighborhood and beatin’ kids up,” yelled another. “That ain’t good for anyone. And we’re gonna start hittin’ back.”

“Let’s try to work together to try and stop the violence, the vandalism, the fires, so that we can actually begin to fix the problems,” the mayor said. “We’ll do everything possible to address your concerns, but we can’t have this violence every night.”

“We need action, not words and speeches,” one leader said. “We’ve been listening long enough to your speeches. What are you going to do for us?”

There wasn’t much accomplished, though city officials seemed a little more confident that things would quiet down.

They didn’t.

As soon as it started to get dark, gangs started roaming the city again. They smashed car windows, without regard to whether people were in them or not. One 50-year-old woman had her car stoned. Windows in buildings—homes, businesses, New Bedford Voke, New Bedford High School—were smashed and broken. Three
white guys were arrested for arson, a U.S. Mail truck was burned, and the Junior Achievement building was set on fire.

Police were stoned while they helped firefighters put out the fires, and they patrolled the city in riot gear. The state police were around, but stayed away from the trouble. There was enormous pressure on Mayor Rogers to call in the National Guard, but he resisted.

In the midst of it all, a white police officer drove through the West End with a gun visibly resting on the steering wheel, just daring someone to try to challenge him or give him a reason to use it. He drove through the neighborhood repeatedly, staring at community folks as he slowly passed them. They stared back, noticing the gun, and wondering why it was there. But they said nothing, and they did nothing.

The officer was intoxicated.

It was all a prelude of things to come. People were angry. White people angry at Black and Cape Verdean people. And vice versa. Neighborhood folks were angry at the cops, and vice versa. Poor people were angry at middle class and rich people, and vice versa. The simmering of anger would continue until it blew up completely.

The one positive sign was that the two-hundred-plus folks hanging around the corner of Kempton Street and Cedar Streets – Ground Zero – were orderly the entire night. No trouble. But they all made it very clear that the violence could spread, and quickly, if they weren’t treated with more respect.

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Now, though, WGBH, a Boston public television station, came to town to film a documentary on the tensions. Ray Richardson, a talented but somewhat radical Black producer, brought in a film crew, and was in the West End asking lots of questions.

“White people treat us like rats,” one of Ray’s first interviewees said emphatically. “And when you corner a rat, it attacks.”

As Richardson interviewed folks, others nodded in agreement. Behind him, listening and nodding intently, was Joe Delgado. He probably wouldn’t say a word. Speaking out wasn’t his style, but he was there, front and center, quietly chewing gum.

“We’ll wipe out downtown if we have to,” as the interviews went on. “We want our rights, and we ain’t got shit.”

“If we have to wipe out the city to get our rights, we’ll wipe it out.”

These were the types of statements that frightened the hell out of my father, and the situation was getting further out of control.

“Only thing they haven’t done is perform genocide.”

“Why is this happening? Because I’m Black.”

“The education system is racist. Counsellors told me to take the general course…no need to go to college…”

“They want to stop Black people from having babies.”

“We’ll get no response from the pigs downtown…city councilors were up here yesterday copping pleas.”
“White racist pigs hold the power structure.”

Richardson barely had to ask questions. All he had to do was turn on the microphone.

It was so good, he came back the next day to speak with a group of Black women, who got very specific about the cause of the anger.

“Not anyone hiring…particularly since I don’t have a high school diploma and I’ve been out of work for a year now.”

“Lot of people don’t want to hire you when you have two kids…Don’t want you to be on welfare…they call us ‘shiftless’.”

“After they give you all this training, they can’t find a job for you.”

They all needed jobs, and they couldn’t find any.

On the second day, Ray got to the heart of the matter when he interviewed Jimmy Magnett, the Minister of Defense in the Black Brothers Action Committee. Jimmy had a straw hat on, a sharp goatee, shades, and a cigarette hanging out of his mouth, as he stood in the middle of the neighborhood holding court.

“Days of exploitation are over,” he exclaimed. “Who the hell wants to work in a fish house?”

“The time to straighten everything out is now…we’re going to arm ourselves because we’re tired of being shot at.”

“The white person knows that the niggers are restless.”

“I’ve made it clear to the Council, the mayor, and to the chief of pigs…I ain’t going to help them out anymore.”

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People were mad. But, that very night—Saturday—things would change forever.

Three white guys—Ralph Brown, George Rose, and Gary DesLauriers were at Lincoln Park, a local amusement park in North Dartmouth, about four miles west of the West End. These guys lived in Acushnet and Fairhaven. They didn’t even live in New Bedford.

Brown, 20, worked at White’s Farm Dairy, and was married with a young child. George Rose, 20, was a driver for Gulf Hill Dairy, and this wouldn’t be his first scrape with the law. His parents had gotten divorced when he was only 10, and he saw a psychiatrist as a child. He attended night school at New Bedford High, and had completed the tenth grade. He had gotten married at 18, and had two little kids. DesLauriers – it’s unclear where—or whether—he worked. He was only 18, and had graduated from New Bedford High School the year before.

At Lincoln Park, they jumped into Brown’s 1957 Chevrolet as the sun was going down and it was getting dark, and drove up Route Six to Kempton Street, to see what was going on. The three got to the police barricade at the intersection of Kempton Street and Rockdale Avenue and couldn’t go any further. So they maneuvered around some side streets and got close to the intersection of Cedar and Kempton, where all the action was.
They were moving through the neighborhood, then got stuck behind another vehicle. Some kids approached, and started banging sticks against the car. The rear window shattered when a brick was thrown through it.

DesLauriers got down in the back seat so that no one could see him. Rose was already huddled on the floor of the front seat. There was a lot of confusion.

Rose said, “Let’s get the hell out of here!”

The car in front of them finally started to move, and they followed.

“They shouldn’t be able to get away with this,” Brown muttered before heading for home.

“Take me home,” DesLauriers said to Brown. “I want to go home.”

“We’ll fix ‘em. We’ll fix ‘em,” Brown responded.

In about fifteen minutes, Brown had made his way out of the West End, over the bridge from New Bedford to Fairhaven, and through Fairhaven into Acushnet. He pulled into his driveway, located right on Main Street. Brown jumped out of the car, and ran into the house.

DesLauriers lived nearby, less than a mile away. It would have been easy to drop him off. But that wasn’t happening: Brown came back out of his house very quickly with something in his hands.

Back they went, to the same place – the West End. The crowd was more than 100 feet away, with loads of people standing outside a local club.

One of them was Gordon Rebeiro, a 20-year-old local college student who had come down to look for his fiancée’s nephew. As he walked along in front of the club, he passed Kim Holland, a local 15 year old high school girl, and Lester Lima, who was sitting on a couch. Lima hung around Buttonwood Park with us, though sporadically. He didn’t play much basketball, but seemed like he was a pretty good guy.

The three white guys showed back up, and parked their car nearby the club. Rebeiro saw Brown’s Chevy, with the three guys inside. It sat there for two to three minutes. No one inside the car moved. There was very little conversation between them.

Then Brown got out, and laid a shotgun across the roof of the car. DesLauriers put his head in his hands. “Oh, my God.”

“He’s got a gun!” someone in the crowd yelled, and people started to scatter.

Hearing the noise, Randy Robinson, a 14-year-old who had been inside, walked outside.

Rebeiro saw him and screamed, “Get back inside!”

But it was too late. Brown shot into the crowd. Robinson was hit in the neck, cheek, upper abdomen, and intestines. Rebeiro heard a thud, and then he, too, slumped to the ground.

Kim Holland was hit, and Lima was hit dead on.

Brown jumped back into the car and sped off. Return shots were fired at the car.

Inexplicably, Brown headed to the police station—to complain that he had been attacked. The police station was just a couple of blocks from my father’s store, with
its rear entrance a block or two down Union Street. They parked right on Union. If they looked up the street, they’d have seen my father’s sign. The three of them walked around the corner to the front, with Brown and Rose dragging DesLauriers into the station where Patrolman Alan Mills met them. “Help us, help us!” Brown yelled to Mills. “Gary’s been shot.” Mills helped them into the station, examined DesLauriers, but couldn’t find any evidence of a gunshot.

“Come out and look at my car,” Brown urged, and he took Mills back around the corner to see his Chevy. It had bullet holes in the trunk, and on the right side, and the rear window was smashed.

“Is it okay if I look inside the car?” Mills asked.

“Sure.”

Mills took a look inside and found a small brick in the back seat.

“This is a hell of a thing,” Brown said to Mills. “They shouldn’t be able to get away with this! It’s a shame what’s going on up there. Somebody could get killed!”

They were escorted up to the second floor, the detective division, where they were questioned. Detectives were called in, and each of them told almost-identical stories about what had happened. Brown actually admitted that he’d shot into the crowd.

Detective Sargent Gilbert Larson asked him, “Did you fire the gun?”

“Yes,” Brown answered. “I was trying to scare ‘em.” He was agitated and excited.

“They’ve gotten away with enough.”

“What did you do with the expended shells from the shotgun?”

“I threw them away, but I don’t know where,” Brown said. “My wife and child could have been hurt if they were in the car!”

“When you got back to the West End the second time,” Larson continued, “did the crowd bother you?”

“No.”

“How far away were you?”

“About a hundred yards.”

At some point, Detective Henry Fernandes had walked into the room, was listening to the interrogation, and noticed that DesLauriers was excited, crying off and on throughout the interrogation.

“I didn’t hear a shot, or I didn’t want to hear it,” DesLauriers said. “There was a lot of confusion. And I was lying down in the back seat the whole time. When Brown stopped the car and got out, I put my hands over my face and said, ‘oh, my God.’ When we drove through the area the first time, I didn’t hear any shots.” Yet there were bullet holes in the car.

Outside the police station, and even inside the station, in the first floor lobby, a crowd had started to gather. They were in the street and on the sidewalks. Word had clearly spread that these three white guys had gone to the police station, so a bunch of guys from the West End followed them there. Folks on the sidewalk could actually
see the white guys through the second-floor windows. The detectives pulled down the shades.

A number of different detectives were involved in the questioning, and it seemed that none of the three white guys understood that they may have killed someone.

In fact, Rose said, “I thought Brown had shot the gun up into the air, not into the crowd. I didn’t think anyone got hurt. But,” he continued, “it’s a shame what the Panthers are doing in the West End. A variety store was destroyed.”

At one point, a police officer was informed that Lima had died, and he passed it on to Brown. Brown hung his head. At another point, a detective walked into the interrogation room holding the shotgun. He had gone through the car and found it.

Brown’s father heard about the shooting and showed up at the station. “What are you doing here?” he asked his son. His father had recently retired. He had been the principal at Roosevelt Junior High when Gary Pope and Larry Livramento had been there just a few years earlier.

“I need a lawyer,” he responded.

There was now mass confusion throughout the station, people everywhere; and outside, people were waiting, getting more and more angry.

“Mills, we’re going to get you and your family!” someone yelled into the station at the police officer.

After statements had been drawn up for the three men, Rose and DesLauriers signed theirs. DesLauriers read each page of the statement himself before he signed it. Sergeant Guy Oliveira, who was in the room throughout the interrogation, and Rose read his statement together before Rose signed his.

Brown refused. He said, “What I told you is the truth,” but wouldn’t sign.

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“They shot Lester Lima!”

“Lester Lima is dead! Shot by a car full of white guys!”

“This is what happens: the pigs don’t protect us.”

“They shot into a crowd, and hit a bunch of folks!”

The situation had now changed forever. Three angry white guys, who didn’t even live in the city, had killed an innocent teenager from the minority community. The community had been threatening to take things into their own hands, and three stupid white guys had. Nothing would ever be the same again.

While the three white guys were telling their version of the story to the cops, word spread about the shootings, and the city broke out into violence again. Shootings, fires, and rock throwing were the norm. Armed folks rode through the city, shooting randomly.

John Burns, the proprietor of a small electronics store on Kempton Street, was confronted by a bunch of Black kids who taunted him as he was closing up. He knew there was more to come, so he called his wife before he left and asked her to leave the phone off the hook. He did the same in the store.
CHAPTER 1

John went home, and was soon listening to the same kids breaking into his store, looting it, and ransacking it. When they realized the phone was off the hook, they hung it up and continued. The store was in ruins the next morning.

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Black and white leaders both knew something – anything – needed to be done. So they decided to meet at midnight right in City Hall, in the council chambers.

The meeting started badly. Black leaders showed up first, and immediately took the chairs normally reserved for city council members. The councilors weren’t there yet: they were being picked up by a police cruiser, making several stops to collect them all.

One of the first stops was in the South End. George Clark, the local councilor who represented the West End where the tensions took place, wasn’t living in his home. He’d shipped his wife and kids to a suburban town nearby to live with his in-laws, and he had moved down into the South End with his own parents.

The police picked him up, and rode up Rockdale Avenue to pick the others up. The cruiser was a station wagon of sorts, with an officer in the back, holding a shotgun out the open back end. They were clearly afraid of having trouble getting to the meeting.

When the councilors finally arrived, those in their seats didn’t move. It was tense. Eventually, they did move, but it was a precursor of what was to come.

It didn’t get much better when the mayor presented a few warmed-over ideas to improve things: incorporating the West End into the Model Cities Program, letting the city’s minority leaders serve on the neighborhood planning council. It was hardly worth the effort.

The community leaders had other ideas: more recreational facilities and playgrounds, a meeting with union leaders to talk about job opportunities, representation of higher level police officials on the Police-Community Relations Board, the creation of a minority majority city ward, the dropping of charges against all of those arrested since the trouble started, and community control over the police showing up in the neighborhood.

Obviously, most of these were reasonable; a few were difficult to agree with. Some of them could be done quickly, others would take years.

The mayor wanted to take the high road and say they were all reasonable. He desperately wanted to turn down the temperature in the city and try to get people on both sides to work together. But the whole effort collapsed early on.

“Nonviolence is dead,” said one Black leader. “We’re not going to stand by and watch our young get killed. This form of genocide will no longer occur! We cannot accept whites coming into our community and killing us like dogs or cattle.”

“We are already making plans to evacuate the young and the old from the neighborhood because it’s time to revolt against the pig system,” added another.

Another said that they were willing to defend themselves by force if necessary. They were angry. And they were starting to feel that they might need to start defending themselves because the police wouldn’t do it. In their minds, the shootings proved it.