

DEATH ON THE DOORSTEP - IT TAKES MORE THAN BLEACH TO CLEAN THE BLOOD FROM THE PORTCH THAT WELCOMED THE NEIGHBOR

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HOMICIDE NUMBER: 192

Victim: **James Ford**

Black male, 28

Date: Jun3e 16

Location: 704

Lakewood

On a gray misty morning, Margeree Jefferson wakes up early to wash death off her front porch.

She lugs a bucket of hot water, puts it down with a splash and collects bottles of Ajax, Pine-Sol, bleach and all-purpose cleanser. She puts on blue rubber gloves and black winter boots with rubber soles, even though it's the second week of June. "It's just the thought of this, that this is somebody's blood," she says. "I'm not superstitious, but it might be a bad omen to walk inside your house and have somebody's blood at the front door."

Jefferson, 62, dips a mop into the bucket and slops the water onto the painted wooden porch. As she scrubs back and forth, swirling the mop, bloody suds collect at her feet. Her expression is blank. This is the reality of living inside a murder scene -- a grandmother has to wake up early and clean up the blood of a stranger before it dries and leaves a deep stain that might never come out.

Some stains never do.

"I'm not going to use my regular bucket, just in case," she says, afraid of the diseases she might catch from the blood. She stands tall, full of pride. Her hair has a hint of gray. Her arms are strong from a lifetime of chores. Cleaning house. Washing walls.

"Around here, you hear shooting. Not every night. Too much to suit you."

Less than seven hours earlier, she was getting ready for bed, watching the 11 o'clock news, when she heard gunshots outside this two-story house where she has lived for 13 years. At first, she thought it was a hailstorm. The weatherman said to expect some summer showers. In the next moment, she thought it was more "happy" gunfire -- another round of shooting in celebration for the Detroit Pistons. Oh, she loves the Pistons -- she thinks they give the city so much hope and joy when there is so little to celebrate. The night before, people fired hundreds of shots into the air, all around Detroit, after the Pistons beat the Los Angeles Lakers and won the NBA championship. Guns are such an integral part of this community that they are used for everything from personal protection to celebration, especially on New Year's Eve or after clinching a championship.

But this sounded different. There were too many shots, too close together -- pop, pop, pop, pop, pop -- an angry string of violence that she's heard too many times to count.

"Did you hear that?" she asked her husband.

"Yeah," Elisha Jefferson, 65, said.

She started down the shiny oak staircase in this immaculate four-bedroom house, where she raised three children and proudly displays pictures of her five grandchildren. They used to call this the Kool-Aid House, the place where all the kids from the neighborhood would gather to play video games or hang out and do homework. Mrs. Jefferson would take care of everybody, making treats and opening up her dinner table to anyone who was hungry. She was always around, giving her children guidance, molding them, teaching them to be polite, teaching them that their choices had consequences.

"Don't open the door," Elisha Jefferson warned.

Mrs. Jefferson turned around to return to the bedroom, when the doorbell rang.

"Don't answer it," her husband said.

She couldn't help it. What if somebody needed her? What if she were the one on the outside? She kept walking down the steps, assuming it was her neighbor, asking if she heard the shots, too. Everybody in this east-side neighborhood is close. Friendly. They look out for each other. They've never had a crack house on this block. They wouldn't allow it.

Mrs. Jefferson pulled back the curtain and saw a young man standing on the porch, blood dripping down his face.

"Don't open that door," Elisha Jefferson said, and then he went and got his "stuff."

He came back with a loaded shotgun and stood on the landing, halfway up the stairs, afraid that whoever shot this young man would chase him back here. Twenty years earlier, Elisha Jefferson had stood on the stairs in another house with a 9mm pistol, protecting his children, after two robbers had broken into their home. Mrs. Jefferson was afraid her husband was going to get into a shooting match, that somebody would wind up dead, so she started screaming and scared the robbers away.

And now, 20 years later, inside the Kool-Aid House, she didn't know what to do. The mother in her wanted to help. The realist was afraid. She had watched the news too much; she knew the danger.

"You don't know who is behind him," Elisha Jefferson warned.

Mrs. Jefferson pulled back the curtain again, peering into the darkness, and the young man said he had been shot.

"Call 911," he said.

She did, then returned to the door but kept it locked. Her doors and windows are secured but don't have metal bars -- she refuses to "bar up" -- afraid of what it would say if she turned her house into a cage, locking herself in, keeping everything else out, and leaving nothing but a fire hazard.

"The ambulance is on the way," she said through the window.

The man asked her to call his house and gave her the number.

She got the phone, dialed and a soft female voice answered. Mrs. Jefferson thought it was a child.

"Is this an adult?" she asked.

"Yes."

And then she realized that she didn't know the man's name.

"What's your name?" she asked through the door.

"Dee-oh," he said.

"Do you know somebody named Dee-oh?" Mrs. Jefferson asked the woman on the phone.

"Yes."

Mrs. Jefferson told the woman what was happening.

That's when it clicked. The nickname sounded familiar. Mrs. Jefferson remembered the young man as a child. He went to school with one of her sons. He wasn't one of the regulars who came to her house, but she remembered him.

She went back to the door and tried to comfort the man.

"Don't get up," she said. "The ambulance is coming. Just lay still. Where were you shot?"

"In my stomach," he said.

She could see a wound on his face but little blood. She assumed he was bleeding internally.

An EMS unit was nearby, waiting around the corner for a police escort, following policy. Responding to a shooting is too dangerous for the medics without protection, although it is certainly not unusual. Through the first six months of the year, there have been more than 800 shootings in Detroit, an alarming spike in violence.

A squad car arrived and then EMS rolled up about 15 seconds later. An officer rushed to the porch and found the young man, lying on his right side, conscious. "What's your name?" he asked. "What happened?"

The man said he was out drinking with some friends and got into an argument.

"Over what?" the officer asked.

"Nothing," he said.

Mrs. Jefferson stood inside her house, watched through the window and listened to the police interview the man. Her husband stood on the landing with the shotgun. The paramedics put on rubber gloves and it startled her, reminding her that the man's blood could be deadly on its own. HIV or hepatitis C.

The man asked for morphine.

He was taken to the hospital, where he died. Later that night, a homicide detective interviewed Mrs. Jefferson, sitting on a couch in her family room.

A window was cracked open and Mrs. Jefferson could hear a soft gentle rain. It smelled clean and crisp, even though the rain was splattering the blood on the porch.

The events became clear: the man was shot about a block away on Lakewood. He ran northeast on Freud, turned left on Chalmers, and passed a house before stopping at Mrs. Jefferson's home. Several shell casings were found in the road and a silver handgun was recovered in the wet grass, near bottles of alcohol.

Mrs. Jefferson gave a statement to Detective Dale Greenleaf. She told him her slice of the story, and it matched the versions of other witnesses and officers.

"Anything else you can tell me?" Greenleaf asked.

"Basically, that was it," she said.

He thanked her for her help.

After the shooting, Mrs. Jefferson had difficulty going to sleep. Her mind raced. She got up and watched a replay of the news at 2 o'clock, but she hates to go to sleep after watching the news. There's too much evil in the world, too much death in this city, and it kept running through her mind. She likes to watch a comedy before going to bed, something light. But she couldn't stop thinking about the young man who lay dying on her porch. What brought him here? Why did it happen? Could one of her sons or grandchildren fall into the same trap? Or was he just an innocent bystander?

"These young kids get into so much trouble," Mrs. Jefferson says, scrubbing the porch as if it were a mundane chore. "For what? It's terrible. It's so senseless. They just don't value one another's life anymore. I don't understand that. You just wonder, what in the world."

Birds chirp softly and the air is thick with mist.

Standing on the porch, she looks at two rugs, each stained with blood.

"I'm going to throw that one away," she says, picking up one. "I'm going to see if I can salvage this one here."

She takes a brush and rubs the windowsill. Red, dirty water drips down the brick façade and onto the porch. She pours bleach on a thick spot of blood and scours it hard. The suds swirl, twisting and spinning, leaving a pattern like the footprint of a tornado.

As the chemicals mix together, a slender wand of smoke rises in the air.

"It's not like in the movies," she says. "The top part of the blood kind of rolled off but the rest isn't coming up."

As she works, she thinks about the young man -- later, she would learn that his name was **James Ford**, whose street name was Juice -- and wonders why their lives became linked. Criminologists, community leaders and police say that the recent spike in violence stems from a mix of poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, drug use, hopelessness and a gangsta rap culture. It forms a violent cycle that has spun out of control for generations -- tiny tornados that can touch down anywhere.

"Maybe he just felt like he was going to be safe here," she says. At the Kool-Aid House. "All of the boys, at one time or another, would come here."

Her husband walks across the bloody rug.

"Now, look, you just walked right across that," she says.

He picks up a bloody mat.

"Are you going to save this?" Elisha Jefferson asks. They've been married for 35 years. He is a retired tool and die maker, and he still works doing electrical work and plumbing. His hands are thick and strong.

"Yeah, I'm going to try to save that," she says. "Leave it alone. I'm gonna put some soap on it and then dry it off."

Typical. She thinks anything can be salvaged. A bloody rug. A life. A city. She worked as a secretary at a nearby elementary school, and she believes in children.

Her husband, on the other hand, is an ex-Marine. Careful. Realistic. Hard. And he chastised his wife for moving back that curtain.

"I don't take any chances," he says.

"I don't take any chances, but you never know," she says. "It could be you out here, sometime, through no fault of your own. And you knock on somebody's door and they say, get away, get away."

"Hey, that's life," he says. "That's reality. I know a case where a guy was willing to save somebody and he died, too, right down here at the canals."

"I have, too," she says.

"A guy went in there to save a dog and died," he says. "Can you believe this? He got tangled up in the fishing line!"

He shakes his head. He still looks like a Marine -- with a thick barrel chest and tight haircut. He moves with a swagger, confident and powerful.

"He jumped into the canal to save a friggin' dog."

He shrugs his shoulders.

"My wife is too cute for Detroit," he says. "She's an optimistic. I'm a pessimist. I know what I'm talking about."

But the tough talk belies his gentle smile. He goes behind the house, where he just started a garden in the back corner of his backyard. A struggling diabetic, Elisha Jefferson knows he has to eat more vegetables. The garden is thriving -- tomatoes and cucumbers and broccoli -- so much good coming from a small corner of the city, just a 10-second walk from where the shooting took place.

Mrs. Jefferson keeps scrubbing, working the porch. The stains are deep. On the porch. On the street. Throughout the city. And the answers seem out of reach.

Some will argue that the violence in Detroit involves only a small percentage of people, but the aftershocks touch thousands. Others believe that violence is a personal choice -- either you pull out the gun and shoot or you don't -- it's no more complicated than that.

"It seems like it's coming out," she says, unwilling to stop.

She drags the rugs to the side. It's garbage day on the block. Up and down the street, piles of trash line the route. Plastic bags. Trash bins. Wet cardboard boxes. All the ugly remains. But this is the day when all the rubbish gets taken away and the streets come clean again.

She pours ammonia on a stubborn spot, and her eyes burn from the vapor. "You get used to it," she says. "I bleach a lot."

As the sun rises, the city comes alive. Thousands have taken the day off work, to line the streets for the Detroit Pistons parade down Jefferson Avenue, celebrating the magical victory.

Somebody drives by the house, leans out a window and screams in joy: "Bad boys! Bad boys!" It is a chant from another time, another championship basketball team, back when the Pistons were led by Isiah Thomas and Joe Dumars. Back when there was a certain morality on the streets. When kids usually settled disagreements with fists, not guns. Back when this was the Kool-Aid House.

Mrs. Jefferson pulls out a hose and sprays off the porch. The bloody, soapy water flows out a small drain and on the ground. She pours more bleach, and finally, the stubborn spot comes clean.

Three hours later, after changing her clothes and cleaning up, she goes to the Pistons parade with her son, daughter-in-law and three of her five grandchildren. She watches the cars go by, filled with the basketball stars, and she cheers for the team that so reflected the spirit of the city -- blue-collar athletes doing the dirty work, hustling around with skinned knees and never giving up. The team that gave this city so much hope, a welcome diversion from the crime and despair. She claps for Richard Hamilton, Chauncey Billups, Ben Wallace and coach Larry Brown, soaking in the joy, feeling like there is a shred of hope.

But when she takes a deep breath, she can still smell the bleach.

EPILOGUE

Police investigated the case for months and believe there were three shooters, a triangle of death. Once the shooting started, it was inevitable that someone would die.

Everybody, it seems, has a gun.

The case is still open and no one has been charged. A memorial of 22 teddy bears is tied to a pole, marking where Ford died.

A few weeks later, in mid July, there was a shooting one block from Mrs. Jefferson's house. "A young man was shot four times," Mrs. Jefferson says. "It's crazy. With me having sons, it touches me. There are only two things that get me through this: prayer and faith. How are we gonna stop this?"

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(SIDEBAR)

ABOUT THIS SERIES

City leaders have tried to stop the violence in Detroit -- teaching children tools for conflict resolution, flooding areas with cops, targeting the drug trade, buying back guns and even holding a day of prayer. But the violence continues. Through November, there were 1,279 shootings and 341 murders.

Why is this city killing itself? What has it done to the community's soul?

That's what the Free Press wants to show you, in the special series that continues today. Staff writer Jeff Seidel and photographer Eric Seals spent the last six months traveling with homicide detectives to crime scenes, watching them try to solve the crimes. Seidel and Seals also spent time with the families of victims, in the courts and in the neighborhoods where people are getting killed.

Keep up online

See photo galleries with more photos, and read the previous stories on the Web at www.freep.com.

In Wednesday's Free Press

Michael McGill went to the corner to meet someone and never returned. His girlfriend and his father go to the morgue to see his body as detectives search for answers.

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Caption: Photo ERIC SEALS/Detroit Free Press

The morning after a shooting victim rang her doorbell and pleaded help, Margaree Jefferson scrubbed his blood from her porch. When her children were growing up, the Jefferson home was a gathering place for the neighborhood. Elisha and Margaree Jefferson have different reactions to the neighborhood violence that has become part of their daily lives. Friends of **James Ford** made a memorial at the corner of Lakewood and Freud near the place where he was shot. Elisha and Margaree Jefferson have different reactions to the neighborhood violence that has become part of their daily lives. A photograph of Michael McGill, 23, of Detroit.

Memo: HOMICIDE IN DEROIT: ECHOES OF VIOLENCE: PART 2. END.

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