

Excerpted from the preface and chapter 1

In this memoir of my childhood in Newark, New Jersey I have tried to identify and describe the influences — good and bad — as best I could recall -- that played a role in my development. Had it not been for the constant echo of the voices of my mother and my Uncle Hugo surfacing in my head at opportune times, trying to intervene when I found myself going off course, I might have wound up in jail or dead at a very young age, as was the fate of a few boys in my neighborhood and two of my best friends in high school. To be sure, I did not always listen to those voices; but when I didn't, I suffered the consequences.

As best as I could recall, I have used the language of black and Italian adolescents and teenagers in my neighborhood and at the schools I attended during the period covered by the story. Moreover, I use phonetic spellings to recreate the sounds. Some words are plain "Jersey" such as "youse" for "you second person plural" and "anyways" for anyway. The reader will notice that I use the words, "colored" and "Negro". This is a reflection of my evolving identity due to political and social dynamics defined and accelerated by the civil rights movement.

Finally, I played the music of my favorite R&B singers of the time as I wrote about events through middle school. Towards the end of middle school, I discovered jazz and my interest in it and its creators took root and began to redefine me. Once I started high school and formed a new circle of friends who shared my affinity for jazz, I fully embraced it. Thus, I played through high school the music of Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Gerry Mulligan, Art Blakey Benny Golson. So, when I started writing about my high school events, I played their music to help me experience the feelings I had to help me give authenticity to my language.

It is my hope that in these pages readers will find something of value, an anecdote or lesson that might help some young person get on and stay on a positive path to being a responsible and productive and citizen.

David Hugo Barrett  
Ellicott City, md  
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Part 1  
The Neighborhood

Chapter 1  
In the beginning

(1)

James I. Barrett was born March 6, 1911, in Franklyn, Virginia. Less than a month later that same year, Annie Owens was born April 5, in Portsmouth, Virginia. Somehow their paths crossed and they met and married 19 years later. Annie, who was to become my mother, was a high school graduate; but James, my future father, had completed only the eighth grade. None of my siblings knew how it came to be that our parents had moved from Virginia to New Jersey. But like many Southerners migrating north during the 1930s, James was probably searching for economic opportunity so he could support his growing family. We do know that the family had

moved several times around New Jersey in the towns of Bloomfield and Montclair, where one of James's maternal aunts, Rose, lived. They settled in Newark in 1942 with a family of three girls and one boy. They moved to a five-room, cold-water flat on the first floor of a three-story, nine-family tenement at 67 Clay Street in the North Ward — the section of the city known as Little Italy because of its high concentration of Italian immigrants. The tenement was a half-mile west of the Passaic River, which separated the blue-collar city of Harrison from Newark. The Clay Street Bridge connected the two cities in New Jersey.

Within two years of the family's moving to Clay Street, my younger brother, Melvin, and I were born 15 months apart, at Beth Israel Hospital in the heavily Jewish Weequahic section of the South Ward of Newark.

The neighborhood in which we lived encompassed an area bound roughly by High Street on the west, Eighth Avenue on the south, Crane Street on the north and McCarter Highway on the east. The residential part of Clay Street extended three blocks — from High Street, crossing Broad and Spring streets and stretched all the way down to McCarter Highway.

On the other side of Clay Street, beginning in my block and heading east were the Clay-Bro Diner (so named because it was at the intersection of Clay and Broad streets); Bruno's used car lot, where my older brother, James, Jr., was employed; four or five garages owned by Bruno that were rented to the few neighborhood families that had cars; a succession of linoleum stores and another used car lot where Clay Street intersected with Mount Pleasant Avenue. Extending for another block and on both sides of the street, there were even more linoleum stores clear down to the Amoco station at the southwest corner of Clay Street and McCarter Highway; and finally, the Passaic River.

On one side of cobble-stoned Spring Street were a sweltering steel foundry, a scissor manufacturer and a dress factory, while on the other side were a pair of row houses and the parking garage for the Bell Telephone Company service trucks, the Flamingo Lounge (formerly the Fireplace Tavern) and Newman's grocery and deli at Eighth Avenue and Spring Street. Because of the presence of these businesses, there was a large influx of white people into our neighborhood during the day to work at the steel foundry, the telephone company, or to shop at the many linoleum stores that lined Clay Street. Invisible to these intruders, I would watch with rapt curiosity as they looked for parking spaces, took lunch and coffee breaks and rushed home after work. I used to wonder what the neighborhoods they lived in looked like and what they thought of mine.

Each of Newark's five wards had its own mix of racial, religious, and ethnic groups. The Central Ward was as colored as the north was Italian, while the West Ward was second only to the North in its Italian demographic, though there were a significant number of colored people and a few other white ethnic groups living there as well. The East Ward boasted a Polish and Portuguese population, the latter being the third-largest in the world after Lisbon and Boston; and a growing Puerto Rican community. The South Ward, once virtually entirely Jewish, was slowly becoming a colored ward as the Jews moved farther west into the Weequahic section and finally out of the city altogether into the suburbs of Orange, West Orange, East Orange and Millburn.

Broad Street was the longest street completely contained within Newark. Other streets were longer, but they stretched into other jurisdictions such as Bloomfield, Montclair and Irvington. Broad Street, running north and south, intersected with Market Street to create a space Newarkers called Four Corners. Broad ran east and west, right through the heart of downtown Newark, a bustling shopping and office district. The three-mile stretch along Broad Street between Clay and Camp streets was populated with businesses and public spaces that contributed to the character of the street and the city. Among them were the administrative offices and communications nerve center of Bell Telephone, an over-the-top nouveau building at 540 Broad Street; the Lackawanna railroad station; and the Studebaker automobile dealership, behind which were stabled the Budweiser Clydesdale horses, fixtures in the Thanksgiving Day

parades. Then there were the Mutual Benefit Life Insurance Company and Washington Park, where a bronze statue showed George Washington standing proudly next to his horse, addressing the troops after a victory at Rocky Hill, New Jersey. Four hundred yards northwest of General Washington on Washington Street were the Newark Public Library, once the best in the state, and part of the Newark campus of Rutgers University. Continuing south on Broad Street, one would pass the Loews Movie Theater and S. Klein's, Bamberger's and Hahne's department stores. Military park was directly across from the three stores.

Just south of Hahne's was the corporate headquarters of the Prudential Insurance Company. At 24 stories, it was the most imposing structure in downtown Newark. Continue south a few blocks and you come to the Four Corners, the name given to the intersection of Broad and Market Streets. Teddy Powell's Lounge, the most popular jazz club in New Jersey and frequented by those well-schooled in jazz and blues. On one occasion, I recall my father being climb-the-wall excited about Billy Holiday billed to appear there. "Billy's coming to Teddy Powell's next week", he broadcast to neighbor, Frank Jones. At the time, I thought he was referring to a man. It was only when I was well into my teens that I learned he had been talking about Philadelphia-born singer, Billy Holiday.

In the next block was the Potampkin Chevrolet dealership, where in 1965, I was to buy my first car and directly across the street, the Continental Ball room and Newark Symphony Hall. If you traveled south two more blocks, you would be greeted by a statue of Abraham Lincoln standing tall in a small park bearing his name directly across from the federal office building at the intersection of Camp and Broad streets.

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In the 1950s and '60s, if you were downtown during the week in the daytime, you would have gotten a distorted view of the proportion of colored people living in Newark, because you saw largely white people on foot, in cars and peering out of the windows of buses. A few lived in Newark, but the vast majority commuted from Newark's Essex County suburbs, mainly those west of Newark such as the Oranges (East, West and South); Livingston; Short Hills; Montclair and Bloomfield. At 7 a.m. or 5 p.m., one need only stand on any one of the in/outbound thoroughfares -- West Market Street, South Orange Avenue or Springfield Avenue -- to watch the steady, slow, flow of traffic out of the city ferrying white faces to even whiter spaces to fully appreciate this curious phenomenon.

Newarkers had access to cheap forms of recreation in its parks and swimming pools. While Newark was dotted with several small parks, the two largest ones were Branch Brook in the North Ward and Weequahic, in the South Ward. These were the parks that many families frequented on weekends for recreation of swings, row boating, softball and picnicking. Curiously, Weequahic even had tennis courts, a golf course and a defunct half-mile harness race track.

On hot summer days, we could take advantage of five swimming pools, one in each of Newark's five wards. On Clifton Avenue, Rotunda was the pool that served my neighborhood and one that we would frequent at our own risk; it was in Little Italy and we had to walk through densely populated Seventh Avenue to get there. Gangs of Italian teenagers and young adults would occasionally be hanging on the corners and, depending on the mood of the group, they would be inclined to "get some niggers" when they saw colored boys passing through their neighborhood. But we sometimes wanted relief so badly from the summer heat, it was a risk we were willing to take and we attempted to mitigate that risk by traveling in a group whenever we could.

I was 9 years old when Newark's mayor, an Irishman named Leo P. Carlin had begun his first term. He was the first mayor whose name I knew because he was the centerpiece in a 9 x 10 black and white photograph my father cherished. It pictured him, nattily dressed, sitting next to Carlin with a small group of other white men, each hoisting a glass of liquor, at an affair

at Newark's Terrace Ballroom. "The mayor's my friend," my father would casually mention. I surmised that this could not possibly be true since the other men my father called his friends were men with whom he drank, played cards or shot craps. These men would occasionally show up at our apartment to engage in these activities. They were named One-Eyed Phil; a dancer called Hucklebuck Shorty; Biracial, Donald Boston, Big Red an Irish, ruddy faced bus driver and Oscar Singletary, who carried a .45 caliber pistol in a shoulder holster. The mayor was never among them.

During one of his visits, Oscar, a bachelor who lived at 65 Clay Street, took me to our back yard and fired his pistol into the air. The loud noise and flash of fire were so frightening; the recall of the experience still makes me uncomfortable. I wondered where the bullet would fall and if it would injure someone. How would they know who fired the gun? The next day, I worriedly scanned the Newark Star-Ledger for any report of someone being struck by a stray bullet, not knowing what I would do if I had found such a report.

Like most families on Clay Street in the 1950'S, my family did not have an automobile or telephone — it would be 1954 before the first family, the Keys, and most everyone else would get a telephone. In the interim, the public telephone at the old Oak Tavern around the corner on Broad Street southwest of our tenement served that purpose. It also served as the neighborhood hangout for my father when his funds were low. On payday, he would move upscale, going to the Novelty Bar and Grill downtown on Market Street and, on special occasions, to Teddy Powell's Lounge to hang with the hipsters. Of all of the fathers in my neighborhood, mine was the only one who hung out in bars.

My mother got the news of her father's death over the telephone in the telephone booth of the Old Oak. He had been sick and one evening my mother went "to call home" to check on him. When she returned, she called Melvin and me into the kitchen and announced in a sad voice, that "Papa's dead."

Ten years earlier, when she learned she was pregnant (with me), she had used the same telephone to share the heavy burden with her younger brother, Hugo. With children ages 12, 11, and 7 (one child had died of pneumonia as a toddler) and on welfare, she was overwhelmed by the prospect of having yet another mouth to feed and was seeking Hugo's advice. She was the only girl of five children born to James and Grace Melvin Owens, the children of enslaved Africans who were raised in the Deep Creek area of Norfolk County, Virginia. My mother's brothers called her "baby" even though she was older than two of them. The younger boys got their cue from the older ones and the name stayed with her until her death from an angina attack on June 28, 1978.

"What must I do?" she cried.

After a short pause, he said, "If it's a boy, name him Hugo."

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With the exception of three families that lived in the Eighth Avenue row houses, everyone in the neighborhood was a renter. In our block, there were three red brick tenements with slate stoops. Each was three stories high and encompassed the street numbers 65, 67, and 69. All of the apartments had five rooms and one bathroom, which was entered from the kitchen. This particular style of apartment was known as a shotgun or railroad flat, so called because you could walk from one end to the other in a straight line and see the entire apartment just as you could walk through the cars of a train. At the north and south ends of the apartments were the kitchen and the front (living) room which faced Clay Street. The three rooms in between served as bedrooms. My parents slept in the room next to the living room and my older brother, James, and I slept in the same double bed in the room next to theirs. A door separated the rooms. On the other side of our room was another bedroom adjacent to the kitchen where my sisters slept in a double bed and Melvin slept in a folding bed. Once my sisters left home, though, my parents bought a convertible sofa bed for Melvin. His room would then double as a

sort of family entertainment center, since it was there we kept our television and record player, both acquired in 1955.

Though Melvin had wanted a Castro Convertible sofa bed, we could not afford one. He had been captivated by their catchy jingle, whose first line was, "Who was the first to conquer space?" "Castro Convertible," was the answer.

My mother bought a record player after she heard "The Great Pretender" by The Platters; she bought the television because Melvin and I had been spending too much time next door at the Carters' watching "Howdy Doody," "The Rootie Kazootie Club" and "Captain Midnight" on Saturday mornings on a TV Mr. Carter had built. She reminded us that the Carters already had nine children of their own and had no extra room for us. I do not know where Mr. Carter acquired the skills to build a television, since for a living he was a delivery truck driver for the Schickhaus meat packing company on Orange Street.

In winter, we heated our apartment with three kerosene stoves. One was built into the kitchen and had been converted from a wood-burning stove in the late 1940s. Standing three feet high by three feet deep by four feet wide, it was a sturdy, black iron structure nestled in a corner next to our gas stove and opposite the small pantry, in which we stored not only our food, but also, our dishes, pots and pans. It had an oven and four top burners. The burners' tops were removable with the aid of a portable handle that fit neatly into slots designed for that purpose. Once the tops were removed, I mesmerized by the dancing flames rising from the kerosene-soaked wicks. This stove provided not only heat for the kitchen, but also, in the winter, my mother would sometimes use it for cooking. This convenience saved us money, of which it seemed we never had enough.

I have two distinct memories of that old stove: warming my hands over it when I came in from playing in the snow, and polishing it with a special black wax. It wasn't the actual polishing that I relished; rather, it was the slightly pungent smell of the burning wax that filled my nostrils after I lit the stove following a good polishing. So I did not mind when my mother asked me to polish the stove because experiencing that unique smell was my reward.

The second stove-related ritual was one I performed with Melvin -- clipping and then placing our finger- and toenails to burn on the stove's hot surface. Once, when he had athlete's foot, Melvin peeled the infected skin from his feet and burned it too. We were surprised that the skin smelled the same as the toenails.

On cold winter, school mornings, my mother would get up an hour or so before anyone else and light the stove so the kitchen would be warm for breakfast (Decades later, I would read a poem by Robert Hayden, *Those Winter Sundays*, that would remind me of her). She would also heat a kettle of water so Melvin and I could wash our faces and hands before we got dressed. We did not have pajamas (I thought that clothing item was worn only by white people on television and in the movies), so it did not take us long — five minutes max—to perform this ritual.

Neither did it take us very long to get dressed in the morning. I suppose it helped that we had a sparse wardrobe; this made it possible for us to spend very little time each morning trying to decide what to wear. While I changed my underwear every day, I wore the same pair of corduroy or khaki pants to school an entire week, and I wore the same shirt for two days straight. Then I would change to another shirt for the next two days. The shirt that I wore on the fifth day, I would wear again on Monday, but with a different pair of pants for that week. With these outfits, I wore my only pair of school shoes, always black, from Thom McCan's, a store known for its sturdy, affordable shoes. I continued this ritual through sixth grade. But as an "upperclassman," I thought I was God's gift to Burnet Street School; but once I got to junior high school, I was the lowliest of the low as a seventh-grader and I had to rise to a new standard of hipness. Being hip was the most important thing — not elementary-school hip, but junior-high school hip, which was a whole 'nother thing. And the most obvious way to advertise that you

had arrived at hipdom was to dress the part. Corduroy pants, plaid flannel shirts and Blockbuster shoes got you attention, but not the kind you wanted.

The second oil stove was dirt-brown and stood about three-and-a-half feet tall in Melvin's room; it provided heat, such as it was, for that room and the next bedroom where James and I slept. The third stove was in the living room, which had no door between it and my parents' room, which was next to James' and my room. Since we were so poor, we would light it only on special occasions, such as Thanksgiving and Christmas, or when relatives visited. Except for those occasions and during summer, the living room was as cold as it was outside. In fact, my mother nicknamed it "the refrigerator" because when she had to store food such as a turkey or large ham that was too big to fit in our icebox (in 1952, we got a Hotpoint, a low-end refrigerator made by GE), she would place the meat, ironically, on top of the stove. This put it out of reach of hungry mice. Fortunately, the holidays that we celebrated with big meals occurred in the winter months. I don't think any food ever spoiled in "the refrigerator."

There were only two sets of windows through which any significant amount of light was admitted into our apartment. They were in the refrigerator and the kitchen, whose windows looked out onto Clay Street and the backyard, respectively. I don't know why we called it the "backyard" because there was no front yard from which to distinguish it. The bedroom windows faced the east wall of the building at 69 Clay Street and the buildings were so close you could reach through an open window and nearly touch the opposing wall.

As was the case with the other apartments in the neighborhood, ours was a cold-water flat. To get hot running water, we had to light a small gas water heater that stood adjacent to the hot water tank that was located in the kitchen. We performed this ritual weekly on Saturdays in preparation for our Saturday-night baths and the week's clothes-washing. Melvin and I had to take the baths even if we did not need them. To prove we were wrong about that, after our baths, my mother would point out the black ring lining the tub and ask, rhetorically, "Where do you think that came from?" If we needed hot water for a "bird bath," we would heat it on the gas stove in a gray tea kettle and pour it into the wash basin. During the week, we would wash hands, faces, armpits, private parts and feet (I sometimes skipped this latter step) in the basin, which we placed in the kitchen sink because we had no sink in the bathroom, only a toilet and bathtub.

In 1956, my mother once told me that she had read in the newspaper that the Newark Housing Authority was planning to build a multiple-building, high-rise housing project, the Christopher Columbus Homes, only a few blocks from Clay Street, in Little Italy. With suppressed excitement, she said the apartments would have steam heat and hot water all of the time and that we could all have our own rooms. She said we might take out an application to get in. It sounded like heaven to me — I had already begun to imagine myself in my own room reading comic books.

She did apply, but our application was rejected because we "made too much money." That was the year my father earned \$3,500! My mother was floored. She said they did not want us, but it was because we colored. I secretly thought it seemed white people could do anything they wanted to colored people and get away with it. Hadn't they done so with Emmitt Till?

The year before, we had applied for that public housing, Emmitt Till, a fourteen-year-old Chigo boy visited relatives in Mississippi; just as Melvin and I would visit our grandparents in Portsmouth and Franklin. But on his visit that summer, he was savagely murdered by a pair of white men who were purported to be members of the Ku Klux Klan. The news put both fear and hatred of white men deep in my bones. In the relative safety of Newark, adults whispered among themselves, of the Till tragedy in a failed attempt to shield us youngsters from the horrible news.

Being rejected by the Columbus Homes turned out to be a blessing in disguise, because over time, these and other such high-density housing developments proved to be federally

financed, rat-infested incubators of crime. In the interim, I was disappointed and resolved that we would be stuck on Clay Street for the rest of our lives.

In addition to being just plain drafty, our apartment was on the first floor, directly over the cellar, a dark, damp place that had a dirt floor and contained six lockable storage bins, one for each family. Each storage bin housed a 50-gallon oil drum which was also lockable. My mother used to say that the reason our linoleum-covered floors were so cold was that we were directly over the cellar. However, the heat from our apartment rose to heat our ceiling which, in turn, heated the floors of the second-floor tenants; so if our apartment was warm, so were their floors. In good times (this meant when my mother was working to supplement my father's income) our oil drum was filled with kerosene delivered by Mr. Curtis, the oilman; one of four delivery people who were neighborhood fixtures; the other three being the paperboy, the Italian policy man, Tony the numbers runner, and the milkman. Mr. Curtis looked as though he had washed both his brown, crusty-hard hands and coveralls in oil. He always smelled like oil — even in the summertime when he was delivering ice for our ice box before we got our Hotpoint refrigerator.

In the winter months, Melvin and I were overjoyed when Mr. Curtis showed up because it meant for a few weeks, anyway, we would not have to trek the two blocks east toward the Passaic River to the Esso gas station on McCarter Highway to fill our five-gallon kerosene can. It also meant we could have uninterrupted heat for 30 days or so. That is except at night, as I have said, when all stoves were shut down.

In between the good times, though, Melvin and I would have to take turns carrying the heavy oil can until we got the beautiful, red Radio Flyer wagon, which not only made the task easier, but it also meant only one of us was needed to do it.

That wasn't the only use to which we put the red wagon; I used it to haul groceries to the homes of the many people, almost exclusively women, who shopped at the Acme supermarket on Broadway near Bloomfield Avenue. It seemed to be the norm that most shoppers did not own a car, or preferred not to drive it to the Acme. Many of those who did drive still required assistance getting their groceries to wherever they had parked.

Friday evenings and all day Saturday were the Acme's busiest times, as most people got paid on Fridays and did their major shopping on these two days. Ranging in age from 10 to 13, our group of budding entrepreneurs parked our wagons in front of the store, in a neat little line parallel to the curb as we waited to approach a potential customer with the words, "May I take your order, ma'am or sir?"

It was not unusual for one of the other boys to try to bogart (elbow in on) your order. I could not rely upon my customers' remembering me, so to avoid the "my-word-against-yours game," I made a point of wearing some distinctive piece of clothing (usually a brightly colored cap) so my customers could readily recognize me when they finally emerged with their groceries. "Remember me," I would say, "I'm the boy with the red cap."

Like the other boys, I had no fixed fee that I charged my customers; they pretty much gave us whatever they wanted, which was between a quarter and a dollar. There seemed to be no correlation between pay and the number of bags hauled, number of flights of stairs climbed, or the distance traveled.

Over time, I got to know who the big spenders were and also who lived so deep in Little Italy that no size tip would get me to go there. Garside Street was as far west as I would go. The first and only time I took an order above Garside was uneventful until I had made my delivery and headed home. As I pushed myself in my wagon, left knee planted firmly inside while I propelled myself with my right leg, a little boy, who could not have been more than eight years old, threw his teddy bear and hit me in the face. I suspected it was a set up to see what I would do, so I ignored the assault and kept my eyes glued straight ahead and whistled as I pushed on. I thought of the movie *The Sound of Music* and the song "Whistle a Happy Tune" so no one would suspect I was afraid. But that tactic did not cut any ice with the pint-sized punk. Thinking that this was only the start of a bad situation, I lifted myself out of my wagon and,

walking as fast as I could, began to pull it south toward home. Before long, I heard someone shout, "git that nigger!" I looked back to see what seemed to be, seven or eight boys whose ages I could not even guess; it had gotten dark and they must have been thirty or forty yards behind me. My heart jumped into my throat and I took off as fast as my legs could carry me. I thought about another movie that featured a colored man who had found himself in a haunted house. When he heard a strange noise, he shouted "Feets don't fail me now!" before he lit out safety bound. His name was Stepin Fetchit.

Like most colored boys my age, I thought nothing of Hollywood's portraying our people as fools; in fact I had come to expect it. So, of course I thought the scene in the movie was funny. But I wasn't laughing now. I ran so fast, the wheels of my wagon barely touched the ground. I ran past curious adults and teenagers who seemed to be amused at the fun the kids were having at my expense. I prayed that none of them would try to intervene to stop me. I continued running; made a left onto Seventh Avenue and continued a few more blocks before I noticed I had not heard any screaming in a while. I looked back and, seeing I was no longer being pursued, I slowed to a brisk walk. I do not know how much longer I could have kept up my fear-fueled pace, but it did not matter now, I had shaken them and I was near home.

Emboldened, I thought "them mothahfuckas better not follow me to Clay Street if they know what's good for them." In a short-lived fit of fantasy, I imagined myself calling together all of my boys to go to our "secret hideout," (the cellar) to plot how we would get even with my would-be attackers. But never having gotten a look at them I would not have been able identify them even if we had been bold enough (which we were not) to go into Little Italy to hunt them down.