CONTENTS

PART III — TURNING POINT

PART IV — THE PURDIE EFFECT

APPENDICES

1.

BUGSY

"Can I take you to the preacher? Let me take you to the preacher!" Bugsy shouts and waves his hands as he jumps into the path of the oncoming car he's spotted—one with New York tags. A young soldier in uniform pulls his new 1949 Ford coupe to the side of Route 40. After a brief conversation with the boy, he nods to his female passenger, who then lets Bugsy into the backseat. The car exits the highway with the youngster giving directions.

The soldier glances back at his young passenger. "You're going to get yourself killed out on this road. What's your name?"

"They call me Bugsy, sir," the boy says proudly. "Make a right up here."

Neat clapboard cottages with small porches appear behind the trees lining both sides of the street, as signs announcing the matrimonial services of several parsons in town vie for the soldier's attention. Taxicabs had long ago monopolized the train-station and bus-stop wedding trade, so Bugsy worked the highway, where he could give directions from the backseat, expecting a generous tip from the happy groom at the end of the

ride, in addition to a finder's fee from the parson.

"It's on the next block. The parson will take care of you," Bugsy says. He sounds confident as he brings his clients to a big corner house with four large signs on the front lawn, each with a different silhouette but all announcing the same message: "Minister-Marriage-License." While the car is pulling up to the house, a matronly woman steps out onto the front porch. Bugsy waves to her from the backseat, then rushes ahead of the couple as they walk toward the porch steps.

Bugsy beams with his brightest smile as he bounces up the steps two at a time. "Hello, Mrs. Sears," he says to the wife of one of the ministers who performs wedding ceremonies.

"Hi, Bugsy," she says quickly, turning her attention to the couple now coming toward her. Bugsy moves to her side.

"You look lovely, dear," Mrs. Sears says to the young woman as the couple approaches. The bride looks up from beneath her bonnet and smiles.

"The parson is just completing a wedding ceremony. He won't be long. Come into the parlor and be comfortable while you wait. Let me get you something to drink," Mrs. Sears offers.

She does not wait for a reply and quickly returns carrying a silver tray with two tall glasses of iced tea, each with a stirrer and a sprig of mint. Mrs. Sears's gestures are carefully choreographed. She has done this many times.

Bugsy observes her through the screen door. His clients stand nervously in the parlor, and he can hear the parson's voice coming from beyond the room. Mrs. Sears feels his small presence at the front door and turns abruptly to go out to the porch. Bugsy steps back. She hands him fifty cents. "Thank you, Mrs. Sears," Bugsy says in response. He bounds down the porch stairs and sprints back to the highway.

Since the 1920s, Elkton, Maryland, has been known as the

"Marriage Capital of the East." The State of Maryland does not have a waiting period for the issuance of marriage licenses. The first county seat one encounters when traveling into Maryland by road or rail from the populous northeast, Elkton has had little competition in attracting lovesick couples looking for quick, uncomplicated marriages. The city's motels run perpetual "Honeymoon Specials," and ready-to-wear wedding bands are prominently displayed in store windows along its Main Street. Taxi drivers pitch package deals that include transportation first to a parson, then to the honeymoon suite, and finally, back to the train station or bus depot, with a wedding band thrown in for good measure.

One Elkton minister reportedly performed more than 4,000 weddings in one year. Elkton's reputation as a wedding mill was so widespread that during the Second World War, the United States' military campaign against the Japanese on Rabaul, New Britain, was named "Operation Elkton" because it "married" the Army of General Douglas MacArthur with the Navy of Admiral William "Bull" Halsey. Ethel Merman, Bert Lahr, Joan Fontaine, Cornel Wilde, Billie Holliday, Willie Mays, and Screamin' Jay Hawkins are among the celebrities issued marriage licenses at the Cecil County Courthouse in Elkton.

As a child, Bugsy was taking his first tentative steps into the flow of America's cultural history.

During the Great Depression, James and Mary Purdie moved from North Carolina and settled in Elkton. James found work on the track gang of the Pennsylvania Railroad and on the highway building crew for Route 40, a section of a cross-continental highway funded under President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. After the highway opened, James took a job as a cook at the Elkton Diner, which opened along the same road. Mary Purdie gave birth to sixteen children in as many years, but only nine of

her children survived infancy: six sons in succession followed by three daughters. Dr. James Johnson, Cecil County's only black physician, delivered all of her children, including her fifth son, who arrived on June 11, 1942. James and Mary named him Bernard Lee Purdie. Henry, their oldest son, nicknamed him "Bugsy."

Mary Purdie was a big woman, standing nearly six feet four inches. She towered over James, who stood five feet eight. Mary lived for her children and her husband. Her world was her kitchen, where she prepared meals for her family on a coal-burning pot-bellied stove. Up before dawn, Mary started her day by boiling water for bathing (there were no indoor facilities). She would bake bread, prepare breakfast for the Purdie clan, and make lunches for the schoolchildren. During the day, Mary kept her infant child (there always was one) in an unadorned basket sitting on a kitchen chair, while a two-year-old scuttled around the kitchen floor. Each new arrival went into the basket, marking the graduation of the next oldest child to explore the kitchen; meanwhile, the next oldest moved on to a life of small household chores.

Despite his height, James was a very powerful man. It was said that he could carry an entire section of steel railroad track on his shoulder unaided. James earned reputations for working hard and fighting hard, and he was proud of both. His reputation for prowess with his fists was so widely known that out-of-town toughs would approach him in groups and challenge him to fight. If he couldn't talk them out of a fight, he would make sure he got close enough to throw the first punch. Staring menacingly into the leader's eyes, he never threatened, but if he sensed a punch was coming, he would hit the leader first as hard as he could, trying to hurt the man severely with one punch. That blow usually ended the fight. James Purdie never backed down

from a fight, a conviction that he passed on to his sons.

Then there was the elderly Cap: a surrogate grandfather to the Purdie children and a calming influence on the fiery James. James never questioned Cap, no matter how agitated he might become. Cap needed only to place his hand on James's shoulder; James would stop and respond immediately with a respectful, "Yes, sir!" How Cap and James established their relationship is a mystery, but from the children's point of view, Cap had always been there. He was considered their grandfather, even though their paternal grandfather was alive and resided on the Purdie family farm outside of Elizabethtown, North Carolina.

Lying east of the Susquehanna Flats along the Big Elk Creek for which it is named, Elkton sits at the head of the Chesapeake Bay, one of the world's great estuaries. The land on which Elkton is situated was once the property of Robert Alexander, a British sympathizer during the Revolutionary War who sailed back to England after the colonies won their independence.

After Alexander's departure, his property was confiscated and subdivided. The principal residence of Alexander's estate sits on the bank of Big Elk Creek, then the town's primary access to the Chesapeake Bay and the source of its early commerce. Subsequent owners named the Elkton estate "The Hermitage," after the Nashville, Tennessee, homestead of President Andrew Jackson. James Purdie was the caretaker of Elkton's Hermitage estate. James and his older sons kept the grounds and tended to the Hermitage residence and nearby apartment buildings owned by several merchant families with a financial interest in the estate. To the Purdie family, it was simply "the farm."

Shortly before Bernard's birth, World War II turned the sleepy village of Elkton into a boomtown. The population of Cecil County tripled almost overnight. The principal naval training center for the East Coast was opened only fifteen miles west

in Bainbridge, Maryland. At its peak the Bainbridge Naval Training Center housed nearly 35,000 recruits on the 1,000-acre property, which became the site of hundreds of barracks, training halls, classrooms, gymnasiums, and mess halls. A small fireworks factory in Elkton was pressed into service making naval munitions. The United States government took over the facility, and 1,000 self-contained buildings were constructed on the site, located far enough apart so that, if one building exploded, it wouldn't take the whole town with it in a chain reaction.

Government recruiters traveled as far away as North Carolina and West Virginia to search for workers willing to move to Elkton to pack shells at minimum wage. The federal government recruited women and blacks for the tedious work. Approximately 50,000 job announcements were dropped from airplanes over the backwoods of West Virginia, and by 1943, more than 11,000 new workers had invaded Elkton. Another 6,000 people arrived in their wake. Off-hour crowds roamed the streets looking for entertainment in a town that was bursting at its seams.

Yet entertainment was in short supply in Elkton. Philadelphia and Baltimore were too distant to provide an outlet for wartime employees and military personnel; to alleviate the situation, the newly formed United Services Organization (USO) established one of its first centers in Elkton. While the USO provided some activities, these did not address the needs of war industry workers, particularly black workers.

These new arrivals found their way to local black clubs and dance halls in the county and provided a source of increased business for a local orchestra led by two Elkton brothers, Clyde and Pete Bessicks. The Clyde Bessicks Orchestra played engagements from rural Maryland counties northeast of Baltimore to the Brandywine Valley of Pennsylvania and down the eastern shore of the bay into Delaware and Maryland. The orchestra consisted

of fourteen instrumentalists and played the popular dance music of the day. Jazz arrangements made popular by Duke Ellington, Count Basie, and Benny Goodman were the orchestra's standard material. Clyde Bessicks, a local high school music teacher, insisted his orchestra also learn and rehearse the latest hit songs, and he made sure his musicians had written arrangements. It was a remarkable organization to emerge from a town the size of Elkton. Clyde Bessicks was committed to playing at a high level, even if he was relegated to venues outside the larger cities. The orchestra's drummer was Leonard Heywood, another music teacher at George Washington Carver School in Elkton, the public school for colored students in Cecil County. In a few years, Heywood would take on a talented and relentlessly ambitious young apprentice.

At the age of two, Bugsy found himself with a fifth brother, Richard, nicknamed Hedgie. Hedgie bumped Bugsy from the kitchen basket to the kitchen floor, where Bugsy rode around on his mother's leg for a good part of the day. When he was old enough, Bugsy accompanied his father and older brothers as they went about their chores tending the property's grounds, making repairs, and cleaning the houses and apartments. They also planted and harvested crops on the several acres of land at the northern end of the property that lay between the Pennsylvania railroad tracks and Big Elk Creek.

Sometimes James would bring home food from the diner (though both James and Mary were excellent cooks), and the family ate well. Cap tended a vegetable garden, and the Purdie family raised chickens and other farm animals. James also raised hunting dogs. Cap sold medicinal ointments, cures, and remedies. He kept his apothecary in a salesman's case under his bed. Skilled in the distiller's art, Cap kept an inventory of his homemade wines and other spirits as well. As Cap was very popular, a

steady stream of "visitors" went in and out of the Purdie home. One day young Bugsy found his way into a bottle of homemade gin. It didn't take the family long to figure out why he was giggling and staggering around the house. When World War II ended, the thundering munitions testing on the western bank of the bay at the Aberdeen Proving Grounds ceased for a time. Elkton, like the rest of the country, started readjusting to peacetime. The naval munitions plant west of town closed, laying off 12,000 workers, and the massive Naval Training School in Port Deposit closed its doors as well. But a significant number of displaced workers stayed in the area, and by the end of the war, Elkton's population had doubled.

Bugsy was an outgoing child who had a gift. His fascination with percussion blossomed literally at his mother's knee, as he scuttled around on her kitchen floor, cobbling together a contraption of his own design from pots, pans, pie tins, and a commercial-sized potato chip container that his father brought home from the diner. Bugsy's mother had used the container to store bread, but she let her son incorporate it into his homemade drum set.

With the container serving as both a drum throne and a bass drum, Bugsy capped each knee with a pot or a pan or a pie tin and played a beat in his own fashion. He was fascinated with the contrast of sounds. He marveled at the bright sound of a small pie tin struck with a butter knife, weaving a bright rhythmic pattern through the darker sound of the bread can as he struck it with a wooden spoon. Bugsy gradually broadened his percussion ensemble to include the hambone and added tap dancing to his rhythmic repertoire. Between the ages of three and six, he became quite accomplished. These were Bugsy's "bimbanging" beginnings.[1]

Bugsy drew his inspiration from everyday sounds. Alert to

their patterns, he constantly turned them over in his mind. One Sunday morning, he noticed the lilt of a preacher calling to his flock. Bugsy observed that in the preacher's delivery of the sermon, he moved his congregation by using softly spoken phrases following a shout or a bellowed expression. The preacher got the congregation's attention with a thunderous exhortation and then fed them the message in a turn of phrase that he barely whispered.[2]

Each spring, James and Mary drove south with the younger children to the Purdie family farm in North Carolina. The farm stood near the banks of the Cape Fear River on the outskirts of Elizabethtown. The older of the children picked cotton, potatoes, tobacco, and other cash crops during the day. Since the harvest of each picker was weighed at the end of the day, the picking was quite competitive, even among the children. James's eleven brothers and sisters lived on the Purdie farm with their spouses and children. In the evenings after supper the adults would sit on their front porches to smoke and tell stories, while all family members would listen to the radio. Some evenings the adult conversation would turn to the subject of the Purdie family history. Bugsy was all ears.

According to the porch talk, the farm had been handed down from Bugsy's great-great-great grandfather, Henry James Purdie, who emigrated from Canada in the service of a Canadian landowner of Scottish descent named James Purdie. James Purdie had settled in the area at the beginning of the eighteenth century. The Purdie family inherited the land from James Purdie, whose will stipulated that if any of the other Purdie heirs challenged the bequest to Henry James Purdie, they would forfeit their own inheritances.

The surname Purdie—Scottish, but of French origin—is quite prominent around Elizabethtown. Highland Scots seeking

refuge from religious oppression in their homeland first settled Bladen County, North Carolina, in the middle of the eighteenth century. Elizabethtown was a natural trading center, situated as it was, about fifty miles upstream from the seaport of Wilmington. It was eventually designated the county seat.

In 1786, one James S. Purdie served as both county sheriff and county clerk. In 1861, Thomas James Purdie joined the Confederate Army as a private in the Bladen Guards of the North Carolina Militia. He rose to the rank of colonel in the Army of Northern Virginia under General Robert E. Lee. Colonel Purdie was a dedicated confederate soldier, but he had the dubious distinction of mistakenly ordering his men to fire on Stonewall Jackson during the Battle of Chancellorsville. Jackson died of his wounds three days later. Colonel Purdie was killed the next morning from a bullet to the head, reportedly fired from a Union sniper's rifle. The colonel's funeral was held at Purdie Methodist Church near Elizabethtown. For many years Colonel Purdie's uniform was on display at his birthplace, Purdie Hall, a mansion that sits on the banks of the Cape Fear River, a few miles north of Elizabethtown.

Henry Purdie's descendants built homes on the land and farmed it, raising tobacco, cotton, watermelon, peanuts, alfalfa, and corn. They kept hounds for hunting and horses for pulling and plowing. In general, children had free run of the farm as long as they did their chores. They could sleep over and have meals at a different house each day if they wished, and Bugsy often did. He worked in the fields, played with his cousins, and stuffed himself with the seemingly endless variety of food served each day. Occasionally, his father took him hunting. In the evenings, an attentive Bugsy listened, as the adults sat on their front porches smoking and spinning yarns. His inexhaustible curiosity produced an abundance of questions. At times, Bugsy would at-