



THE BLACK HORN

*The Story of Classical French Hornist
Robert Lee Watt*

ROBERT LEE WATT

The Black Horn

African American Cultural Theory and Heritage

Series Editor: William C. Banfield

The Jazz Trope: A Theory of African American Literary and Vernacular Culture, by Alfonso W. Hawkins Jr., 2008.

In the Heart of the Beat: The Poetry of Rap, by Alexis D. Pate, 2009.

George Russell: The Story of an American Composer, by Duncan Heining, 2010.

Cultural Codes: Makings of a Black Music Philosophy, by William C. Banfield, 2010.

Willie Dixon: Preacher of the Blues, by Mitsutoshi Inaba, 2011.

Representing Black Music Culture: Then, Now, and When Again?, by William C. Banfield, 2011.

The Black Church and Hip-Hop Culture: Toward Bridging the Generational Divide, edited by Emmett G. Price III, 2012.

The Black Horn: The Story of Classical French Hornist Robert Lee Watt, by Robert Lee Watt, 2014.

The Black Horn

*The Story of Classical
French Hornist Robert Lee Watt*

Robert Lee Watt

ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD

Lanham • Boulder • New York • London

Published by Rowman & Littlefield

A wholly owned subsidiary of The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.
4501 Forbes Boulevard, Suite 200, Lanham, Maryland 20706
www.rowman.com

16 Carlisle Street, London W1D 3BT, United Kingdom

Copyright © 2014 by Robert Lee Watt

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the publisher, except by a reviewer who may quote passages in a review.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Information Available

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Watt, Robert Lee.

The black horn : the story of classical French hornist Robert Lee Watt / by Robert Lee Watt.

pages cm. — (African American cultural theory and heritage)

Includes index.

ISBN 978-1-4422-3938-8 (cloth : alk. paper) — ISBN 978-1-4422-3939-5 (ebook)


1. Watt, Robert Lee. 2. Horn players—United States—Biography. 3. African American musicians—Biography. I. Title.

ML419.W38A3 2014

788.9'4092—dc23

[B]

2014018746

™ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992.

Printed in the United States of America

I dedicate this book to my family
and my dear friend, the late Jerome Ashby.



Contents

	Acknowledgments	xi
Chapter 1	Prelude	1
Chapter 2	Early Memories	3
Chapter 3	Back to Asbury Park	7
Chapter 4	Left Back	11
Chapter 5	First Love	17
Chapter 6	Music Chose Me	23
Chapter 7	Adolescent Secrets	29
Chapter 8	A Random Blessing	33
Chapter 9	First Date	37
Chapter 10	Pleasure and Pain	43
Chapter 11	Lessons in Life	49
Chapter 12	My Great Escape	53
Chapter 13	First Sweet Victory	57
Chapter 14	Tension	61
Chapter 15	Welcome to the World	67

Chapter 16	Music Camp and the Boston Pops	73
Chapter 17	Best Summer	79
Chapter 18	Turning Pro	83
Chapter 19	Musical Adventures	87
Chapter 20	Tanglewood	91
Chapter 21	The Musical Mountain	97
Chapter 22	First Auditions	101
Chapter 23	Madness!	105
Chapter 24	The Los Angeles Philharmonic	111
Chapter 25	The Dream	115
Chapter 26	Black Los Angeles	119
Chapter 27	Deeper into the Dream	125
Chapter 28	Emotional Highs and Lows	129
Chapter 29	To Viet Nam?	133
Chapter 30	On with Life	139
Chapter 31	Fear of Flying	143
Chapter 32	Japan	145
Chapter 33	A New Black Player and the Ark	149
Chapter 34	Leave the LA Philharmonic?	153
Chapter 35	What We Fear the Most	157
Chapter 36	Conversations with Jerome Ashby	163
Chapter 37	Challenged by a Peer	169
Chapter 38	Give It Up	177
Chapter 39	My Sandbox Buddy	183
Chapter 40	Where Had He Been All My Life?	185
Chapter 41	Who Was He, Really?	191
Chapter 42	Tales from the Symphony	197

Chapter 43	Final Revelations	203
Chapter 44	The New Brass Ensemble and Adventures with Madame	209
Chapter 45	More European Adventures	217
Chapter 46	A Black Brass Quintet in Finland?	221
Chapter 47	Enchanting Encounters	227
Chapter 48	What I Live For	233
Chapter 49	“It’s Good to Be Negro!”	235
Chapter 50	Missing Miles	239
Chapter 51	Salzburg Festival	247
Chapter 52	Finale	251
Appendix	List of Negro Musicians Compiled by the New York Philharmonic (April 1969)	255
	Index	261
	About the Author	267



Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge my longtime friend Elston Carr for long ago recognizing my need to write a book, after hearing me complain so much about my orchestral life. In a phone message he said, “You need to write, Negro!”

I am also extremely grateful to my friend Marcus Eley for yelling at me to start writing my book: “There are your millions, in your book!” He also assisted me in the early stages of my manuscript preparation and in countless other ways.

I also give thanks to Euterpe (Greek Muse of Music), for helping me, via music, to call forth the emotional memories to effectively write about my past. I am also extremely grateful to that goddess of voice, Mezzo Soprano, Jessye Norman, whose recording of Richard Strauss’ “Vier Letzte Lieder” (Four Last Songs) transported me there. I would like to thank writer, Mery Grey for introducing me to my first editor, Iris Schirmer (formerly with Random House), who helped me cut my book down from its formerly immense size.

I would like to thank my dear friends Todd Cochran and his wife, Hasmik, for their continued support and encouragement while writing my book.

I also wish to acknowledge many others who helped me in countless way during this process: Tina Huynh; Dr. Courtney Jones; Daisy Newman of the Young Musicians Choral Orchestra of Oakland, California; Raynor Carroll of the Los Angeles Philharmonic; and especially my family—my cousin Marjorie Nickelberry, my little brother Tony M. Watt, my big brother Ronald B. Watt, my big sister Judith Watt-Carson, and my little sister Gail D. Watt—for their helpful memories and insights.

CHAPTER ONE



Prelude

I was born into this world at a time when my father, after shining shoes all day at the Berkeley-Carteret Oceanfront Hotel, was not allowed to swim in the public swimming pools at the beach in Asbury Park, New Jersey. He angrily related the racist reality to us in those days:

When I wanted to swim after work on those hot summer days I was not allowed to go into the swimming pools down at the beach, even though the sign on the building said in great big letters, “PUBLIC BATHING.”

Those crackers laughed as they told me, “Hey, boy, why don’t you go on over to the colored beach and swim—but you might drown trying ’cause there’s lots of sewer pipes in that water.”

When I wanted to go see a movie, black people had to sit in the balcony and the ushers didn’t see you to your seat; they just directed you to the balcony and you were on your own.

I went to a segregated grade school—Bangs Avenue School. There was a black principal and a white principal and all the classes were totally segregated. The entire school building was divided with blacks on one side and whites on the other. We even had separate playgrounds.

Even if you wanted to take a road trip on the highway, you had to know in advance where you could stay overnight, where you could stop for gas and get served, where you could stop to eat or just get a lousy cup of coffee.

There was actually a published manual, *The Negro Motorist Green Book*, that listed the places you could stay, get a haircut, get gas, or even which Chinese restaurants served colored. The book was an international travel guide for every state in America, Mexico, Bermuda, and Canada. There just wasn’t much

black people could do in those days without having to first think if they would be admitted or turned away. You were just supposed to *know your place* as a black person. It was a horrible time to be black in America.

January 15, 1948, was an extremely transitional time in American history. Harry Truman was president, the Supreme Court banned religion in public schools, the Marshall Plan was enacted, the first LP records were introduced, cars had no seatbelts, there was no Civil Rights bill, there were white and black water fountains in the South, and black people were referred to as “colored,” “Negro,” or worse. There was a popular saying among whites *and* blacks: “I’m free, white, and 21—I can do as I please.” However, the concept was only true if you were white.

A glass of beer was only a nickel, Miles Davis and Dizzy Gillespie still played normal trumpets, and the cheapest seat for a symphony orchestra concert was 60 cents.

A man could be drafted into the armed forces, go to war, and die before he was old enough to vote. Black people had fought in World War II in a segregated army fighting for the same freedoms as whites, but captured German soldiers who had murdered countless white Americans in battle had more rights in the United States during World War II than American black soldiers. A black man could be lynched for interacting with a white woman. If a black person fell sick in the streets, there were only certain hospitals where treatment was available. Consequently, many black people expired before they would ever be admitted to a “white only” hospital. There were no computers, cell phones, or DVDs in the world in which I drew my first breath.

My father often told the story of how our great-grandfather on his side of the family was from Asia.

He was an orphan boy running errands for British missionaries on the docks of Rangoon, Burma . . . that’s why you all like rice and that’s why your aunt Nelly and them in New York are so yellow looking. Now, your grandmother’s mama was from the so-called Gullah Geechee people, who were the last black people brought here from West Africa well after slavery was outlawed. They were left to die on those little islands off the coast of South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida, but they survived. The Geechee name came from Florida, where your grandmama’s mother was married to a British ship captain who ran a steamship up and down the St. Johns River in Jacksonville, Florida.

CHAPTER TWO



Early Memories

I don't know at what age we are supposed to have our first conscience memories, but I do remember moving from one roach-infested house to an even larger one. We must have looked like a caravan of weary Bedouin carrying food, clothes, and blankets to our new house on Drummond Avenue in Neptune, New Jersey. At that age, the whole world seemed a frightening blur through my copious tears, as my family slowly pushed my rickety stroller to our new living adventure.

The new, larger, roach-infested house was in a much better neighborhood and the new house looked in great shape from the outside, but we caught holy hell in that poorly heated funhouse in winter.

There was an old wood-burning coal stove, so we had to keep a large woodpile in our backyard, which grew to more than half a story high, creating a natural temptation for us to play "King of the Woodpile."

Then there was the time Ronnie, one of my older brothers, tried to be Superman by tying a cape around his neck and jumping from the back porch roof onto that woodpile. His Superman cape flapped wildly upwards as he dropped wildly downwards with a brief scream, earning himself a broken collarbone.

The house produced many memories:

I recall one very cold evening in our new house that really stayed with me. Our mother was waiting on the front porch for Dad to take her to the supermarket. We noticed how agitated she was when she began to pace up and down. Where was my father? It was getting late, a snowstorm was starting

to blow in, and we were wondering when we were going to have dinner. Suddenly our mother came back into the house and angrily threw off her coat. We heard her say under her breath, "Son of a bitch, I can never count on him."

Her lips were trembling with anger as she ordered, "Ronnie, Judy, get the large soup bowls down from the cupboard . . . and the large soup spoons." There was nothing in the house to eat. Everyone just watched as our young mother leaped onto the kitchen counter like a gazelle and pulled down an ugly green box. On the box it said, "United States Army Reconstituted Powdered Milk." She ripped it open and started spooning it into a large pot of boiling water. After a short while, the entire house smelled like Thanksgiving and Christmas and for just a brief moment we imagined that we were going to have sweet baked goodies. Mother ordered us into the kitchen to fill our bowls with the rich creamy-smelling offering. It was delicious, thick, sweet, and very warming to the stomach. She told us to "eat as much as you want and then go right to bed, because pretty soon it's going to get very cold in this house. I'll have a big breakfast waiting for you when you get up."

One by one, like marines darting from a foxhole, we made our way up the stairs to our freezing beds, screaming as our warm bodies hit the cold sheets. We fought, as usual, over which one of us got to sleep under the warm, funky, rat fur overcoat.

A few hours later, I was awakened by snow blowing through a tiny hole in the window, which had actually formed a small snowdrift in the corner of the bedroom. I wanted to get rid of it, but it was just too cold to get out of bed. Besides, I remembered that we often had snowball fights inside the house and it would be useful for the morning battles. As I was about to doze off, I heard our mother crying in her bedroom. Something told me that there would be no big breakfast waiting for us when we got up in the morning. God willing there would be some of that milky concoction left. Our father didn't come around again for nearly two weeks.

On rare occasions my father came home late at night, a little drunk, and played his trumpet with the mute stuck in the bell. He crashed out on the floor with his horn pointed towards the ceiling. He had a great sound and good musical expression, especially his jazz playing.

At seven years old, I became fascinated with his trumpet, which he kept above our defunct fireplace. It was bright and shiny and I wanted to blow it. I was too short to reach the trumpet so I put my little brother Tony on my shoulders. When he reached for the horn, I lost my balance and we both fell on the trumpet. Unfortunately we dented the horn and I came up with the

bright idea of using a hammer to work out the dents. The more I tried to remove the dents the worse they became. Then I decided to take the valves out of their casings and get a really good sniff of the valve oil for myself. Valve oil in those days was made from kerosene and little bit of whale sperm oil, giving it a most intoxicating smell. However, I innocently put the wrong valves back into the wrong valve casings. The next time my father tried to blow his horn, nothing come out. He looked at the horn and began to unscrew the valves. He held them up to his one eye looking for something small on the underside of each valve.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

He said, in a stern frightening tone, “You been messing with my horn, that’s what. You replaced the valves wrong and made these dents in the bell, that’s what’s wrong! Come over here, boy!” he ordered, pulling me by my arm right next to him. I stood trembling in fear as he proceeded to lecture me on which valve went into which casing. “You see this little number?”

“Oh yeah, I see it. It’s very tiny,” I said in a scared shaky voice.

“Yeah, yeah, well, you gotta put the right-numbered valve back into the right-numbered casing, you understand?” He looked at me for a long time from behind his dark ominous glasses and said, in a calmer tone of voice, “If you were interested in the trumpet, you should’ve told me. I would’ve been glad to show you how to play it. . . . Look at this dented bell . . . damn it! You never touch a musician’s instrument, never!”

Sometimes my father didn’t pay the electric bill for months at a time, forcing us to use kerosene lamps and candles for light. I remember my mother carrying a kerosene lamp upstairs when we went off to bed. Ronnie carried the second lamp, Judy followed with the third, and I carried a fourth. It looked like a procession of smoking chimneys as we walked. The black smoke streamed out of the top of the lampshades, looking like the smokestacks of an ocean liner.

During those times when we didn’t have lights, Ronnie often told us frightening tales of how he saw Mr. Randolph, our neighborhood warlock, turned into a man with a goat’s head. He cautioned us how to safely pass by his house. “Always walk backwards while in front of his house, walk sideways for thirteen steps, and then run as fast as possible.” After hearing those frightening stories, we made our way quickly past Mr. Randolph’s house, executing all those silly rituals.

As we got older, Mother shopped for our Christmas toys in September. Ronnie always knew where she kept our toys hidden. His big thrill was to wait until we were all in bed on a cold winter night and then ask us if we

wanted to see our Christmas toys or if we were hungry. “If anybody wants to see their Christmas toys and play with them for a little while, I can tell you where they’re hidden, for a nickel. Also, if anybody’s hungry, I have some sandwiches I made under the bed in a suitcase. They are Karo syrup, mayonnaise, and mustard on white bread.”

CHAPTER THREE



Back to Asbury Park

In June 1958, I was ten years old. Our mother called us together and told us that our father was behind on the rent and we would have to move back to Asbury Park and live in an apartment. That was a very traumatic moment for all of us and I was especially upset by the news. It was very hard to understand why I had to move from my childhood home, with all the things I had grown up with—Mr. Randolph the warlock and the wheat field where we played and dreamed for hours on end. There was also the urban legend of the Jersey Devil, who stood eight feet tall with a horse's head, a long neck supported by batlike wings, skinny bird legs, and horse's hooves. It could fly off the ground, bite you in the face, or rip your guts out, causing you to die a horrible, bloody, death.

We went with our mother to see our new place. It was an old three-story building with a storefront just below our apartment. There was an entryway from the street that led to a dingy hallway, which smelled of wine and urine. After going up one flight of stairs, we came to the kitchen door. The floor of this hallway was warped and went uphill like a wheelchair ramp, the floorboards were black with soot, and some were sticking up and needed to be nailed down. The first thing I looked for was a gas stove, some sort of central heating, and if the place had hot water. It had none of those things. In fact, there was no kitchen stove at all. We asked the landlord if he was going to put in a gas stove. To our surprise, he said our father had a stove that he would be moving in himself. We stormed out of the liquor store downstairs and went back to continue our examination of the filthy, dreary apartment.

The walls of the kitchen were made of tin panels that had rusted out in many places, especially in the ceiling over the stove area. The bathroom was very ordinary, with a bathtub, no shower, and walls with tin panels.

Heading back through the kitchen we entered the next room, which had walls of plaster with some cracks and a chimney flue. In that room we thought perhaps we might install the kerosene stove. Moving on, we found a very large room with space for three sets of bunk beds. There were three large front windows overlooking the street below, which turned out to be great for us, because many insane things happened at night on Springwood Avenue.

I remember the day my mother got our old kitchen stove burning with a nice hot fire. She said that we were going to need some more coal so I agreed to run right out for it. Before I left, I happened to look up at the ceiling. It was covered with hundreds of large shiny roaches—the heat from the stove must have brought them out. My mother yelled, “Bob, bring some roach spray too . . . and hurry!”

When I got the blue coal home and onto the fire, we noticed that we also had mice. They were up in the ceiling and when they moved around they knocked bits of rusty debris and mouse droppings onto the stove. That night was bitter cold, but at least we had a nice warm fire going, despite our discovery of new critters.

The triple window in the large front room was a new wonder. We sat for hours just watching people and the things that happened on the street below. Once I saw the police continue to beat a handcuffed guy who still had chunks of glass in his body. At the time, there was a particular walk in vogue—we called it the “Springwood Avenue Bop”—where young men walked fast dragging one foot and on that one shoe were heel plates that caused sparks to fly.

There was one thing that happened on Springwood Avenue that I could never quite understand. The guys with the “Konk” hairstyles were the only ones who did this. Every so often we would hear a loud commotion: a guy in a Cadillac convertible would be driving down the street with a white woman sitting next to him—she usually looked more like pink pickled pig feet, wearing a dress and stuffed in a jar, compared to her black male escort—and as black women so eloquently put it, “Well, . . . she white.”

Living on Springwood Avenue was fast becoming a real problem for my family, with the people loitering in the hallway entrance of our building, drinking wine, and keeping warm. One night my oldest sister, Judy, was coming home and a man decided to follow her.

She came running up the steps yelling my name. “Bobby, help!” The man had actually started up the steps after her.

When I got there, I slid down the steps, catching him in the knees with my bare feet. As he fell on top of me, I reached up and poked his eyes with my thumb and forefinger. I heard him groan. I always wondered if I'd actually damaged his eyes. He stumbled away moaning. I never found out who he was and I was glad it was too dark for him to recognize me.

CHAPTER FOUR



Left Back

My father started a new job at the West Side Community Center and lived there on the top floor by himself. He was the caretaker, janitor, athletic coach, and music director. During that time period, he tried many times to teach me trumpet. He said if I learned the trumpet, I would be joining a long line of trumpet players named “Bobby.” There was my cousin Bobby Booker, or Robert Lee Booker, my namesake, a well-known jazz trumpet player in New York, and *his* Uncle Bobby who also played jazz trumpet in New York. But in spite of that great tradition, I never learned the trumpet.

The West Side Community Center in Asbury Park always had a very fine drum and bugle corps, which my father started up again. I reluctantly played soprano bugle in the corps, feeling like it was the least I could do for my father, who had taught me how to blow a brass instrument.

During that time I’d heard from my friend Stan about another drum corps called the Neptune Shoreliners. He always talked about how they played really fancy music, did very sophisticated marching maneuvers, and had really great uniforms and shiny bugles. One night I was helping my father clean up at the community center. I was going through some old 78 recordings when I found the William Tell Overture. While listening to the old recording, I asked my father what the instrument was that came in after the trumpet in the famous Lone Ranger theme.

He said, “Oh that’s the *French* horn, the peck horn. It only plays the off-beats and never gets the melody. Why, you like that horn?” He asked in a

surprised tone. "It's an instrument for thin-lipped white boys. Your lips are too thick for that narrow mouthpiece."

I was crushed, because that horn sounded so wonderful. I felt it in my bones, like part of my heart and soul. There was nothing in my world that beautiful.

The very next day my friend Stan invited me over to Booker's, who played baritone bugle in the Neptune Shoreliners. His bugle was completely chrome-plated. When they finally asked me to join, I told them that I could play the soprano bugle. They said what they really needed were more *French horn bugles*. I had never heard of a French horn bugle, but if it sounded anything like the French horn I heard on that 78 recording, I was in.

The first time I saw my father cry was when I got my report card telling me that I did not pass the seventh grade. I was "left back," as the kids used to say. I never thought it would happen to me. I had to take my report card to my grandmother.

She took it, looked at it, sucked her teeth in disgust, and said, "You just wait here until your father comes."

I sat around and waited for many agonizing hours. When my father showed up, he looked at my report card and just stared at me with a horrible sad look on his face.

"Why?" he asked. "You're not dumb; I know you're not."

Then to my great surprise, he began to cry right in front of me. Tears were dripping from beneath his dark glasses onto to his rough facial skin. My punishment was that I had to give up my French horn bugle and the Shoreliners until I did better in school.

The following year we were told by our black southern schoolteachers that eighth grade would be held at the high school and that we had better behave while we were there. Our homeroom was in the balcony and there were assemblies every morning where we prayed and pledged allegiance to the flag. We had some of our same black teachers at the high school teaching the black kids. The high school was half white kids and half black, which was why the black teachers were so concerned about how the black kids would behave in the presence of the white world at Asbury Park High School.

A year later I was walking through the "Old Village" when someone called out to me from one of the units.

"Hey there! Young Watt!"

I glanced around startled . . . then it came again.

"Hey, young Watt... Bobby Watt! Over here."

It was Tom Jones, a friend of the family. He asked me what year I was in high school. I told him that I was about to graduate from eighth grade and would be starting high school in the fall.

“I see, so tell me about yourself, young Watt. I don’t know you as well as I know the rest of your family. I remember you as the quiet one. Just call me Jones.”

Jones had a really bright-eyed expression on his face when he smiled. He was about six feet tall, dark skinned, short-cropped haircut, a square jaw line, and full lips. His neck was shaped like a bodybuilder and he was seriously buff in his torso and arms. He had played fullback on the high school football team.

“So, young Watt, what do you want to do in life? Talk to me, I’ve got time.” It was early evening, perhaps 5:30. Jones handed me a beer and put on some music. It was jazz—Horace Silver’s *Songs from My Father*. He said jazz is the music of black people. “It’s our music, Watt. You must understand what it really means to be a black man in this world. If you don’t, you’ll wander the planet *lost* for the rest of your life. Black! To be black is cool, young Watt. It’s like the night, dark and mysterious with many colorful secrets. It’s one of the true wonders of the Western world. Don’t ever be ashamed of being black—and don’t ever let anyone *make you feel ashamed of it*. Embrace it and it will serve you forever.”

We talked on many different subjects—things I had agonized over in my adolescent mind, like religion, church, Jesus (especially the white icon of Jesus), sex, black women, interracial dating—all the things no one dared talk to young people about in those days. We often sat up all night and he always ended our talks with, “To be continued, Watt.”

I finally got my French horn bugle back from my grandmother and brought it home. At night, I practiced in the large unheated front room. I sat for hours playing in the dark, wearing gloves and my overcoat. I took breaks every so often and joined my family in the TV room with the kerosene stove to get warm.

The new drum corps, the Neptune Shoreliners, was my first real fascination with music. I could finally produce that French horn sound that haunted me so much. My father was not happy about my finding another drum corp. He said that it was OK if I played in that white drum corps as long as I still played with his West Side Community Center corps. “Don’t leave us for them white boys.”

The very last days of my eighth-grade school year, I was going into my homeroom and I noticed a girl I had never seen before. She was very cute,

brown skinned with very pretty black eyes. She looked right at me and smiled. Of course, with my self-image in those days, I immediately looked behind me to see who she could be flashing such a beautiful toothy smile. I struggled to smile back as she opened her balcony door and disappeared. I was so shaken that I hit myself in the face with the door as I entered my homeroom.

From that moment on, I was a different person. It was like being awakened from a deep sleep. From that single smile, I felt so warmed and validated that I couldn't function the rest of the day. I just had to find that lovely girl. "Was she real?" I wondered. I never saw her again for the remainder of the school year.

That summer I had one the worst jobs in the world. My father used to get me up at 5:30 in the morning to drive out to Seaside Heights, New Jersey, to clean a giant seafood restaurant. There was never any time for breakfast—he woke me, waited while I dressed, and we were off. I joined my two older brothers, Edward and Ronnie, in my father's old blue-panel truck and drove to that crazy job sitting on five-gallon wax cans and holding onto his floor-waxing machines. On that trip several times a week, my mind flashed on how I was going to meet that lovely girl at school in the fall. *Who was she?*

My father always started the work with us and then left after a short while. My oldest brother, Edward, worked in the front part of the restaurant scrubbing and waxing the bar and restaurant floor with the large floor-waxing machine. Ronnie worked cleaning beneath the wooden slats in the kitchen, and I worked outside in the back of the restaurant cleaning fifteen to twenty trashcans. Since it was a seafood restaurant, I was dealing with discarded shrimp, lobster, and crab shells, rotten fish heads, and whatever else the restaurant served. When I opened the cans, the smell was nauseating. There was always something brutally sickening about smelling rotten seafood on an empty stomach early in the morning. Sometimes there were maggots and mice in the trashcans and flies that had no mercy when they bit. When my brothers heard me cursing the flies, they always yelled out to me, "Bobby, have some shrimp, I hear they're very *sweet* this time of year."

My father always showed up after the work was done eating a sandwich, but for some reason never brought any food for us. He checked everything out and said, "Good work buzzards. I might even pay you."

One day the white boss showed up. My father *jumped to* and changed his entire tone of speaking. "These are my sons, this is Edward."

"Please to greet your acreetance" came nervously out of our oldest brother's mouth.

Ronnie quickly flashed me one of his devilish smiles.

My father glared at Edward for being so nervous. I doubt the white man noticed, but my father was very embarrassed. On the way home he lectured us on how to make a proper introduction. "Always remember, when you meet someone new just say, 'How do you do?' And open your mouth wide and say it loud. Don't try to be all fancy saying, 'Please to greet your acreetance,' like your brother, sounding like a Goddamn fool!"

At the end of that crazy summer, my father finally paid us. It was just enough to buy one pair of shoes, one pair of pants, and one shirt for school. On the other hand, those were the first *new* clothes I'd ever had in my life. I always got hand-me-downs from my older brothers. But then, having *some* new clothes was going to come in handy when I got to meet that lovely girl at school.

I was always very embarrassed having to go to my grandmother's place in the projects once a week to take a bath. I recall one particularly warm evening, as I approached my grandmother's, things became quite ugly. Everyone was sitting out on the lawn: Miss Eva, Mr. Cliff and his wife, Connie, my father, my grandfather, and my grandmother. I dreaded that whole scene and tried to sneak past everyone without having a drawn-out greeting session.

My grandmother yelled out, "Don't you *dare* walk by everyone without speaking—come over here, boy, and speak!"

I was just about to speak, when my father suddenly grabbed me from behind and pushed me even closer to everyone.

"Get on over there and speak, boy!" he said under his breath.

I felt so ridiculous and humiliated that I *really* wanted to hurt somebody. Music was the only thing that calmed me down after such episodes with my father and grandmother. I sat and played my French horn bugle for hours in the dark in that large front room before I felt like myself again. I didn't know, at that time, the difference between practice and playing. I just played whatever came into my head, mostly French horn passages that I had heard on movies and television.

CHAPTER FIVE



First Love

My father worked part time behind the liquor counter at the Westside Drug Store, across the street from our Springwood Avenue apartment. I washed windows and swept up in the back a few times a week in that same drug store with him and he'd give me a few dollars every so often. I remember the pharmacist, a short, fat, white-haired, brown-skinned little man with thick, dry lips that clucked when he talked. He was very cruel to the customers at times and I despised him. One evening he really angered a man trying to discreetly buy condoms. The man tried with difficulty to pronounce the word "prophylactic." The mean little pharmacist pretended he didn't understand the man.

"What is it you need, sir?"

The man quietly asked, "Do you have any ah . . . prophyl . . ."

The little pharmacist pressed him, "What? Speak up, man! What do you want?"

The man finally lost it and yelled, "Do you have any rubbers, man?! Stop messin' with me, Goddamn it, and give me some rubbers!"

The petty little pharmacist laughed, along with those in line, and said, "Oh, rubbers . . . yes, we have lots of those."

At that same drugstore, there was a very priceless moment that I witnessed one evening while my father was working behind the liquor counter. One of his girlfriends came in to talk to him. She was a regular customer, six feet tall, quite brazen, and known for stealing husbands. While the woman was talking to my father, my mother happened to come in. She asked the woman to leave so she could talk to my father. The woman ignored my mother's polite

request and our feisty mother picked up the wooden sign from the counter and smashed it on the side of the woman's face, nearly knocking her out. "I said move, bitch!"

I laughed out loud and my father yelled at me to go finish up my work. There was a part of my father's cruel, twisted personality that probably enjoyed the spectacle of two women fighting over him. It was a dark side of him that perhaps only I knew.



During that crazy summer of 1963, before I was to enter high school, my grandfather dropped dead while standing in line at the bank. That was my first experience with a death in the family. The death of my grandfather was very sad for me because I always felt he had a rather unfulfilling life being married to my grandmother. During the viewing of the body in the local funeral home, my grandmother took every opportunity to act out her phony, guilt-ridden, grief drama. Most people fell for it and tried to console her, but I knew better.

Besides my grandfather's funeral, the only other funeral we ever attended was that of our family doctor. My grandmother and many other black folks worshiped him, because they believed he gave them a break on their medical bills. In fact, he sold my grandmother nerve pills that we later found out were placebos.

At the doctor's funeral, we were told by my father to go up to his casket, kneel, and say, "God bless Dr. Vacarro." I dreaded the whole idea and I remember Ronnie asking, "What if we want to say more?" My father got extremely irritated and snapped at us, "Don't say *anything* else—just say what I told you and get the hell out of there." I went up with my little brother, Tony. We knelt at the casket, looked at each other, and cracked up laughing. We solemnly got back up without saying anything and no one was the wiser.

In September 1963, I entered high school. When classes began, I found out that there were three major curriculums of study at Asbury Park High School: General, Business Administration, and College Preparatory. Later I found out that, based on my GPA in grade school, I was placed in Basic Studies, separate from the three main curriculums. I was suddenly saddened with deep regret that I hadn't done better in grade school. But again, no one ever told me how one went about ending up in College Preparatory or Business Administration in high school. We were just told to go to school and do well. I must have been in a mild depression all those years without knowing it.

After the shock of entering high school wore off, I focused on trying to meet that lovely girl from eighth grade. The beginning of each high school