Contents

Chapter 1

The Ghetto and the Mansion, 1924–46

Imagine waking to find yourself trapped in a small room with all the windows shut. As you try to breathe in such a space, which is occupied by several of your siblings, you are likely to feel an "insistent, maddening, claustrophobic pounding" in your "skull." This is a room you want to leave, but you know that what awaits you outside threatens to suffocate you in other ways. Your parents have probably already gone to work, leaving you to take care of your younger brothers and sisters. Outside the apartment are streets marked by congestion and a catalog of catastrophe. This, James Baldwin tells us, is what it often felt like to be trapped in the "Harlem ghetto" of his youth.[1]

Now imagine waking up to find yourself in a large room in a mansion with dozens of other rooms. As you make your way into the day, you find that there are servants attending to your every need and desire. As you step outside the mansion, you are confronted with seemingly endless natural space to explore. You look forward to the time when you will be free to do so, but you know that first, a nice breakfast awaits you, and then a day carefully planned by your numerous tutors to include plenty of nourishment for your mind and soul as well. This, William F. Buckley Jr. tells us, is what it felt like to grow up on one of his family's estates.

Although Baldwin and Buckley did not begin making waves on the intellectual scene until the late 1940s, their arrivals did not occur ex nihilo. In their youth, both men were shaped by the environments in which they found themselves and the intellectual influences that were exerted on them. As such, it is worthwhile to consider a few relevant matters about the early years of Baldwin and Buckley.[2]

Emma "Berdis" Jones was a Marylander by birth who made her way north during the Great Migration of African Americans out of the South in the first quarter of the twentieth century. On August 2, 1924, she gave birth to her first child, James, at Harlem Hospital. His biological father remains a mystery, but when James was still a toddler, his mother married David Baldwin, the son of slaves who had recently made his way north from New Orleans. Berdis and David would have eight more children, the youngest of which would be born on the day David died in 1943.

Baldwin's relationships with his mother and stepfather would be of vital importance to his intellectual development, but before we consider these relationships we must examine the environment in which the Baldwin family found itself: Harlem of the 1920s and 1930s. By the time Baldwin was born, Harlem was well on its way to becoming the country's largest black ghetto. What was once a relatively diverse neighborhood—with many Italians, Irish, and Jews—was by the end of the 1920s almost 100 percent black and brown.[3] Harlem was, of course, the site of an incredible artistic scene that reached its apex with the "Renaissance" of the 1920s, but during Baldwin's childhood it became the hub of a great deal of economic privation, with many residents out of work, and those who were able to find a job were paid about 25 percent less than their white counterparts.[4]

The cost of living in Harlem only compounded the economic distress most families experienced. As Baldwin often noted later in life, it is incredibly expensive to be poor.[5] The formal and informal enforcement of racial boundaries in housing made it possible for ghetto landlords to charge more for less. By the mid-1930s, most Harlemites lived in housing that was in desperate need of repair, and lacked central heating and indoor plumbing. And yet in the words of one historian, "Rents remained higher than economically comparable neighborhoods" around the city. The most economically depressed parts of Harlem were, furthermore, desperately overcrowded, with "820 people per acre, or about three times the Manhattan average."[6] Due to these conditions and inadequate health

FIGURE 1.1. 125th Street in Harlem, circa 1935 (Bettmann Collection / Getty Images)

care, the "mortality rate in central Harlem was 40 percent higher than the city average during the early years of the Depression, while the infant mortality rate was twice the city average."[7]

It was in this environment that David and Berdis Baldwin attempted to raise James and his siblings. David was a day laborer and lay Pentecostal preacher, and Berdis worked as a housekeeper. Like most Harlemites, they often struggled to find work, and when they did, they were paid less than their white counterparts in the city. When they were unable to find enough work to feed themselves and their children, they sought relief from the government. Like many other black families, they were frequently demoralized by the almost all-white staff of the Home Relief Bureau, which visited the homes of would-be recipients to determine their worthiness for support. Not surprisingly, blacks were denied benefits at a far greater rate than white applicants.[8]

This was the Harlem in which Baldwin was born and raised, and it had a profound impact on the thinker he would become. Baldwin believed that coming to grips with the conditions of the "Harlem ghetto" was important to be sure, but there was an even more crucial task to be undertaken. We must come to grips, he thought, with the very existence of the Harlem ghetto and ghettos like it in every other American city. How did these spaces come into being, and why do they continue to exist? What does this indicate about the moral lives of those who created and maintained them, and what do these ghettos do to the moral lives of those who are trapped within them? These would be some of the questions that haunted Baldwin from his childhood to his dying day.

A little over a year after Baldwin was born and in the same city, Aloïse Steiner Buckley gave birth to William.[9] "Billy," as he would be called throughout his childhood, was the sixth of ten children born to Will Buckley and Aloïse. Will and Aloïse were both southerners, though of different types. Will was a Texan, who had made, lost, and regained fortunes in the real estate and oil businesses in the United States and abroad. Aloïse was born into a well-to-do family in New Orleans.[10] Will was a frenetic type, constantly on the move in pursuit of his next big financial conquest and, by the time Billy was born, could be counted among the nouveau riche. Aloïse came from "old money," her grandfathers served in the Confederate Army during the Civil War, and she was firmly rooted in the values and mores of the "Old South."[11]

The environment of Billy's upbringing makes for a stark contrast with the Harlem of Baldwin's youth. A year prior to his birth, Buckley's father purchased "Great Elm," a forty-seven-acre estate in Sharon, Connecticut. The estate featured a large mansion and extensive staff to tend to the large family's every need.[12] Life at Great Elm was carefully regimented, with clear hierarchies, duties, and schedules.[13] Save for a two-year stint living in Paris with his family and a year at a British boarding school, Billy's central childhood experience was the "unmitigated pleasures" of Great Elm. The freedom and joy of the summer, he observed

FIGURE 1.2. Great Elm, the Buckley estate in Sharon, Connecticut (LIFE Picture Collection / Getty Images)

in autobiographical writings, continued "almost seamlessly" once the "school year" began because "we were taught by tutors right there in the same rooms in which we played when indoors during summer." "When school began for us at the end of September," Buckley explained, "we continued to ride horseback every afternoon, we swam two or three times every day," and "our musical tutors continued to come to us just as they had during the summer, and some us would rise early and hunt pheasants at our farm before school."[14] As his brother Reid put it, "To us children, Sharon was heaven on earth."[15]

When not enjoying the vast outdoors of the estate, the Buckley children received a demanding, if unconventional, education. Billy was primarily homeschooled through the eighth grade (with the exception of one year in a British boarding school). The family employed two full-time teachers, and hired a number of part-time tutors, coaches, and instructors to fill out the academic and extracurricular program.[16] According to Billy's sister, Aloise, her father's "theory of childrearing" was

straightforward: "He brought up his sons and daughters with the quite simple objective that they become absolutely perfect." To achieve that end, he saw to it that his children receive professional instruction in, well, just about everything.[17]

The education of the Buckley children continued informally around the dinner table, where the family would engage in spirited discussions of everything under the sun.[18] Everyone in the family, Reid explained later, was "passionately opinionated" and cared deeply about not only the substance of an opinion but also the style with which it was delivered. "No opinion," Reid recalled, "was by our reckoning worth the name that wasn't worth holding with all our hearts and souls, so that every meal we argued ferociously about novels and poetry and the latest 'flick' we had seen."[19] Reid remembered the family being "quarrelsome" about many things, but it is worth noting that politics and religion were not among them. On these matters, the family was in complete agreement.[20]

Within the environments thus described, the minds of Baldwin and Buckley were shaped—first and foremost—by their relationships to their parents. Both men grew up in households that were basically patriarchal, but they viewed their mothers as important moral teachers. Baldwin would devote far more of his autobiographical writing to reflections on his stepfather than he would to thoughts on his mother, but he often credited her with teaching him the meaning of resilience and what it meant to love another human being. She lived and wanted her children to live, he recalled, by the golden rule, and she taught "that people have to be loved for their faults as well as their virtues, their ugliness as well as their beauty." Although Baldwin would grapple with questions of faith throughout his life, he would identify his mother as a true Christian, in the best sense possible. She sacrificed for others, forgave them for their sins, and most important, she knew what it meant to love another human being. Berdis's lessons about the meaning of love ended up being the anchor of Baldwin's "personal ideology" for the rest of his life.[21]

Buckley, like Baldwin, thought of his mother as a kind of moral exemplar. The virtue that Buckley saw as most central to his mother's character was her piety. She was "as devoted a child of God as I have ever known," he remembered, who "worshipped God as intensely as the saint transfixed." Aloïse expressed her devotion by regular attendance at mass and prayed frequently in a quest to understand the "rules" God wanted human beings to follow in the world. As Buckley watched his mother act on her understanding of those rules, he was struck by the "vivacity," "humor," and personal charm she exhibited with everyone she encountered.[22] It is clear that these elements of her personality—both her public sense of devotion to God and capacity for charm—had a great impact on Buckley, who would follow in his mother's footsteps in both respects.

One other aspect of Aloïse's personality is especially relevant to the themes of this book. Buckley recalled that "although Father was the unchallenged authority at home, Mother was unchallengeably in charge of arrangements in a house crowded with ten children and as many tutors, servants, and assistants."[23] As Buckley watched his mother govern her households (the family would also acquire an estate in South Carolina and spend extended periods abroad), there can be little doubt that he absorbed some crucial lessons about the possibility of beneficent hierarchies, racial and otherwise. Aloïse, Reid would confess, was "a racist" in the sense that she "assumed that white people were intellectually superior to black people," but he explained, "She truly loved black people and felt securely comfortable with them from the assumption of her superiority in intellect, character, *and station*." Blacks were, to her, "dear, kind, simple people," and she felt, Reid explained, a sense of noblesse oblige to those who remained loyal to the family over the years.[24] Hers was a genteel, maternal racism, and there can be little doubt that it shaped her children's worldviews. As we will see again and again in the pages that follow, few things rankled Buckley more than the conflation of racial attitudes like those of his mother with those of racists motivated by hatred. It was possible, he would insist, to reject racial egalitarianism while at the same time treating those of other races humanely. When he made such claims, there can be little doubt he had his mother in mind.

Most of what we need to know about the early intellectual development of Buckley and Baldwin can be gleaned from how each man viewed his father. From an early age, Billy idolized his father. Indeed, by the age of five, he was so taken with his father that he announced that he would abandon his given middle name, Francis, in order to become William Frank Buckley Jr.[25] Although Will was away from the family quite a bit on business and was described as a relatively shy presence, there can be no doubt that he was a dominant influence in the household. He believed he was a "self-made man," and this self-perception undoubtedly played some role in the ideology he would develop and impart to his children. Devout Catholicism was one strand in Will's creed, but the other strands were focused on worldly concerns. Will was, at his core, an individualist. He believed that individuals could impose their will on the world and achieve great things. This core belief in individualism led Will to shudder at the rise of leftist movements around the world and to view American progressivism with deep skepticism. Will's suspicion of state power led him to staunchly oppose Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the New Deal, and it played some part in his embrace of the America First Committee's opposition to US intervention in World War II.[26]

It is safe to say that Will's embrace of the America First Committee's position was rooted only in part in his resistance to state power because his anti-Semitism played some role as well. In his writings later in life, Buckley was relatively open about this failing of his father; perhaps in part because it seems to be an inheritance he was able to shed at a fairly early age.[27] When reflecting on his father's anti-Semitism, Buckley told biographer John Judis that he recalled someone telling him "he would leave the room if ever someone in it said something about the Jews which he had heard routinely at his own dinner table." "That exactly expresses the situation," Buckley explained to Judis, "in my home."[28]

Aloïse was the most consistent presence in the organization of the particulars of the unconventional education the Buckley children received at the family's estates, yet Will's impact was felt not only during

disquisitions at the dinner table but also in the recruitment of occasional guests who would speak to the children about matters moral and political. The man who had the most lasting impact on this front was the individualist intellectual Albert Jay Nock, who taught the Buckley children to distrust democracy and embrace the idea that "a Remnant" of elites ought to govern society.[29] Another influence worth noting, though not an intellectual to be sure, was the segregationist South Carolina politician Strom Thurmond, who the family got to know during its winter stays in the palmetto state. Will's love for Thurmond was so strong he once told him "he knew of no other politician whose views he entirely approved of."[30]

Buckley, "born to absolutes" and "nurtured on dogma," did not accept everything his parents taught him, but the basic outline of his worldview was set at a young age.[31] This worldview consisted of an amalgamation of devout Catholicism, antidemocratic individualism, hostility to collectivism in economics, and a strong devotion to hierarchy—including racial hierarchy—in the social sphere.[32] Although Buckley did not end up aspiring to follow in his father's professional footsteps, he did devote himself to conserving most of the key components of his father's point of view. "As a writer, speaker and debater," Aloise wrote, "his son, Bill, was the essence of all W.F.B. himself had stood and fought for politically."[33] On the level of the personal relationship between father and son, then, we see another stunning contrast with Baldwin, whose life's work was devoted in part to articulating why his father's worldview ought to be rejected.

The "man I called my father," Baldwin once wrote, "really *was* my father in every sense except the biological, or literal one. He formed me, and he raised me, and he did not let me starve."[34] Over the course of his life, Baldwin was—personally, philosophically, and creatively—simultaneously haunted and fascinated by David Baldwin Sr. His reflections on the meaning of David's life and the impact of his relationship to him

would be the central themes of Baldwin's writing. He would come to view his father as a complex figure for whom he had some sympathy, but his life would always serve, fundamentally, as a cautionary tale of how not to live. David was, in short, the embodiment of bitterness and self-hatred, and for this reason, Baldwin came to reject his teachings with just about every fiber of his being.

Although a great deal of Baldwin's writing about his father would focus on matters spiritual and psychological, the physical facts of David's life should not be ignored. David, like so many others in the first generation of "free men," left the South in search of greater opportunity in the North, only to find a life that kept him at the margins of society. He was often unable to find work, and even when he did have a job, his work was back-breaking and the rung he occupied on the economic ladder was thoroughly demoralizing. "I remember my father had trouble keeping us alive," Baldwin told an interviewer in 1963. "I understand him much better now. Part of his problem was he couldn't feed his kids."[35]

One of the ways David dealt with his status at the margins of society was to shield himself with a rigid armor of religiosity. In an open letter to his nephew that was published in 1962, Baldwin explained the connection between his father's marginalization and his faith when he wrote that his father "had a terrible life; he was defeated long before he died because, at the bottom of his heart, he really believed what white people said about him. This is one of the reasons he became so holy."[36] The church, he explained to an interviewer, was the "only means" his parents had to express "their pain and their despair."[37] David was convinced that it was only holiness that could protect him and his family from the cruel world that surrounded them. This led him to express his love in an "outrageously demanding and protective way," and to be extraordinarily "bitter" in his outlook and "indescribably cruel" in his personal relationships. David's bitterness was rooted in the "humiliation" he felt in his everyday life, and it led him to view those he thought the authors of that humiliation—all white people—with suspicion. It also extended to his fellow blacks, though, most of whom he viewed as insufficiently holy. At home, David attempted to rule the family in an authoritarian fashion that

left James and his siblings in a constant state of fear. "I do not remember, in all those years," he wrote in 1955, "that one of his children was ever glad to see him come home."[38]

As young Baldwin watched his father, he saw a great deal that he wanted to avoid. His father was "menaced" by the world around him, and this was a fate Jimmy recognized he could not easily circumvent.[39] But he did not want to follow the route his father had chosen as his way through this menacing world. David, as far as his son could tell, had allowed the cruel world to overtake him, and so cruelty itself became the core of his being, the means by which he would defend and define himself. As David grasped for a lever of power in a world in which he was essentially powerless, the only one he could find was composed of a deadly combination of fear and loathing. In exchange for the small sense of pride this gave him in his life, he was forced to sacrifice his "dignity" or, as Baldwin would put it later, "the health of his soul."[40] This was a price that even a young Baldwin knew was far too high.

In 1929 Baldwin began school at P.S. 24, and it did not take long for him to gain recognition as a student with enormous potential. Outside school, he read constantly (with a special fondness for Harriet Beecher Stowe and Charles Dickens) and began experimenting with writing.[41] He became obsessed with the power of words to connect human beings across time and space. Books were, for him, not merely an escape but also a means to make sense of his experience. Over the next several years, Baldwin's love of the creative arts expanded to film and theater, and he was fortunate enough to find several teachers—most notably Bill Miller and Countee Cullen—who took an interest in his intellectual development and encouraged him to cultivate his love of reading, writing, and the arts.[42] Miller took Baldwin to see live theater and the movies, and offered the Baldwin family financial support in especially tough economic times. Cullen, one of the great poets of the Harlem Renaissance, was one of Baldwin's teachers at Frederick Douglass Junior High School and encouraged him to apply to attend the prestigious DeWitt Clinton High

School in the Bronx.[43] Without the support and encouragement of these two teachers, the world may have never gotten to know Baldwin.

At the age of fourteen, while many of his peers were beginning to experiment with alcohol, tobacco, sex, and petty crime, Baldwin sought refuge in the church. After a dramatic conversion experience, he went beyond merely "joining the church as another worshipper." Instead, he "intended to best" his "father on his own ground" by becoming "a preacher—a young minister."[44] For the next three years, Baldwin's sermons proved to be a bigger draw than his father's, and he was permitted to spend a great deal of time alone in order to write his sermons. With this solitude, he was able to devote himself to his love of reading and writing.

Later in life, when Baldwin reflected on his escape into the church, he concluded that it was rooted in a quest to find some means by which to protect himself from the power of his father along with the "vast and merciless" world around him. As a "handle" or "gimmick" to help him navigate the environment in which he found himself, "the church racket," as Baldwin called it, proved to be the one to which his "capabilities" were best suited.[45] Even as a young man, Baldwin had a way with words and a flair for the dramatic. He was a natural in the pulpit, and although the armor provided by the church was of little value in the face of the unbelievable cruelty around him, it was something, and something, he concluded, was better than nothing.

Baldwin's exit from the church will be discussed in great detail later in this book, but for now suffice it to say that the seeds of doubt were planted by a broadening of his intellectual horizons and the hypocritical deeds of the "true believers" he saw around him. Though not as sudden as the conversion experience that drew him into the church, Baldwin's conversion experience out of the church was just as profound. The "fortress" of his faith, he wrote later, had been "pulverized."[46]

Right around the same time Baldwin was falling away from the church, he was introduced to Beauford Delaney, the man one biographer calls "the most important influence in his life."[47] Delaney was a black painter who lived in Greenwich Village, and it did not take Baldwin long to see he was a kindred spirit. Delaney became a sort of father-mentor figure

in Baldwin's life and had an enduring impact on how the budding writer would see the world. Indeed, as Baldwin would explain later, it was "the reality" of Delaney's "seeing that caused me to begin to see." Delaney, Baldwin noticed, was "*seeing* all the time"; he was, in other words, a "witness" who was able to use all that he saw as fuel for his creativity. Although his medium was different, Delaney taught Baldwin what it meant to be an artist. His work, Baldwin said later, brings about "a new experience of reality" for those who are able to see it. The ability to bring about a new experience of reality is not only a great "triumph" for an artist, Delaney showed Baldwin, but also is a transformative act of love. "No greater lover," Baldwin noted of Delaney, "ever held a brush." Baldwin's time with Delaney fueled his dreams that he might be able one day to do with his pen what the great painter did with his brush.[48]

Although Baldwin was not a stellar student in high school, he did thrive in the endeavors that held his attention. The most notable of these was his editorship of the *Magpie*, the school's literary magazine. Baldwin had been writing creatively for about as long as he had been able to read, and the *Magpie* allowed him to share his talents with others. His teachers were quite impressed. One called him a "talented and modest boy, who will surely go far," and another declared him to be "an intellectual giant."[49]

After years of homeschooling and one year of boarding school in England, Buckley was sent to an elite prep school called Millbrook. While there, he excelled academically, thrived in debate, and made a name for himself by being "obnoxiously Catholic" and vociferously conservative.[50] Buckley promoted the America First Committee's opposition to US intervention in World War II at Millbrook, a place where they were "distinctly unpopular."[51] Buckley's parents noted their pride in their fifteen-year-old son's "attitude of having strong convictions and of not being too bashful to express them." Indeed, Buckley's forthrightness was on full display when he "appeared uninvited at a faculty meeting" at Millbrook in order to criticize a faculty member who had "deprived him of the right

to express his political views in class" before he "proceeded to expound to the stunned faculty on the virtues of isolationism, the dignity of the Catholic church and the political ignorance of the school staff."[52]

Buckley did not mind finding himself on the deviant side of political arguments. He cared far less about being popular than he did about being right. His upbringing led him to feel at home in the position of "outsider." This was the Buckley way. "In the largely Episcopalian and mainline Protestant, Anglo-Saxon Connecticut," Reid wrote, "we were Catholics, Irish, and Southern." In the South, where the family spent its winters, the Buckleys were considered Yankees. This upbringing, Reid concluded, made the Buckley children "pretty fair polemicists," and Billy was the best of the bunch. With so many arguments to be had, the Buckleys "never wasted time doubting [their] convictions."[53] While at Millbrook, Buckley was confronted with challenge after challenge to his worldview, but this led him to cling even tighter to his creed.

Buckley graduated from Millbrook in 1943, and in 1944—after a brief deferment due to a sinus problem—he was inducted into the US Army and was eventually accepted into officer candidate school at Fort Benning in Georgia.[54] Thanks to the many winters he spent in Camden, South Carolina, Buckley was probably not too shocked by what he found when he reported for duty. The army into which Buckley was inducted was segregated, and black soldiers from the period wrote about the harshness of the conditions. "It is no secret," noted a corporal at a southern army camp in 1944, "that the Negro soldier in the South is as much persecuted as his civilian brother." The conditions in his camp, he continued, "are intolerable, and may be considered on par with the worst conditions throughout the South since 1865." The treatment of blacks in the American military during World War II was made all the more bitter by the fact that the United States was at war with a German regime that preached a doctrine of racial hierarchy. This cruel irony was not lost on black soldiers. On a crowded troop train in Texas, one reported that "the colored soldiers were fed behind a Jim Crow curtain at one end of the dining car. In the main section, along with the white folks, a group of German war prisoners dined—and no doubt fed their illusions of race superiority on that Jim Crow curtain."[55]

None of the cruelty of segregation seems to have had any effect on Buckley, who actually reported to his parents that the practices at Fort Benning were far too racially progressive for his taste. "There are also some Negroes here," he wrote to his father. "This I don't particularly like, but there's nothing much I can do about it. I haven't had to do much with any of them yet, but I imagine they are the highest type of Negroes."[56]

Right around the same time Buckley was lamenting the fact that he was being forced to share Fort Benning with black soldiers, Baldwin was learning, in a new way, what it meant to be black in America. After he graduated from high school, he was able to avoid military service as the oldest child in a family that was in financial distress.[57] He found work at various defense plants in New Jersey, and it was there that he had his first extensive encounters with white southerners. Throughout his childhood and teenage years, Baldwin had come face-to-face with racism when he was confronted by police or "the housewives, taxi-drivers, elevator boys, dishwashers, bartenders, lawyers, doctors, and grocers" who were all prone to use "the color line" as an "outlet" for their "frustrations and hostilities."[58] But in New Jersey, Baldwin was introduced to racism of a different sort. In his interaction with the southerners and those policing the color line in the New Jersey suburbs, he discovered a brand of racism that was more belligerent and virulent than what he had encountered in New York City. Baldwin's first reaction to this behavior was disbelief. "I simply did not know," he wrote later, "what was happening. I did not know what I had done, and I shortly began to wonder what *anyone* could possibly do, to bring about such unanimous, active, and unbearably vocal hostility."[59]

In addition to confronting this sort of belligerent racial hostility, Baldwin was introduced to a more passive, almost-robotic racism. During his time in New Jersey, he became accustomed to seeing and hearing the phrase "We don't serve Negroes here." After several "dreadful" encounters with servers at such establishments, Baldwin finally "snapped" on what would be his last night in New Jersey. He and a friend went to the

movies and wanted to get a bite to eat afterward. When they were denied service at a restaurant aptly named "the American Diner," Baldwin said he felt "a click at the nape of my neck as though some interior string connecting my head to my body had been cut," and he walked into "an enormous, glittering, and fashionable restaurant" nearby. He sat down at a table and eventually a server appeared: "She did not ask me what I wanted, but repeated, as though she had learned it somewhere, 'We don't serve Negroes here.' She did not say it with the blunt, derisive hostility to which I had grown accustomed, but, rather, with a note of apology in her voice, and fear." The racism of this white waitress was more enraging to Baldwin than the belligerence he dealt with on a daily basis at the defense plants. He detected in her voice that she *knew* (in a way that the belligerent racist did not) that she was treating him unjustly and that she also knew that there was good reason to be fearful. She could see "the fever" in Baldwin's eyes in a way that those others could not. This made him "more cold and more murderous than ever." He picked up a water mug on the table and "hurled it with all my strength at her. She ducked and it missed her and shattered against the mirror behind the bar."[60]

That night, Baldwin eluded the mob and the police that pursued him, and he realized that he needed to escape far more than that. He recognized not only that he could have been murdered that night but perhaps more disturbingly, he also saw that his rage had almost led him to murder someone else. "I saw nothing very clearly but I did see this: that my life, my *real* life, was in danger, and not from anything other people might do but from the hatred I carried in my own heart."[61]

In 1943 Baldwin returned to Harlem, where his father was nearing death. David had been physically ill for some time and had begun to exhibit signs of mental illness. Baldwin believed that his father's physical and mental illnesses were worsened by the bitterness that dominated his life. When it became clear that he was a danger to himself and others, David was committed to a hospital for the mentally ill and, on July 28, died—as many Harlemites did—of complications from tuberculosis.[62] Later that same day, Baldwin's mother gave birth to her last child, Paula Maria.

After a brief stay with his family in Harlem, Baldwin escaped to Greenwich Village, where he tried to make ends meet with a series of odd jobs, the most important of which was as a waiter at a restaurant called the Calypso. At the Calypso and in the Village generally, Baldwin engaged in self-exploration on several levels. Intellectually, his time at the Calypso afforded him opportunities to interact with an incredible roster of regulars who would achieve prominence on the political and artistic scene, including C. L. R. James, Claude McKay, Alain Locke, Paul Robeson, Burt Lancaster, Marlon Brando, and Eartha Kitt.[63] Baldwin loved to talk and, like Buckley, loved to argue. The setting and clientele of the Calypso was, in some ways, an ideal place for the aspiring writer to entertain ideas and expand his intellectual horizons.

Baldwin's time in the Village was also an important phase in the development of his sexual identity. He had several relationships that ranged in length from one night to several months with both men and women, and although the Village was more hospitable than most places to those who were labeled as "queer," Baldwin was not entirely sure where he fit in. He was not "attracted to men whom he considered to be pretentiously effeminate" and so he often found himself "with the more ambiguous sort, and he suffered the abuse that derived from their shame."[64] Although Baldwin was more sexually attracted to men than he was to women, he fell in love with several women during this period and did not feel comfortable then—or ever—with the idea of putting a label on his sexual identity.[65] When asked about his sexual preference, Baldwin was fond of saying, "Love is where you find it."[66]

It was during these years in the Village that Baldwin would make the connections that would help him gain entrée to the New York literary scene. In December 1943, he met and befriended a young black leftist named Eugene Worth. It was through this relationship that Baldwin was introduced to several New York intellectuals who would give him his start as a professional writer. Worth, Baldwin explained later, would introduce him to the "people who were to take me to Saul Levitas, of *The New*

Leader, Randall Jarrell, of *The Nation*, Elliot Cohen and Robert Warshow, of *Commentary*, and Philip Rahv, of *Partisan Review*."[67] Baldwin's introduction to these leading New York editors was crucial to his development because it was through them that he was able to learn how one might make a living as a writer. Levitas would eventually suggest "a book review per week as a useful discipline" to force Baldwin to his writing desk in order to meet regular deadlines.[68] For Baldwin, who was trying to make ends meet and enjoying a vibrant social life, the goal of one review a week ended up being a bit out of reach. He did, though, accept Levitas's invitation to take up book reviewing and through these short pieces was able to establish himself as an estimable literary provocateur.

In the thick of these bohemian years in the Village, Baldwin would catch another break that proved to be of the utmost importance. While he was working at the Calypso, Baldwin was in the early stages of writing what would become his first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, and would occasionally read aloud from his works in progress during bull sessions with the patrons and employees of the restaurant. One such patron was sufficiently impressed with what she heard that she decided to introduce him to Richard Wright, the Mississippi-born black novelist who had electrified the literary scene with his novel *Native Son*. In winter 1945, Baldwin met with Wright, who looked at some of his work and decided to recommend him for a literary fellowship, which he received.[69]

But things would get worse for Baldwin before they got better. He had a difficult time making progress with his writing, and in 1946, his friend Worth committed suicide. In later years, Baldwin would identify this event as a crucial turning point in his life. He had fallen in love with Worth, and although the two were "never lovers," this relationship proved to be of great significance.[70] Worth became a symbol of idealism for Baldwin. He had been a member of the Young People's Socialist League and dreamed of a revolution that would bring about justice on earth. And yet at every turn, the world told Worth that his revolution would never come and that the color of his skin made him less than fully human. This was more than a dreamer like Worth could possibly bear. And so in 1946, he threw himself off the George Washington Bridge.[71]

Although Baldwin would never adopt Worth's idealism—he remained a member of the Young People's Socialist League only long enough to conclude "it may be impossible to indoctrinate me"—he thought the story of his fallen friend revealed something significant about the sickness of the country's soul and what he might need to do to save his own. What kind of a country, he asked himself, drives a compassionate young man like Worth to self-destruction? And what must I do, he wondered, to avoid the same fate?

Index