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To Barbara,
who told me to write a book

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Exiting the City

ESCAPING the city's racial cauldron could not have been easier; an invisible jurisdictional fence ran just a few miles from City Hall. On the other side was Baltimore County, an independent entity with its own government, laws, rules, traditions—and a tax rate half of the city's. So many whites fled there between 1950 and 1970 that the county's population more than doubled, from 270,273 to 621,077. Consequently the share of African Americans in the county fell from 6.6 to 3.2 percent.

Generations of elected county officials used various means to marginalize African Americans, thus contributing to their declining numbers. Housing was made scarce. Schools for blacks were second rate. Until 1939 Baltimore County did not even operate a high school for blacks, a distinction shared by only one other of Maryland's twenty-three counties. It was true that a few high-achievers were given the opportunity to attend the city's Frederick Douglass High School at county expense. But in the name of fiscal frugality, their numbers were limited and they had to pass a county-administered admission test.

White families fleeing the city quickly discovered that desegregation and integration were not pressing issues in the growing county, which was fine by them. Eventually they became aware of a different set of problems.

Petty corruption was a county tradition. Gifts of cash or liquor—by the caseload—had rained on helpful county decision-makers each Christmastime for as long as anyone could remember. Such largesse from favor seekers was expected, as was sponsorship of bull roasts, where the entrenched Democratic machine's foot soldiers—called b'hoys to honor their filial loyalty to the boss—whooped it up amid mountains of steamed crabs, pit beef, and fried chicken, all washed down with pitchers of beer and whiskey chasers while polka bands blared. At election times, Democratic bosses shook down builders and regulated businesses so that cash could be showered on the machine's army of poll workers and another Democratic victory secured.

Tavern owners pitched in, rewarding voters in Democratic strongholds with a free drink. State law prohibited serving alcohol on election days. So? Liquor inspectors and police were part of the Democratic machine's political patronage. They turned a blind eye to pinball machines and other forms of illegal gambling that went on lustily in back rooms. Such gaming increased tavern owners' profits—and strengthened the umbilical cord linking them to the ruling machine.

The construction of the Baltimore Beltway, which opened in 1962, raised graft to new levels. Zoning approvals acquired a price tag, with shopping-center zoning requiring big bribes. Water and sewer connections became marketable commodities. Contractors, engineering firms, and architects openly bought favors. So did ordinary citizens if they built homes without permits, or on floodplains.

Many politicians and bureaucrats accepted cash, and the greediest demanded it. Among the voracious was Spiro T. Agnew, a Republican, who rocketed—in just seven years—from chairman of the county zoning appeals board to Richard M. Nixon's vice president. Even in Washington Agnew continued to receive plain white envelopes of cash. Inside the White House he accepted a kickback from a civil engineer who was still paying for favors that Agnew had bestowed in his previous offices, first as Baltimore County executive, the highest elected office in the county, and then as Maryland's governor. That particular firm kicked back to Agnew 5 percent of its contract awards.

Evidence of systemic kickbacks forced Agnew to resign as vice president on October 10, 1973. Ironically, he was not the federal

Having resigned from the vice presidency, Spiro T. Agnew departs Baltimore's courthouse. Years earlier, county residents had rebelled against his urban renewal plan, seeing it as a Trojan horse to bring blacks into the county. *(Special Collections, University of Maryland Libraries)*

crimebusters' intended target; prosecutors were after his Democratic successor as county executive, Dale Anderson. Tried in 1974, Anderson went to prison for extorting bribes and failing to report them as income. Another trial took place simultaneously in another courthouse. That accused was Samuel A. Green, Jr., a former Democratic County Council chairman who was serving his second term as state's attorney, the elected top prosecutor. He too went to prison. Among his crimes was his propensity to make criminal cases disappear. He usually did it for money. But when one twenty-five-year-old shoplifting suspect didn't have the requisite amount of cash, Green happily accepted a "carnal bribe" from her, according to the indictment. Green was some man: court testimony showed that he hired nine female office staffers on the mutually understood condition that they serve his sexual needs.

Green had come from patrician roots. One forebear was Harriet Chew, a daughter of Benjamin Chew's, chief justice of Pennsylvania's Supreme Court at the time the United States broke away from Britain. She married Charles Carroll, Jr., of Maryland, son of the only Catholic signer of the Declaration of Independence. At Green's heirloom-filled home in Ruxton, a quaint village favored by the fox-hunting set, an antique etching showed Chew talking with George Washington. Genealogy was not among Green's interests, but his wife, identified in the *Blue Book* as the former Camilla de Chantal Corcoran, treasured that picture.

More typical of Baltimore County were the hundreds of thousands of newcomers who moved there after World War II as part of a suburban migration that transformed the nation. Like Agnew and Anderson, many were returning veterans eager to make up for lost time. Grown up amid the Great Depression, their generation had glimpsed the future during the 1939 New York World's Fair. Forty-four million visitors—fully one-third of the nation's population at the time—saw with their own eyes a consumerist fairyland. General Motors showed a futuristic city ruled by cars and highways. Chrysler assembled Plymouths right before visitors' eyes in a theater equipped with a new technology called "air-conditioning." The AT&T pavilion introduced a robotized, synthetic voice. Next door, IBM showcased electric typewriters and a machine called the electric calculator that used punch cards. It was a primitive forerunner of programmable computers. NBC awed fairgoers by transmitting live pictures to small boxes with tiny screens in rooms seating twenty-five people. The first transmission was devoted to the arrival of one million tulips from Holland, part of that country's exhibit. The picture was in black and white, but viewers saw the colors in their minds.

The defeat of Germany, Italy, and Japan in World War II ushered America into a sustained period of growth and affluence. Gross domestic product more than doubled between 1945 and 1960, as did car ownership. Retooled war industries flooded stores with television sets, refrigerators, lawn mowers, washing machines, and toasters. Advertising, now driven by opinion researchers trained in psychology, created a nation of mass consumers who wanted more of everything—more TV dinners, more breakfast flakes, more frozen orange juice. Above all they wanted more and better housing. And new taxpayer-paid roads, including the huge interstate system that revolutionized motor travel after the Eisenhower administration built it for defense purposes at the height of the Cold War.

Builders were happy to oblige. One of them was William Levitt, a demobilized lieutenant from the navy's construction battalions. His Levittown in Long Island, New York, became the prototype for postwar suburban tract housing. He built inexpensive, mass-produced houses on slabs, using prefabricated elements just as in the military. Copying Levittown's methods in Baltimore County was Victor Posner, the onetime blockbuster and future Wall Street corporate raider. He constructed so many rowhouses that in 1954 he was ranked as Maryland's largest residential developer. The next year proved that it had been a fluke, when Meyerhoff regained the No. 1 ranking.

In later years the Agnews and Andersons of America would rail against federal meddling and governmental subsidies, but they themselves benefited from taxpayer handouts like no previous generation. Thanks to the GI Bill, returning veterans were entitled to stipends for education in addition to a monthly payment to help with living expenses. This was a godsend for Agnew, a Greek immigrant restaurant owner's son who had married his high school sweetheart in 1942 and soon had children. Before the war he had studied chemistry at Johns Hopkins, but he had lost interest and dropped out.

Agnew served five years in the army, including frontline duty in France. He must not have been much of an officer because he was never promoted beyond the rank of lieutenant. Back home the GI Bill enabled him to go to law school at night at the University of

Baltimore, where standards were not rigorous. A veteran's mortgage allowed him to acquire a home. Like millions of other veterans around the nation, he became a suburbanite. Agnew moved to Baltimore County in 1946, two years before the Supreme Court voided racially restrictive covenants and eight years before school desegregation. Race played no part in his decision.

His rancher in Lutherville—a onetime religious campground—was modest; a typical home in those days contained fewer than one thousand square feet of space. But the name of his subdivision, Country Club Park, had a nice ring to it. The idyll did not last long. When war broke out in Korea, Agnew was recalled to military duty. He was forced to sell the home. On his return, all he could afford was Loch Raven Village, a community of two-story rowhouses near Towson built with taxpayer-subsidized FHA loans. On his street the struggling lawyer was sandwiched between the families of a transit bus driver and a postal worker.

Agnew's years in Loch Raven Village marked a turning point. He became involved in community issues. Like his father, he was a registered Democrat, but he soon changed his party registration to Republican. He was rewarded with a patronage job that he badly needed, because he wasn't much of a lawyer. He became a member of the board hearing zoning appeals. He was so little known that *The Sun*, in reporting his appointment, referred to him as Spiro T. Anger.

Dale Anderson had been born in the southern Illinois town of Metropolis, across the Ohio River from Paducah, Kentucky. Metropolis was Huckleberry Finn country, part of a region called Little Egypt because the Mississippi and Ohio rivers were prone to periodic floods like the Nile, and because towns carried names like Cairo, Thebes, Palestine, and Lebanon. Anderson's parents, Baptists, were so inspired that they christened him Naaman, "Pleasantness" in Hebrew. He hated his given first name and never used it.

In 1937 Anderson joined an uncle who owned an auto supply shop in Baltimore. When the war came he volunteered for the army air corps, rising from private to captain but never shipping overseas. On his return he settled in Fullerton, Baltimore County. His work

as a Democratic precinct leader won him a patronage job as a night clerk in a magistrate's court. That's how one advanced in politics in those days.

Neither Agnew nor Anderson realized it at first, but they appeared on the Baltimore County scene at a time when regional power dynamics were changing radically. In 1950 the City of Baltimore's population peaked at 949,708. The next Censuses would record only a modest initial decline, but that was due to a substantial black migration from the Carolinas that statistically replaced white families departing to the county. When that migration stopped in the 1970s, the city's population began shrinking. The city grew more black; the county remained nearly all white. An astonishing 83 percent of the white growth occurred outside the city while 83 percent of the black growth occurred within the city.

In early recorded times, the land area of Baltimore County was huge. It was still considerable after the City of Baltimore and Carroll, Anne Arundel, Howard, and Kent counties were carved out as independent jurisdictions. But although the county had eight times more land than the city, its population was small until World War II, and concentrated near the city line. That left the rest of the county empty. The City of Baltimore, by contrast, was running out of land. It had everything else: people, wealth, political clout, daily newspapers, and radio and television stations. And the city dominated the whole state of Maryland economically, culturally, and politically. Not only did the city reign as the region's unchallenged center of manufacturing until the 1960s, it was also home to nearly all the banks, hospitals, offices, theaters, concert halls, and colleges. The city had the Colts, the professional football team that had moved to Baltimore in 1953, and the baseball Orioles, which had relocated from St. Louis the following year. The city even boasted America's biggest bowling alley—its five floors contained more than one hundred lanes.

Baltimore's fortunes turned after World War II ended and armament manufacturers scaled back, retooled, and terminated tens of thousands. Meanwhile the federal government disbanded big war-procurement bureaucracies in Baltimore, and several floors in downtown office buildings were left vacant. There was more bad news. The day after Christmas 1954 brought the startling announcement that O'Neill's department store was going out of business. O'Neill's, at Charles and Lexington streets, was a mercantile icon like no other. It offered an unsurpassed selection of bridal gowns, First Communion dresses, and good linens. Many Catholic families patronized O'Neill's for an additional reason: a miracle was said to have happened there during the Great Fire of 1904. As a firestorm of flames and cinders spread through the downtown business district, the department store's distraught owner, an Irish immigrant named Thomas O'Neill, raced in his carriage to the nearby convent where his sister led a religious life. He begged the Sisters of Charity to pray for him. They did so, fervently, and the fire stopped at the walls of his emporium. The grateful O'Neill willed his wealth to the Catholic archdiocese. Eventually Thomas O'Neill's fortune paid for a new hospital, several high schools, and the new Cathedral of Mary Our Queen, dedicated in 1959. There, in a chapel near the altar for everyone to see, O'Neill's was immortalized. A triptych showed flames shooting up around the store while a nun—his sister—prayed. A group of boys standing next to her included George Herman "Babe" Ruth, holding a baseball bat and ball, and a studious-looking Asa Yoelson, a rabbi's son better known as Al Jolson, the future singer and vaudevillian. Both had been wards at a reformatory school where O'Neill served as a trustee.

The closing of the celebrated O'Neill emporium overwhelmed the entire downtown retail district with gloom. "It affected us all," remembered Walter Sondheim, an executive of a rival department store. Flagship stores on Howard Street saw sales drop. Equally important, the carriage trade shrank on nearby Charles Street, condemning fancy food stores, fashionable jewelry dealers, and fine furniture merchants to an irreversible spiral of doom.

After O'Neill's closed, the other shoe fell soon enough. The federal government's steadily expanding Social Security Administration decided to centralize its national headquarters operations, which were scattered among ten commercial office buildings in downtown Baltimore. A site in the city was investigated but rejected. Instead a headquarters campus was constructed in Woodlawn, a farming community along the soon-to-be built Beltway in Baltimore County. In 1967 the agency began moving 8,200 employees to Woodlawn. The exodus devastated downtown service retail businesses, from diners to dry cleaners. Office vacancies skyrocketed.

Downtown Baltimore had been under a massive assault since 1944. That year the city hired Robert Moses to plan a new crosstown expressway. No one could argue against better roads; during the war, the few existing arteries in the city had created one of the nation's worst transportation nightmares. Moses, New York's indefatigable parks and roads czar, chose a sunken expressway path. He proposed bulldozing through Howard and Charles streets, piercing the heart of the downtown retail district. His plan would have saved, barely, the Roman Catholic basilica, the Walters Art Museum, and the Enoch Pratt Free Library, but dozens of churches and public buildings were earmarked for demolition. All told, Moses proposed to raze two hundred city blocks and relocate some nineteen thousand residents, most of them black. "Nothing which we propose to remove will constitute any loss to Baltimore," he assured.

The Moses plan cast a pall over the whole center city. Residential property owners, victimized by banks' redlining since the 1930s and fearing that their areas were destined to go black, had another excuse to skimp on improvements and upkeep. Retailers too refrained from investing, using the capital to construct suburban stores instead. America's other cities thrived and expanded during the postwar consumer boom. Not Baltimore. The first major downtown office building to rise since the 1927 stock market crash was not built until 1961.

As it turned out, the east-west expressway was never constructed. But over three decades highway builders acquired and demolished thousands of rowhouses along the road alignment that Moses had identified and others revised. Other renewal projects abounded, with the result that roughly 94,000 people, mostly black, were relocated between 1965 and 1980. The uprooting of more than a tenth of the city's population increased neighborhood instability, magnified by the steady abandonment of neighborhoods by whites.

The collapse of the public transit system contributed to the city's decline. A dense network of streetcars and trolley lines ran through downtown to the suburbs, bonding the whole region together. Indeed, O'Neill's had been at the terminus of two streetcar lines. Reliance on public transport had only increased during the war, when gasoline and tire rationing forced residents of all social backgrounds to ride streetcars and trolleys. Once the privations of war were over, they could choose. And choose they did, aided by National City Lines, which took over the transit company in 1945.

National City Lines was a holding company owned by General Motors, Firestone Tire, Standard Oil of California, and Phillips Petroleum, which acquired streetcar operators in more than a hundred U.S. cities. As it did everywhere else, NCL began systematically replacing the Baltimore Transit Company's streetcars with GM buses, equipped with Firestone tires. Those buses consumed plenty of fuel, which the two oil company partners were only too happy to provide. Meanwhile the remaining streetcar lines experienced unexplained operational difficulties. The Public Service Commission cited the No. 8 streetcar line as the most egregious example. The No. 8, the longest line in the system, connected Baltimore County's county seat, Towson, with downtown Baltimore and the western suburb of Catonsville. So busy was the No. 8 streetcar line that it alone carried 10 percent of the entire transit system's passenger load. Mysteriously, the No. 8 line's vaunted reliability went to ruin. Instead of arriving at predictable intervals, streetcars came late and in twos or threes, leading to charges that they blocked traffic and caused congestion. Critics howled that streetcars should be banned. Traffic planners concurred.

But operational problems persisted even after buses replaced streetcars and trolleys. Service became more infrequent and erratic. Baltimore Transit buses were like bananas, residents joked, "because they are yellow and come in bunches." Baltimoreans, accustomed to transit vehicles that on some lines had run at two-minute intervals during the rush hour and every seven minutes at other times, made other arrangements. In 1948 the Baltimore Transit Company's ridership declined by 9.9 percent. The very next year it fell by 20.4 percent, by 28.3 percent in 1950, and by a further 34.2 percent in 1951. The transit company responded by cutting routes and hiking fares, and then cutting some more. Riders got the point and bought cars.

With cars, people could live farther out. Instead of having to depend on the public Lexington Market downtown or on smaller municipal meat and produce markets scattered elsewhere, families could buy their provisions at new supermarkets, which were opening in the county at breakneck speed. Almost all families shopping there were white, whereas increasing numbers of shoppers in the city were black. A final blow to downtown shopping occurred after the riots in the early 1970s, when department stores abandoned a traditional courtesy that had been much appreciated by customers using public transit. Free deliveries of purchases large and small—even handkerchiefs and neckties—were discontinued, and so was the free collection of returns.

Between 1955 and 1965 the city lost eighty-two industries, sixty-five to Baltimore County. Only six new firms moved to the city, where jobs became difficult to get, particularly in manufacturing and menial labor. Additional jobs were lost when hospitals, colleges, corporations, and prestigious churches relocated to the county. Over their histories, the oldest of those institutions had moved several times, but all the previous moves had been within the city.

Baltimore County became a latter-day Klondike. Residents included corporate executives and other powerful people whose civic commitment to city institutions wavered. By this time such earlier arrivals as Agnew and Anderson had put down roots in the county. Agnew was a late bloomer who had tried all kinds of jobs before finding his niche. Anderson was a go-getter who started a construction business in 1950, quickly establishing himself and thriving.

These were the men who would guide Baltimore County when it began challenging the city as the metropolitan area's most important jurisdiction.