



Chapter Three:

Home to Harlem and 409

It is April 1936. Meme and Thede Butler and I ride home in a cab from nearby Columbia Presbyterian Hospital, where I was born two weeks earlier—two weeks was a normal stay for mother and baby back then. My father carries me under the green awning emblazoned with the white numerals, "409" where the uniformed, white-gloved doorman tips his hat and opens the wrought-iron-framed glass door. We ascend the four marble steps into the lobby. White and black rectangular tiles set in a herringbone pattern edge the Oriental carpets. The rugs muffle the sound of footsteps as my parents walk past the columns embellished with gold leaf toward the elevator at the right end of the T-shaped lobby. The hall man is announcing a visitor on the intercom and directs the guest to the other manned elevator at the opposite end of the lobby. Flower arrangements adorn the tables alongside the Jacobean benches next to the elevators. "Blessed bundle," buxom Mrs. Dial comments in her sonorous voice as she rides on the elevator with us to her ninth floor apartment. We

continue up to the twelfth floor. Our apartment is the first one on the left when we get off the elevator.

We enter our home and Dad puts me down in a bassinet mounted on wooden wheels, designed and constructed by the resident handyman, the cigar-smoking Milton Hinks. The bassinet was draped with a peaked canopy of white organdy hand sewn by my mother's friend, Jane Jackson, a hairdresser who lived in apartment 7C. Twenty-three years later, my mother resurrected the bassinet and set it up for my daughter's first visit to this same apartment. Both Mr. Hinks and Ms. Jackson were invited to see and welcome Karen.

Everyone who was anyone in New York City's African American community knew of "409." Just hail a cab in Harlem and say "409" and the driver would know where to take you. Walter White, W. E. B. Du Bois, Roy Wilkins, Thurgood Marshall, leaders of the NAACP, and other black elite lived at 409 during the 1920s, 1930s and through World War II.

This thirteen-story red brick apartment house on Edgecombe Avenue and 153rd Street dwarfs the other buildings on Sugar Hill. Sited on Coogan's Bluff, high above the Harlem River, the E-shaped structure commands a view of the Bronx and lower Manhattan as well as the Palisades of northern New Jersey. Neighbors sit and chat on a series of green-slatted wooden benches directly across the street from the entrance to 409. Behind the benches iron grillwork extends ten blocks along an uninterrupted promenade where maple trees shade the avenue. Cool water bubbles up from the pebbly stone fountain where you may quench your thirst after climbing the seemingly endless concrete steps from Eighth Avenue to the Hill.

Harlem and 409 both figure prominently in American and African American history. From our kitchen window I can also see a white brick house, the oldest colonial residence left standing in New York City. From this mansion General George Washington commanded his troops during the Battle of Harlem Heights during the Revolutionary War, scoring a decisive victory against the British for the control of Manhattan. However, two weeks later, the colonists defeated the rebels, won back the island and held it until 1783. This house, the Morris-Jumel Mansion at Edgecombe Avenue at 160th Street, was

advertised in the pages of the *Post Boy* newspaper of May 6, 1765 as part of "a 100 acre farm lying between two rivers, convenient for fishing, clamming and oystering." The mansion, on its grassy sloping grounds looks oddly out of place in the midst of the concrete-and-steel buildings surrounding it. On my visits there I enjoyed examining the replica of the desk George Washington used. I imagined him sitting there and signing important documents with his quill pen.

A few African descendants lived in Harlem from the 1600s under Dutch colonial rule, and some slaves and free blacks continued to live in the area after Britain took over the colony. The estates of James De Lancey and Alexander Hamilton were also located there and Hamilton Grange, a National Memorial, is located at 414 West 141st Street, between Convent and St. Nicholas Avenues. Descendants of the original Dutch, English and French families lived quite comfortably in this country town.

By the end of the nineteenth century, abandoned farmlands in Harlem were used to build newer housing, populated mostly by old-line New Yorkers, German Jews and Irish and English immigrants. Harlem was considered to be an outpost of the core city. Pockets of blacks on East 122nd, 124th and 126th Streets and West 126th and 134th Streets provided enough children of color to populate an all-Negro school. The Garrison and Sumner apartment houses at 125th Street and Broadway had Negro residents dating from 1890, when Southern Negroes and West Indians came to New York and moved into Harlem in increasing numbers.

Land speculation began after 1890. The elevated train extended its route to Harlem, encouraging developers to build an abundance of good-quality housing for upper- and middle-class white residents from downtown New York to rent or buy. But the new housing stock exceeded the demand, so in order to protect financial investments, real estate agents very reluctantly opened apartments to those who could afford to pay the rent—but not just anyone. The Harlem Property Owners Improvement Organization, active between 1910 and 1915, was established to prevent rental or sale to African Americans. The organization failed in its goal as reflected in an April 7, 1911 editorial in the *Harlem Home News* that referred to "the black hordes eating through the very heart of Harlem."

The racial covenants designed to prevent Negroes from renting and owning these desirable properties did not hold; nor did these investors anticipate the arrival of Negroes north of the imaginary line at 145th Street that for years separated black and white residential properties. In 1917 one of the land speculators, the Atlanta-based Candler Holding Company, owners of Coca-Cola, had already committed to building 409. But by then Negroes were already moving north (as whites were moving to the suburbs) into the part of Washington Heights that is now considered "upper" Harlem. By 1927 Negroes had replaced the predominantly Jewish residents of 409.

Mr. Harold Thomas, occupant of apartment 13E, had lived in 409 for more than 60 years. During the 1931 and 1932 school summer vacations he was an elevator operator in the "house" where his aunt, Dr. Buelah Gardiner and his cousin Billy lived at that time. Mr. Thomas's older sister, Thelma Wilson, told me, "I was hired in 1927 by Nail and Parker Associates, the successful colored realty firm, to manage the building and collect rents at a time when many apartments were still vacant because of the glut in the market. That was my first job after graduating from Wadleigh High that year, and I was offered an apartment in the house rent free. The Metropolitan Life Insurance Company owned the building, and John Thornton was the superintendent. It was a pleasure to work there because the tenants and staff were so friendly."

For the first twenty-one years of my life, until I married Hubey and moved to the Boston area, 409 was my home. Then 409 became a second home for our growing family. "I see Ba's house, I see Ba's house" my children would chorus from the rear of the station wagon as we motored down the Harlem River Drive to visit my widowed mother. Later on, the apartment was used by most of our eight children when they studied or worked in New York City and it is the place where I now do some of my research and writing. But 409 means even more to me because in its elegance, its glamour, and the pride reflected by the tenants who lived there, it represents a part of Harlem in its glorious days. A few of the people who were my neighbors when I was growing up still reside in the building today. These neighbors assisted my mother in her

advanced years and they add a sense of continuity to my life.

My parents moved into 409 right before my birth. Thede, Meme and Maud literally and figuratively "moved up" to 409 from the fifth floor walk-up apartment next door when the flights of stairs were too much for Meme to climb when she was expecting me. Auntie Maud, Mom's domineering older sister said, "Meme, get a room for me when you move. You will need someone of your own around."

Every day after Auntie Maud came home from work, she would dress me to go out for a stroll. She pushed my carriage down the ten-block promenade of Edgecombe Avenue while the bench-sitters across the street watched. "That mother gets her baby out religiously," Mrs. Simon said to Miss Long. "I always see her with the carriage." "That's not the mother, Miss Long. The real mother doesn't have snow-white hair, and she's not as thin as that lady. That's the baby's aunt. They live together. The mother is my hairdresser, so I know."

It was not surprising that my nurturing aunt became my self-selected godmother, announcing to my parents after I came home from the hospital that "the baby will be christened at St. Philip's Protestant Episcopal Church on Whitsunday." It was typical of her to take command. My mother laughed as she recalled the directives. "You, Teddy," Auntie Maud said to my father, "get the godfather, and you, Meme, get *another* godmother." Auntie Maud purchased the white long flowing christening gown. On the appointed Sunday afternoon in May 1936, Auntie Maud and the other godparents, Edna Jackson and John Adams, all stood together at the altar for the ceremony while Father Shelton Bishop sprinkled holy water on my forehead. In photographs taken to document the day, you can barely see my face emerging from billows of lace. They said I cried.

My mother's brother, Oscar, also stayed with us occasionally. He was a waiter on the Cunard Steamship line and his layover was in New York. His bulging eyes looked right through you, although they were sometimes bloodshot when he had too much to drink. Even bloodshot, however, Uncle Oscar always looked dapper in the custom-made linen suits and Panama hats he purchased on his trips abroad. My Uncle Oscar called me

Miss Betty when he didn't call me "moonface." In my room I had a bookcase with glass doors and a key, just like my dad's bookcase. On top of that bookcase I kept the curios my Uncle Oscar brought home for me from his trips to Asia. There was a seashell girl—her mischievous face painted on one seashell, her body formed by two shells glued together, her legs a pair of pipe cleaners attached to another shell. Next to her I placed a black-and-white speckled rooster with a red comb that looked so real. He had springs for legs and could bounce on his stand. Then there was a wooden jinrikisha, four inches high with a hand-carved man pulling the carriage and a couple riding in the rear. The wheels rolled when I moved the carriage. A Japanese paper umbrella with a toothpick-size frame rested next to the jinrikisha. One of the other souvenirs he brought me, a beautiful white silk kimono with quilted sleeves and a blue-and-silver dragon embroidered on the left side, hung in my closet.

Oscar's daughter, Edna, came to our house every day. Edna played the Hardman Peck piano in the living room every afternoon after school. She went to Wadleigh High, at 114th Street and Eighth Avenue, Harlem's premier all-girls school, and took the subway to our house. I would watch from the living-room window as she walked down the hill on 155th Street. Since well before I was born, Edna had come to my parents' apartment to prepare for her Saturday afternoon piano lesson—paid for by my mother—with Miss Shephard, the music teacher.

"My brother Oscar was away at sea most of the time and your Aunt Louise, who was also from Jamaica, worked in a factory doing piecework. So Edna had lots of time on her hands," mother told me. "She spent weekends with me when I was single. We went to the movies and window-shopped downtown. We had a ball. I was like her second mother."

Those excursions around the city were abruptly halted when I came on the scene and began monopolizing my mother's attention. Edna admitted to me decades later that, "at first it was hard having you around, Betty." Thirteen years my senior, Edna was like an older sister to me and I know I must have been a pest to her. "I was accustomed to having Aunt Meme all to myself but I got used to you being my shadow."

When Edna rang the doorbell, Mom was usually doing a customer's hair in the kitchen off the foyer, so I would open the door. I remember my cousin as a tall, lanky girl wearing a box-pleated skirt and a loose-fitting beige sweater and a blouse with a Peter Pan collar at the neck. Bobby socks and brown-and-white saddle oxfords completed her outfit. Her hair was combed into a neat pageboy style, parted on the left side. After she settled in, Edna would let me sit next to her on the piano bench while she practiced scales. Her long legs easily reached the pedals while my legs dangled in the air. I hoped that someday I could read those odd-shaped notations in the music book and know what keys to press with my fingers to make the living room fill with sound.

I liked to follow Edna and watch her brush her long hair over the bathroom sink as the medicine cabinet's rectangular mirror reflected the movements of Edna's graceful hands as she carefully applied deep red lipstick to her heart-shaped lips. Edna had the same space between her two front teeth that I had, but that was about all we had in common. My cousin was quiet and shy while I was talkative and inquisitive. But Edna loved to dance. Her face would come alive as she grasped the bed posts of the two-poster in my parents' room using it as an imaginary partner to pull herself back and forth, her feet flying in step with the rhythm of the lindy hop playing on the radio. Edna also loved fashion, spending hours intently paging through *Vogue* and *Glamour*. She ordered her high-heeled shoes from a Newport News, Virginia, sales catalogue and had them delivered to our apartment.

Then Edna and I would go into my bedroom, which I had inherited at age four when Auntie Maud moved to the Dunbar apartments on Eighth Avenue and 150th Street. In my room Edna kept the Remington Rand typewriter Mom gave her when she began a secretarial course at Wadleigh High, immediately after her 1941 graduation. "Won't you teach me to type, too?" I begged. "Okay, Betty. We'll set up the card table and put the typewriter on it. First get the telephone book to sit on so you can see what you're doing. Now you sit in this chair and rest your fingers on this middle row of letters. The next thing you have to do is to memorize the keyboard so that you don't have to look at the keys then you will know exactly where each letter is. But first, I'll put the paper in the roller and you can try

pushing the letters down one at a time and see how the typewriter works."

My first of a series of lessons began. Eventually, after much patient help from my cousin, I learned to type. Edna let me time her speed in typing the exercises in the silver-covered instruction book. I can see her fingers moving effortlessly across the keyboard, hear the tinkle of the bell when she finished the line and moved the carriage back, always with her eyes on the sentences she had to type. That course preparation enabled Edna to be hired as a secretary when the scarcity of workers caused by World War II opened previously unattainable jobs to Negroes in white-collar positions and defense work. Edna continued to visit our home at least twice a week for many years while she pursued a lifetime career in government service.

But time passes and lives change. Family ties strengthen and weaken, ebb and flow. In 1951 Edna and I lost contact with each other when Meme favored her brother, Oscar (Edna's father), after the breakup of his marriage to Aunt Louise. Edna's allegiance was to her mother, and remained there past the death of her father, her mother, our Auntie Maud and Edna's favorite Aunt Meme. We met only at funerals of family members. A gnawing feeling of uneasiness and guilt prompted me to telephone Edna one evening at her St. Albans, New York home. A thin high-pitched voice answered the phone. "May I speak with Edna," I asked. "Who is calling?" the unfamiliar voice asked. "Betty Butler. I'm Edna's cousin."

"Betty who?" I felt as though I had traveled light years through space. Neither of us recognized the other's voice; it had been decades since we had seen each other. Once we had reintroduced ourselves, we tried to catch up.

"How many children do you have?" What did you say your husband's name is? When did you get married? I wish I had that Remington typewriter now, instead of this word processor—it keeps skipping on me," Edna laughed.

"You know I still keep the apartment at 409, I said. "I haven't thought about 409 for ages," Edna said.



Unlike Edna, my attachment to 409 was (and continues to be) not only a physical attachment but an emotional one

as well. The impact of my neighbors on my life was almost as strong as the influence exerted by my family.

The 409 tenants were an interesting and eclectic mix, representing the entire social and economic spectrum, the famous and infamous. It was a diverse vertical community of African Americans from all walks of life who treated one another with respect and courtesy. You didn't have to leave the building to encounter ministers, teachers, musicians, artists, red caps, lawyers, hot goods dealers, judges, gamblers, doctors and hairdressers in those 111 apartments. As a young man, after returning to New York from Jamaica, and before he became famous as a singer, actor, and social activist, Harry Belafonte hauled trash for the residents. His recollection of these tenants was of a snobbish exclusive group. To me as a child, they were my friendly neighbors.

Long-time resident, Ms. Thelma Wilson recalls one neighbor in particular. "I remember Madame Stephanie St. Clair breezing through the lobby with her fur coat dramatically flowing behind her. She had a mystical aura about her, and she wore exotic dresses with a colorful turban wrapped around her head. She was always very pleasant to me. When I went to her apartment to collect the rent she invited me in to see her collection of gold coins embedded in a glass-topped table. I was impressed."

I was impressed too when I thought about the courage, intelligence, skill, and savvy needed for a woman of the 1920s to create and run one of the most lucrative policy banks in Harlem. Also referred to as "the numbers," policy banking was an illegal and lucrative gambling operation. When notorious gangster and bootlegger Dutch Schultz, who controlled the numbers in other areas of the city, attempted to encroach on Madame's territory, she resisted. This tall statuesque entrepreneur of French-Caribbean ancestry stated that she was not afraid of Dutch Schultz or any other man. She hired ten controllers and numerous clerks to operate the business, forty runners to collect bets and distribute winnings, and guards to protect her business. She also retained personal henchmen to protect her. Harold Thomas recalled, "One day during the summer of 1931 when I was operating the elevator, the hall man on duty signaled for me to come to where he stood, as a black limo stopped in front of the house. I saw the four doors open simultaneously and one man got out of each door.

They closed the doors in unison, making a single sound. They were very businesslike in their appearance; they about-faced and walked into the building military style. I took them up on the south elevator to Madame St. Clair's floor. They rang for me about twenty minutes later and repeated the routine, leaving the building the same as when they entered, without saying a word. These men were Madame St. Clair's protectors. My cousin, Billy, told me that Dutch Schultz sent one of his men up to see Madame St. Clair. She pushed him in a closet, locked the door and called her men to take care of him," Mr. Thomas reported. When Dutch Schultz was gunned down by mobsters and taken to the Newark, New Jersey City Hospital, he received a telegram from his guileful antagonist. According to Dutch Schultz' biographer, Paul Sann, the telegram read, "As ye sow, so shall you reap" and it was signed, "Madame Queen of Policy." Shultz never recovered from his wounds; he died in the hospital on October 24, 1935.

The numbers racket was an integral part of Harlem life and it worked much like the modern lottery. Today's store-keeper sells tickets much like a numbers runner did back then. When I was living in 409, a Mr. Brown was the numbers runner for most of the tenants. A very respectable-looking man with mixed gray hair and a complexion like butterscotch pudding, "Brownie" came to the building every day except Sunday. His trousers were properly creased and his jacket well fitted and he unfailingly tipped his hat to the ladies as he came around the corner. His shoes were polished to a gleaming shine and he always had the New York *Daily News* tucked under his arm. For several hours he went from apartment to apartment to collect the numbers the tenants played for the day.

Our apartment was one of the stops Mr. Brown made. My mother had a piece of paper with a list of the numbers she wanted to play for the day, straight or in combination. It was always three numbers, playing 687 for five cents straight, for instance, or various combinations such as 876, 786, 678, and so on for two or three cents per combination.

Dreams and hunches determined my mom's selection, and she frequently referred to her "dream book" for listings of numbers associated with the content of dreams. Brownie sat down at the kitchen table, opened the New

York *Daily News* to the centerfold of photographs, took a pencil sharpened to a needle point, and carefully copied the numbers in the minutest way possible so that you needed a magnifying glass to decipher them. Then he got up from the table, said his goodbyes, and tucked the paper under his arm on his way to the next apartment. He carried no evidence on his person of this illegal activity; no number slips could be found in his pocket if he was arrested.

If you "hit the number" (based on the results from the horse races), Brownie came the next morning to pay off the bet—twenty dollars, fifty dollars or hundreds of dollars, depending on the amount of money that you placed on the number(s). As far as I know he never got caught. I would get a special treat when Mom hit the number, maybe a new coat if I needed one, or a trip by subway to Radio City Music Hall. My dad never played the numbers and I never thought that there was anything wrong with this activity. It was a chance for working-class people to dream of striking it rich for a day. Nowadays, we call it Lotto and it is a legal activity.

In 1941 the United States entered into World War II, and during those wartime years 409 was the air raid shelter for the neighborhood. A yellow sign near the front door identified the building as the place to go in case of a bombing attack. When the singsong sirens blared to indicate an air raid practice drill was occurring, men and women called wardens wearing white helmets and armbands checked the streets to make sure that no lights showed from any apartment. Special black shades were pulled down, the streets were silent and everything was in total darkness. The sweep of searchlights across the sky created an eerie glow. I was not scared that enemy planes would drop bombs on us, even though I had seen newsreels of buildings in Europe reduced to rubble. In the films, patriotic music played as parachutes billowed and American aviators dropped from the sky onto enemy soil, while deep-voiced male commentators reported scores of victories for the Allied troops.

The war propaganda made its indelible mark on my mind. Cartoon films depicting slant-eyed, yellow-skinned Japanese pilots shot down from the heavens brought roars of delight and applause from the audience. On the West

Coast, where the largest number of Japanese Americans resided, real estate belonging to Japanese Americans was confiscated, and the owners were sent to internment camps. Japanese Americans also became easy targets for racism across the nation. "Japs" was the derogatory name frequently used in news reports, even in respectable media. Yet there was no similar use of derisive names for the German enemy and German Americans were not placed in detention camps.

While World War II continued overseas, African Americans still battled racism at home. On the floor above us, in apartment 13B, Walter White, Executive Secretary of the NAACP, entertained his guests. These included his neighbors on the thirteenth floor as well as poet Langston Hughes, author Claude McKay and pianist and composer George Gershwin. Mr. White and his wife Gladys had two adult children, Jane and Walter Jr. ("Pidgy"). The Whites' apartment was referred to as the "White House" because so many influential people partied there. Although Mr. White was light enough to "pass for white" when he traveled south to investigate lynchings firsthand, the Ku Klux Klan was capable of lynching him or anyone else suspected of gathering information to use in court against them. One day a volunteer came to our apartment collecting money for the NAACP and left a flyer with the picture of a Negro man hanging limply from a tree like a puppet on a string. When I saw that picture my stomach turned over.

Next door to Walter White and his family lived the poet and literary editor, William Stanley Braithwaite. The Braithwaites had three generations of family, including adult children, living in their large six-room apartment, 13A. Historian and social critic Dr. W. E. B. Du Bois, the most important Negro intellectual of our time, who predicted that the color line would be *the* problem of the twentieth century, also lived on the thirteenth floor, in apartment 13H. I remember Dr. Du Bois, carrying a cane on his arm, barely acknowledging my presence with a nod of his shiny domed head when we were riding on the elevator together. He was deeply engrossed in his own thoughts. Dr. Du Bois was so different from the friendly Mrs. White, who reminded me of a Native American with her copper colored skin and straight black hair; and the gregarious Mrs. Braithwaite, who could have passed for

white. These ladies always asked me, "Betty, what did you learn in school today? What do you want to be when you grow up?" The elevator was the meeting place for tenants in this vertical community, and we had a long ride together from the twelfth floor to the lobby.

In 1953 lawyer and neighbor Thurgood Marshall was planning strategy and preparing to address the United States Supreme Court in the case of *Brown v. Board of Education* (Topeka, Kansas) which ultimately determined that segregation in the public schools was a violation of the Constitution of the United States. That summer I suffered a humiliating experience while swimming with other camp counselors, who were white, at a New York state park near Poughkeepsie on our day off. "You... get out of the water," a life guard yelled and pointed at me, as he frantically waved his hands in the air. Transfixed, I was motionless for several moments then I slowly waded to shore. Even though I knew that discrimination in public places was illegal, we all left the park. The experience was so painful for me at the age of seventeen that I buried the details in the recesses of my mind. I could hear the silence in the car ride back to camp. Thoughts ran through my mind. "This couldn't happen to me in the North. Segregation in the South was a way of life, but in New York State....?" My friends were determined to fight this violation of my rights through the New York State Commission Against Discrimination, chaired by Algernon D. Black, my high school teacher and a leader in the Ethical Culture Society. My mother wrote to me at camp, "You have a good case there. If you want me to, I will speak with Thurgood Marshall in 9E. I'm sure he can help." Although the lawyer was not a personal friend, my mother knew that she could count on Mr. Marshall because he was our neighbor in 409. I was elated when Mr. Marshall won *Brown* in 1954 and again in 1967 when he became the first Negro Justice to sit on the Supreme Court of the United States—where he served for twenty-five years. These national leaders in 409, people working for the cause of racial equality throughout the world, became my role models, although I did not know it at the time. Their accomplishments reinforced the idea that whatever I wanted to achieve was possible.