To see it in retrospect, to look backward across thirty years on the Fayette Streets of this country is to contemplate disaster as a seamless chronology, as the inevitable consequence of forces stronger and more profound than the cities themselves.

Cursed as we are with a permanent urban underclass, an unremitting and increasingly futile drug war, and Third World conditions in the hearts of our cities, the American experiment seems, at the millennium, to have found a limit.

The poor will always be with us, declared the biblical sages, and this divided nation seems to go out of its way to prove the point. As America lurched away from the rubble of great societies and new deals, no less a populist than Ronald Reagan wryly declared that we fought a war against poverty and poverty won. Many of us heard him and smiled knowingly at
what seemed to be unvarnished truth. For decades now, the ghettos have appeared to us as certain and fixed, their problems beyond the reach of programs or policies or good intentions.

Perhaps it was inevitable. Or perhaps there were a few moments early on, a lost opportunity or two in the generations before the inner city acquired its permanence. Perhaps there was another potential for the brownstones of the South Bronx and the brick rowhouses of North Philadelphia, an alternative path for the broken streets of East St. Louis and West Baltimore. Concede for a moment that we might be jaded by decades of failure, that our vision is skewed by knowledge of the outcome. It might serve to just once see the thing as William McCullough—Gary's father and DeAndre's grandfather—saw it, walking Fayette Street with a full stride and twenty-eight years of life, standing on the painted stone steps of his Vine Street home and thinking it good.

His castle was a two-story Formstone rowhouse like twenty others in the 1800 block. But this one in particular—the worldly possession of W.M. and his bride—was the sum of all their struggles. Wedged between Lexington and Fayette, the alley street was barely wide enough for automobiles, but it was clean back then, the rowhouses tucked into small lots on the south side of the alley, the facing rear yards of the Lexington Street houses lush with summer gardens.

Vine Street was in its glory, a quiet haven in a neighborhood still racially mixed, still predominantly white, in fact. Working-class and middle-class white families lived mostly along the main streets; their black, working-class neighbors lived mostly behind them on alley streets named Vine and Fairmount and Lemmon. That was a time when the corner markets were mostly Jewish, free of bulletproof Plexiglas and willing to sell to local families on credit, a time when St. Martin's parish, once the largest in Baltimore, was still a thriving bastion of Roman Catholicism in the center of the neighborhood. That was before the Harbor Tunnel and I-95 replaced the long journey up Monroe Street and across North Avenue on old U.S. 1, a route from which a generation of interstate travelers might look out their car windows at the fresh Formstone, painted brick, and clean-scrubbed marble steps of Franklin Square and see the very essence of Baltimore's working-class rightness. That was the time of unlocked doors and open windows and sleeping in Druid Hill Park on hot summer nights, a time when heroin was little more than a whisper and violence rarely went beyond the occasional domestic assault. By the calendar, that was 1955.

William McCullough had come to Baltimore fourteen years earlier, a stowaway on the bus from Salisbury, North Carolina. As a small boy, W.M. had picked cotton for pennies on the plantation of his birth, the Cathcart farm just east of Winnsboro, South Carolina. He was the great-grandson of slaves owned by the McCullough family, a West Irish clan who had
settled the land along the riverbank to the northeast of Winnsboro; he was the grandson and son of sharecroppers who could never quite make the land pay. The cotton fields were hard, tenant farming harder. W.M. could remember the hardest Depression years in Winnsboro, with his father struggling to squeeze money out of bad crop setties and his mother and younger brother stalking through the woods, looking for roots and nuts and anything else that might stave off hunger. When Fred McCullough managed to land a job with the Southern Railroad, it seemed to his older son that the very worst days were gone.

The family moved north to the rail hub at Salisbury, where at twelve, W.M. began shining shoes and working in the kitchen of the Trailways depot on Main Street. Week after week, he brought his pay back to the wood-frame bungalow at the north end of town, where it was pooled with what his father and brother managed to earn. When he was fourteen, he had the temerity to use a couple dollars from one week’s pay to purchase new overalls and a leather jacket. His father took a strap to him and, no doubt about it, Fred McCullough could hit hard when he was mad. It wasn’t the first beating and unlikely to be the last, so W.M. decided right then and there that he was gone. He said good-bye to his brother, crawled out a side window, and jumped down into the weeds. That night he slept inside a bathroom at the bus depot, and the next morning, he convinced a northbound driver to take him to Baltimore. He had an uncle up there making money. He would make money, too.

He had a strong back, enormous self-discipline, and an utter absence of formal education. But he was unashamed of his limitations and unafraid of hard work. He could read numbers, handle money, and work harder than most anyone he knew. He believed these things were enough.

He landed at the bus station in downtown Baltimore with $1.40 in his pocket, and the driver, doubtful of W.M.’s chances, told him that if things didn’t work out he should come back to the terminal the following night, when the driver would be back through and could return him south. But by then W.M. had a job working a grinding wheel at an iron foundry on South Charles Street. The plant produced wheels for railroad cars—the sheer weight of the things drove grown men to quit after less than a week—but W.M. lied himself up to eighteen years old to get hired. The company men had learned to trust in fresh black immigrants from the Carolinas and Virginia. Greenhorns just up from the cotton patch always work hard, the bosses believed, harder than the coloreds who had grown accustomed to city life. For his part, W.M. proved the rule; he was their John Henry, grinding and lifting and hauling deadweight for twelve years.

It was 1942 and William McCullough, at the age of fourteen, was a small but committed part of the largest ethnic migration in American history. It was larger than the flight of the starving Irish a century before,
larger still than the succeeding waves of Eastern European and Italian immigrants who later crowded the halls of Ellis Island and Castle Garden. The black exodus from the rural South in this century would utterly transform the American cities of the East and Midwest. In the Mississippi Valley, the northward migration brought thousands of southern blacks to Memphis, Kansas City, St. Louis, and ultimately, to the terminus cities of Chicago and Detroit. In the East, the same phenomenon brought waves of migrants to Baltimore and Washington, Philadelphia and New York.

There was nothing surprising about this. Mechanization was changing the agrarian economy of the South, with the sharecropping and tenant farming that characterized so much of black rural life increasingly marginalized. By the early 1940s, even the farming of cotton—the most labor-intensive of Southern crops—was being transformed as mechanical cotton pickers were perfected and marketed. Once the South had staked both its society and economy on black labor; by World War II, the same labor force was expendable.

To the north, the smoking cities of the American industrial belt offered an alternative. Even in the Depression years, the pages of the black community newspaper in the McCullough hometown of Winsboro were littered with notices of a generation drifting inexorably northward:

“We regret to report another departure for Baltimore . . .”

“Mr. Hill, a Winsboro native and lifelong resident of the county, will leave to join relatives in Philadelphia.”

“On Sunday last, a good-bye picnic was held for the Singletary family . . .”

“. . . the young gentleman will be departing our community next month with friends to pursue prospects in Washington . . .”

Baltimore siphoned from the rural black population of both Carolinas and the Virginia tidewater. Southern whites—those with any sense of the future anyway—began to see the migration as beneficial, a pressure valve on their demographic time bomb. Though increasingly superfluous in the wake of mechanized agriculture, the black population had become a majority in many rural counties, a growing threat to the world of Jim Crow that might one day require a reckoning. Now, through migration, much of that reckoning would come in the North.

The Baltimore to which W.M. fled was America’s most northern southern city, and it was here, as an adult, that he truly learned the ways of white folk. Every day, when he walked into a little luncheonette across from the foundry, the owner’s trained parrot would stretch its wings and squawk, “Nigger in the house, nigger in the house.” Of course, he couldn’t sit at the counter, but he could carry his lunch out, so he didn’t let it bother him. He couldn’t go into the downtown hotels, or restaurants, or into most shops save for the basements of the Howard Street department
stores, and he couldn't even think of using one of the changing rooms to try on clothes. But then again, he didn't have the money for downtown, so he didn't pay it any mind.

In the schools, theaters, ball yards, and swimming pools of Maryland's largest city, strict segregation had long been the rule. City politics, the police and fire departments, the patronage of civil service—all of it was lily white, just as strict housing patterns had limited the black belt to a handful of dense, crowded neighborhoods on the eastern and western edges of downtown. On the east side, Gay Street became the central boulevard for black Baltimoreans, and to the west, there was Pennsylvania Avenue—the Avenue as it came to be known, black Baltimore's Broadway, home to dozens of juke joints and the legendary Royal Theater. Beyond those core areas, in rowhouse neighborhoods like Franklin Square, black families were consigned to back alleys in a fashion that left them only half visible to neighboring whites. Little was heard from the colored folk in places like Vine Street and Lemmon Street alley, save for the occasional house-rent party or fish fry, or the righteous shout that went up from the backstreets whenever a radio announcer declared that Joe Louis had put another white man on his ass.

Until the great migration north, the Germans, Irish, and Lithuanians who made Franklin Square their home saw little possibility that anything would change. Until World War II, in fact, change on the city's west side came only gradually. Originally, the gentle slope to the immediate west of downtown had been farmland, the possession of a gentleman farmer who forfeited all when he went off to fight in a Confederate uniform. After the bloodletting at nearby Antietam in 1862 and Gettysburg the following year, the Union Army used the confiscated land for an encampment and field hospital. The ramshackle medical facility drew nuns and clergy and soon spawned a small Catholic parish that would, in time, grow into the gothic behemoth of St. Martin's, its stone bell tower ringed by gargoyles that, the locals now liked to say, were too damn scared to come down and take their chances on the street.

As the city stretched westward after the Civil War, the redbrick Federal-style rowhouses were filled by a proletarian class of Germans, with some Irish and Scots mixed in—an immigrant class that predated the war and found some contentment in looking down on later arrivals. The settlers were shopkeepers and small businessmen, factory workers and longshoremen, clerical workers and political ward heelers. Many of the westsiders worked at Baltimore & Ohio's huge roundhouse and rail yard off West Pratt Street, many others on the piers that lined the Upper Patapsco a mile or so to the east. H. L. Mencken, the sage writer of the city, had been born in the rowhouse at 1704 West Fayette, then proceeded to spend his writing years in a Hollins Street home on Union Square, just a few blocks to the southeast.
During the early years of the migration, the working-class and middle-class whites of Franklin Square had no great love for the blacks who began to crowd the west side alleys or the core of the black belt along Pennsylvania Avenue, but neither was there a great deal of overt racial conflict. Baltimore had settled into a practiced and—from the white viewpoint, at least—functional segregation. If more rural blacks chose to shake the Carolina clay from their boots and find Lemmon Alley, or Vine Street, or the battered rowhouse slum of the lower Avenue, it hardly required accommodation or even a serious reckoning from Baltimore's governing elite. The Mason-Dixon line was a good forty miles to the north; racial separation was the civic firmament.

It took World War II and the epic of industrial rearmament to destroy the illusion of equilibrium, if not Jim Crow itself. In Baltimore, as in every industrial city, the influx of migrant labor accelerated at astonishing rates as factories, steel mills, and shipyards began running two and then three shifts. Nor, by wartime, was the rural migration a singularly black phenomenon. From west of the Shenandoah came the Appalachian whites, weary of scrub farms and darkened coal mines in West and western Virginia, desperate in their pursuit of a factory wage in the nearest metropolis of the Eastern industrial belt. They settled into rental properties carved from the poorer housing stock in alleys and on side streets.

As much as or more than the Southern black migrants, the Appalachians battered communal sensibilities in Franklin Square and throughout the southwestern part of the city. Older German and Irish residents quickly came to regard the new arrivals as Huns and Visigoths; for some of the mountain folk, indoor plumbing was beyond aspiration, and trash removal consisted of tossing dinner scraps from the back kitchen window. Whereas white working-class discomfort with neighboring blacks was muted by the distance between boulevard and back alley, poor whites were unconstrained by racial geography. When a family of hard-living, hard-drinking ex-coal miners moved into a third-floor walk-up and began raising hell, the whole block knew it.

As the wartime boom continued, some of the poorer west side neighborhoods began to destabilize. Pigtown, a neighborhood surrounding the B & O roundhouse and terminus, was so named because of nearby slaughterhouses, but in time the name would be imbued with a cold sarcasm among older residents who watched the neighborhood sag under the weight of so many poor Appalachians. To the north and east, the colored enclave around Pennsylvania Avenue also began to sprawl, as the growing black population could no longer be easily contained in a handful of city blocks. By the end of the war, the lower end of the Avenue—"the Bottom" as it came to be known—was regarded as the worst and most crowded black slum on the west side.

It was to the Bottom that W.M. moved a few months after arriving in
Baltimore. He had found his uncle that first day off the bus and he had stayed with him for a time, but the man was a drinker. For weeks, the older man pressed his nephew for liquor money, but rather than give up some pay, W.M. moved out, getting a room of his own in the 700 block of Saratoga Street. He was fifteen.

He worked and he saved. When his father finally learned his whereabouts and came north to bring him home, W.M. stood firm. He wouldn’t go back; he was his own man now, surviving in a new world. The foundry was backbreaking work and there was precious little to come home to in the room on Saratoga Street, but in Baltimore, more things seemed possible than people ever dreamed about down in the country.

When he was sixteen and still grinding at the foundry, he met a thirteen-year-old girl, a quiet churchgoing thing named Roberta. The first and only woman in his life was a Baltimore native, living just off the Avenue with her family, who had come up from tidewater Virginia. Being underage, W.M. needed a guardian’s signature to approve a marriage, so his uncle did the honors. When some of the neighborhood people went so far as to get in touch with his father, asking him to stop such a youthful union, they got a sharp response.

“He’s a man,” Fred McCullough told them. “If he’s supporting himself, I can’t stand here and tell him what to do.”

They lived for some years with Miss Roberta’s family, with W.M. sharing his pay and all the time looking for something better. Beyond his wife and in-laws, he had few friends as a matter of choice. He didn’t drink and wouldn’t carouse and managed to stay aloof from the high life along Pennsylvania Avenue. He simply didn’t trust a good time, and more to the point, he didn’t trust anyone who did. He’d seen too many country boys waste themselves and their pay in the jukes and bars, or down at the legendary Selene’s, which would survive for more than a decade as the great temple of Avenue whoring and gambling. His young wife had religion, and W.M., though never enamored of preachers and collection plates, was more than willing to do his share as a family man.

After twelve years at the foundry he found a better-paying job at American Standard, where he would lift cast-iron bathtubs and toilets and carry them around the plant as if they were stage props. He was a legend at American Standard: He never shirked, never tried to look for an easy way. Not once did he call in sick; why lie around in bed when you could just as well work an illness out of you? He still couldn’t read, but after a few years at American Standard, he could see ways to modify and improve the manufacturing process. Plant managers had him walk around with a herd of efficiency experts and engineers who were redesigning the assembly line. Production quickly doubled, though W.M. never got a dime for his ideas.

He was at American Standard about a year when, in 1955, they moved
into the Vine Street house. Franklin Square was still majority white working-class; even on Vine Street, the McCulloughs were neighbors to a half-dozen white families. Black and white got along well enough—W.M. felt a camaraderie with all of his neighbors that seemed to him genuine. They worked hard; so did he. And when one family was in trouble, everyone else on the block was quick to pitch in. Newly integrated by the Supreme Court decisions, the schools around Franklin Square were still strong, still stable. The streets were clean, the corners clear. More often than not, when someone’s kid was misbehaving, the child stood a good chance of taking one slap on the behind from a concerned neighbor, then a second when he got home.

For W.M. and Miss Roberta, this was the best time of their lives. The family was growing as McCullough families always had—Fred McCullough had stopped at thirteen children; W.M. would beat that mark by two. Kathy had come first in 1948, then Jay four years later, then William Junior a year after that. Joanne and Judy followed them and then in 1957 came Gary, the sixth child and third son.

Not surprisingly, the McCullough children reflected the values of the neighborhood and home that raised them. All were willing to work as hard as was necessary, to take care of business, to live for more than just today. Kathy would travel the globe as a field engineer with Westinghouse; Jay would hold a planning position with the city government; Joanne would make her mark as a program analyst with Bethlehem Steel, Judy as a computer programmer. The son born just behind Gary, Daniel, would join the U.S. Army, rising to staff sergeant and serving overseas.

Until the early 1960s, life was very much as it was supposed to be on Vine Street. The children were growing, reaching for a better life than their mother and father had ever envisioned; the neighborhood seemed safe and stable. For the McCulloughs, it seemed the immigrant experience was playing out as it had for all those who came before them, for the Irish and the Germans, the Jews and the Lithuanians. They were not a wealthy family, nor would they ever be, but all things being equal, they had what they needed and their children and their children’s children would reap the just rewards of so much struggle.

But of course, things were not equal. For the cities, the black migration would prove to be the single greatest social and economic phenomenon of the century, yet it was an event that would never be addressed in any systematic way. In Baltimore as elsewhere in the mid- to late 1950s, the urban migration led to the construction of federally funded low-income housing, sited and then utilized along distinct racial lines. With the majority of the high-rise and low-rise developments built in the core of the black belt, that area grew more crowded, more oppressive.

Realtors seized the day, busting block after block. In the neighborhoods just north of Franklin Square, frightened whites fled at the first sign
of a black home owner; in the late fifties, stable communities such as Edmondson Village could go from white to black within a year.

Along Fayette Street, too, the whites ran—many heading west toward suburban Irvington and Catonsville, others south across Baltimore Street, which would remain a hard-and-fast racial boundary for another two decades. By the early 1960s, W.M. could count only a handful of white strays, older residents mostly. The Jewish families were still working the corner stores, but none lived above the shops anymore. They drove down from Park Heights in the morning, worked the counter, then drove back with the day's receipts.

Almost overnight, the sense of shared community that W.M. had discovered and prized in Franklin Square was dead and buried forever beneath a blizzard of real estate signs. He had been among the neighborhood's first black home buyers, the crest of the immigrant wave. What broke behind him was not only a deluge of black working-class families trying to buy their own homes, but the working poor, the sad fodder for carved-up rental units, many of which were rowhouses already battered by the earlier Appalachian migrants.

On the west side of Monroe Street, some of the white homeowners held for a time, selling off to individual black buyers at prices that accorded their tree-lined blocks the pride and stability that home ownership always brings. But from Monroe Street down the hill to Franklin Square itself, there was very little that the landlords and speculators didn't eventually claim. It only got worse when city planners rammed I-170 through West Baltimore, knocking down blocks of rowhomes just north of Franklin Square, forcing ever more poor refugees into the worst of the rental properties.

By the mid-1960s, the poor had come to Fayette Street and the problems of the poor became the problems of the neighborhood. Worst of all, the industrial and manufacturing economy that had originally propelled the migration began to disappear. Among the later migrants, particularly, unemployment was chronic as factories closed and the demand for unskilled labor collapsed. Nor were the schools what they had been; white refugees took the tax dollars with them, though until the end of the decade, an adequate public education could still be had at high schools like Frederick Douglass, Carver, and Mergenthaler.

In the McCullough family, the older children seemed for the most part immune. The neighborhood was changing, but they had all grown up on the values of their parents, on streets that were still generally benign. The corners weren't corners yet; the drug trade had not yet grown bold and vast. But the scent of the game was in the air and a few were learning where to go and who to find.

By 1966, Ricardo had been born, and Rodney, too. Kathy, now the oldest of nine, was already out of the house, attending college. Gary al-
most nine, was already showing the kind of utter earnestness that his father could recognize as a McCullough trait. That year, Gary got his first job as a stock boy at Nathan and Abe Lemler's pharmacy, grocery, and liquor store on Lexington Street, and the Lemlers imparted everything they knew about work and business to the child. Gary worked hard, stayed honest, and was, in turn, trusted by the family. He made twenty dollars a week.

To Gary, the Lemlers seemed to be good people—they extended credit and would fill prescriptions without charge if someone was sick and unable to pay—but they were regarded as outsiders by the locals, who saw them as purely mercantile. Gary felt his loyalty stretched to the limit when some of the older heads would roll through the store—snatching liquor bottles and carrying them off—and the Lemlers would ask Gary to chase after them. Once, he had followed Fat Curt’s brother, Dennis, who had lifted a bottle of rye whisky.

“Nigger,” Dennis asked, when Gary caught up to him, “who the fuck you think you is?”

It was a question he never had to answer; the riots after the 1968 assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. decided the matter. From Fremont Avenue to Edmondson Village on the west side, the Lemlers and nearly every other Jewish shop owner were burned out, eventually to be replaced by Korean merchants who would neither extend credit nor hire children from the neighborhood.

The riots accelerated the decline along Fayette Street. At night, a quiet but persistent heroin trade opened up at Fulton and Lexington, the corner where the Lemler store used to be.

At 1827 Vine Street, William Junior—known to all as June Bey—was first to stumble, losing himself by the early 1970s in a heroin addiction that would consume the rest of his adult life. His mother and father tried to wait him out, tried to revive their hopes each of the two dozen times June Bey took himself off the street for drug treatment. He’d been to Kentucky for the detox program there; he’d been down to Carolina to stay with family. But nothing took, and when the appliances around the house began to disappear, W.M. finally put him out.

It was the first heartbreak. Miss Roberta took solace in religion and her other children, praying all the while that June Bey might still see himself in a new light. W.M. did what he had always done; he swallowed hard and went back to work.

In the mid-1970s, American Standard closed their Baltimore plant, and the company provided W.M. with a twenty-year pension that amounted to exactly thirty-seven dollars a month—an absurd sum that he often thought of questioning, though his inability to read discouraged him from seeking a detailed explanation. For a time, W.M. drove a truck interstate for Sky King, then worked for a limo service, and then, in 1980, he
got a license from the public service commission and began driving for Royal Cab. Most weeks, he worked six days of double shift, rising early to catch the morning rush, then coming in for lunch and a nap, then back out until ten or eleven at night. He drove everywhere, worked every neighborhood, relying on his instincts to keep him alive in a line of work as lethal as any in Baltimore. After being robbed a half-dozen times, he started carrying a pistol under the driver's seat.

W.M. was never much on conversation; it was always Miss Roberta who provided the day-to-day childrearing, who would take hold of the minor problems and major disasters in their lives. But W.M. served as the moral example, as a standard for will and endurance against which his children took their measurement. Gary, more than most, stood in absolute awe, and his own double- and triple-shift life was a tribute to his father. He'd learned a lot about business from the Lemlers, and what he didn't know he set about learning in half a dozen jobs that took him through high school. He cooked crabs down at Seapride on Monroe Street, clerked at some of the shops on Baltimore Street, sold a bit of weed now and then, and still found time to run all kinds of errands for his mother and father.

He graduated with honors from Mergenthaler Vocational—"Mervo, where they teach you how to earn a living, but not how to live," Gary liked to say—then spent the half year at Ohio State before getting that telegram from a pregnant Fran Boyd. He came home—not only because it was the right thing to do, but because he was tired of school. College was all talk and theory; Gary wanted to be out there, working and earning and scheming.

His sister Joanne told him about an affirmative action program at Bethlehem Steel. For years, the company had steadfastly refused to hire blacks for skilled positions and was now playing catch-up. Gary took the test and scored well, getting an apprentice job and becoming one of the first black craftsmen at Sparrows Point, eventually rising to supervisor. He took a night job as a guard out at the Social Security building in suburban Woodlawn. Then he started buying cheap, vacant rowhouse properties in the neighborhood, rehabbing some as rental units and setting up Lightlaw, which he registered at City Hall as a minority contractor. He worked every day of the year—Christmas, Easter, New Year's, his own birthday—sometimes for sixteen hours a day. When the money began rolling in, when there was more under the mattress than he could spend, he began soaking up the financial publications, trying, on his own, to decode the Babel of stock and fund listings. He got a brokerage account with Charles Schwab, began trading, feeling his way through some ventures. At one point, his income from investments alone reached more than two thousand dollars a month.

Gary McCullough was a whirlwind, a man of dreams and plans. Before long, he was the talk of the neighborhood. For W.M., his son seemed
proof positive that whatever problems there were on Fayette Street, they weren't going to hold his family down. June Bey had fallen, but he could still be counted as the exception. Nothing out there made you take drugs, or hang on the corner, or laze around the house all day waiting on a welfare check. W.M. and Miss Roberta had proved the other way of living, the right way; now their children were proving it, too.

The oldest children—Kathy, Jay, and Joanne—were not so sanguine. Repeatedly, they urged their parents to move off Vine Street, to buy a house or take an apartment in the county. Since the 1970s, suburban flight had ceased to be a white prerogative in Baltimore; the black middle-class had been pushing westward since the late 1960s, a step or two ahead of the working poor that would follow them down Frederick Road to Irvington and Yale Heights, or out Edmondson and Liberty Heights Avenues to Edmondson Village and Forest Park. Now, western Baltimore County—Woodmoor, Woodlawn, parts of Randallstown and Arbutus—was home to the black taxpayer. Left behind were too many of the broken families, too many who had grown up without hope; too many migrants and sons of migrants who had come too late to the city, who had never caught hold of the union-scale wages that allowed one generation to climb out of poverty and carry the next on its back to the suburbs.

The irony was ripe: Segregation had leavened the ghettos by keeping black professionals and middle-class families active in the life of city neighborhoods; now they, too, were missing at the community meetings, at PTA conferences, at recreation centers, at block parties. By the late 1970s, many of black Baltimore's institutional treasures—Providence Hospital, Douglass High School, even the grand boulevard of Pennsylvania Avenue—were, to one degree or another, failing.

W.M. and Miss Roberta sensed this, of course, just as everyone else in the city sensed it. They had seen their older children move to suburban homes; now those same children were pleading for them to follow. But the mortgage was paid on Vine Street and they wouldn't get much if they sold out. There wasn't any savings to talk about, though the children offered to help pay for the move. Still, that wouldn't do; neither W.M. nor his wife could stand for that kind of charity. Besides, it felt like home. Miss Roberta had fed a family out of that small kitchen; W.M. had stepped down the same stone steps for every working morning going back twenty-five years. There were all of the usual ties to the neighborhood; Roberta McCullough never missed a church function at St. James on Monroe Street. And there were still others like them, too—good people who would stick it out with them if they stayed. Ella Thompson. And Bertha Montgomery, across the alley. And Paul Booth around the corner on Lexington.

They stayed, just as Gary stayed on Fayette Street when Fran convinced him not to buy that house out in Catonsville. But there was an inertia to their decision, an inability to see just how bad Franklin Square
had become, or how much worse it would get. Slowly, in ways that were perceptible only over years, the Fayette Street corners grew more and more treacherous. The New York Boys came. Then the cocaine vials, and, finally, the pipers and the ready rock.

Among the younger McCullough children, Darren, Sean, and Chris were all as hardworking and serious as their predecessors. But the corner caught up with Judy's husband about 1984, driving him out of a happy marriage and up onto the Monroe Street corners. It caught up to Ricardo, too, when his friends lured him out of the house to run with the pack, trying their hands as sneak thieves and stickup boys. It caught up to Kwame, the youngest son, so angry at everyone and everything that W.M. actually tried to talk to him, going out of character to make his boy see that a man had to make peace with himself and the world. But Kwame couldn't see it, couldn't feel it the way W.M. had. For a time, Darren got him a job at the shoe store on Baltimore Street, where Darren had made manager, but Kwame spent the rest of his time in the streets, working packages or sticking up younger dealers with Shamrock. The corner also caught up to Kenyetta, the youngest, who got involved with a boy who gave her a child and then took to shooting people before a state charge finally stuck and he rode the prison bus to Hagerstown. The baby, Shakima, toddled around Miss Roberta's kitchen every day while Kenyetta tried to finish school at Southwestern.

But the shocker was Gary. The third son, who had taken life by storm; the wide-eyed dreamer who had learned his father's lessons and taken them to a new level. When Gary began the fall into drugs in 1986, his parents were shaken to the core. Gary had made it in a way that W.M. understood; others among his children were equally successful, but their way had been paved by educational opportunities and career plans. All of them made W.M. proud, but Gary's victories resonated with his father because he had won them as W.M. had—by getting up early to chase a few dollars more.

There was no sense in it, nothing to W.M.'s eye to explain how his son could fall so far. Gary split with Fran for good in 1985 and four years after that, all of it—the craftsman's job at Beth Steel, the second job, the properties, the Mercedes-Benz, the bank accounts, the brokerage account—was gone. Gary had been hurt; W.M. knew that. He'd been hurt by Fran, by the women who followed Fran. Quite a few people in the neighborhood had taken advantage, too, stealing from Gary; his son was always a little too trusting that way. But nothing to W.M.'s way of thinking could take hold of someone with Gary's dreams and Gary's mind and transform that person into a drug addict.

In the end, it was Gary who let them know just how much worse it could get, who taught them to fear their neighborhood the way it ought to be feared, so that standing at the front door on a summer day, watching
the dealers work a ground stash, Miss Roberta could turn to her husband and say, very gently, that maybe the children were right. Maybe they should have left.

There was no more to it than that. No anger, no recrimination, no polemics against the police or the government or the white man. That wasn't the McCullough way. If W.M. blamed anyone, he blamed the men and women in the street, the sons and the daughters who had lost their way, who didn't understand life the way he did. If it were up to me, he'd sometimes tell people, you wouldn't need prisons and you wouldn't need jails either. If he had possession over Judgment Day, that gas chamber down on Eager Street wouldn't shut down until the corners were clear. He could say things like that and mean them, feeling the vengeance warming in his veins. And then he'd walk out to the cab for his afternoon tour and see Gary coming from the alley tester line, or June Bey nodding at the pay phone, or DeAndre, his grandson—and a bright boy, too—huddled at the mouth of Vine Street with the other touts and lookouts. At such moments, W.M.'s heart would break and all the anger would rush out.

He had lived the way a man was supposed to live. He had played by the rules, working all his life, working still to make ends meet, though he was now of an age when most men retire. He had never gone on welfare, or sought a handout, or complained about what did or didn't come his way. He had taken a good woman and kept his vows. He had brought fifteen children into the world, loved them, given them food and clothes and a home, and sent them to schools to learn things that he never had a chance to know. He had not been as clever as other men, perhaps, or as wise with his money and property. And he had never really understood the forces arrayed against him. But then, none of that can be claimed as part of our national premise, our enduring myth that says America is the land of opportunity, the last best hope for all races and religions, and that any man who stays true to himself and works hard here can and will succeed.

For the last half-century in the city of Baltimore, William McCullough has stayed true to himself and worked as hard as any man conceivably can. At age sixty-five, he has the woman with whom he shared a lifetime, Miss Roberta. He has many children and grandchildren, some of whom make him proud, some of whom don't. He collects a $37-a-month pension. Six days a week—some weeks, seven—he drives a cab.

And every night, he comes home to Vine Street.