

# Preface

I had no way to know it at the time (back in April of 1965), but the arc of my life was about to change as a result of a job interview with a lawyer named Abe Berkowitz, a name I knew only because of his letters to the editor of the local newspaper.

Though his letters had been published a few years earlier, during the period of American history we now call the Civil Rights Era, I had remembered this “A. Berkowitz” as the one person who stood out as exceptionally courageous during those troubled times, when a faceless Ku Klux Klan was busy operating behind the scenes in the political life of our city. Birmingham in the late fifties and early sixties was by all measures a tough town, and it took a tough man to be willing to offer his candid, contrarian views to the public through the local newspaper, placing his name at the conclusion of his letters

Frankly, after all these many years, I can’t remember how long I sat before Mr. Berkowitz’s desk in a stupor that April 1965—how long I sat before finally finding my tongue when he asked me what I now call “the question.” Nor do I recall exactly how I answered the question, but I did manage to tell him something of my background and my moral evolution (though I had no intention of doing so until he put me on the spot). One thing is certain, however, that job interview for a summer position with Mr. Berkowitz in 1965 (a job I didn’t get) marked the third time the newspaper would shape the course of my life.

The first time was as a teenager, when over a course of five years (1952 - 1957) my worldview would radically change as a result of my single-minded devotion to my daily newspaper delivery routes. You see, I didn’t simply deliver those papers; I would lock onto and consume every word of the headline stories, taking in all the existential horrors of those years: the War in Korea, the Cold War,

the fear of communism, and the looming threat of increasingly violent racial tensions across the South.

And the second time my life was changed by the newspaper was when I met Vernon and Helen Miller. Had it not been for my morning *Post-Herald* route I would never have met this delightful and intelligent couple from the Far North who had moved into my territory and quickly became my favorite customers (“territory” being a word I use to describe a location far broader than one limited to mere geographical boundaries. I also use it to suggest “the territory of the heart.”)

Newspapers . . . books . . . the written word. Through a shy and lonely adolescence, *these are the things I turned to* in marking my way forward, reaching for the boundaries while seeking my center.

Yes, the years of my youth and young manhood leading up to April 1965 had been a “long journey” for me, but it had all played out within a radius of five miles from where I then sat before Abe Berkowitz, and the essence of that single interview now resides comfortably in my memory, as if it had occurred only a short time ago, though many of the details have faded. Except for the truncated version I told Mr. Berkowitz that day so long ago, I don’t recall that I have ever recounted the story of my personal journey to anyone else. I’ve been too caught up since then in the “everydayness of life,” as Walker Percy put it in *The Moviegoer*—my family, my career—to reflect on the course of my own life.

It doesn’t seem possible that since I was first interviewed by Mr. Berkowitz almost a half-century has passed; but now, at seventy-four years of age, I have the time and perspective to tell the whole story as I best remember it. I think it’s a story worth telling, not for the sake of my own ego, for I did little in those years but receive the gifts and kindness of others. No, as much as anything, this effort to tell my story is a belated expression of gratitude to those remarkable individuals in my life who made a difference in a time

of troubles.

As I ruminated over how to present my story to you, the reader, I came to understand how impoverished a memory can become when untended for a lifetime. I wish I had kept a journal but never did, and, as I thought about my life's story, I found that much of it was too dim, too deeply buried to retrieve. I also found that a life in remembrance is not a linear thing like the railroad tracks close to my house that I could follow, as I often did as a child, walking the rails, step-by-careful-step, with arms outstretched for balance. No, a life remembered seems instead to be more like a series of events or high points loosely strung together like Christmas lights.

So, I've written my "story" as a series of unconnected "stories"—stories from my childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood—stories I recall of the people who made a difference in my life as I came of age in a difficult time in a tough and unforgiving city.

These stories are true in their structural elements. I've tried to place them in the proper chronological order. The dialogue is true to the spirit of the situation, but I cannot and do not claim accuracy to the letter of what was said. The truth is that my growth and maturity during my youth did not follow some sweeping arc in an altogether positive manner. I often resisted, pushed back, and, at times, regressed.

The names I've used for the customers on my newspaper routes (as well as a few others) are mostly fictitious, except for the Millers. After these many years, I simply cannot remember them all and a few I've changed for obvious reasons.

I've used the old-fashioned, at-the-time-polite terms "Negro" and "colored" to describe the African Americans who appear in these stories. I hope you will understand I have no intention to offend anyone by my choice of those terms. For integrity's sake, I'm merely using the vernacular of the time.

Unfortunately, however, I have been compelled by truth to use “that other word” on occasion, and must apologize for its presence. It struck me as dishonest to ignore the reality of the time when, among many citizens of Birmingham, such a hateful term was not taboo.

## 1 • The Question

*Abe Berkowitz’s Law Office The Empire Building Birmingham, Alabama, April 1965*

**S**tepping into the elevator of the Empire Building on the corner of First Avenue North and Twentieth Street in downtown Birmingham, I asked the operator, a middle-aged colored woman, to take me to the fourteenth floor, please. She closed the brass accordion gate, turned the crank, and we jerked into motion. As we ascended, I vacillated about whether to follow through with my plan or not, thinking *Am I really doing this? Walking in to see Mr. Berkowitz, an important man? Why would he want to see me?* My resolve was so weak I decided I would ask the operator to take me back down . . . but then was too embarrassed to do so.

When we reached the fourteenth floor, the elevator bounced uncertainly, and then she cranked the doors open. To my surprise and consternation, I was not in a vacant hallway where I could gather my courage, as I assumed I would be. Instead, I was looking directly into the eyes of a receptionist behind a long desk no more than ten feet in front of me. Retreat was now impossible.

I timidly stepped from the elevator into the anteroom.

“Yes, sir, may I help you?” the receptionist asked as the door clanged shut behind me.

She was a neat, composed lady of about sixty years of age, with white hair and a kindly, but suspicious, smile. I stammered, “I’m here to see Mr. Berkowitz.”

“Do you have an appointment?”

“No, ma’am, I’m here to see him about a job.” “But you didn’t call for an appointment?” “No, ma’am.” I studied the carpet in front of her desk, then looked to

her for help. “I’m a first-year law student at Cumberland Law School, and I need a summer job.”

“Yes, sir. And what is your name?”

“I’m sorry,” I floundered, “my name is Chervis Isom. Do you think Mr. Berkowitz will see me?”

“I don’t know,” she smiled, “but I’ll find out.”

She lifted the telephone and dialed a couple of numbers. “Mr. Berkowitz, a young law student is here to see you about a summer job. His name is Chervis Isom. He doesn’t have an appointment, but he would like to talk with you, if you have the time.”

Then she smiled and placed the phone on the cradle. “Mr. Berkowitz will be glad to see you. Just have a seat over there. He’ll be with you in a few minutes.” She motioned me to the seating area.

I was too fidgety to sit, but I did as she said, and studied the name of his firm posted in large brass letters on the wall behind her desk—

### **Berkowitz, Lefkovits, Vann, Patrick & Smith**

—I knew only the name “A. Berkowitz,” and was surprised he had so many partners.

Rehearsing in my mind the little speech I planned to give, I wondered if my words and delivery could possibly make a good impression. Doubt on one shoulder, regret on the other. Why had it not occurred to me to call for an appointment?

After a few minutes that seemed like an hour, Mr. Berkowitz came into the reception area. He put out his hand and warmly greeted me. "I'm Abe Berkowitz. I'm glad to see you. Come on back to my office," he said in a gravelly yet mellifluous voice that spoke of cigarettes and whiskey and a long, interesting life.

I followed him down the hall and into his office. He was stylishly dressed in an expensive, dark suit with white shirt and tie, his jacket buttoned over a moderate paunch. He was perhaps sixty and about five-feet-seven-inches tall. Though I'd never seen him before, I'd expected someone much taller because in my view he was a giant of a man.

I knew of him only from his many letters to the editor of the *Birmingham News* written over the past few years as the civil rights struggle in Birmingham came to a boil. These were desperate years in Birmingham. The Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education*, which ruled segregated public schools unconstitutional, had been issued in 1954, but the white public schools in Birmingham more than ten years later had not yet admitted colored students. George Wallace had publicly obstructed every effort to integrate the school systems, culminating in his stand at the schoolhouse door at the University of Alabama in June 1963. Eugene "Bull" Connor<sup>1</sup> was Birmingham's public safety commissioner, clashing with Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth (and later Dr. Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and his followers), taking every initiative to frustrate the hopes and dreams of colored people. Those events had occurred only a short time before I entered law school in the fall of 1964. It was now April 1965, about eighteen months after the fatal bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church on September 15, 1963.

By his public letters during those years, Abe Berkowitz had stood up to Bull Connor and the forces of evil. Now, here, right before me, was the man I wanted to work for.

He directed me to a chair before the largest desk I had ever seen. There were no papers on the surface except for a single file, closed and orderly. Near the file was a neat, wooden letter box with a lid, and on the front corner of the desk was a dark sandstone statue of a man in robes holding a broken sword above his head, which I took to represent some biblical prophet.

“Have a seat, young man, and tell me what I can do for you.”

“Yes, sir, thank you for seeing me. I’m sorry I didn’t call for an appointment.”

I hesitated, took a deep breath, and began. “I’m in my first year of law school at Cumberland, and I need a summer job as a law clerk. My grades for the first semester were good, almost all As, and I think my grades this semester will be good as well.

“I’m married. My wife, Martha, is a teacher. We have a baby boy, one year old—Hugo. Martha is helping me with expenses. I’m currently working part time at Sears in men’s clothing, but they won’t have much work for me this summer. Even though I have a partial scholarship, I need a full-time summer job to earn enough money to pay my tuition for the next school year.”

He then asked me about the law courses I had taken and the grade in each class. He asked me several other general questions about law school, my college background, and where I was from. We spoke for perhaps fifteen minutes. I was pleased that Mr. Berkowitz, a busy and important lawyer, had listened to me with interest and respect.

But then he said, “I’m really sorry, but we don’t have a place for you this summer. This is a small office. We have room for only

one law student, and we've already made a commitment to someone else."

The interview, it seemed, was over. Though disappointed, I thanked Mr. Berkowitz for his time and trouble. Having expected nothing, I was grateful to have been treated respectfully. I straightened myself in the chair, was about to stand—but Mr. Berkowitz continued to sit quietly at his desk, alert, focused, watching me carefully, so I remained on the edge of my chair.

A few moments of uncomfortable silence passed, and, with his dark, half-hooded eyes searching my own, I could tell he was on the verge of speaking.

"Tell me," he finally said, not unkindly, "why are you here?"

I hesitated. *What could he mean by the question?* He knew I had come to inquire about a summer job as a law clerk, and he had only a moment before told me he had hired someone else. *How could I answer a question that seemed to make absolutely no sense?*

My heart skipped a beat, my vision blurred. My mouth finally fell open to speak but nothing came out. I had come because I wanted to work for Abe Berkowitz and no one else. But I couldn't bring myself to say that. Nor could I answer his question in a simple sentence or two. He didn't have time to hear (and I would have been too embarrassed to tell him) my life's story—how I made the long, arduous journey from the place where I had started—as an anti-Semite and a racist—to the chair in which I now sat before the desk of a Jewish civil rights hero.

After a moment or two, he seemed to appreciate my discomfort. "I understand you're here looking for a summer job," he said, firmly, and then he repeated the critical question.

"I want to know why you are *here*."