

RECLAMATION

SALLY HEMINGS,
THOMAS JEFFERSON,
and a DESCENDANT'S
SEARCH *for* HER
FAMILY'S LASTING
LEGACY

GAYLE JESSUP WHITE



AMISTAD

— 35 —

“Ties to Thomas Jefferson Unravel Family Mystery” (January 26, 2014) and “DNA Does Not Lie and Neither Did Aunt Peachy” (April 4, 2014) appeared in *The Root*. Permission granted by publisher.

All photographs courtesy of the author unless otherwise noted.

RECLAMATION. Copyright © 2021 by Gayle Jessup White. All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, address HarperCollins Publishers, 195 Broadway, New York, NY 10007. HarperCollins books may be purchased for educational, business, or sales promotional use. For information, please email the Special Markets Department at SPMales@harpercollins.com.

FIRST EDITION

Designed by Nancy Singer

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data has been applied for.

ISBN 978-0-06-302865-4

21 22 23 24 25 LSC 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*To Mom, Dad, Janice,
and Aunt Peachie*

The Christian parents have long ago gone
to their Heavenly home,
leaving the religiously trained descendants happy
in Earthly homes of their own.

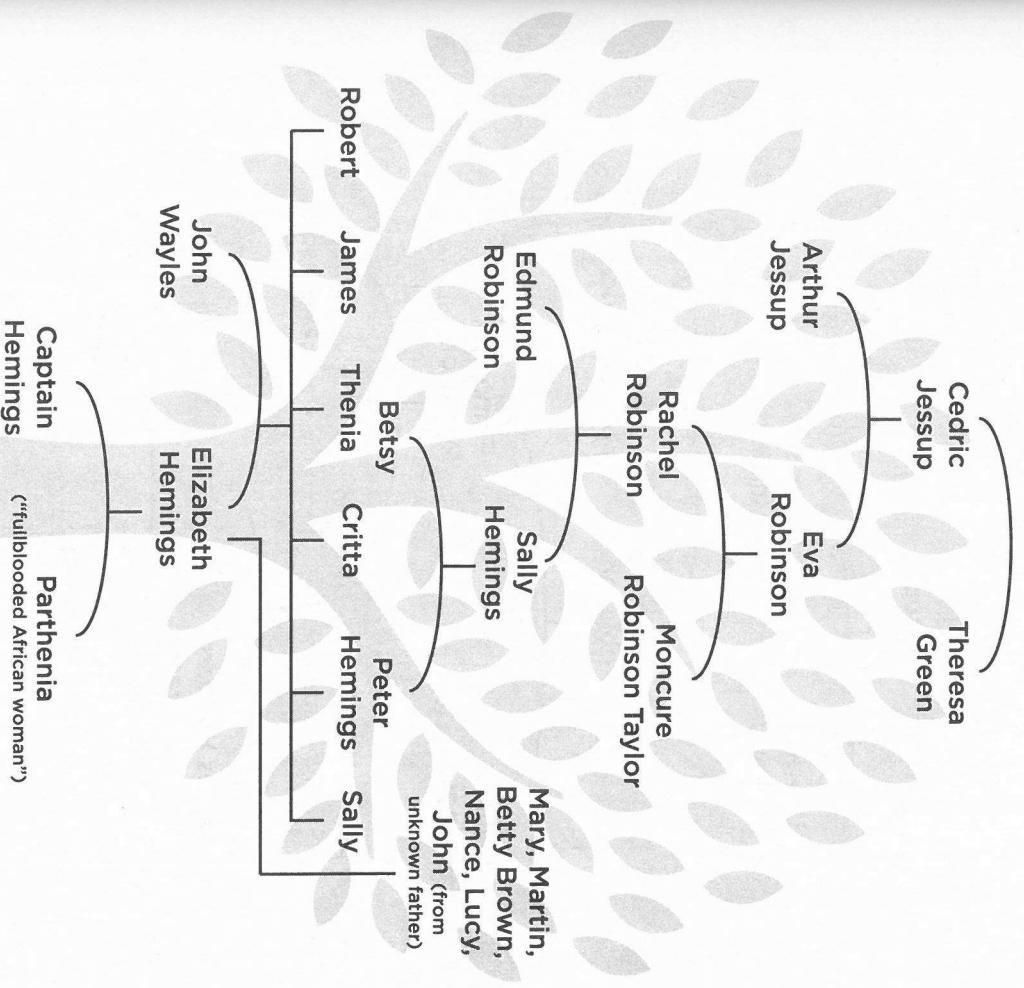
*A. C. Nelson
1992*

CONTENTS

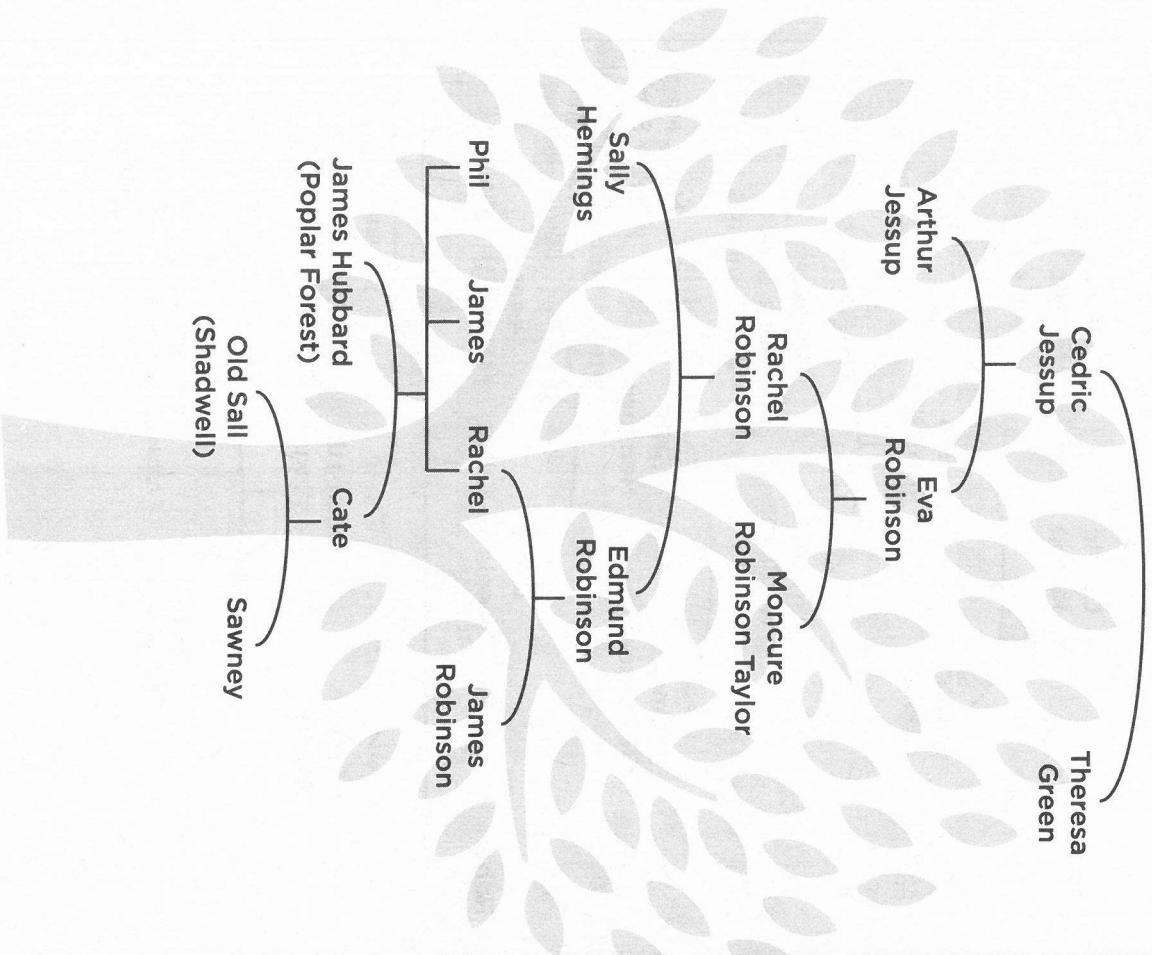
Family Tree Illustrations	xi
Prologue	xv
PART ONE	
1: Eastland Gardens	3
2: Deanwood	13
3: Las Vegas: A Turning Point	21
4: Washington, DC: The Jefferson Question	26
5: Howard University	50
6: Roots	59
7: Chicago	66
8: Georgia	72
9: Wedding of the Year	80
10: A Prayer and a Poem	87
11: An Ode to the Jessups	92
12: Marriage	97
13: Death Always Comes in Threes	105
PART TWO	
14: Richmond	119
15: The Dome Room	124

16: Eva Taylor—Mysterious as Ever	129
17: Paternity Test	138
18: RIP, Chocolate City	144
19: "A Slave Girl Named Sally"	148
20: The Plot Thickens	157
21: The Randolphs	164
22: Cousins	169
23: DNA Does Not Lie	180
24: What's in a Name?	187
25: The Robinsons	194
 PART THREE	
26: Whitewashing History	205
27: A Coffee Shop Chat	209
28: My Ancestors' Footsteps	214
29: Velma & Ruth	223
30: Charlottesville	227
31: Sally Hemings Robinson	233
32: Homecoming	243
Epilogue	255
Acknowledgments	259

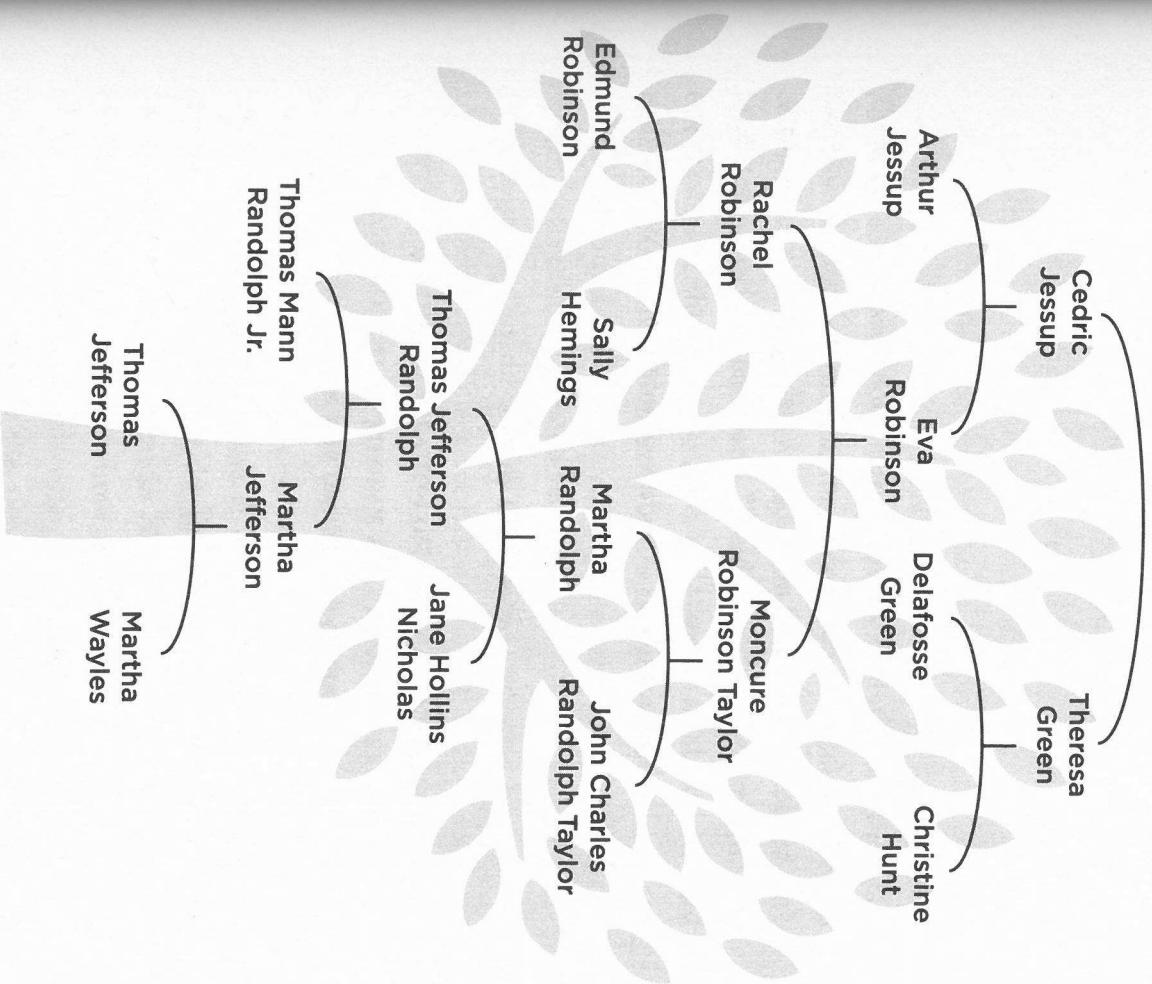
THE HEMINGS LINE



THE HUBBARD LINE



THE JESSUP LINE



PROLOGUE

There are at least two known burial grounds at Monticello, the estate that was Thomas Jefferson's home. One is near the main house and surrounded by an imposing wrought iron fence. It is populated with tombstones marked "Jefferson," "Randolph," "Taylor," and the surnames of other kin. Jefferson's grave is marked by an obelisk adorned with an inscription of how he wished to be remembered:

HERE WAS BURIED
THOMAS JEFFERSON

AUTHOR OF THE DECLARATION OF AMERICAN INDEPENDENCE
OF THE STATUTE OF VIRGINIA FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM
& FATHER OF THE UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA

The graveyard is still in use. It is the only property on the former plantation not owned by the Thomas Jefferson Foundation, the nonprofit that owns and manages Monticello, but by a group called the Monticello Association, whose members are direct descendants of Thomas Jefferson and his wife, Martha Wayles Skelton. From time to time, members of the association gather for a burial or a wreath-laying ceremony to commemorate their legendary ancestor. Only Jefferson, his white family, and their descendants and spouses

are buried there. Only they are welcome. That was made painfully clear a few years after a white descendant invited dozens of his Black cousins to an association reunion. They were guests because they too can trace their origins to the third president.

They were descendants of a liaison between Jefferson and a woman he enslaved, Sally Hemings. In 1999, as the cousins, white and Black, mingled cordially at Monticello and at lunches and cocktail parties, the media followed. The news reports that followed made reconciliation seem possible, even imminent. But three years later when the same white cousin who had orchestrated the reunion sought membership for his Black kin, they were shut out. According to witnesses in 2002 when a vote was taken at the association's annual meeting, a near-riot erupted as white members, fueled by two centuries of denial about who fathered Hemings's children, furiously objected. The episode made the national press. "There was my family being racist on the front page of the *New York Times*," lamented a white descendant twenty years later.

A short walk down the mountain along a gravel path and near the entrance of Monticello's Visitor Center is another gravesite. Bordered by a parking lot, a few trees, and wooden rail fencing is a burial ground for those who were enslaved on Jefferson's plantation. Here are no obelisks or tombstones, only large rocks marking where people—my people—are buried. No one knows the names of those interred there, only that they were enslaved at Monticello.

The burial ground, like much of African American history, was almost lost forever.

What saved it was an oral tradition, which for centuries was how America's Blacks remembered their past. The story goes that when old-timers who had spent their lives living in the shadows of Jefferson's mountain heard that the graveyard was to become a parking lot, they spoke up. They knew bodies were buried there

because their mothers and fathers, who had heard it from their mothers and fathers, said it was so.

We can only speculate about who might be buried there. Perhaps Ursula Granger, whose reputation as a great cook induced Jefferson to purchase her at his wife's request in 1773. It was Ursula's breast milk that saved the life of the couple's sickly six-month-old daughter, named Martha after her mother, when her ailing mother was unable to nurse her. Were it not for Ursula I would not be here, because the child she saved would become my great-grandmother four times over. Or skilled worker Cate Hubbard, my four-times-great-grandmother. Two of her sons were among Monticello's few "runaways." Or Elizabeth Hemings, who came to Monticello with her ten children when Jefferson's father-in-law, John Wayles, died in 1773. Elizabeth's remains might rest near her cabin or the burial ground, but we will never know. Though they were human beings, they were treated like property, passed down to Wayles's daughter Martha as part of her inheritance, just like money, land, and livestock. However, the Hemings clan was linked to Martha by an unacknowledged kinship. Wayles was the father of six of Elizabeth Hemings's children, including the infant girl Sally. They were Martha's half-siblings, and in a different world they would have been considered Jefferson's in-laws.

Hundreds of Black people spent their entire lives held captive on a five-thousand-acre plot of mountainous land laboring, as Jefferson put it, for his "happiness" while trying to carve out some happiness of their own.

Aside from an inconspicuous panel describing whose remains may be inside the fencing of the enslaved graveyard, there is little to indicate that this space is hallowed ground. There have been reports that some visitors, assuming the site is a dog park, have allowed their pets to urinate on the trees next to the graves, oblivious to the history they were desecrating. Yet I am not oblivious to it. I can't be.

The Jeffersons, Randolphs, and Taylors at the top of the mountain are as much my kin as the Hemingses and Hubbards whose remains might be at the bottom. But my heart rests with the souls in the graveyard of the enslaved. It is at their final resting place that I find solace and inspiration. It is their spirit that spurs me forward, even when I am feeling weary and battle-scarred after another day spent fighting for equal recognition of Black history that for many is merely an afterthought.

The gravel path from the enslaved at the bottom of the mountain to the enslavers at the top is less than a mile long. But the chasm this distance symbolizes is as deep and dark as the ship hulls that carried human cargo across the Atlantic during the Middle Passage. It began more than four hundred years ago when the first captured Africans were brought to the British colony of Jamestown, Virginia, in 1619. A complex entanglement between Blacks and whites also emerged, one that has left virtually all African Americans with European DNA.

There are few places where those woven relationships are as well chronicled as those that existed at Monticello. At least four generations of Hemingses had close relations with Jefferson family members, from his father-in-law to his great-great-grandson, the man who became my great-grandfather.

I did not grow up knowing this history. In fact, like many Americans I was not taught that the principal author of the Declaration of Independence—the man who declared that all men are created equal—owned human beings. However, from the moment I learned the family lore that we are Jefferson descendants, I was intrigued by the mystery of our family's origins and set out to try to uncover the truth.

Sometimes intentional, sometimes not, I have made choices throughout my life that brought me to where I am today—to Monticello, the epicenter of the American paradox—and of my family's story. While some might have been repelled by a place where their

ancestors were enslaved, I was drawn to it. From my very first visit to the plantation, I knew I wanted to work there. I was in my early forties—no youngster—when I finally took the time for the two-hour drive from my home in Washington, DC, to Charlottesville, Virginia. It was the spring in 2004, and until then I had always been too busy with school, then college and career, followed by marriage and family. But once I carved from my schedule two days to spend in Charlottesville, I was captivated by Monticello's hypnotic beauty. The sun-kissed flower gardens and the winding paths beneath a cloudless blue canopy made it seem like I was strolling through a Monet or Renoir painting.

During that first visit, as I explored the home that Jefferson designed, I waited in vain for the guide to talk about the enslaved people who built the house. Their stories, I believed, reflected my own family's and those of millions of people descended from the enslaved. That day in 2004 the questions sparked when I was an inquisitive child began to grow into something more compelling, something deeper, what activists might describe as a cause, and what the spiritual might define as a calling. That calling was the voice of my ancestors demanding to be heard and imploring me to be their spokesperson. That calling was my ancestors guiding me to confirm the family lore and reclaim our place in American history. That calling was my destiny.

What started for me as a sheltered thirteen-year-old's curiosity about my family's unproven ties to Thomas Jefferson became a passionate cause, and finally an unlikely late-life career.

My fifty-year-long journey began in a cloistered community in Washington, DC, called Eastland Gardens. The neighborhood was distinct, for it was one of few in the nation designed, built, and owned by Blacks.

PART ONE

1

EASTLAND GARDENS

July 26, 1957

I grew up "Negro rich." It meant that my family was well-off for Black people. I attended parochial school for which my parents paid hefty tuition, went to an exclusive summer camp where I learned to swim, and spent vacations in California. My family spent leisure time at Highland Beach, Maryland, the Black resort founded by Frederick Douglass's grandson and where my mom's family once owned a house and a hotel. When I was sixteen, my dad gave me a brand-new car, a red Mustang. He paid cash for it.

Although our family was comfortable, thanks to Dad's employment in what folks in Washington, DC, call "a good government job," we were not part of the city's Black elite. That status was reserved for the families of doctors, dentists, and perhaps a few successful lawyers and businessmen. We were always right on the periphery, invited to the parties but not members of the club. But we were a close family, proud to be Jessups, and for us that was special enough.

Born in Washington, DC, on July 26, 1957, the same year the city became majority Black, I was the youngest of Cedric and Theresa Jessup's five children, my mother's so-called menopause baby. She was almost forty years old when she had me. Dad was forty-three.

Their oldest, Janice, was nineteen, Cedric Jr. was seventeen, Pat was fourteen, and Bruce was nine. The family, especially my sisters, doted on me. They dressed me in pastel-tinted crinoline-lined dresses and tied ribbons in my fuzzy sandy brown hair. Mom made sure I had color-coordinated patent leather shoes, lace-trimmed socks, and white gloves. Properly attired, I accompanied my big sisters downtown for tea at Woodward & Lothrop, one of Washington's high-end department stores and a place where just a few years earlier, people who looked like us would not have been welcome.

The nation's capital and its suburbs were segregated until the Supreme Court ruled in 1954 that racial segregation violated the Constitution. While I never knew of "whites-only" facilities, my parents and older siblings were all too aware of the distinction. Even as an adult, many decades later my brother Bruce still pined over being locked out of Glen Echo, an amusement park in Maryland only a few miles from our house in Northeast Washington that ran seductive commercials on TV featuring a massive roller coaster and an Olympic-size pool accompanied by a catchy jingle:

*Glen Echo Amusement Park,
a place to have fun,
boy it's a date!*

The youngsters splashing in the pool or laughing on the carousel were all white. Black people like my brother were not invited. For Bruce, the snub has never stopped stinging.

As the youngest of the Jessup children and a privileged member of what some people derisively called the "bougie" Black middle class, I was oblivious to my brother's discomfort or to anyone else's. My parents knew all about segregation and how humiliating it could be, but they did their best to protect their children. They were like

many other Black parents of their generation. So protected was I that my earliest memories were feelings of confidence and security. Almost six decades later, I still remember an afternoon standing on our sunlit back porch and feeling like the luckiest little girl in the best family, the best city, and the best country in the whole world.

And why not? My family treated me like a princess. Sometimes Mom placed on my head the rhinestone-studded tiara she wore to her fancy parties. At my first ballet performance, I was the only little girl whose pink tutu included a crown.

Like my parents and older siblings, I was always perfectly turned out. When Washington's once-segregated doors finally opened, my family walked into department stores, boutiques, restaurants—and even Glen Echo—as if they owned the place. I, "Little Gayle," was right there with them, never knowing that we had been anything but welcomed.

Because I was born into a family of adults and older teens, I always felt protected and spoiled. My sisters brought me gifts, little things like plastic dolls, Bazooka bubble gum, and tiny pet turtles. "Where's my 'kaprize'?" I chirped, unable to pronounce "surprise," when Janice and Pat returned home from work or school. I treated their gifts like treasures, hiding them from Bruce, who took perverse pleasure in destroying what I loved. He was jealous that I had stolen his "youngest-in-the-family" status. Still, I adored him as only a younger sister who looks up to an older brother can.

Race was never discussed in our house, at least not within my hearing. I occasionally heard someone say "Negro," "Colored," or "white," but those words held no significance to me, as they came without context. No one, for example, explained to six-year-old me that the 1963 March on Washington was about "jobs and freedom" for Black people. In fact, no one explained to me that I was Black. At 1120 Forty-Second Street Northeast, in the heart of Eastland

Gardens, we were simply American. Like most American households of the era, my father was king.

Daddy was very much like "Jim," the patriarch of my favorite childhood TV show *Father Knows Best*. Played by Robert Young, the show's main character seemed so much like my own dad, right down to the suits, hats, ties, and sweaters. It never registered that the characters didn't look like me or my family. In fact, what I saw was *my* family.

That's how things were in the 1960s. Dads like mine went to work as doctors, lawyers, engineers, postal clerks, school principals, educators, and government employees. The moms stayed home, prepared meals, kept house, and reared the children. If they were really lucky, they had a housekeeper. Much of the time, we were really lucky.

Of course, there was a big difference between our family and the ones I saw on TV, and it wasn't our race. It was our religion. We were Catholic. That's what mattered most in our household, Catholicism, character, and tradition. "John Kennedy is Catholic," I'd hear my parents boast about the first Catholic president. One of the few times I saw my mother cry was when Lee Harvey Oswald assassinated President Kennedy right before Thanksgiving in 1963. I cried too because she was crying. I adored my mother. Aside from the little girl who lived next door, she was my best friend.

Our family was so devout that we not only attended Mass every Sunday but prayed together every evening after dinner. One of my most vivid memories is of Mom bringing me into the living room where Dad and my siblings were already assembled. The room was stuffed—floor-length gold drapes; a baby grand piano, which we all learned to play with various skill; a rose-colored sectional sofa; a cocktail table; end tables; and accent chairs. I was only three years old, and by this time, my siblings were adult size. They looked like giants—the kindly type—to me.

I tip-toed into the room, squeezing between my two sisters, Janice and Par, and tried to make out what was going on. My father stood looking solemn in front of the brick fireplace. On the mantel facing him was a foot-tall ceramic statue of Jesus looking down at us with sad, forgiving eyes.

There was a mirror on one wall and family photos on the piano, but Jesus's figure dominated the space. Amidst my mother's meticulously decorated room, it seemed out of place, even to me. The statue of Jesus, dark hair touching his shoulders, displayed bloody holes in his hands. One hand was held up as if in absolution, while the other pulled back a red, ceramic robe to expose a bleeding heart. As a little girl, I should have been frightened by the goriness of the thing, but I wasn't. I had seen the statue so many times that Jesus and his bleeding heart seemed normal to me.

Everyone was quiet as Dad said, "Please bow your heads. Let us pray." Following his instructions and everyone's example, I did as I was told. However, those were the only words I understood. What followed was unintelligible to me. Dad somberly spoke first, followed by the family's response that sounded like a chorus of bumble bees. It wasn't long before I lost interest and was on the floor playing with the feet of my all-in-one pajamas and nodding off into sleep. The evening ended with Dad carrying me upstairs to bed and Mom kissing me goodnight.

It was not until first or second grade when I was a student at St. Francis de Sales Elementary School that I got a clearer picture of what all that praying was about. Religion was part of the curriculum, as was reading, math, art, and music. It was a respectable education that laid the foundation for future success. Even now, I occasionally play in my mind a tune I learned in elementary school, "There's a Hole in the Bucket": "There's a hole in the bucket, dear Liza... Well, fix it dear Henry... With what shall I fix it, dear Liza?... With an

ax, dear Henry . . ." And so on. It was an early lesson in problem solving and logical thinking. We also learned "Kumbaya"; however, Sister James Lucille didn't explain to our class of mostly Black students the song's African American origins. We probably wouldn't have understood if she had, as my classmates were as oblivious to race as I.

The nuns were from the Order of St. Joseph and were armored in full habit: black, ankle-length skirts, stiff white bibs, snug head coverings, and veils that students assumed hid the sisters' bald heads, as not a single strand of hair was visible. To me, they looked like the nun in one of the books Mom read to me, *Madeline*, about a little French girl at a Catholic boarding school in Paris.

I liked my teachers, even when they tried to explain incomprehensible things, like transubstantiation (wafers and wine turning into the body and blood of Christ) or transfiguration (Jesus ascending into heaven). I trusted the sisters and believed what they told us, even what sounded magical and superstitious.

St. Francis was in Woodridge, a neighborhood about a fifteen-minute drive from our house in Eastland Gardens. Mom chose the school because she had taken a job teaching kindergarten at a nearby daycare where she would briefly work with a woman whom she had long admired from one of Washington's elite Black families.

The family thought he resembled a 1930s child star named Dickie Moore, thus the nickname he carried the rest of his life.

By all accounts, he was an adorable child. However, early on there were troubling signs. Dickie was not reaching the milestones that parents look forward to—not rolling over or cooing or responding to familiar voices. My parents, young and hopeful, sought help.

It was the early 1940s, and the doctor who assessed his case was not nearly as polite as medical professionals would have been had Dickie been born and diagnosed decades later. "Cognitively challenged" is what my parents would have been told in the twenty-first century, but in the mid-twentieth, the diagnosis was "mentally retarded," a social stigma in those days.

My grief-stricken parents took their baby home and tried to raise him with Jan, who was not quite two years old. But it was too much.

sippi" sitting at our yellow Formica kitchen table long before Sister James taught us how to read "see Spot run" in *Fun with Dick and Jane*. I wasn't a showoff in class, but I liked being smart.

By first grade, the long-practiced ritual of the family praying together had ended because the house was emptying. Jan had graduated from college, was teaching elementary school, and had her own apartment. Pat, ever the free spirit, had bolted to Los Angeles and gotten married. And last, Bruce was about to be shipped off to St. Emma Military Academy, a boarding school for Black boys in Powhatan, Virginia, almost a two-hour drive from DC. The campus had a history. It was built on a plantation called Belmead where 150 people had been enslaved.

My other brother, Cedric Jr., Dickie we called him, did not live with us, and had not since he was a child. He was sent away long before I was born. Pictures of him show a cute little boy with large eyes, a turned-up nose, and a head full of big curls. His hair clippings that Mom saved in a small manila envelope were gingerbread brown. The family thought he resembled a 1930s child star named Dickie Moore, thus the nickname he carried the rest of his life.

Remember, read silently to yourself, not out loud with your lips."

My mother was a very good teacher. I learned to spell "Missis-

As Dickie grew older and became mobile, he would run away from Mom or scream or throw and break things. Eventually, he became a threat to himself, to Jan, and to the family's new baby, Patricia.

My parents decided that their only choice, the only one that would help him and save their other children, was to make Dickie a ward of the state. When he was eight years old he was sent to live at a place called the District Training School for the Mentally Retarded, a sprawling developmental center in Laurel, Maryland, about thirty miles from their home. In the 1960s, the name was changed to Forest Haven. Dickie was cared for at a facility at the complex called Children's Center.

Mom and Dad never talked about what it felt like to have their child institutionalized and raised by strangers. But years later, my mother's older sister described to me what it was like the day Dickie was "sent away." It was a weekday, so Janice was at school. Mom's family—her mother, a brother, and her three sisters—were at the house. Everyone was crying. Dad, usually unemotional, broke down as well. My aunt said Mom was inconsolable. It was as if someone had died.

In some ways, the family never recovered. According to Jan, in the early years our house was an entertainment hub. Dad's friends would come over to shoot pool, Mom would host parties, kids would play ball in the backyard. All that changed after Dickie's departure. The house, Jan said, went from glee to gloom.

However, by the 1960s when I was growing up, aside from the solemnity of those evening prayers, the household seemed like a cheery place—as I said, like the family-friendly sitcom *Father Knows Best*.

That's when big, gas-guzzling cars and leisurely Sunday drives were wholesome. For our middle-class family, it was another activity that made us typically American, like visiting the Washington Monument

or eating TV dinners or watching *Bonanza*. "We're going for a ride after church," Mom announced most Sundays, as if it were a fresh idea.

Often the three of us, my parents and I, would jump in the family's silver Pontiac Catalina with the black vinyl top and make the thirty-minute drive to Children's Center in Laurel that housed Dickie. It was no coincidence that my mother's two unmarried sisters also lived in Laurel. One of them had taken a job as an administrator at Children's Center. She was always on hand to make sure my brother was well cared for.

My aunts lived together with their two Chihuahuas, Geronimo and Pocahontas, in an unpretentious one-level house with screen doors that slammed closed with a loud thud. They were always unlocked, and neighbors would drop by unannounced. The informality reminded me of being at the beach. My parents would leave me with my aunts while they visited my brother. "We're going to Children's Center to see Dickie," Mom would say. I was uninverted. As always, my parents were trying to shield me from what they thought would be a stressful experience, and I didn't question their judgment.

I can remember only one visit with Dickie during a Sunday outing when I was around ten years old. We were in the car for a short ride, just long enough to create a memory. I sat beside Dad, who was driving, while Mom was in the backseat with my brother. Mom had a loaf of Wonder Bread, which she used as a tool to connect with her son. As she broke off pieces of the spongy, white bread, he kept asking for more. "Bread," he said over and over. Dickie knew what he wanted and was able to communicate it, although in the most rudimentary way. Mom looked joyful as she watched him chew, her face never betraying disappointment or hurt. Later that day, I heard her tell Dad that Dickie could take apart a toy clock and put it back together. She was hopeful, always hopeful.

Dad, ever stoic, had little to say about my brother that day or

on any other. However, years later when I was in my thirties with a son of my own, he opened up. I was visiting one afternoon when I found him in bed fully dressed and staring at the ceiling. Dickie was now living in a group home, and Dad had just come from a consultation with his caregivers. "It's very depressing, you know. He's my namesake," he told me. My father was more sensitive than he liked to reveal.

That was one of the few times we talked about the family's second born. He was treated like a secret. In spite of the stigma then associated with intellectual disabilities, I don't think my parents were ashamed of him, but rather they preferred to bury the pain. Whatever the case, I would learn that Dickie was not the only family secret.

Indeed, covering up painful or embarrassing matters was almost as much a family tradition as saying the rosary every evening had been. It began with the circumstances of my parent's marriage.

February 1938

Cedric Jessup and Theresa Green were teenage sweethearts. They grew up in the same neighborhood of Deanwood. Remote and isolated on the far outskirts in Northeast Washington, it was a place unto its own where Blacks of all economic classes blended into a close-knit community. Homes designed by notable Black architects—including J. Alonzo Plater, my mother's brother-in-law and the architect of our house on Forty-Second Street—dotted a landscape of farmland, family grocers, and local shops. There was even a movie theater. It was also home to famous people like R&B singer Marvin Gaye and civil rights activist and educator Nannie Helen Burroughs, as well as a cadre of Black middle-class and working-class homeowners.

Yet in spite of Deanwood's small-town feel, Theresa and Cedric did not meet until she was sixteen and he was nineteen. They were in a church play, *Romeo and Juliet*, where they both had bit parts. She was pretty, vivacious, and smart. Everyone called her "Billye," which seemed to suit her. Enrolled at Dunbar, Washington's legendary Black college-prep high school, she planned to be a teacher. Being a Dunbar student meant something special. One of the nation's first high schools for academically inclined Black youth, Dunbar was well

2

DEANWOOD

known around the country for educating the city's best and brightest students and sending them off to elite colleges and universities, including the Ivy League. Among its many celebrated alumni were Negro History Week founder Carter G. Woodson, US Senator Edward Brooke, and blood bank innovator Dr. Charles Drew. Noted suffragist Mary Church Terrell taught there. It was the same school Billye's mother, Christine Hunt, attended when it was called M Street High School, and the same one from which her oldest daughter would one day graduate.

When Theresa met Cedric, he was already a Dunbar graduate and a sophomore at Howard University, where he played football and took pre-med classes. He was going to be a doctor. His ambitions matched well with her dreams for the future and with her socially connected family. Billye's father, Delafosse Green, had been a celebrated chef for two US presidents. No one knew who taught him his culinary skills, but it could have been his father, Shelton Green. Shelton was enslaved in Virginia, and his military records indicate that he was a Civil War cook and, after that, a coachman at the French Embassy in Washington, DC. That was where he heard the name "Delafosse," whose French roots translate as "from a ditch." Whatever its meaning, Shelton apparently thought it exalted when he named his youngest son.

He was often mentioned in not only the Negro press but in white-owned papers as well, including the *Washington Star*. At first, he was merely a supporting cast member, as in a 1915 Wilmington, Delaware, newspaper article about the dietary preferences of Wilson and his wife-to-be. He reportedly prepared chicken consomme, fried chicken à la Maryland (Southern style), sweet breads on toast, and charlotte russe. Getting the name wrong, the writer quoted Delafosse: "Adolphus Green, negro cook on the presidential specials for years extended himself to serve his new mistress. 'Ah suddenly will serve some luncheon today,' he confided."

Since the reporter got the name wrong, he probably misrepresented his manner of speaking as well, imposing an obnoxious stereotype on the high school-educated, Washington, DC-born cook. I hate to imagine him bowing and scraping to his "new mistress." But if he did, he would have been like millions of other Black men and women forced to condescend, appease, and appeal to the prejudices of white people in order to curry their favor. For Blacks, their very

found decent jobs working for the federal government. Even after Reconstruction ended and during the Jim Crow years, when systemic racism was institutionalized, some Black people could find a modicum of success in DC working for the federal government. Most jobs, however, were limited to skilled labor.

Delafosse, who was born in Washington in 1882, was among the lucky few to find gainful employment. He started out as a cook for the famous Pullman Company and ultimately made his way onto the government's payroll. He was on President William Howard Taft's domestic staff but found a slice of fame working for President Woodrow Wilson, who took office in 1913. Wilson was a fervent racist who screened *The Birth of a Nation* at the White House. But my grandfather must have had a gift for getting along with anyone. He was probably also a culinary genius.

He was often mentioned in not only the Negro press but in white-owned papers as well, including the *Washington Star*. At first, he was merely a supporting cast member, as in a 1915 Wilmington, Delaware, newspaper article about the dietary preferences of Wilson and his wife-to-be. He reportedly prepared chicken consomme, fried chicken à la Maryland (Southern style), sweet breads on toast, and charlotte russe. Getting the name wrong, the writer quoted Delafosse: "Adolphus Green, negro cook on the presidential specials for years extended himself to serve his new mistress. 'Ah suddenly will serve some luncheon today,' he confided."

Since the reporter got the name wrong, he probably misrepresented his manner of speaking as well, imposing an obnoxious stereotype on the high school-educated, Washington, DC-born cook. I hate to imagine him bowing and scraping to his "new mistress." But if he did, he would have been like millions of other Black men and women forced to condescend, appease, and appeal to the prejudices of white people in order to curry their favor. For Blacks, their very

survival depended upon subservient behavior. It wasn't slavery, but it was not equality either.

A few years later in 1919, Delafosse reached the height of his celebrity when he was featured in a story in the *Washington Times*. The headline read "The King of Cooks." The story was a fairly detailed account, describing how he looked ("a stoutish neat, bustling colored man"), what he earned ("a modest sum of \$110 a month"), and how he got his name ("his father was a coachman to the ambassador" of France). It also described his approach to cooking:

"Food should be cooked and served plainly," said Green. "There should be few mixtures and few sauces. The manner of cooking followed by the early huntsman was the right method. Such food retains its flavor and is good for the stomach. Dr. [Cary] Grayson [Wilson's personal aide and confidante] and I realized that we were associates as guardians of the President's health. I always feel that the health of those for whom I cook is in my hands. It is a responsibility, and I try to live up to it."

"That does not sound like the same man who "suddenly will serve some luncheon."

Not only did Delafosse cook for two presidents but also for royalty and world leaders, wealthy industrialists and businessmen, congressmen and cabinet members. One of those officials, Treasury Secretary William Gibbs McAdoo, who also happened to be Wilson's son-in-law, apparently considered raising funds for one of Delafosse's business proposals, a one-thousand-seat "moving picture theatre for colored people." A letter survives to Delafosse from McAdoo outlining how he might lend his support. His one caveat was "that all this work must be done quietly." Evidence abounds that Delafosse was not a man who kept his connections and business dealings private. Perhaps that's why

the theater never happened. But he did open a restaurant and catering business when he left government employment.

A wealthy Californian, McAdoo ran for president in 1924 with the support of the Ku Klux Klan. I can scarcely imagine the mental hoops Delafosse, like so many Black people maneuvering through a white supremacist society, must have jumped through as he bargained with a bigot like McAdoo. It must have been like shaking hands with Jefferson Davis. But that was the price many Black folk had to pay to provide for their families. Today we call it code switching. Perhaps the stress of constantly guarding his dignity contributed to Delafosse's death at the age of only forty-one, leaving his wife and six surviving children destitute.

As for the Greens, their diminished circumstances didn't stop them from striving. Four attended college while another was a gifted pianist and composer who, according to family lore, played with Duke Ellington's band. The family's matriarch, Christine, always wore pearls.

Sticking with her plan, Billye graduated from Dunbar High School and enrolled in Miner Teachers College, a segregated normal school that later became part of the University of the District of Columbia. But above all, she wanted to be a doctor's wife. Like the rest of her family, she was ambitious and determined to push her way into Washington's Black social elite.

Cedric's family was not as accomplished, but just as hard-working. His father Arthur Jessup operated the massive machines that printed money at the US Bureau of Engraving, a good job for a Black man in the early twentieth century. Good enough to afford him a mortgage, a luxurious Packard automobile, and the latest contraption, a radio. Good enough to send his youngest boy to college to study medicine.

Billye and Cedric were an attractive couple. He was handsome, tall, broad-shouldered, and athletic. His skin was the color of buttermilk—a

complexion that many Black people had been conditioned to believe superior to brown skin. A saying that persists to this day illustrates the colorism that began on plantations and became part of Black social hierarchy: "If you're white, you're all right, if you're yellow, you're mellow, if you're brown, stick around, if you're black, get back."

There was no indication that Cedric felt his skin color made him better than anyone else. Billye probably recognized that his light skin and his plans to become a doctor would give her the entrée to the Black society to which she aspired. One can only speculate, because colorism was not a topic she ever discussed.

Billye had an oval-shaped face with high cheekbones, big brown eyes, and a smooth, walnut-brown complexion. Years later when Cedric reminisced about their romance, he described how beguiling she was. Laughing out loud—a rarity for him—he recounted one of their first dates. It was at a neighborhood ice cream parlor. Seated across from Cedric at a small table, Billye took the straw from her shake and put it into his so they could sip from the same frosted glass. Watching her "bat her big brown eyes," he was completely undone. She was a "pistol," even then, he frequently said years later.

While batting her big browns, Billye was probably imagining her life as a doctor's wife—the fine house, the social clubs, the fancy clothes. She no doubt saw herself at the top of the social heap, the queen of Deanwood, or better than that—the prestigious LeDroit Park where her family had lived before Delafosse's death. The envy of all her friends. But it was not to be.

An unplanned pregnancy, which the young couple kept to themselves and their immediate family, derailed her grand ambitions and their expectations. In those days, anything but a quick marriage was out of the question. Billye and Cedric took their vows on February 6, 1938, at a small civil service. She wore a white business suit. He wore a dark one. There are no pictures of the event. It

was not clear if any were taken or if at some point, in a fit of rage, she destroyed them.

To support his family, Cedric quit college, gave up on medical school, and found what was then a good job especially for a Black man, delivering mail for the US Postal Service. The Post Office was a haven for smart Black men during that time period, including ones with college educations, for there were few opportunities available anywhere else.

Even though the job was stable and relatively well-paying, Billye was deeply disappointed. She had dreamed of being married to a doctor, not a mailman. But in the beginning of their marriage, she suppressed her resentment, especially when after just one year the young couple saved enough for a house of their own. They bought a lot in Eastland Gardens not far from their Deanwood roots and built a three-bedroom brick home with white shutters, a screened front porch, and a big backyard. The house was one of the first architectural achievements by Billye's brother-in-law, Alonzo.

Janice was one year old when the young family moved into their new home, and Billye was once again expecting a baby. Always very fashionable, even during pregnancy, the soon-to-be mother of two made her own clothes. She made her new home just as pretty, designing and sewing her own furniture slipcovers and curtains. She also canned fruits and vegetables, baked cakes and pies, and made the best smothered fried chicken her husband ever had.

Cedric dutifully provided for his growing family, never missing a day's work, sometimes picking up part-time jobs for extra cash. He also coached a neighborhood softball team. "Everyone looked up to Uncle Cedric," a nephew he coached said years later. "He was a neighborhood hero. I was so proud to be his nephew."

Billye had a son, Cedric Jr., on November 19, 1940, and another girl, Patricia, on July 26, 1943. As the family continued to grow, so

did the pressure on Cedric. Not only did he need more money to support his family, but he needed to satisfy Billye's aspirations. She was not going to settle for being a postman's wife. That was never going to be good enough for her. So she pushed him to move up, helping him prepare for tests that would be a first step toward better government opportunities.

He had his own ambitions as well. He became one of the first Blacks to provide customer service inside a Washington, DC, post office and to be a supervisor. In the late 1950s and 1960s, as the federal government became less segregated, he kept moving up, shedding the uniform and becoming a suit-wearing, white-collar professional. After twenty years with the Post Office, he became a manager and human resources specialist with the power to hire and fire. "When I speak," he would tell his staff, "it is as if the Postmaster General were speaking."

By the 1960s after their youngest was born, Cedric had the position and some of the status his wife had craved her entire life. They hosted parties, bought expensive cars—often convertibles to please her—and always American ones, in keeping with the period when few people bought imported cars. They dined out, played golf, and traveled, mostly to LA to see their daughter Pat.

But that success came too late for Billye. No matter how high Cedric climbed, she remained unsatisfied and disenchanted. She never stopped blaming him for depriving her of the life she had dreamed of as the wife of a doctor. Eventually, her disenchantment turned into bitterness. There was nothing more important in the status-conscious Black community of Washington, DC, than being a physician—or a physician's wife. No matter what Cedric's accomplishments, financial stability, or professional respect, it was never going to be good enough for Billye. He would never be a doctor, which left her in a state of perpetual disappointment.

3

LAS VEGAS: A TURNING POINT

1967–1970

As a child, I was blissfully unaware of my mother's grievances or of any fractures in my parents' marriage. If they were unhappy, they kept it to themselves. Dad was there with his broad shoulders to lean on and Mom, a consummate baker, with cake-battered spoons for me to lick. My biggest concerns were school, friendships, and having fun.

One of the most impressive days of my young life happened when I was ten. It was the summer of 1967 and my best friend and I were on a ferry headed to Marshall Hall, an amusement park on the Maryland side of the Potomac River. Sheltered from the outside world, we did not know what was happening beyond our cloistered community. We had no idea that earlier that summer, there were riots in cities across the country from Newark to Detroit to Milwaukee that left eighty-three people dead and hundreds injured. We did not know about the smoldering cities or about the racial inequality that ignited the unrest. Nor did we know that Marshall Hall was until recently for whites only. All we knew or cared about that warm,

summer day in 1967 was the good time we were about to have at the region's premier amusement park.

BUT WE NEVER GOT TO MARSHALL HALL THAT DAY. NATURE CALLED, and my friend just could not wait until after we disembarked for a bathroom. By the time we made it to the gangway, the boat was pulling away. With tears rolling down my cheeks, I watched the famed Mad Mouse roller coaster fade into the distance.

Never mind, Mom said, we'll take the ferry to Mount Vernon instead. George Washington's home was almost directly across the river from Marshall Hall, and while visiting the first president's estate was not my idea of fun, I accepted my fate.

But once we crossed Mount Vernon's threshold, I was enthralled. I studied as much as a ten-year-old could the dining room where the first president took his meals and the bedroom where he slept and was fascinated by the eighteenth-century china and silverware, the colonial clothing, and the decorative art. The day inaugurated my fascination with presidential history.

That was three years before I learned I was related to Thomas Jefferson, three years before I learned about my parents' troubled marriage, three years before I learned that my skin color made me different from other Americans. Three years before it all came crashing down at once.

• • •

When I was nine, I started spending summers in Los Angeles with my sister Pat and her husband. She and I were born on the same date, July 26, and even though we were fourteen years apart, we were pals. A gifted artist who wanted to be a nurse but ended up as an art education professor at California State University—Los Angeles, Pat was light-hearted and fun. She was also amazingly good-looking—tall, about five feet nine, with closely cropped curls that reminded

me of Mom's black lambswool jacket. She had a curvy figure that made hugs feel like squeezing a soft pillow. Her home sparkled with creativity: mobiles, masks, paintings, and all sorts of random shiny objects. Every wall was covered with her art or someone else's. We spent hours making jewelry, ceramic dishes (I still have two), and paper flowers. There were trips to the beach where I swam in the Pacific and was buried in sand, as well as the LA County Museum, Grauman's Chinese Theatre, Watts Towers, and the La Brea Tar Pits. Of course we went to Disneyland, where for the second time in my life I was treated to my all-time favorite ride, "It's a Small World." The first time was at the 1964 New York World's Fair. The third time would come thirty years later with my four-year-old son at Disney World in Orlando. Indeed, summers with Pat were always a treat, but the year I turned thirteen was going to be exceptional because we were going to meet Mom and Dad in Las Vegas.

I was excited about the five-hour drive that would take us through the Mojave Desert. Along the way, Pat and her husband talked endlessly about Las Vegas's restaurants, casinos, and shows. The Ike & Tina Revue was their favorite. That sounded great for the grown-ups, but all I cared about was swimming in the hotel pool.

In the early 1970s, there was not much for a kid to do in Las Vegas. This was years before theme parks and zoos made the desert town family-friendly. Back then, Las Vegas was principally an adult playground. But that did not matter to me. I had all I needed just a few feet away from our hotel room. Almost, anyway. Not many children my age were around, and while I was comfortable playing alone, I wanted a companion. My wish was answered the second day of our vacation when I spotted a girl on the other side of the pool. She seemed friendly, if a little lonely like me, so I bounced through the warm water to introduce myself. It seemed to me we had a lot in common. We appeared about the same age and were dressed in the

same swim gear: colorful one-piece suits, white rubber swim caps, and blue goggles. Within minutes, we were friends, giggling until our sides ached and playing in the pool until our finger and toe tips looked like bleached prunes.

But even with that much fun, I probably would have forgotten the afternoon had it not been for what happened next. We were doing underwater somersaults when the lifeguard made everyone get out for the pool's chlorine treatment. My new friend and I begrudgingly complied, agreeing to meet as soon as the guard gave the signal that the pool was ready. The girl climbed out on one side of the pool and I on the other, wrapping ourselves in towels and taking our places beside our moms in their plastic lounge chairs. What seemed like an eternity was likely only fifteen minutes, so as soon as the guard gave the "all clear," I wasted no time jumping back into the crisp, clear water. I waded toward the center, eagerly waiting for my new friend to join me, and feeling a bit bewildered when she did not. I looked at her still sitting with the towel wrapped around her thin body. Come on, I exuberantly gestured, the water's warm. It feels great! She did not move.

Undeterred, I kept trying, twirling in circles to show how much she was missing. To my dismay, I watched her stiffen even more. Come on, I mouthed, with ever-diminishing enthusiasm, having noticed her swim cap was off, revealing her dark, straight hair.

She finally moved, slowly and subtly shaking her head—back and forth, side to side. Her gaze moved shyly toward her mother, sitting rigidly in her plastic chair, a magazine or book in her hand. But the woman's eyes were on me, cold as a shark's. Stunned, I saw something I had never seen before: hate. I shivered in the warm water, as I slowly grasped what was happening. The woman's cruel eyes and the little girl's mortified expression said it all: *You're different. Stay away.*

What I had overlooked when the girl became my playmate was her race. She was white, but I barely noticed because it didn't matter to me. Race had only recently become a part of my consciousness, but not in a political or social way. I knew I was Black, but I didn't feel that made me different, just different looking. Until that day in the Las Vegas pool.

I don't think race mattered to the girl either. But it did to her mother. I turned my back to the woman's piercing eyes and resumed bouncing about the pool but without a friend. Like insults I would endure in the future, I pretended that nothing was wrong. That day, a coping mechanism I would employ throughout my life took root.

I did not tell anyone what happened until almost fifty years later. But I will never forget how the woman made me feel—alone, abandoned, and a little sad. Until Las Vegas, I thought race indicated color, not opportunity and privilege. In fact, for many years, I thought Dad and Jan, with their light complexions, were white. Race was not a topic we discussed with family, friends, or teachers. At home, school, and church, we pledged our allegiance to the same God and country.

4

**WASHINGTON, DC:
THE JEFFERSON QUESTION**

1970-1972

For many years, family elders, especially my parents, effectively sheltered me from the caprice and humiliation of race and discrimination. It helped that we lived in Washington, DC, a majority Black city steeped in middle-class comforts and conformity. But they could not protect me forever.

Of course, I knew about Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Mom insisted that I watch his last speech, "I've Been to the Mountaintop," delivered April 3, 1968, the day before he was assassinated. And I could not have missed the riots in Washington and in urban centers across the country that followed his death. Crowds looted businesses on the main thoroughfares of the DC Black community and burned hundreds of buildings to the ground in an outpouring of rage and grief. More than a dozen people were killed. The military was called in to quell the violence, and machine guns were mounted at the White House and the Capitol. But it didn't affect me very much. I always felt safe.

Appearing unalarmed, Mom reported that tanks were rolling down Rhode Island Avenue past my school, St. Francis de Sales. She

chuckled when confiding that Dad had a sign in his car that announced "Soul Brother," protecting it and him from rioters. He often complained that Mom didn't take life seriously enough, and during the 1968 riots it certainly seemed that way.

I found her laissez-faire posture reassuring, which might have been her intent. At that point, she was still mother-henning. As a result, rather than absorb the chaos unfolding around Washington and cities across the country, I retreated to my bedroom with a book, my stuffed animals, and my recently installed private-line, pink "princess" phone. Adopting Mom's disposition, I ignored the violence and the racial strife at the heart of it.

But two years later in that Las Vegas pool, I encountered for the first time what racism felt like, and I did not like it. That was the first shock to my otherwise stable world. But worse was to come.

Back home a few weeks later, another intrusion punctured what had been a tightly spun cocoon. I know it was a Saturday morning because I didn't have school and was sleeping late, or at least trying to. I was a light sleeper—still am—but the noise I heard that morning would have awakened a drunk. Mom was shouting, and so was Dad. They were saying horrible things, even attacking each other's families. Stunned, I left my bedroom, climbed down the center-hall staircase, and turned left toward the dining room to face my parents.

Dad was sitting at the head of the French provincial table Mom had proudly purchased with the money she earned taking care of working mothers' children. He was wearing large, square-framed reading glasses fashionable in the 1970s and often required by people in their mid-fifties. In front of him was *The Washington Post*, which he read daily from front to back, and a cup of coffee. Mom was sitting catty-corner to him, her pretty face already made up but lined with the fury she felt. They both seemed surprised to see me, as if

they had forgotten they had one last child living in the house who still needed parental assurance.

Uninvited, I plopped down into one of the dining room chairs, whose brocade-patterned cushions Mom had upholstered herself.

Their argument was so heated that they could not unplug, even with me sitting there. I watched, dismayed; picked up my cat, a black-and-white tuxedo named Cleo; and placed her on my lap. I stroked her and prayed for courage. If the cat stayed in place, and generally she did not, it would be a sign from God that I should intervene in my parent's war. I was still a good Catholic girl then. I believed it was up to me to save them and to save our family. Miraculously, Cleo sat placidly, purring with each stroke. I had my sign. With tears streaming down my cheeks, I pleaded with my parents to end their fighting, if not for their sake, then for mine. My words were like a prayer, sweet, sincere, scared.

I looked at Mom, watching for an indication that I'd made a connection and expecting her to shed a few tears of her own, even though she rarely cried. Instead, I saw her large eyes narrow, as she turned to my dad and said, "Do you see what you've done, Cedric? You've upset Gayle." Discouraged, I looked at Dad, wondering whether I had influenced him, even a small bit. I did not expect what happened next. To my horror, I watched as Dad lowered his head into his hands and wept.

It didn't take long for my father to compose himself. He apologized, assuring me that everything would be all right, and their fight ended. I was relieved to see the self-possessed, autocratic visage Dad ordinarily displayed at home and in public return. I was also deeply disturbed by what I'd witnessed. I felt scared and insecure. Yet I recognized that something transformative was happening.

My Father Knows Best Dad, who in our family was almost as omniscient as God, was human after all. The moment he let his emo-

tions go changed the way I saw him, and for the better. His sensitive display for my feelings would make it easier for conversations we would have in the future—ones where we would both reveal our vulnerabilities.

But that would come later. At the moment, witnessing my parents unravel, I felt exposed, as another layer of my innocence was stripped away. And my season of revelations was not over. There was another shock on the heels of Las Vegas and my parents' fight—this time from my oldest sister, Janice.

I had not seen her for three years. Janice was back in the States after having moved halfway around the world with her husband, Wallace Terry, a correspondent for *TIME* magazine. She and their three small children lived in Singapore while he covered the Vietnam War as the magazine's deputy bureau chief in Saigon. After marrying Wally, Jan gave up her teaching career for what she anticipated would be an exciting adventure as a foreign correspondent's wife. She was not wrong. More than once, she traveled to the war zone to be with her husband. Wally's reporting became a 1967 *TIME* magazine cover story, "The Negro in Vietnam," and eventually a book, *Blood: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Black Veterans*.

Even though Jan was my sister, we were not very close. She had been a college sophomore when I was born, married with a family of her own when I was six years old, and off to Asia when I was ten. By the time she returned to the States, I was a blossoming thirteen-year-old and very curious about the sister I barely knew.

When she visited our tidy brick colonial in the fall of 1970, I was enthralled and at the same time intimidated by her. She was like no one I had ever seen, aside from in the pages of a fashion magazine. Tall, slender, and very glamorous, to me, she looked like a model. Her smooth complexion was light, like vanilla custard and her straightened hair was almost black. Her sophisticated good looks

were a contrast to my own. Just shy of five feet, six inches tall and tannish, I was still a somewhat awkward teenager. In spite of the fashion magazines that cluttered my bedroom, I had not yet developed a "look." Not so for my sister. She accented her large, brown eyes with heavy eye makeup and her full mouth with red lipstick. The dress she wore that day was a skinny, burgundy knit that hit her mid-thigh, a radically different look from the ladies-who-lunch ensembles complete with pearls, matching shoes, gloves, and handbags that my mother preferred.

Having lost my childhood shyness and most of my baby fat, I was an outgoing if bookish kid with a group of neighborhood and school friends whose families shared the same values and goals: hard work, education, family, and God. I thought that my trips to places like California, Nevada, Mexico, and New York had given me some insight into the adult world, but nothing in my youthful experience prepared me for someone like Jan. She seemed so cosmopolitan. I had no idea what to say or how to act in her presence, so I just hovered around her and the rest of the family, watching and listening.

As Jan sat on the sofa in the living room, her long legs crossed at the knee, she regaled my parents with stories about the past three years. She had been to places all over the world I had learned about in geography class—France, India, Lebanon, Thailand. It was impossible to keep up. She spoke quickly and with an accent that matched her sophisticated appearance, her vowels stretched, so that *a* sounded like *ah*. France, for example, became *Brownn*. Brown University, her husband's alma mater, became *Brownn*. As the conversation sprawled, I eventually retreated to the kitchen for a snack.

Peering into the well-stocked refrigerator packed with processed American cheese, sliced deli meats, eggs, leftovers, and lots of salad dressing (I don't know why, but we always had so much salad dressing

ing), I listened with a little less interest than I had when the conversation had begun. Janice had been talking for hours.

I had just found a cold can of grape soda, the less expensive generic brand my dad bought when he did the grocery shopping, when once again, she had my attention. She and Wally were the guests of honor (and the only Blacks) at the American ambassador's home in Saigon. When the dinner table conversation turned to family lineage, the other diners (all white) began claiming illustrious roots, "like royalty," I heard my sister say. "So I told them, well, I'm descended from Thomas Jefferson."

I stood in silent disbelief, drawn back into the conversation, and strained to hear what might follow. Mom had left the room, probably to entertain Jan's children, leaving my sister and Dad sitting alone on the sofa. I listened closely, hoping for an explanation and feeling as if I had just overheard something forbidden. "How dare they?" she demanded with a rhetorical sweep. "That is not what America is supposed to be about. We don't have royalty here. So, I told them." As I peeped into the living room watching Jan and Dad, his expression was unchanged as my sister seamlessly moved to the next topic. I, however, was flummoxed. I thought, *What in the world is Janice talking about? Related to Thomas Jefferson? No way!* That was not the kind of thing families hide. Or was it? I was too timid, too nervous around her to ask what she meant. Whatever questions I had would have to wait. Meanwhile, I thought, in spite of the improbability, wouldn't it be exciting to be descended from my favorite president?

I had been captivated by American history ever since that visit to Mount Vernon when I was ten years old. Of the founders, the one I admired the most was Jefferson because he had written the Declaration of Independence. Even as a young girl, I understood the document's weight on American history. Of course, July Fourth picnics and fireworks helped to reinforce my appreciation. We usually spent

the holiday with neighbors who had an annual cookout. I loved the handheld sparklers almost as much as I loved America. And I really did love America! I thought it was the greatest country in the world. Since first grade, we had said the Pledge of Alliance to start our school day. I proudly recited the words “one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all,” and *believed them*. I thought the lyrics of “The Star-Spangled Banner” were poetry: “O say does that star-spangled banner yet wave o’er the land of the free and the home of the brave?” My idea of a good time was visiting the Smithsonian Museum of American History. I trusted that my country represented liberty and justice for all. Nothing I experienced in my young life had shown me otherwise. Even the incident in Las Vegas had not changed my mind. That, I told myself, was an anomaly.

Ignorant of Jefferson’s status as one of Virginia’s wealthiest slave-owners, I placed the third president on a pedestal, a superhuman of almost mythical stature. I thought being descended from him was tantamount to being related to Zeus.

However, no matter how intriguing, Jan’s claim seemed unlikely. As a naive thirteen-year-old, I could not imagine under what circumstances my hero would have Black descendants. Besides, one thing that became demonstrably clear during my sister’s visit was that she had a flair for the dramatic. I considered the possibility that she had made up the entire story.

Still, I could not ignore the physical evidence right in front of me—my dad. Like Jefferson, he was six feet, two inches tall. His face was freckled, his nose long and pointy. Before he started going grey and then bald, his hair had been reddish, the color of a rusty bucket.

I thought about the images I saw of Jefferson in my textbooks, an aristocratic-looking man with auburn hair. Yep, in my adoring, girlish eyes, that was what my dad looked like, too. With my head spinning, I needed to get answers. I decided to go to the person I trusted

most, the person I believed could separate fact from fiction, the person who always told me the truth—my father.

Like many fathers and daughters, Dad and I shared a special bond. I was his baby girl, and although my dad could be reserved, and even aloof, we were close. And after the argument I saw between him and Mom when he had let his emotions show, we grew even closer.

It was also a relationship born out of necessity. Mom was drifting away from us. She was often gone from home, working as a substitute teacher, shopping, or volunteering on political campaigns. She stopped cooking regularly, serving up TV dinners with shriveled “fried chicken” and dried-up “mashed potatoes.” Sometimes we had Chinese carry-out or hamburgers from the Hot Shoppe. She had even stopped going to Sunday Mass with us.

Because Dad covered all household expenses—the mortgage, the utilities, the cars and their maintenance—the money Mom earned was completely hers. Although she was generous with her children, she used most of her income to build a queenly wardrobe, including diamonds, leathers, and furs—all the luxury items she imagined a doctor’s wife would have. There were plenty of lunches, club meetings, and dances to attend to show off her pretty things. To this day, people marvel at how well put together my mother was. “Everyone knew about Billye Jessup. She was always dressed up and very social,” one of her old friends told me when I called on her ninetieth birthday. “Some people thought she was a muckety-muck,” she added, perhaps indiscreetly.

Eventually, Mom would leave us for days and weeks at a time while on trips that took her to Europe, Asia, and the Caribbean. Her excursions allowed her to meet celebrities like Sidney Poitier and Lena Horne. Mom was intent on pursuing the life she felt she had lost when she became a teen bride. Dad and I were collateral damage. We filled the vacuum her absence left with each other’s company.

I knew Mom loved me, loved all of us, but I missed her and represented her absences. I was a young girl experiencing all that young girls encounter—physical changes, an infusion of hormones, boys. As close as Dad and I were, these were subjects I did not want to discuss with him.

I was also struggling with my religious faith. After eight years of Catholic school, catechism lessons, confessing my so-called sins—*Bless me, Father, I said a "bad" word*—and regular church attendance, I was having some doubts about Catholicism, and even about the existence of God.

All that logical thinking the nuns taught us had unintended consequences. Nothing I learned about God seemed logical to me. For example, I wondered how the God we were taught loved us allowed so much suffering in the world, even among innocent children. “Eat all your food,” Mom would say. “Children are starving in India.” Why would God let children starve? And closer to home, I wondered why God allowed so much pain in my life. Surely a loving Father would not allow the discord that threatened my parent’s marriage and my continuing happiness. But even as my faith floundered, I longed for something to hold on to, something grounding. Finding out whether I was actually descended from Thomas Jefferson, who was for me god-like, would give me purpose. Dad, I felt, was almost as infallible as the Pope. Surely, he would know.

“I overheard Jan say we’re related to Thomas Jefferson,” I eased into the conversation one afternoon when we were alone. “What was she talking about?” We were in his basement bar watching TV.

“That’s what they say,” was his matter-of-fact response, his eyes glued to the football game on his floor-model Zenith color television set. The Washington Redskins, as DC’s team was then called, were having a winning season and we were both huge fans.

I probed, “What do you mean ‘that’s what they say’? Who is ‘they’? Is it true? Are we really related to Thomas Jefferson?”

Appearing mildly annoyed, Dad looked at me and shook his head—“I don’t know, Gayle”—then turned back to the game, making it clear that he would not be interrogated.

However, his reticence only fueled my interest. I wondered whether he was hiding something, another secret perhaps, like the reason he had dropped out of college or that one of the Jessup children was intellectually disabled or that racism existed. As close as we were, as much as we talked about religion, politics, football, and a plethora of other topics, he had never mentioned the Jefferson connection. Dad was holding something back. I just knew it.

As a teenager, I began developing the relentless determination that would one day lead me to Monticello and to my ancestors. Perhaps Dad didn’t want to talk about his family’s ties to Jefferson, but that was not going to stop me from probing. However, I needed a strategy. It was not long before I devised a plan that would suit us both. Every Sunday and many weeknights, I climbed down the basement stairs to join him while he watched his favorite TV shows. I settled into what was then a fashionably sleek, orange, leather loveseat near his cushy La-Z-Boy recliner. Only an end table hosting his pipes and the paraphernalia that went with them separated us. During commercial breaks between the *CBS Evening News*, *The Carol Burnett Show*, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, and *Gunsmoke*, I nudged, poked, and pushed, day after day, week after week. For the longest time, he just chuckled and tried to ignore me. “There’s nothing to tell, Gayle,” or, “I don’t know any more than what you heard from Jan,” he insisted.

Then one afternoon while the two of us were alone watching golf, he broke. “You know my mother was from Charlottesville,” he said, a hint of slyness in his voice. I was flabbergasted. “Jefferson was from

Charlottesville," I practically shouted. "I know," said Dad, the glimmer of a smile on his narrow lips. Then he turned back to the match we were watching, signaling that he was done with the subject—at least for the time being.

I still felt Dad was keeping something from me. The bombshell that his mother was from Charlottesville was proof that he knew more than he was letting on. I was not going to give up. But Dad was as stubborn as I was relentless. I had to be patient, stick to the strategy, and keep watching TV shows on that floor-model Zenith.

"Tell me about your mother," I sweetly cajoled one Sunday afternoon after serving him his favorite—a bowl of Breyers vanilla ice cream. Dad was no fool. He knew what I was doing. He had been thinking about what he would say long before I tried to bribe him with dessert. He took a last swallow and started talking.

"My mother's name was Eva Jessup," he said. How beautiful, I thought, wishing it were mine. "Gayle" was a cute name and sounded up-tempo, like me, so it suited. But "Eva," I thought, sounded symphonic, like the languid notes of a cello. I was already imagining what my grandmother looked like. In my mind, she was as beautiful as her name, slender, I was sure, with a heart-shaped face, a warm complexion, and soft, gentle hands. "Tell me about her," I implored. "What was her maiden name? What did she look like? Was she kind or funny? What was she like?" He picked up one of his pipes and filled it with tobacco. As he lit it with a disposable BiC lighter and took a puff, he seemed to consider how much he was ready to disclose. Once his mind was made up, he turned to me, the pipe resting in his left palm, and said, "I don't know, Gayle, I don't know much about my mother. I'm not even sure of her name."

THAT MY FATHER DID NOT KNOW A FACT AS BASIC AS HIS MOTHER'S name was to me unfathomable. I finally blurted out with unmasked

incredulity, "Daddy, how can you not know your own mother's name?!" Suddenly, what felt like a light-hearted conversation turned gloomy.

"I don't know my mother's name or much about her because she died when I was five years old," he said. "I don't know what my mother looked like. I can't remember her face or the sound of her voice." He faltered, but just a bit. And then, like a tragic hero, he confessed his darkest agony, "I never knew a mother's love."

I didn't know what to say. Legs crossed like a sitting Buddha, I sat upright in the orange loveseat, twisting strands of curly hair around my finger. It was difficult to imagine my dad, stalwart husband and father of five, as a motherless child. I wanted to comfort him but wasn't sure how. At the same time, I wondered whether my badgering opened a painful past that he had tried most of his life to forget.

I managed a weak "I'm sorry Daddy." A minute or so passed before he responded. Then, taking his eyes off the TV, he turned to me and repeated, this time with greater emphasis, "I never knew a mother's love. Imagine that, Gayle, *never knowing a mother's love.*" I took that as a cue that he wanted to talk, that he wanted my sympathy and support, that he wanted to share the grief he carried from his childhood with someone who loved him unconditionally.

Had my mother been at home, he might have confided in her. Perhaps he already had long ago. Whatever the case, she was not there when my questions pushed Dad's memory back to the nightmare that was his childhood. She was off on one of her escapades, and Dad and I were alone. I couldn't understand what it was like to lose a mother, but I knew what it was like to miss one.

As I unfolded and stretched my limbs and sank into my chair, I waited for Dad to continue. He might not have known his mother's name, but surely he knew how she had died. Unflinching, he kept

talking. "My mother died from TB—tuberculosis. And she wasn't the only one," I braced myself. "All of my sisters died from tuberculosis too," said Dad, stiffly belying the emotion he must have felt.

I was familiar with the disease. As a fan of classic black-and-white films, *Wuthering Heights* and *Camille*, for example, I had watched Hollywood stars stricken with "consumption" waste away in ethereal beauty. As I listened to Dad, I romanticized my grandmother's death, envisioning her fading, like Merle Oberon or Greta Garbo, in her husband's arms.

However, what my father described was anything but romantic. What happened to his family was nothing short of carnage.

"I had five sisters. I don't remember much about them, but I was told they were sweet girls. One after the other, they died," he shook his head. Again, almost dumbstruck, I offered a meek "I'm sorry, Daddy." I was fourteen and had no experience confronting such incomprehensible loss. What ran through my mind was what parents tell their children with a scraped knee, "Let me kiss it and make it better." That's what I wanted to do for my daddy, kiss it and make it better.

From that moment forward, I promised that I would take care of him, that I would give him the love he had lost, that I would kiss it and make it better. I got up from the chair, walked over to him in his La-Z-Boy, and kissed his bald head.

During the weeks that followed, Dad was more forthcoming, showing the eagerness for storytelling that I had been trying for months to tease from him. Most of the stories he shared were of hardships, but there were lighter moments. Like the time he and his buddies, caught splashing in a brook behind a fire station, were spotted by neighborhood "cops." The boys ran, but one, Henry Hill, got caught. Dad said he and his friends feared the boy would be locked up. Instead, he was spotted later that day with an ice cream cone, a

gift from the policemen. "That's how it was in those days," Dad chorused. "The cops were all right."

But mostly he talked about his losses, especially the death of his mother. He finally explained to me as best he could the mystery of her maiden name. "It could have been Eva Robinson or Eva Taylor," he said. "I don't know which. That's just what I heard people say." Dad had few mementoes from his mom, only a set of pastel-and-cream-colored fine china dessert plates his father had brought back from his naval service in the Philippines, and an elegant hand-painted porcelain tea set. The floral pieces were also decorated with graceful-looking women in red kimonos and stored in Dad's workshop. As a child, I occasionally got a glimpse of the set when, like a puppy, I followed him from room to room.

All he knew of his mother's family was that she had two brothers, both of whom shed their Black identities. "I know I have white cousins out there somewhere," he confided. He also had an aunt, a woman everyone called Aunt Peachie. "Who was she?" I asked, having never heard of her. "My mother's half-sister," Dad said nonchalantly, as if he hadn't just dropped another bombshell.

Aunt Peachie, I learned, lived with the family for several years before I was born. Dad didn't have much to say about her, only that he was her favorite. He didn't remember her speaking of Jefferson, although he acknowledged hearing the family lore from somebody somewhere. "That's what they say," is all he was able or willing to muster.

He did, however, talk about his brother and five sisters, especially the one he remembered well, Cary. She had been a lively girl who loved to joke, he said, and the only female in the family to survive the scourge's first wave. She was eleven when their mother died, six years older than Dad.

A faded photo taken in the mid-1920s shows a slender teen-

age Cary in a print dress and with a fashionable "bob" haircut, surrounded by friends. Eyes squinting in the sun, she displays a mischievous smile.

But whatever hopes the family had were dashed when Cary was also stricken with TB. Summoning all their emotional and financial resources, the family sent her to a sanatorium, and prayed. Hospitalized for weeks, Cary seemed to rebound. She was well enough for company on her sixteenth birthday and well enough to show off her spirited personality. "I'll never forget it," Dad recalled fifty years later. "'Sweet sixteen and never been kissed,' she said." Two days later, Cary was dead.

Dad and his older brother escaped death, but not hardship and horror. The emotional toll on them and on their father was devastating. "I'd trade both my sons for just one of my daughters," his father would tell them. If that was not cruel enough, after a house fire, he sent them to live with relatives they barely knew.

Separated from their father and from each other, the boys were shuttled from house to house, as one relative after another cast them out. Dad was only ten, scared and often alone. He said he walked miles to school, sometimes in the dark and through mounds of snow.

When their father remarried, there was hope his new wife would bring a mother's love and warmth to the reunited family. But that did not happen. "Cold and indifferent," was how Dad remembered her. On the other hand, my mother's family was warm and welcoming—just what Dad needed. "The Greens were great people," he often said. With my mother, he acquired more than a wife; he also got a wonderful family.

If the notes my parents exchanged early in their marriage are to be trusted, they were very much in love. A few survive, including a postcard Dad wrote to Mom during World War II:

March 24, 1942
Dear Mrs. Jessup,

Times have changed. The world is at war. Spring is in the air. The birds are chirping. The bees are buzzing. The trees are budding. The time has come when one must declare himself. In these words I would like to say, "yo-te-amo."

Lovingly
C.B.J.

Mom would tuck similar notes, along with homemade sandwiches and snacks, in the lunch box he took to work when he was still a mail carrier.

But by the mid-1970s, whatever affection she had for him was apparently gone.

"So, what?" she said when I asked her what she knew about Dad's childhood. "My father died when I was six years old, and you don't see me moping about it." I pushed back.

"But you had your brothers and sisters. Most of Dad's family died. And besides, nothing seems to bother you. You laugh about almost everything—except when it comes to Daddy."

She shrugged her shoulders, saying, "Your father loves being unhappy."

I did not believe her. One year after the spectacle of the big fight that brought their marital discord out of the shadows, I felt that I had gotten to know Dad pretty well. It was true, he was not like my mother. He did not laugh as easily as she, or want to dance, or go to parties, or travel, or do many of the things that Mom thought made life worth living. But he didn't want to be unhappy

either. Unlike Mom, he was not having a midlife crisis, but he still faced a reckoning.

His marriage was unraveling, and he felt partly to blame. He admitted that he had disappointed my mother, that he was not as sociable as she wanted him to be, that he did not like traveling unless it was for work, and that he could lose his temper. Like the time Mom was playing Sammy Davis Jr.'s "I've Gotta Be Me" for the umpteenth time. Dad hated that song, that and Otis Redding's "Try a Little Tenderness" and Frank Sinatra's "My Way." They were Mom's theme songs and her way of getting a not-so-subtle message to him. Enraged, he snipped the head off the stereo's electric cord, and for good measure, the radio's too. My parents had unique methods of torturing each other.

But Mom's biggest complaint—that he had not gone to med school—he felt was unfair. He provided a good life for her, he said, built her a brand-new house when she was only nineteen. She didn't have to work outside of the home, unless she wanted to. For goodness sake, he said, she even had a housekeeper.

They both had grievances, and appropriate or not, shared them with me. More than anything, I wanted the parents I loved to be happy. If it meant hearing marital issues that should not have been my concern, so be it. I would do whatever it took to keep them together.

Meanwhile, my conversations with Dad continued, sometimes about his childhood, sometimes about his wife. We talked about Jefferson, but Dad was not as consumed about knowing the truth as I was. He was more interested in the family he knew than the family he had lost.

Still, I was convinced that if I could prove our Jefferson lineage, I would give Dad something to be proud of—and Mom, too. So what

if Dad was not a doctor? He was something better—a descendant of one of the most famous men in history.

As it turned out, my interest in Dad's clan only made matters worse with Mom. "It was my family that was accomplished," she said. "My father was a White House chef, not his." And the perennial, "Your father was supposed to be a doctor." I wanted to cover my ears and scream, "Enough!"

But instead, many mornings and nights, I lay in bed listening to their fights, most of them wrenching. One was so outlandish, however, that even Mom laughed about it—eventually. After traveling to Italy, a colleague of Dad's, a white woman, sent our family gifts: a tie for him, cameo earrings for me, and a potholder for my mother. Sizzling with justified anger, she tore the offending object to shreds, its cotton fibers floating through the kitchen like down feathers.

Other than that, the household's instability was no laughing matter. I felt like I was living on a fault line, fearful of the earthquake that would one day swallow us. The time I spent with Dad quelled my unease. As long as he was around, I knew everything would be okay. So I kept joining him in the basement, crawling into the orange loveseat, watching TV—and talking.

The best were Sunday afternoons during football season. He taught me to love the "Skins" as much as he did. However, his admiration for the team's legendary coach, Vince Lombardi, had as much to do with racial equality as it did with skillful team management. "He stood up for the race," Dad said of the man who, as longtime head of the Green Bay Packers, had insisted on equal treatment for his Black and white team members, including the same hotel accommodations in the segregated South.

There was not much Dad and I didn't discuss, from how to

shake hands ("with a firm grip and looking the person straight in the eye"), to what to read ("The Washington Post, every day, front to back, including the comics"), to religion ("you just have to accept the Bible on faith, even if some of it doesn't make sense to you"), to interpersonal communication ("never let people know what you're thinking. Remain stoic. If you don't know what that means, look it up").

As I matured, so did our conversations. Race was no longer a taboo subject. "You have to be twice as good to get half as far," Daddy counseled, an adage many Blacks passed down to their children. The principle seemed to work for Dad and our family. By most material measures, we had a good life.

However, there were times he acknowledged the challenges Black people faced, even in a family like ours that seemed to have so many advantages. "If I had my druthers, I'd rather be white," he said one day, to my shock and dismay. I loved being Black. I felt like a princess, never wanting to be anyone else aside from Gayle Louise Jessup. But I guess for Dad, it was different.

His ambiguous looks—"Some people think I'm Greek or Italian," he told me—exposed him to uncomfortable situations. Like the time he was playing golf with white colleagues who commented that a coworker was "smart for a nigger."

"I'm a Negro," he announced to the unsuspecting and embarrassed offenders before recording the breach in their employment records. This was years before diversity training. Back then, it was the job of human resource managers to train an integrating workforce. Dad said one of his responsibilities was to make note of race-related insensitivities and insults.

Before Dad became a Post Office "big shot," back when he was still delivering mail, he stopped eating watermelon because of the distorted, racist postcard images of children devouring the fruit. "It

was shameful," he said in disgust. But after a few years of deprivation, he changed his mind. "I decided not to deny myself something I love so much because of people's racism," he said.

Dad retired soon after I started high school at the all-girl Notre Dame Academy near the US Capitol. With time on his hands, he became my chauffeur, driving me to school, to concerts, and to sleepovers. While Mom was sporting about town in a striking, crystal-blue Buick convertible, he was driving teenagers in his lackluster white Rambler. Often, after dropping my friends and me off at an event, he would park until it was time for us to go home. One night, he waited five hours outside a concert venue, Constitution Hall, while my best friend and I and a thousand other fans waited for the perpetually late R&B group Sly and the Family Stone to show up. Although I was at a Catholic high school and still attending Mass, my faith continued to stumble. The beginning of ninth grade marked the end of my years as a devout Catholic. By the end of my first year in high school, I announced to my parents that I no longer believed in Catholic doctrine. I did not believe that Moses had parted the Red Sea or that Noah had built an ark or that God had turned Lot's wife into a pillar of salt. "Nonsense," I told Dad during our many conversations about God and faith. I wasn't even sure if I was a Christian.

Rather than chastising me, he listened patiently, explaining that the Bible was meant to teach us lessons. "There're things you just have to accept," he said. "It's a mystery. That's why you need faith." But my faith was like an old fluorescent lightbulb. What was once so bright had begun to flicker and die.

Sick of religious education, nuns, and uniforms, I asked to be released from Notre Dame, as if I were seeking a prison probation. My parents agreed, and the next year, I started tenth grade at a new public school, H. D. Woodson. Ironically, the concrete, eight-story

high-rise building with its black asphalt parking lot looked more like a prison than a school.

On the edge of far Northeast Washington, Woodson was promoted as an oasis in an urban desert. The state-of-the-art building was equipped with an indoor swimming pool, elevators, and escalators. The best teachers were recruited from high schools across the city. Exceptionalism was expected. In spite of its Brutalism-inspired architecture, it seemed like a good fit for me.

Eager to become popular, I sought extracurricular activities, joining the band, becoming a majorette, and singing with a choir. Beyond football—specifically the Washington team—I was not a big sports fan. But I tried to develop school spirit, attending basketball games and track meets after school. I dated a couple of guys and even got caught skipping class once. None of that endeared me to my less affluent classmates, however, many of whom lived in low-rent or subsidized housing. My first exposure to children from a different socioeconomic background than my own left me emotionally and, after a fight, physically wounded.

I just did not fit in. For one thing, my clothes were all wrong. After years of wearing a uniform, I invested in a fashionable wardrobe purchased at expensive Georgetown shops. I traversed Woodson's halls in bright-colored, flare-leg pants, stretch tops, and platform shoes. Many of my fellow classmates didn't have the resources to buy clothes like mine.

Some kids ridiculed the way I walked with my eyes focused and head held high, and even the way I talked. "You sound like a white girl," they taunted. I was devastated. But it wasn't all bad. One smiling girl with a neat afro greeted me with "Que pasa?" at the beginning of every Spanish class. We never became friends, but I always remembered how she made me feel: welcomed. And I was a hit when I won for the girls' history class team, correctly answering how Socrates had died.

"He drank hemlock," I shouted as the down-to-the-knuckles contest ended to the applause of my classmates. However, those enchanting days were few, and I often avoided fellow students altogether, skipping class and studying alone in the school's library.

Weekends were a reprieve and a chance to spend time with Dad. For a while we felt like a family. Mom, while still frequently out and about, was spending a little more time at home, and my brother Bruce was back from military service in Vietnam. He had his own place but was at our house almost every day. Bruce was the sibling chronologically closest to me—only nine years older—but still too distant for us to be buddies. After he returned from Vietnam, we became friends. Bruce, a cinnamon colored version of Dad, came home with an afro, bell-bottom pants, and an irreverent attitude. He once dropped by the house wrapped in an American flag. My brother taught me how to swear, appreciate rock and roll music, and smoke a joint.

In the 1970s, we were not the same family that once had held nightly prayers in front of Jesus's bleeding heart. In fact, Dad, who had moved into his own bedroom, had taken the statue under his protection. It sat atop his dresser beside a dish that held his keys and small change.

In spite of my parents sleeping in separate rooms, their marriage appeared to be on the mend. On at least one occasion, when I broke curfew, they were a united front, grounding me for two weeks. In an odd way, I didn't mind. Their attention felt like a security blanket. If a little acting out on my part helped us feel like family, the crime was worth the punishment.

I was beginning to feel safe again, that no matter what happened between them, they would stay together, and we would remain a family. Until one day after school, I came home to my worst fear. Nothing looked different as I walked up the cement path toward

the front porch steps. Dad's well-manicured lawn was like green velvet, the waist-high shrubs like leaf-covered boxes. To my right, the old-fashioned yellow-and-white metal porch swing was motionless, the matching chairs on the opposite side empty. Dad's car was gone, but I assumed that only meant he was running errands, perhaps to the grocery or hardware store.

However, I knew something was amiss when Mom opened our onyx-painted door before I could insert my key in the brass lock. "Where's Daddy?" I asked. Her face looked worn, gnarled like an old oak, not like Mom's at all. "Your father left," she angrily spat, "he moved out."

I didn't believe her. Dad would never have left. He loved routine, his big Zenith color TV, his backyard pear trees, his home. He loved us. Why would he leave? However, Mom persuaded me that he was indeed gone. I was too angry to cry—angry with her for chasing him away and with him for leaving us. I refused to discuss the acrimony that must have preceded his departure and went straight to my room. I didn't even want to talk on the phone. One of my favorite science fiction writers—George Orwell or Kurt Vonnegut—would be my companion that evening.

Dad called before bedtime to check on me and to say good night. He had a furnished apartment in Bethesda, Maryland, a ritzy DC suburb. A two-bedroom, nice enough, he said. I heard the local TV news in the background. If I closed my eyes, I could imagine him watching his preferred station, channel 9, as if he were downstairs in his La-Z-Boy. If I squeezed them hard, I could see myself plopped in the orange leather chair next to his while we reviewed the day.

What I couldn't imagine was Dad living alone in a furnished Bethesda apartment.

I never saw his place. He came back home in less than a week

as stealthily as he had left. I arrived home from school, and he was standing at the front door, as if it were business as usual. Feeling bruised that he had been gone, even for a short while, I gave him a perfunctory hug and ran upstairs to my room. We never talked about it, ever.