



## INTRODUCTION

**W**hy now, at the age of forty-six, did I write this book? What did I hope to accomplish?

Even though I now accept that my out-of-wedlock birth and subsequent abandonment were issues beyond my control, I nonetheless felt buried in shame for much of my life. Today, in casual conversations with coworkers or acquaintances, I no longer cringe when the subject of family comes up. I am frank with people and say I have no family. The reactions range from pity to acceptance, and people do not always know how to respond. Sometimes I feel sorry for them because they appear so uncomfortable. You may or may not get along with your family members, but you know they are there. However, I know absolutely nothing about my parents. Most of my friends are surprised I did not grow up shrouded

in anger, but holding onto bitterness would only disrupt the course I have chosen.

I never thought my life story would be of interest to anyone. Then, one day a friend suggested I write a book about myself. “Ha, you must be joking,” I thought. But she persisted, telling me what I experienced as a long-term foster child had meaning. Most books written about foster care are told from the professional’s point of view. Very little has been written to convey what children experience and how they feel living among strangers. Thus, one of the main goals of my book is to let adults know their injudicious actions can have disastrous consequences for their children. Foster care may be a convenient way to deal with the children of troubled parents, but it can also hurl youngsters into an emotional abyss. Social workers, policy-makers, and parents themselves may not fully appreciate the lingering scars foster care can leave on the thousands of children who end up in the system. More than half a million American children are currently in foster care. I hope my book will provide an honest, sobering account of what can happen to those children after they enter the system.

As I began to write this book, trying to find the right words to express myself, a story slowly took shape. At times, the pain stabbed through my heart, plunging me into depression. I hated reliving those memories, but once I finished I felt an overwhelming sense of relief. Writing this book also helped me to make peace with myself and to find sorely needed serenity.

This is a memoir of my entire youth spent in a variety of foster homes in upstate New York. Like most foster children, I had no choice with whom I lived or how long I would stay. Others controlled my life. Even when I was old enough to form my own opinions and aspirations, I was never consulted on any aspect of care.

More than anything else, I wanted to be a part of a family, even if they lived in a house without a white picket fence or a two-car garage. As a foster child, I acquired many social rules with which to communicate and interact with others. My difficulties in doing so arose from a lack of emotional and financial support, as well as the familial love necessary to succeed in life. On the few occasions when those things presented themselves, I failed to fully appreciate or even to recognize when people tried to support me.

Similar to conditions many foster children currently experience, I was not raised in filth or a decrepit tenement. I also never starved, walked around in tattered rags, or camped out on a park bench. The transient nature of foster care, however, could not provide me with a sense of belonging.

Foster care was originally started as a way to provide assistance to deserving poor children, but now it offers safety and security mostly to maltreated children. I somehow slipped between the cracks because I was abandoned, not abused. Throughout my childhood, I wanted to be in a house where I had the same last name as everyone else and resembled other members of the household. Instead of feeling

like a family member, I was more like a guest in other people's homes, someone who had overstayed her welcome. I was not free to be adopted because the woman who gave me life did not relinquish her custody rights. I celebrated my eighteenth birthday not because I had attained voting age, but because I was now legally my own person and no longer a ward of the state—a term that always made me feel like a number on an assembly line.

It has taken me several decades to accept there is no shame attached to my out-of-wedlock birth, my subsequent abandonment, and my status as a ward of the state. In writing this book, I have relived tender memories of days I thought I would rather forget. This process has finally enabled me to make peace with my past, the woman who abandoned me, and the imperfect child welfare system charged to look after me.

This story is about the everlasting hope of a child for a family and the ability to heal oneself with the help of a few good people. I have tried to convey the vicissitudes of the foster care system as I encountered it during the 1950s and 1960s. I invite you to travel with me through nineteen years of foster care that began in 1954, the year I was born, and ended in 1973, the year I graduated from high school and entered college.

Some of the vocabulary used in part one is from a young child's perspective. In part two, my adolescent voice becomes stronger as I developed more of an understanding about my life. By part three, my young adult's viewpoint is presented without becoming disjointed. At that stage of my

life, I learned the value of listening to the voice from within, and the vocabulary used, as well as the insights made, become considerably more sophisticated.

I am a testament to all those children who have managed to come through the child welfare system. I attribute this to two things: my constant hope that life would eventually change for the better and the unwavering belief that others had in me when I lacked faith in myself.

My book is dedicated to all foster children who, for whatever reasons, have been separated from their biological families and live with surrogate families. Although this book is about the life of an African American girl in foster care, I believe it has a broad enough appeal to help anyone come to terms with a difficult past.

Names and some minor details have been changed to protect the privacy of the people involved. To tell a balanced story, I left out some of the foster children with whom I shared homes. If I had mentioned them all, the story would have become too complicated. Other parts of my history have been omitted because I either never knew all the facts or was unable to discover them.

Finally, it is my hope that one day soon it will be possible to discount the current value of assigning one's ethnicity or color to one's personal story. All of us who have survived the foster care system in the United States have had to overcome much, and it would please me greatly to be known simply as a human being rather than as the author of a black girl's story.

# PART ONE





## CHAPTER 1

### In The Beginning

**M**y birth certificate says I was born on January 29, 1954, in Buffalo, a medium-sized industrialized city on the shores of Lake Erie in western New York. Buffalo is the second largest city in New York State and is known as the Queen City of the Great Lakes. This official document, now a wrinkled piece of paper with faded lettering, reports the name of my mother, who at the time was a teenager from Mississippi. There is no mention of my father. I do not know if he was with my mother when I was born.

The truth behind my roots may never be known. What is the real identity of my parents? Obviously, my mother knew I existed. Did my father know that one of the sexual encounters he had with this young Negro woman from a rural southern state left her

pregnant? With me? Maybe my mother never told him she was pregnant. Maybe he knew, but was unwilling or unable to accept the responsibility of fatherhood. Only his conscience, my mother, and the Almighty know the truth.

Evidently, single motherhood was too much for the woman who bore me. It must have been especially hard for her as a Negro living in a largely white community, far from her hometown in the South. Although most Negroes were Protestant, my mother was either Catholic or she had me baptized in the Catholic Church. Because New York State required that children be placed with an agency of the same religious affiliation as the parents, I ended up in the hands of Catholic Charities, a nonprofit social services agency with offices throughout the United States. This would have been a reasonably acceptable solution, except my mother walked away without making the proper arrangements to free me legally for adoption. Left in a legal limbo, Catholic Charities had no choice but to place me in foster care. There were few options available for abandoned Negro children, including me.

I wonder if there may have been extended family members from both sides who, if given the opportunity, would have taken me in. My mother probably never reached out for help. At the time, bearing children out of wedlock was still a social taboo. My mother may have become pregnant with me while living in the South and, to hide the shame to her family, traveled to another state to deliver, something unmarried women in those times

frequently did. Or maybe she was a local girl who got mixed up with the wrong man.

I could spend hours speculating about this woman's life and still never know the truth. Beyond her, however, are the shadows of an extended family lost forever. I will always be curious about family members I never knew, about Fourth of July picnics or Christmas dinners missed. Once in a while, when I see pictures of family reunions, I feel a sense of emptiness, knowing I have no family albums to peruse. Sadder yet, I have no childhood photos of myself. Without a family, the normal documentation of a childhood never occurs.

Orphanages for Negro children were rare because white society never wanted to fund them and Negroes could barely make ends meet. Expecting Negroes to donate money for an orphanage was impossible. Most Negroes worked in menial, low-paying jobs. Thus, racism, as evil as it was, kept a lot of Negro children out of these human warehouses. Close family friends, although not blood related, often filled in the gaps and were quick to lend a hand when needed. To this day, thousands of people have aunts and uncles not biologically related to them, but still considered family. If my mother had come from a solid Christian background with strong family ties, chances are her people would not have left me, an infant, in the hands of white strangers.

Without records to guide me and with no memory of my earliest days, I do not know what happened after my birth. Rumors suggest that when my mother was discharged from the hospital, she

took me with her but subsequently deserted me in front of an orphanage. Other rumors suggest that I was turned over to Catholic Charities right away.

Regardless of why or how I was abandoned, I was a newborn without a home and therefore became a ward of New York State. Due to my tender age, I do not recall my first foster home or what the people were like. Because the nation was still in the throes of legalized segregation, it is safe to assume my first foster family was Negro. I do not know, however, if I was placed with more than one family during my first few years of life. For unclear reasons, I was not legally freed for adoption until many years later, at an age when I was less likely to be adopted. Who is to blame? Catholic Charities? My mother? The child welfare system? Institutionalized racism?

No longer angry at my birth mother for turning me over to strangers, I remain indignant, nevertheless, that she did not take the time to sign at least one important piece of paper, one that would have given me a chance to find my own little promised land. I may not have been adopted, but her actions deprived me of the chance to grow up surrounded by a loving family. I have forgiven her, but I have not forgotten what this woman potentially deprived me of. The effect of her carelessness will always be with me.