



## CHAPTER 1

### A College Career

In my first book, *Foster Care Odyssey: A Black Girl's Story*, I told how Catholic Charities dominated my childhood. The organization decided with whom I lived, for how long I stayed, and where I went to school. Foster care provided for my basic needs—food, shelter, and clothing—but it did nothing to prepare me for life on my own. If I had not run away from foster care when I was in high school, the system would have cut me loose when I graduated. As it was, at the tender age of 19 all I had was a high school diploma, a ragged suitcase with a few sets of worn clothes, and a burning ambition to prove I was somebody. As for marketable skills, I ran on near empty. If I was lucky, I might have passed a typing test at 25 words per minute. I was not a singer, dancer, or athlete. Nobody was knocking

on my door with a job offer. A career as a cook or a maid had about the same appeal as boiled cabbage for breakfast: both made me sick. To avoid a life of panhandling or living in squalor, I hesitantly applied to college. Without family to lean on, I had no choice but to prepare myself for the future, wherever that might lead me.

At that time, 1973, blacks remained largely unwelcome in corporate boardrooms; television and movie roles portrayed us mostly as thugs or hookers. Regardless of the gains made by the civil rights movement, society remained largely segregated, and blacks had to work harder to press forward. I assumed this would be the same for me.

To say I was ready for college life would be a lie. On one hand, I threw my hands up in relief that I was no longer considered a “ward of the state.” Whoever coined that term may have meant no harm, but I despised it. It made me feel like second-rate property and not a person. On the other hand, being separated from Catholic Charities terrified me. For years, the system took care of me. I did not have to think. I did not make decisions. They did it all for me. Now, they no longer wanted any part of me, whether I was ready to deal with the outside world or not. When prison inmates complete their sentences, they at least receive a small amount of money, bus fare, and maybe something decent to wear. Foster children receive nothing.

In June 1973, I sold my most valuable items, which amounted to a used guitar, a Timex watch that did not keep good time, and a pair of thinly

lined winter boots. With the proceeds I bought a one-way ticket from my hometown—Buffalo, New York—to Boston. I had plans to attend a special summer program at Boston College, where I had been accepted on a four-year scholarship.

Jeanne O'Rourke, my friend and mentor who had been instrumental in my college-application process, drove me to the seedy bus terminal in downtown Buffalo. The surrounding neighborhood, once a vibrant transportation center where steady streams of blacks and other hopeful immigrants arrived looking for work, had sunk into decline when factories closed and jobs shifted to countries with cheaper labor and fewer government restrictions. Decay slowly eroded the once proud blue-collar city.

Because my bus was not scheduled to leave for another half-hour, Jeanne and I retreated to a small donut shop. Unemployed men with vacant stares sat huddled over dingy coffee cups. The smoke-filled air made my head feel like exploding. Jeanne glanced at my unhappy face and said, "How about breakfast?"

I shook my head "no."

"Are you sure?"

I gave her a weak smile. "Yes, I'm sure."

"It's a long ride. Can I convince you to have something? A donut or muffin, maybe?"

"I brought along turkey on a hard roll. I'll be fine."

"Do you mind if I eat?" Jeanne asked. "I haven't had breakfast yet."

For the next 15 minutes, I sat sandwiched in between Jeanne and an unemployed middle-aged man studying a thin column of want ads. Like me, Jeanne turned aside from the man's beaten-down face.

"This is a big day. Are you excited?" Jeanne asked.

My voice mirrored my feelings. Both were as bland as a plain white blouse. "No, not really."

"Jeez, I remember how I felt when I went off to college. I was a nervous wreck."

"No, I'm OK. Honestly." How could I tell her I was scared stiff?

"I'm glad you're taking this so calmly." Once she wiped her mouth with a napkin, she gave me a warm smile, the kind I could never muster. "Knowing you has enriched me."

"Thanks." By this time, she had to know most of our conversation would be terse. I doubted she expected any other response.

"Best of luck," Jeanne said, tenderly squeezing my hand. "I'll be expecting progress reports."

"OK."

Failure was not an option. If I dropped out, then what would I do? Spend my life as a beggar? I did not think I could handle the rigors of the military or solitude of the convent. College was all I had left.

Just then, an announcement crackled over the loudspeaker. My bus was boarding. We rushed through the terminal until we reached my gate. When Jeanne looked at me with teary eyes, I assumed she wanted a hug. I forced a smile, hoping

that would satisfy her. It did not. She reached out and embraced me anyway. “Promise you’ll call if you have problems.”

“Sure.” I doubted that I would.

Although I found it difficult to show my emotions, I did appreciate the help Jeanne gave me. She was a bright spot in my otherwise dark life. Without her, I might have drifted into a life of drugs and alcohol abuse. As I picked up my bag and headed for the bus, Jeanne unexpectedly followed me.

“Theresa, wait. I have something for you.” I did not expect a gift; she had already gone out of her way by paying my college application fees. I was speechless when she handed me \$100, which in 1973 was a tidy sum, especially considering she earned a modest salary as a counselor in a group home.

“Thank you.” I slipped the cash inside my back pocket, waved good-bye and handed my ticket to the driver. In an instant, the bus pulled out of the terminal and I was on my way to an uncertain future.

As the Greyhound bus rumbled east along Interstate 90, the sight of the rolling hills and verdant scenery failed to hold my attention. I brought a copy of a *Time* magazine, but as I flipped the pages, words about the space station Skylab looked like gibberish. Sleep was impossible. I almost chewed my nails off. What would college be like? Would I pass? Would I get along with my classmates? Would people expect me to socialize? I was

edgy about living in a city considerably larger than Buffalo, the only home I had ever known. Buffalo had not been a good home, but it was home nonetheless. By the time I arrived in Boston, I had probably dropped a pound from sweating so much.

Known locally as BC, Boston College is a private Jesuit institution situated along Commonwealth Avenue in Chestnut Hill, a separate city adjacent to Boston. Back then, BC sponsored the “Black Talent Summer Program” for minority students. The program helped underprepared students master the rigors of college. Its special curriculum reached out to high school students like me who not only lacked self-confidence but also carried the burden of inferior grades. The turbulent 1960s had brought calls for equality, with minorities demanding greater access to college campuses. Before that, most blacks were welcome only at historically black colleges. A few slipped into mainstream universities from time to time, yet most campuses shut their doors to us. To recruit minority students, several national initiatives were born. The program at BC was an offshoot of this movement. Other students who had already passed through the program played a major part in its operation.

Even though I am black and had lived in black foster homes, this was my first experience among virtually all black students. The Catholic schools I attended were predominantly white. Their modest tuition was beyond the reach of most blacks. Skin color did not separate me from the other summer students at BC, but religion certainly did. Most

blacks were of the Baptist faith. Hardly any identified with the Catholic Church, viewing priests and nuns as hokey. Some even blamed the church for not embracing a stronger stance against the evils of Jim Crow, the discriminatory laws that had oppressed blacks for so long. When those debates came up I kept silent because the Catholic Church was the only religion I had ever known. The Baptist faith was alien to me.

Family situation also shoved an additional wedge between us. Most of my fellow students were reared in closely connected families, a tradition we developed during slavery times. These young people enjoyed the solid support of parents, aunts, uncles, grandparents, cousins, and close family friends. But no one except Jeanne and a few high school classmates even I was in college.

Casting these differences aside, we had this in common: we all felt compelled to achieve. College was our ticket out of the ghetto. A lot of students were the first in their families to attend college, and they arrived with high aspirations.

I grew up to be an eccentric, never belonging anywhere. I was at BC mostly because Jeanne had insisted I apply. After all she did for me, how could I let her down? Yet I was not sure this was the place for me. Then again, was there any place for me? I felt more out of place than the only black resident in an all-white neighborhood.

I was socially awkward, with communication skills that barely existed. I did not know how to approach people, even those who I thought I would

like. Moreover, I was as plain as dry toast, not much different from the nuns I once lived with. I lacked with-it clothes, hip lingo, and the latest hairstyle. I had spent my life feeling excluded and I suspected the same thing would happen at BC.

Social situations were agonizing to me. I always looked for ways to avoid human interaction. That was how I lived as a foster child, without significant human contact. Hugs and kisses were as rare in my foster homes as reading and playing games. By the time I was a toddler, I had already been molded into a hermit. Whenever I had to interact with others in school, I fretted. That behavior pattern extended to adulthood. Now, I worried about college. I was hopeful that I could handle the academic requirements, but far from convinced I could deal with the social interaction. I found out how hard that would be during the first few days at BC.

On a break at an orientation session, a student name Carol approached me and asked, “Hey girl, where’re you from?”

“Buffalo.”

Carol ignored my brevity and easily shared her background. “I’m from D.C. I got six kids in my family. Two sisters and three brothers.”

“That’s nice.” I wondered if my discomfort was obvious.

“Mom raised us because Daddy got hit by a car. How big is your family?”

“I don’t have family.” Carol looked at me like I had whipped out a pair of rosary beads, bowed my head, and started to pray. She seemed

so unprepared for my response I felt sorry for her. I followed with my standard reply. "I was raised in foster homes."

The ends of Carol's lips curled downwards. All she could utter was an awkward "Oh."

Chatter about loving families heightened my awareness of what I missed and the growing void I felt. I refused to admit I still longed for something I would probably never have. Deprivation had started robbing my soul not long after birth. It never stopped.

I changed the subject and Carol never asked me another probing question. In fact, she avoided me. I kept my distance as well.

In time, though, a senior student wearing a nametag that identified her as Janet Freeman noticed I was always alone. Janet attempted to draw me into the group, but I resisted.

One day, however, Janet approached me. "What're you doing here all by yourself?"

From the corner of my eye, I noticed Carol still running her mouth. I felt envious because she seemed so at ease.

"I'm not good around groups," I said.

Janet tugged on my elbow and grinned. "Talk to me then. Let's find another seat."

"I . . . I . . ."

"Give me five minutes."

I acquiesced and followed her to an empty table.

For the next ten minutes, I reluctantly shared a little bit about myself. I surprised myself how

quickly I relaxed around Janet. Perhaps our dark skin drew us together. Gentle in manners, but strong and proud, Janet was also very capable intellectually. She took no pity on me and treated me like any other student.

With an upbeat attitude, she said, “Not too long ago, none of us would be in college.”

“I know.”

“Some teachers and students will make hurtful remarks, but hold your head high. Don’t get caught up in nonsense.” In a sly manner, she lifted one eyebrow and said, “Get what I mean?”

“I think so, but I don’t know if I can do the work. I always struggled in high school. What if I don’t make it? I’m afraid of ending up as nobody doing nothing.”

In grammar school, a series of standardized tests proved I was not retarded, as one of the nuns had insisted. The results showed that I had above-average intelligence, but that I was hampered by a learning disability. In fact, I was dyslexic. But I didn’t get any help for my condition. Back then, disabilities drew scant attention unless they were obvious disorders like Down’s syndrome or autism. Sometimes, I felt like the village idiot, even though test results showed otherwise.

“Girl, our people struggled for a *loong* time. College will be no different,” Janet said. “You can make it here.”

“You think so?” I did not see how I would.

“Believe in yourself. If you don’t, who will?” She noticed the crowds were breaking up. “Remember,

I'll be there for you as much as I can.”

For several hours a day that summer, I sat through college-level classes in economics, English composition, and social sciences. These were followed by a lengthy study period supervised by older students. The goal was to hone our skills so we could compete with white students. Although the civil rights movement had opened up doors for us, it had also brought about other, unintended changes. “White flight,” the kind I had witnessed in Buffalo, had affected the entire public school system. Many white families had left the inner cities for the suburbs. Rather than allow their children to sit in the same classroom with minority students, the white families who stayed behind often enrolled their children in private schools. The loss of so many middle-class people deprived the public schools of a solid tax base for education. Minority children like me, educated in crowded, underfunded public schools, could not compete with white students taught in schools with more teachers, smaller class sizes, and ample resources. The program at BC was meant to put us on more equal footing.

Class work aside, I found dorm life to be a different kind of adjustment. College students went crazy away from home for the first time. Parties became a way of life. Unwanted pregnancies happened. Studying took a back seat. None of these temptations applied to me. I was untouchable.

Dormitory life nearly killed me. As a foster

child, I almost always had my own room, even if it was the size of a broom closet. But at BC, our rooms were like box-shaped walk-in closets with tiny shared bathrooms. Each suite had a living room for television viewing, radio listening, or hanging out. To reach my room, I had to pass through the living room. Whenever I did, there were always a handful of young women there. Men were not supposed to be there, but sometimes that rule was ignored.

My suitemates always said hello and asked me to join them. I shut them out at every turn. I expected them to start to hate me, but that did not happen.

Friendly and soft-hearted, my roommate Ruth wiggled her way into my life. One afternoon, I found her glued to Richard Wright's *Black Boy*. As I unloaded my backpack, she closed the book and said, "Hey girl, sit down and let's rap."

"I can't." I pointed to a pile of dirty clothes and said, "The machines are empty now, and I am almost out of clean clothes."

"The heck with the clothes," Ruth said. "Do not be one of them stuck-up bitches; just sit down. You're not in trouble or something?"

For the next half-hour or so, Ruth and I made a slight connection. When it came to emotions I always threw up roadblocks. Dying patients often isolate themselves. Feeling so alienated from ordinary life, I did the same. I was not about to drop my guard for Ruth. I did, nonetheless, crack open the door an inch or so. Whether she knew it or

not, Ruth's persistence slightly eased me out of my detachment. Not much, but a little.

I finished my brief account of my life. Ruth sat silently for a moment.

"I don't know what to say," she finally said.

"There isn't anything you can say."

"I'm sorry, girl." She grasped my hand, but I held back. Ruth seemed to understand.

From that point on, Ruth took me under her wing. To avoid offending her, I went along. She introduced me to her circle of friends. Once in a while, I shared meals with her and other students who came from ghetto sections of big northeastern cities like New York, Baltimore, and Philadelphia. I picked up tidbits about popular black neighborhoods like Harlem and North Philly. As much as I enjoyed the company of these women, I was like a permanently disconnected phone line. It was still so hard to reach me. I was not sure I could end my years of self-imposed isolation. Then again, would I always live my life swallowed up in grief?

Themes of black power and ethnic pride resounded through the early 1970s. Large Afros and colorful dashikis were popular. Angela Davis was admired by some and feared by others. Eldridge Cleaver's book, *Soul on Ice*, was popular. Through aggressive and questionable tactics, the FBI picked apart the Black Panthers, but to many of us, the Panthers would always be winners.

I was surrounded by street savvy, which I lacked.

Conversations were peppered with street language that was as foreign to me as Greek. Fashion trends such as bell-bottoms, platform shoes, large hoop earrings, and polyester blouses with large collars that stretched to the shoulder were in vogue.

Some students in our program carried grudges against other black students and referred to them as “bitches.” White people, mostly men, were either called “honkies” or “the man.” My sheltered life in Buffalo did nothing to prepare me for life in the big city.

Early on that summer I was accused of conspiracy. One woman with an in-your-face attitude confronted me in the hallway and said, “I’ve seen you eating lunch too many times with *them*.” She was referring to white people.

“I didn’t know I was being watched,” I said. “What do you mean?”

“We not black enough for you? Don’t act so high and mighty, Miss know-it-all. You know exactly what I mean.” She tossed her head back and sneered. “Talking like you’re one of them on top of it.”

I stood my ground. “Proper English is good for everyone. Ghetto language only stereotypes us as imbeciles. I’m here for an education, so I can get a job.”

Such thoughtless comments shattered my confidence. I had always assumed that speaking standard English without ghetto slang would improve my lot in life. I had never regretted being born black. I was not material for any radical party,

but I was proud of my heritage.

One night Ruth and a few sisters barged into my room and announced, "If you don't get dressed, we'll dress you and take you with us."

"No, really, I can't go."

When I saw Ruth and the others open my closet door and sort through my clothes, I gave in. "OK, I'll be ready in ten minutes!"

"Make it 5." Ruth winked and said, "I don't trust you."

Not surprisingly, the nightlife scene was largely segregated. Dance clubs for blacks, oddly enough, were not located in the black ghetto of Roxbury. Instead, they were squeezed into the downtown area near Boylston Street.

I was as graceless on the dance floor as someone on stilts. Disco was beginning to be popular. The song "Keep on Truckin'" by Eddie Kendricks was popular that summer, and it blared in the nightclubs we patronized. Young men tried to teach me a few steps, but I am one black woman not blessed with natural rhythm. The "Soul Train" chugged out of the station without me.

Narcotics were common on campus, but on our group outings, no one suggested getting high. As blacks in a primarily white city, we had to stay one step ahead of our white peers. If we got nabbed with drugs, we knew our punishment would be harsher than sentences meted out to whites. We kept clean because interaction with the police was tantamount to suicide.

As the summer went on, Ruth became fondly

critical of my wardrobe, made up of hand-me-downs and sale items. She insisted on taking me shopping in a popular commercial area called Downtown Crossing. “You need some snazzy clothes,” she said bluntly. “You dress like an old maid.”

How could I disagree? But I didn’t have a clue what to do about it. And I was, as usual, broke.

“Girl, haven’t you ever heard of Filene’s Basement?” Ruth said with a huge grin. “It’s the greatest place to shop in Boston.”

“What is it?”

“What is it? A huge bargain basement that’s got everything,” Ruth said. “We’ll find you some clothes that’ll give you a lift.”

“Do I really look that bad?”

“If I say yes, promise you won’t be mad.”

Filene’s Basement was the most uncivilized department store in Boston. The place hopped with impatient, cost-conscious shoppers who snatched garments right out of other shoppers’ hands. People pushed and shoved their way through the aisles, making me feel frantic. Since Filene’s Basement had no dressing rooms, women whipped off their clothes and tried on new outfits on the spot, regardless of who surrounded them. An extremely modest person, I resorted to a more cautious way to see if something fit. Whenever I found an outfit I liked, I held it up against me. If it did not look like it would fit, I tossed it back into the bins and kept looking.

I prevailed through an exhausting afternoon. By the time we walked out, I had purchased two new outfits, which, according to Ruth, did not

make me look like I was dressed for the Middle Ages. I vowed, however, to avoid Filene's Basement forever.

I shared a dorm room with three students. Generally, we tolerated one another, but tensions arose at night. Stella, a student from Baltimore, snored so loudly she sounded like the underground subway clanging through a tunnel. Needless to say, the rest of us missed out on a full night's sleep. At the end of four almost sleepless nights, we had a heart-to-heart talk with the offender, but Stella took the defense. She scrunched up her nose and said, "I can't help it, y'all."

"None of us can sleep listening to your big mouth. You ever hear yourself?" Ruth asked. "Girl, you sound like a rhino at a drag race."

"I'm not that loud," Stella insisted. "What you want me to do?"

Ruth glanced at the rest of us and said, "There's three other sisters here who can't sleep because of you."

"Y'all acting like I'm doing this on purpose."

Ruth shot back, "Get your noisy nose to cooperate and we'll all be happy."

The snoring dragged on and so did our restless nights. My roommates and I woke up groggy almost every morning. Sitting through class on four to five hours of sleep caused me to nod off now and then. To prevent mayhem, one of the program managers moved Stella to a private room. I heard her snoring was so noisy that students in

the next room threatened to throw her off the John Hancock Tower if the noise persisted.

Janet Freeman, the senior student who had befriended me earlier, treated me like a younger sister. She checked up on me at least once a week. Usually we ate lunch in the dorm cafeteria. In spite of my interpersonal clumsiness, I felt a connection with Janet I did not enjoy with the others. We shared a few traits but differed in many ways. Reserved like me, Janet was mature for a 22-year-old college student. She seemed so worldly. She also had a polished elegance I longed to have. Underneath my emotional armor, I appreciated the way she cared about me. A huge chunk of me regretted I could not voice my thanks, and I trusted Janet understood.

I became more and more aware of how my past had crippled me. Constantly viewing myself as a boarder in someone else's home had hobbled my interpersonal skills. Every set of foster parents distinguished between foster children and their children. It was always us vs. them. All the foster families I lived with were poor, so they showered their children with praise and affection, if not gifts. I was ignored and never hugged. Research studies show that foster children often develop behavior problems. I could have told them that without any studies.

There were light-hearted moments over the summer. Streaking, also known as the art of running naked, prevailed on college campuses

in the early 70s. One afternoon, Janet and I shared chicken salad sandwiches outdoors since the weather was so inviting. After lunch, we entered an elevator to take us to class when suddenly a white student jumped in, stark naked.

Janet looked coolly at the nude man and shook her head. She said, “Honey, cover up that puny pecker. I wouldn’t flash that little bitty thing if I were you.”

The man’s face flushed as though it’d been burned by the Florida sun. He grabbed himself and dashed off the elevator, flapping away as he ran. Once he was out of sight, Janet and I looked at one another and fell out laughing. Janet heaved so hard her stomach ached.

Several weeks passed, and I slid into a predictable routine. Dorm life, however, was not so routine. Four women sharing a tiny bathroom created chaos, especially since everyone but me wore makeup. The proper application of eyeliner, eyebrow pencil, face powder, and lipstick took hours. Two of us wore large Afros, a hairstyle needing lots of time to pick and fluff to a good size. I forced myself out of bed at sunrise. The early hour allowed more than a 60-second shower and time to do my hair without another student banging on the door. For someone used to rules and order, the confusion grated on my nerves.

To get along with the others, I pushed myself into a compromise on some issues. As part of the bargain I made with myself, I rotated meal sharing. I sometimes ate with the black students,

but once in a while I sat at a table with white kids I knew. Most often, I dined alone. Only one or two black students bugged me about eating with whites. Mostly, though, where or if I had meals became a non-issue.

Food was the typical institutional type. The canned vegetables were limp and salty. Fresh fruits were served on a haphazard basis. Dishes containing meat were often brackish, lacking any discernible taste. Servings of white bread and butter were plentiful. There was an endless supply of desserts, mostly glazed donuts, frozen layer cakes, and ice cream sandwiches. Because I was on the meal plan, I stuffed myself at every meal. In just a few weeks, my waistline expanded at least half an inch.

One evening, Ruth noticed I had passed through the food line twice. She stared at the slab of meat loaf on my plate, next to three pieces of bread and a hunk of cake. She asked, “Girl, how many people are you feeding?”

“Um . . . it’s for me.”

“If you keep on packing it away like that, you’ll be a porker in no time.”

My excessive eating had its roots in foster care. The families I lived with all survived on meager incomes, so usually there was not enough for second helpings. During particularly hard times, meals consisted of macaroni and cheese or canned mystery meat. Imagine my shock when the food at BC turned out to be abundant; I did not need permission to have seconds.

A Catholic school education had drummed a sense of order into my life. I was always on time and prepared for class. Some of my roommates, however, followed a tradition among certain blacks called “CP time” and breezed into class several minutes late. CP time stood for “colored people time,” and it referred to tardiness, a common behavior in the ghetto. Obviously, the white professors weren’t used to so many black students, let alone CP time. Several stern warnings about timeliness ended CP time that summer.

Although I reluctantly pushed myself to be sociable, I remained detached. Years of research have shown that children need adequate attachment relationships if they are going to develop normally. No kidding. I am a classic example of what happens when attachment relationships as an infant are fractured or non-existent. I have pored over research studies about maternal deprivation during infancy. I am not an expert in this field, but it is clear that nothing substitutes for a steady, nurturing figure, whether it is a man or a woman. I had neither. Sometimes I felt as if my feelings were permanently on ice.

If Prozac was around when I started college, I would have been the perfect candidate for this modern miracle drug. But the last thing I wanted was to immerse myself in the system again by asking to see a counselor. Janet Freeman was available, but I remained stoical and handled my problems alone, like I always had.

Books tucked underneath my arm, I left my room one evening and headed for the library. On the way, I bumped into Ruth. She tilted her head to the side and asked, “Girl, where’re you off to?”

“The library.”

“Want to come and chill out with a group of sisters?”

“No, I better not,” I said. “I have this assignment due.”

Ruth said, “Girl, you’re such a party pooper. If you come to your senses, you know where to find us. Later for you girl.”

Walking away, I wondered if I would always be such a bump on a log. Congenial women like Ruth attracted hordes of attention, yet I could barely say hello to people. Everyone in the program, it seemed, knew Ruth. How many people knew my name?