CIRCLE OF STRENGTH

A University Thesis Presented to the Faculty

of

California State University, East Bay

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in English

By

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June 2016
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Date:

5/3/2016
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The Storytellers

One of the most vivid memories of my grandmother is her sitting in a chair, down in the basement of Foster’s Restaurant peeling potatoes. I was around nine or ten years old. The potatoes were in a brown, wooden barrel.

“Here, make yuhself useful,” she said as she handed me a knife.

I’d never seen that many potatoes before; just looking at the barrel overwhelmed me. Reluctantly, I began peeling them. I thought I’d be peeling potatoes when Christmas rolled around. It was July.

Foster’s Restaurant was located on Geary and Market Street in San Francisco. It was one of the chain restaurants owned by Samuel Longley Bickford. Once, Mr. Bickford paid a surprise visit while I was there. He was there to transact some business and check on his restaurant. Bickford came down into the basement where he observed me helping my grandmother. Bickford walked over to where my grandmother and I were peeling potatoes.

He smiled and said, “I see you have your helper with you today.” He patted me on my shoulder, “A few more years you’ll be old enough to work at Fosters.”

I wanted to tell him that he couldn’t pay me a million dollars to peel potatoes. But, I bit my tongue for fear that Granny might backhand slap the taste out my mouth. She considered it rude—sassing an adult. Her southern roots made “Yes sir” and “No sir” a mandatory decorum when speaking to elders. Whether they liked what an adult said or not, she believed a child should stay in a child’s place.
Born and raised on the one hundred and fifty acre farm owned by her father in a rural community called Rodessa, Louisiana, she was used to hard labor. She was big-boned, but solid, and strong as an ox. She could lift a three hundred pound hog and throw it across the pigpen as if it were a weightless piece of paper. Granny did strenuous tasks that were foreign to a city girl like me. Her younger days had prepared her to endure uncomfortable, harsh working conditions. She had spent many earlier days working outside in the humid heat and scorching hot sun to help plant and harvest the crops on their farm. The blistering hot sun left some visual telltale signs etched in her light, faded chestnut complexion that revealed years of hard, backbreaking manual labor.

Domestic jobs Granny did for condescending white folks taught her how to survive in a world that devalued African Americans’ humanity and exploited their hard work for a pauper’s pay. Years spent underneath the foot of Jim Crow did not kill her spirit. She maintained her jovial, laid back, independent personality. Granny was kind-hearted, but she wasn’t a pushover; she, definitely, didn’t take any shit off anyone either.

Nevertheless, I couldn’t visualize myself peeling potatoes, scrubbing floors, and washing mounds of dishes. I visualized myself as a homemaker living in a house, with a white picket fence like the one I saw on Leave It to Beaver. I’d have a pretty dress with matching high heels. Every now and then, I visualized myself as an actress or model.

My imaginary world was naïve in a country that didn’t want to see African Americans with a nickel or anything resembling the glamour I saw on television or in magazines.
Whenever Granny cooked, she cooked enough food to feed an army. Whatever she cooked was from scratch. Betty Crocker, quick meals in a box or canned foods were a sacrilege to her. Granny was an excellent cook. No one resisted an offer to eat or take a plate home whenever she cooked. Granny loved to cook.

“You never know when someone might be hungry. Never turn a person that’s hungry away. Feed them. If one of y’all were hungry, you’d want someone to feed you. I remember the Great Depression. Po people had a rough time,” she said.

More than anything, her greatest delight was feeding people. I believe that’s why she’d cook so much. It was her way of staying prepared in her mission to feed the poor.

Many weekends, I stayed with Granny in her one bedroom apartment located in Hunters Point. She lived on a hill overlooking Hunters Point Naval Shipyard in San Francisco. My step-grandfather had served in the Navy during World War II. Many African Americans migrated from the South and moved there to find jobs during the 1940s. The exterior color of the two-story, dwellings was a Patriot Red, with a Martin Cream trim. All of the apartments had a kitchen, living room, bedroom, and a bathroom. The dwellings had pale yellow, vinyl linoleum floors with gold diamond and circle patterns in the center of them. Compared to the slums around the city restricting African Americans citizens to substandard, dilapidated, roach, and rat-infested housing, Hunters Point housing was a heavenly oasis.

Many years later, a bit of interesting information surfaced that was unknown to the residents who lived in the Hunters Point housing during that era. “The naval shipyard had an undisclosed radiological laboratory used by scientists testing biological and
chemical weapons and were experimenting on animals. Ships used in atom bomb testing were also decontaminated there” (Fimrite). Most African Americans suffer respiratory problems in neighborhoods with similar toxic environments. This country has always given an impression it wanted to eliminate African Americans one way or another. Yet, I hated it when she moved from there.

Hunters Point housing complexes had a park down the hill, on the left hand side of it with swings, a merry-go-round, and jungle bars. I loved playing there during the day. The shipyard faced the park. It was in close proximity—only a couple of feet away to be exact. There was a Mom and Pop store at the bottom of the hill, on the right hand side, where I’d go buy candy with my play, toy money. I learned when I got older that Granny had already paid for the candy with real money. Sometimes it was the elderly Jewish owners’ treat. She and the storeowners kept that secret arrangement between them hidden from five year old me. Nevertheless, it made me feel like I was a big kid, which amusingly tickled the three of them.

When she moved to Clara Street, I missed the freedom to roam around the neighborhood and explore all by myself. It was also my first encounter with creepy roaches, nasty tasting water, and the never-ending smell of Raid Ant & Roach Killer. Wherever Granny lived, she kept her place so immaculate; a person could eat off the floor. She had meticulous housecleaning habits—every nook and cranny was spotless. She scrubbed her floors and waxed them until they had a mirror shine of perfection. Granny’s beds were so neat and smooth until a person could roll a coin on it. Nonetheless, her housecleaning habits didn’t stop the roaches left from prior tenants or
the roaches’ determination to crawl all over the place. Those roaches were some stubborn, impolite critters. Now, that I think about it, the reason they were so visible was because her place was too spic-and-span. They had nowhere to hide. Nonetheless, I was extremely happy when she moved from there.

For entertainment, Granny and I played Pokeno or cards for wooden matchsticks or pennies, which is how I learned to count and basic math.

“Here divide these matches up with your brothers,” Granny said as she handed me the matchbox.

When we weren’t playing games, we watched the wrestling matches, *Shirley Temple*, and *Charlie Chan* on television. Back then, actors on television were lily white. Even the actors portraying Charlie Chan were white men with their eyes taped to look slanted. Roles for genuine people of color were a bare minimum. Instead, whites portrayed people of color and imitated them with mockery and derision. *Charlie Chan*, *Shirley Temple*, and wrestling matches had African Americans in them. However, their acting parts were stereotypical buffoons, simpletons, and cowards.

It tickled Granny to see Stepin Fetchit bulge his eyes, scratch his head, and do his simpleton act. It made my ears and face turn red. I didn’t know any African Americans like the roles Lincoln Theodore Monroe Andrew Perry portrayed as Stepin Fetchit. All the African Americans I knew in real life were dignified, gracious or down-to-earth, intelligent, and courageous.

Later on as an adult, I learned that Perry wasn’t anything like his television personality. He was an intelligent journalist who worked, simultaneously, for the
Chicago Defender Newspaper. Back then, African Americans did what they had to do to get into the entertainment world and earn a decent income. Today in Hollywood, African American women only receive Oscars for playing stereotypical parts such as the domestic help, abusive mom, singer, deceptive psychic, and slave. Today there is a slight difference in stereotypical roles. Hollywood has toned down the humiliation.

One evening, when Granny finished washing dinner dishes, she sat down in her chair to relax. The chair was beige with a red rose’s pattern in it. A white doily with an embroidered rose in the center covered the arms of the chair. Between dipping Garrett snuff and spitting it out in an empty Folger’s coffee can, she entertained me with stories until I dozed off to sleep on the couch. Some of the stories were funny, but some were not. She told me stories about relatives I’d never met or I’d meet later on, or I’d never meet.

“Child...youse related to ev’rybody in Kiblah and Rodessa. Baby, you got enuff kinfolks to make a Tarzan movie,” Granny said and laughed.

Therefore, I didn’t take her serious. I felt as if she made up some stories for entertainment purposes. It turns out most of them were true. As my cousin, Reatha Mae put it, “Ooh, good Lawd. YES!” Maybe, Granny embellished some of it, but then again, maybe not.

Both Kiblah and Rodessa are located in rural communities surrounded by wooded areas with dirt roads. My enslaved ancestors in Doddridge, Arkansas built an African American settlement within the community after slavery ended. They named it Kiblah. Kiblah means the direction faced when a Muslim prays during salat. African Americans
nicknamed it the Bend, but whites called it Nigger Bend. Kiblah is beautiful in some areas with rolling green hills. The historical path of the Trail of Tears runs through some of our land. There are Native Americans’ and Union soldiers’ graves in the Blanton and Ryan Cemetery. The church that my great-great-grandfather Wesley Godfrey founded in 1868 still sits on top of a hill. A school that my cousins established during Reconstruction transformed into a recreation center.

Gradually, the slave masters relocated and they sold the land in Rodessa, Louisiana on one side of the railroad tracks to my ancestors. Roads that bear the names of my ancestors on them are unspoken identifications markers that reveal each relative’s land ownership. The land is valuable for its timber and oil. During the Nightriders reign of terror, Nightriders threatened a few of my ancestors over their land, but their attempts to drive them off their land were unsuccessful. My ancestors fought back and held on to their land. They passed it down as heirs’ property to their descendants.

For survival in both places, Granny taught me lessons about the environment. From her I learned that prickly trees are good for medical purposes. She used the bark from the tree to make a tea, which relieved pain in arthritis. The prickly tree was also good for other serious illnesses. She always said, “These doctors don’t know what they talking bout.” Granny did not trust doctors.

There was an article in the newspaper about smog that Granny read. After she read it, she put the newspaper down, and she stared out the window.

Granny said, “There aren’t enough trees. Trees purify the air. Country air is fresh…there are more trees.”
I remember those little lessons she taught me for survival in the woods. I can hear her warnings in my head, now.

She’d say, “Child, stop! Don’t go that way. Look wer’ yuh’re goin’. Don’t you see those snake tracks? Snakes are up ahead! Turn. Go dis way. Watch out! Dat there dat look like sand, it’s a red ant pile. They’ll eat you up. Don’t touch dat tree, its poison.”

She taught me that people in the country that have a bunch of cats is because the area infested with snakes. Whenever, she walked through the woods, she carried a stick. She’d hit the stick on the ground as a warning to snakes. Snakes are scared of people too. Thank God, I never ran into a snake before. I probably would have flew away on my coattail.

One Saturday evening, Granny shared a story with me about her deceased baby brother. “It wuzn’t a drop of blood left in his body,” Granny said in a low voice filled with anguish.

“The women were crazy about him,” she said. A sad, faraway look washed over Granny’s face. She paused for a minute or two and then she continued.

“That gal lived over yonder in Vivian,” Granny said. She paused again, leaned over, and spit in her can.

“She killed my brother,” Granny said as her voice cracked and tears formed in the corner of her eyes.

Granny wiped her eyes with her apron. I lay on the couch and wrestled with compassion and inquisitiveness in my mind. Part of me didn’t want Granny to cry, so I
remained quiet. The other part of me was curious as to why he didn’t have a drop of blood left in his body.

Mixed emotions of sadness and anger engulfed the room. I wanted her to finish telling me, but not if it made her cry. For her, the story was a reliving of strong emotions—past unbearable grief.

“That heffa called herself casting a love spell on Brotha,” Granny composed herself and continued.

“She believed in that ole hoodoo. She put something in his food. The woman’s sister found out. She begged her to stop. But, she wouldn’t. My brother got real low sick. Her sister told Captain. You’d better come see bout your brother. But, it wuz too late.”

Granny’s brother went looking for the woman, but she disappeared. Sometimes I wonder if my great-uncle had something to do with her disappearance. No one heard from her again.

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“Some women are too men crazy,” she said.

However, what seemed odd to me was Granny’s conclusion of her brother’s death. She felt he was too handsome for his own good.

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Oftentimes, through my grandmother’s stories I learned about an emotion opposite of love—hate. It is a sort of hate which blinds men into believing they're God. Those kind of men think it is their God-given right to end a life without consequences or
punishment—in a so-called Christian nation. Self-proclaimed Christian folks murdered without remorse or a conscience. Yet, they swear that their religion is one based on love. White privilege embedded a belief in them that people of color are subhuman—disposable inferiors. In a scholarly article, *White Fragility* written by Robin DiAngelo, he wrote, “White people are taught not to feel any loss over the absence of people of color in their lives. In fact, this absence is what defines their schools and neighborhoods as ‘good’; whites come to understand that a ‘good school’ or ‘good neighborhood’ is coded language for ‘white’” (qtd. in DiAngelo 58). Therefore, that belief is the foundation of discrimination, racism, and segregation.

Some whites murdered three of my ancestors who they caught off guard, in vulnerable positions.

“White men lynched Cousin Charles,” Granny said with a tone of disgust. She continued, “He was a preacher. They lynched him over the oil on his land,” she said. Granny shook her head in a disapproving manner.

“The oil men wanted his land,” Granny said. She paused. Then she continued telling the story.

“They told him to leave or die. But, he refused to leave. It happened one Sunday night. He and his wife were on their way home from church. A man stopped them on the road. The man told him he needed to talk to him. He sent his wife home,” she said.

Granny told me he didn’t return home that night. His wife began to worry. In the morning, she went to the sheriff. The sheriff found his body and another man’s body hanging from a tree over the Black Bayou.
In the book *100 Years of Lynching* by Ralph Ginzburg, he mentions Charles name in two sentences (Ginzburg 80). In newspaper articles I obtained, the first clipping stated, “It is believed by the officers that Tyson was the victim of a plot by members of his own race, as he had never had any trouble with his white neighbors and not even suspicion of any crime had ever rested on him” (N. O. Times-Picayune). However, the second newspaper clipping clearly states, “The grand jury declared that information received indicated beyond doubt that white men were responsible. The lynching was described as being shameful and disgraceful to the white manhood of the parish, and such crimes of assassinations that were committed by the bloodthirsty men in darkened ages, but should not be countenanced in this age of enlightenment” (N. O. Times-Picayune). However, the guilty parties escaped punishment. The court ruled, “The evidence didn’t justify indictments” (Times-Picayune). The injustice illustrated that his life compared to white privilege was as worthless as two wooden nickels.

During my research, I learned the cause of my Uncle Bill’s death when I found his death certificate. Uncle Bill was a great-uncle on my mom’s paternal-maternal side. He lived in Kiblah. Sometimes it wasn’t safe in some places to be out alone when the sun went down. I learned from his death certificate and my cousin Lorene that whites killed my great-uncle Bill in Texarkana. He was a preacher too. Texarkana is on the borderline of Arkansas. Uncle Bill usually went to Texarkana to visit with his brother Oscar. White men pistol-whipped him to death. A relative of my ancestors’ ex-slave master found him. He brought him back home.
Apparently, racism has wings. Granny shared a story with me about her brother Bo. He served in the army during WWII. While stationed over in France, Uncle Bo befriended a French woman and her family. He was helping her carry some bags. On the way, they encountered some hostile white soldiers. Those soldiers brought Jim Crow with them to France. An African Americans man on friendly terms with a white woman didn’t sit too well with them. The soldiers picked a fight with my uncle. They tried to kill him. It was either him or them, so Uncle Bo killed them in self-defense. He spent eleven years in Fort Leavenworth Prison. After his release from prison, he got a construction job. Uncle Bo married, settled down, and lived to a ripe old age. I’ll always remember him as a soft-spoken, calm man with a pretty smile, and a good sense of humor. He was wise, nonjudgmental, and generous.

While I was on vacation in Louisiana, I stayed with my cousin Suge. There are many elderly women in my family who told me stories. My cousin Suge was one of them. She told me the story of Cousin Parker. Cousin Parker was another one that whites had warned to leave. He lived in Vivian, which is a small town next to Rodessa. Whites wanted to buy his land. The town’s country club was built where his land was located. Whenever Suge told me a story, she dramatized it.

“Some whites wanted to buy Cousin Parker’s land, but he refused their offer. Someone who overheard warned him. The white men planned to attack that night. Cousin Parker sent his wife and children away. He hid on his barn rooftop. He waited for them. The men came late at night. They shot up his house. He heard them say they
were out of ammunition. Cousin Parker shot and killed every single one of them, except one. He maimed him in the leg,” Suge said.

That man was Grandma Jane’s white, half-sister’s father-in-law. He walked around with a peg leg for the rest of his life. Cousin Parker left and took refuge in the Caddo Native American village for protection. He stayed with them awhile until it was safe for him to leave. Cousin Parker lived to be an old man. The Nightriders left my ancestors alone.

One afternoon, Suge and I were in her room talking. I had been showing her some pictures that I had. Suge handed me back the last picture.

“Cousin Thad owned a small café and juke joint. He and a deputy sheriff messed around with the same woman. The deputy sheriff didn’t like Negroes, but he loved Negro women. He came during the oil boom. Thad was at his café. But, he wasn’t feeling well. He rested his head on the hood of his car. The deputy drove up. He got out his car, walked over to Thad. The deputy hit Thad upside his head with his pistol. He arrested him,” Suge said in a dramatic fashion.

I learned from Suge that the sheriff took Thad out in the woods where he had a hearse and more men waiting on them. A cousin of ours happened to be walking through the woods and saw them. He hid in the bushes and watched them. The sheriff made Thad run back and forth, while he shot at his feet. Our cousin that hid left and ran to go find Noah’s son. Noah Jr. got his gun and gathered some men. When they got there, it was too late. The sheriff lied. He claimed Thad attacked him, and he had to shoot him. The sheriff claimed that Thad was manufacturing illegal whiskey, which wasn’t true.
In another incident that Suge told me about that sheriff, a man with blue gums bit him. It caused an infection the sheriff failed to have treated. It was the cause of his death. The sheriff lost his mind as the infection progressed.

“There’s ghost troubled him when he lost his mind. He’d cry out, beg, and plead with Thad to leave him alone. He’d scream, ‘Thad, I’m sorry,’ Suge said.

Suge shared a story with me was about my grandmother’s father. My granny, my aunts, and uncles called him Poppa.

“Poppa didn’t bother anyone. No one dared to bother him either. He was a man of his word; he meant what he said. He didn’t bite his tongue. He’d let people know where they stand with him. Two things Poppa couldn’t stand—a liar and a thief. He had a good heart, but he didn’t play.”

Suge told me a story about Poppa’s watermelon patch and two of our cousins.

“Poppa had a watermelon patch across the road, in front of his house. Randolph and L. Nathan used to raid Poppa’s watermelon patch.” He said, “Stop raiding my watermelon patch. If you want a watermelon, come and ask me. I’ll give y’all anything you ask me for. But, don’t take it without asking. If you take from me, you’ll steal.”

Randolph and L. Nathan didn’t take heed to what Poppa told them. One day, Poppa was sitting out on his front porch. He saw Randolph and L. Nathan in his watermelon patch, but they didn’t see him. Poppa reached down on the side of his chair, and he picked up his rifle. When Randolph picked up a watermelon, Poppa shot it out of
his hand. It scared them. They took off running. When they got home, they told Aunt Sarah, “That old man is crazy.” After they told her what happened, she laughed. She told them, “Well, you shoulda asked. He told you to ask him.”

My two cousins learned their lesson that day. Never again did they raid Poppa’s watermelon patch. Thenceforth, they asked. I learned from that story that my ancestors didn’t play. When they said something, they meant it.

One Saturday evening, I was looking through Granny’s photo album. There was a picture of a woman in it. The woman sat in a rocking chair.

“Who is this?” I asked as I pointed at the picture. Granny replied, “My Grandma Jane.”

“But, she’s white,” I responded in disbelief.

“No, she’s Black,” Granny replied.

“Huh,” I said, “But…she looks white.”

“Her father was white,” Granny replied. “His name was Noah Tyson. He was Grandma Jane’s father and slave master. Grandma Caroline had her by him,” she said.

Years later, I found out that Noah had sixteen children in all, eight by his slave women, and eight by his wife Amanda. Noah Tyson was one of the founders of Rodessa. He was a police juror, postmaster, and co-owner of a store with his daughter Mary Emma’s father-in-law, Nathaniel Hoss. Mary Emma married his son James Hoss. Hosston, Louisiana is a small town named after James, which he owned. Through research, I discovered that Noah was a witness at Grandma Jane’s daughter Callie wedding. Callie was my great-grandmother. His name appeared on the marriage certificate.
Not only are the women storytellers in our family, a few of the men had stories to tell as well. An elderly cousin of mine name Hurlis lived with Grandma Jane.

Hurlis said, “Tyson’s son dropped by once in a while to chat with her. Whenever he came to visit, Grandpa Hal would leave,” Hurlis said while trying to suppress his laughter.

Whether or not Noah Jr. acknowledged Grandma Jane as his half-sister in public, he didn’t say. Hurlis did tell me that Noah’s son attended family funerals and other events. Before Hurlis died, he repeated the same story.

He also said, “On holidays, Noah stopped by for dinner. He’d bring his family with him.” I wondered to myself if it was more a servitude position involved than an ordinary family dinner or if Hurlis was confused. Hurlis was up in age when he told me that. He died a few months later. Nonetheless, I believe that it had to be Noah’s grandson because Noah and Noah Tyson II were both dead. Noah II died the same year Hurlis was born and Noah died in 1874.

As time went by, I heard more about Noah from other cousins. One of those cousins was Mark. He I share a similar interest in family history, so he’s one of our family historians. We have several. Most of what Mark knows are family stories passed down through generations or are documents found doing genealogy research. All of the family historians have the same information, pictures, and documents. However, a few of the stories passed down to Mark from his Grandpa Dave that he told me leave room for doubt. They seemed farfetched. In a conversation he and I had on the telephone one story he told me, I found hard to believe.
His Pawpaw told him that Uncle Sambo said, “Noah didn’t treat his black children like slaves. He made his white and black children ate out the same trough.”

When Mark told me that, I rolled my eyes and shook my head. I found it hard to believe for several reasons. Noah denied his slave women control over their own bodies. He never freed any of them or the children they had by him. Noah worked as an overseer on the plantation of his brother, Archibald, in Alabama before he migrated to Louisiana to branch out on his own. His brother, by the way, was one of the biggest slave owners in Lowndes County, Alabama. Mark and one of the white Tysons claimed that the Tysons didn’t beat their slaves. True. They burned them. Noah’s whole family were slave owners.

Archibald became owner of The First White House of the Confederacy. Archibald’s grandson Laban Warren Tyson Jr. married Mildred Keller the sister of Helen Keller. Noah’s whole family owned slaves in every southern state. In addition, a son of John Adams Tyson, John Russell Tyson was a U.S. Representative from Alabama, lawyer, and judge. Another one of Archibald's sons, Archibald Pitt Jr. was a Confederate Civil War veteran who served in Mississippi with Nathan Bedford Forrest, the man known to be the father of the KKK.

Being African American and a woman, I felt sympathy for his slave women and his wives that he cheated on during their marriage to procreate children by his slave women. That in itself spoke volumes about his character. Undoubtedly, it more than likely created hostility between white and black womanhood during that time. Nevertheless, whites’ blood ties to some African Americans living there wasn’t exactly a
secret in a town too small to contain it. Tattletale images of white men revealed in the African Americans reflected the advantages taken in an era not quite forgotten. While researching our family history I obtained from the Shreve Memorial Library in Louisiana a copy of an excerpt from a published book in which a local historian wrote a slightly apologetic excuse for Noah in behalf of his infidelities. It said in the excerpt, “All of the white and black Tysons in Rodessa descended from Noah Tyson. Noah Tyson couldn’t resist a pretty face” (Collier, 49).

During my last vacation in Rodessa, I spent a whole day at the house of one of my white Tyson cousins. His wife and I went to the cemetery together. When she pulled out her photo album, it surprised me. She had a picture of Grandma Jane in it. They knew who she was. Later on, I discovered many of the white Tysons doing genealogy have a picture of Grandma Jane on their page—listed as Noah’s daughter. They acknowledge her, but they hide the fact that her mother Caroline was a slave—an African American woman, except for a couple of them. Instead, they list her mother as Noah’s wife Amanda. I don’t know which two of the “ashamed” make them do that. Those people are dead and gone. Left behind are the reminders of what happened in the past. Nevertheless, we’re living in the age of truth. People tend to fight against the truth.

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I discovered a few relationships that were complicated and confusing that involved some kinfolks in Rodessa. However, they were on different sides of my mother’s family—her paternal side or her maternal side. One great-aunt would be my
step great-grandmother too, some cousins would be my cousin and uncle or my grandfather and uncle. Rodessa was a small rural town and my African Americans kinfolks had been there since slavery and the founding of Rodessa.

Noah Tyson Sr. was one of the founders of Rodessa. He and others in the community called a meeting to give the town a name. They named it Frogs Level in the beginning because of the frogs croaking at night in a nearby pond. The President of K.C.S. Railroad named it Rodessa after his daughter when the railroad company moved there.

Another branch on our family tree is the Herndons. The Herndons’ father was a white man name John Frederick Herndon. Herndon fathered children by his slave Lou Patsy Charles. He emancipated Lou Patsy and her children. He left his children by her a great deal of money and land in his will, but excluded her. Herndon stated in his will, “The woman [Lou Patsy] had gotten all she deserved from him” (John F. Herndon Will). From the look in Lou Patsy’s eyes, in a picture I have of her, I feel she deserved more. I can see it in her eyes that she had been through hell. A couple of their daughters married my Grandma Jane’s brothers, so some of her children are my double cousins.

Herndon came from a rich, influential family that lived in Spotsylvania, Virginia and he had strong political ties; William Herndon was his cousin. William was President Lincoln’s law partner and friend. More than one William in the Herndon family practiced law. Other relatives of his were Fleetwood Herndon, Louise Herndon who married President Chester A. Arthur; Mary Jane “Polly” Bradley who married Governor
James Sevier Conway, Arkansas’s first governor. Some of the white Herndons are on my 23andme and Ancestry DNA relative chart.

I do know that Granny thought that one of our African American Herndon cousins was crazy. She told me that he called himself liking her.

“I told him that he’d better gon’ somewhere with dat. I don’t believe in kissing cousins. If he didn’t leave me alone, I’d tell Poppa. He left me alone after I threaten to tell Poppa.”

Nonetheless, Granny didn’t volunteer information about the white side of the family; nor did her siblings when they were living. I guess that’s what Aunt Jimmie was referring to when I called her to get some information while working on the maternal side of my family.

“Leave that shit alone. You might find out something you don’t wanna’ know,” Aunt Jimmie said in an antagonistic manner.

Nevertheless, I had a strong desire to know our family history. As Alex Haley said, “In all of us there is a hunger, marrow-deep, to know our heritage—to know who we are and where we have come from. Without this enriching knowledge, there is a hollow yearning. No matter what our attainments in life, there is still a vacuum, an emptiness, and the most disquieting loneliness” (Haley).

A few of our kinfolks invested in oil, real estate, bonds, gold, and other profitable business ventures. Some of them accumulated a great amount of wealth. “Our Cousin Mary Ann Herndon’s son David Raines was very wealthy,” Granny said. The W.E. B. Du Bois’s Crisis Magazine interviewed David for philanthropy. He made large
contributions to Wiley College, the Home for Elderly Negroes, construction of a Boy’s home, and he bought a poor elderly man a home.

“The Herndons had a lotta of money. Their father left them money in his will. Mary Ann’s brother Joseph lived a simple life. Joseph wasn’t flamboyant...he didn’t flaunt his wealth. Looking at him, people woulda thought, he’s just another po’ Negro. But, he wasn’t,” Granny said nonchalantly.

Granny and others in the family told me that Joseph lived in a shack with a dirt floor and wore old, patched up clothes. He donated $125,000 dollars to have a school built for African Americans. They named the school Herndon High after a battle in court. My cousin Dave Tyson took them to court. The new superintendent thought he’d be able to renege on a promise and stipulation in the deal, but my ancestors won that court case. He’d underestimated them. Fighting battles in court was one thing the Tysons and Herndons loved to do.

One thing the Tysons and Herndons had experience in was the court system and knowledge of the laws, which they learned from the white side of our family. One day after watching Perry Mason on television, Granny blurted out of the clear blue sky, “Our kinfolks is a mess.”

“Elbert Tyson took David to court,” she said. Granny shook her head, laughing in between, while telling me, “Mary Ann had some land and rental properties. She died. Elbert had been collecting the rents on the properties for Mary Ann when she got old. After she died, David went to take possession. Elbert wanted to keep collecting the money for himself. He took David to court. Elbert told the judge that David was
illegitimate. He told the judge that David’s father John Raines was a white man.”

Granny broke into an uncontrollable laughter. She had to compose herself before she finished telling me the story.

“Elbert had R. H. Harrell, Uncle Sambo, Sam Sewell, Teat, and Calvin and Charley Hamlin to testify that David was white. Teat, wasn’t even born when John was living. Elbert had promised them some money if he won the case. Uncle Sambo and Harrell were the only ones ever seen John before. But, they claimed that David told ‘em his father was white. Mary Ann’s brothers testified for David. Elbert lost, and David won.”

During that era, people could challenge the legality of a marriage on the grounds of miscegenation if they could prove that one of the parties was white. The court transcripts stated,

Martha Payne, two of the brothers and a sister of Mary Ann Raines, deceased, testified for the defendant. They knew John Raines well. Joseph Herndon, at the time he testified in the case, was 83 years old, and Jim Herndon and Martha Payne were over 70 years old. They testified that John Raines’ complexion was dark; that his hair was very curly; that he associated entirely with Negroes; and that they believed he had Negro blood (Tyson et al. v. Raines).

David was an astute businessperson and invested his money wisely. “An article written in the 1920 Negro Year Book Louisiana Farmer Purchases $100,000 Worth of Liberty Bonds was referring to David” (Tyson). Today, there are several David Raines Community Health Centers named after him located in Shreveport, Bossier, Gilliam, Haynesville, and Minden.

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One holiday, Granny was listening to the blues on her record player. Back then, vinyl records played on record players instead of CD’s or IPod. A song came on by Howling Wolf called Dust My Broom. The first part of the lyrics to the song was:

\[
I \text{ believe I'll dust my broom} \\
I'm gettin' up soon in the mornin' \\
I \text{ believe I'll dust my broom} \\
I \text{ quit the best girl I'm lovin'}
\]

*Now my friends can get in my room* (Howlin’ Wolf)

“That song reminds me of my Uncle,” Granny said in an upbeat tone. She bent down to sweep the dust particles in the dustpan. Granny walked over to the trashcan, emptied the dustpan, and put the broom in the corner. She walked back and sat down in her chair.

“Uncle Link’s wife name wuz Rosie. Aunt Rosie wuz’ a pretty woman… Sweet as she could be. She wuz’ a good, faithful wife, and mother. Uncle Link loved his Rosie. But, he wuz jealous. Whenever he left his house, he swept his tracks. When he came back home, he’d check for footprints,” Granny said.

Uncle Link’s real name was Abraham Lincoln. My great-great grandparents were so glad to be free they named him after President Abraham Lincoln. During that era, most people white and black were illiterate, so they mostly went by word of mouth. Whites told them on the day that freedom came that President Lincoln freed the slaves. Had my great-great grandparents known President Lincoln’s white supremacy beliefs and
his ulterior motive, maybe, he’d have chosen Frederick Douglas name instead. In spite of
President Lincoln’s white supremacy views, evidently, whites didn’t think too much of
him. The message was loud and clear when they put his face on a brown penny—nigger lover. A penny is the only coin not made of silver.

One Sunday afternoon, Granny started a conversation about Grandpa Hal.

“Grandpa Hal never said hi or hello,” Granny laughed and said. He’d say, “First rate.” If a person didn’t respond, he’d say, “Ass speak! Mouth won’t!”

Grandpa Hal was a deacon at his church. The wood frame churches had dirt floors during that era.

“The church had a rule if anyone spit on the floor, that person had to pay a quarter. Grandpa Hal would get up. He’d put a quarter in the cup and spit on the floor,” Granny said and she laughed.

During slavery, the slave auction sold him from his mother when he was eight years old. Grandpa Hal wasn’t fond of white people at all. He didn’t trust or fool with too many African Americans either. Slavery taught him well, but it destroyed his trust. Grandpa Hal was mean, ornery, and stubborn. He was a rough and tough man. Whites thought he was crazy, so they left him alone. Grandpa Hal wasn’t afraid to die. He wasn’t crazy though. That day, I learned a few things about Grandpa Hal. Grandpa had an astuteness in business matters. In his will, he left his descendants’ valuable land with timber and oil on it. He paid two dollars for eighty acres. That land remains in the family to this day.
One evening, I lay at the foot of Granny’s bed because she wasn’t feeling well. She lived with me, when she retired. As Granny aged, she developed arthritis in her hands and knees. Sometimes it made her bedridden. Whenever she had those spells of arthritis, I’d go in her room to keep her company.

“Grandma Patsy wuz mean. She wuz blind. Ooh…she wuz so mean. She wuz meaner than a junkyard dog. My brothas, sistahs and me couldn’t stand being roun’ her. Grandma Patsy lived with us when she got old. She used to make stuff up to get us in trouble. When she went to the outhouse…we’d take a stick and poked her through the crack with it. She thought it wuz the chickens pecking her. Back then, when folks died…the coffin set in the house. That’s where people viewed the body. When Grandma Patsy died, her coffin sat in the parlor. We were scared to go to sleep,” Granny said and laughed.

They thought Grandma Patsy’s ghost would haunt them for the pranks they played on her. I couldn’t find a death certificate for Grandma Patsy. However, I did find a record for Social Security for Poppa and it said that Grandma Patsy’s maiden name was Blanton. She chose the surname of her slave owner when slavery ended. However, she wasn’t kin to the white Blanton family as far as I know. Her slave owner was Richard Blanton, he was a judge; his son James Deas Blanton was an Arkansas State Representative, and James wife was kin to President Polk. I discovered that on an obituary for one of James’ children.

Many women died early back during that era due to poor health or childbirth. Poppa Nelson married multiple times due to death of his wives. Grandma Callie died
when my grandmother was a young child. He married my grandfather’s Aunt Aimee. Aunt Amie was on my mother’s paternal side. She was my great-grandmother’s sister. Aunt Aimee died. His third wife was a woman name Louvenia. She wasn’t from Rodessa or Kiblah. He worked for the railroads laying down tracks when he married her. Therefore, Poppa would be gone for weeks and days. Louvenia had some children too.

Granny said, “When Poppa was gon’, Louvenia mistreated us. Louvenia was cruel to us. She fed her children and starved us. Louvenia told Poppa she didn’t like Bo. Poppa told her to pack her clothes. If you don’t like my son, you don’t like me.”

Granny told me he took Louvenia back to her people and left her there. That marriage didn’t end in death.

During the 1950s, the minimum wage pay scale was seventy-five cents an hour. In the sixties, it started at one dollar and went up to one dollar and sixty cents.

“It’s a mighty po’ person, that doesn’t have a hustle on the side,” Granny said. Gambling was a means of resource to supplement Granny’s income. Granny played poker, the horses, and Pokeno. She sold breakfast at the poker games held at her house. Granny would take that money and go to the racetrack. After she left the racetrack, she went to play Pokeno. Later on, she went to a poker game to play poker. Whenever she won big, she gave me a moneybag filled with silver dollars. Granny was lucky because she was never broke. When she died, she left thirty thousand dollars between her mattress and box spring. She didn’t trust banks.

Granny only drank alcohol on rare occasions, which I could count on one hand, and still have some fingers left over. One time was when her sister came out here from
Louisiana to visit, she and her sisters celebrated. Those three sisters played one record repeatedly. It was a record sung by Tommy Tucker called *Hi Heel Sneakers*. All day and all night I heard, “*Put on your red dress baby 'cause we're going out tonight, oh yeah. Put on your red dress baby 'cause we're going out tonight,*” (Tucker) blasting on the record player until they fell asleep. The sisters drank Jim Beam Whiskey. They sung along with the record, and they danced all night. It was a joyous occasion for them—the gathering of three sisters who loved each other unconditionally. I learned the genuine meaning of family from Granny, her siblings, and her aunts and uncles. When a person doesn’t have a friend in the world, they still have family. All throughout life, friends will come and go, but family will remain. Blood is thicker than water.

Another time she drank to celebrate was when she won the Exacta at the racetrack for seven hundred dollars. Granny got a little too tipsy that time. She called her sisters and a niece on the telephone. What she said next made me laugh and shake my head at the same time.

“I got the Holy Ghost,” she said in an upbeat tone.

I don’t know what kind of Holy Ghost she was feeling, but she had to be feeling mighty damn good. Nevertheless, that good feeling turned into anger, tears, and depression the next day. The bookie she had trusted left town with her winnings. She wasn’t expecting him to run off with her money. In the past, he had been faithful in bringing her winnings to her. After that incident, she never played the bookie again. Instead, she sent my dad or her brother.
Never will I forget the day my granny died. I had been out of town attending a function with some of my friends and my two daughters. When I came home, my answering message service was full. However, I didn’t bother to listen to them when I got home. Instead, I went to bed and slept until my granddaughter woke me up. I began to scroll through my messages. Ten of eleven messages were from one of my baby sisters telling me to call her. However, the last message from her was the one that shocked me into a stupor.

“Granny died,” that’s all she said.

I heard a click and a dial tone. I threw the telephone on the floor. I didn’t bother to listen to any of the other messages. My daughter picked the telephone up and hung it up.

“What’s wrong?” She asked me.

I was devastated, and I couldn’t answer her. Sadness and grief engulfed the room like a dark cloud. It seemed like a thousand ifs went through my head, but it was actually three.

She asked me again, “What’s wrong?”

Finally, I replied, “Granny passed away.”
Good and Bad Memories Growing Up

Up until I was in the third grade, our family struggled through some hard times. My parents struggled to make ends meet while they saved money. We lived in two temporary housing projects. They were for economically depressed shipyard workers in Richmond, California. One was on South 52nd Street. The other one was in the Canal located in Point Richmond. I used to throw rocks in a ditch close by the building.

My dad’s youngest sisters came to live with us after their father died. Aunt Daisy was still in junior high school and Aunt Jenny was in high school, at the time. Aunt Daisy stayed with us until she got married. Aunt Jenny didn’t stay with us long. In fact, she didn’t stay with anyone long. She had an independent spirit. The only memory I have when we lived in the Canal was that I was tender-headed. Both aunts took turns combing my hair. I hid under the beds or took refuge anywhere else, I could find. I hated getting my hair combed. My hair was long and thick. I had a good grade of hair, but it tangled easy.

On South 52nd Street, the only door in the bedrooms was the one separating the next door neighbors from ours. The neighbor’s children, my brothers, and I talked to each other through the door at night. We used curtains tacked over the doorway. My dad’s oldest sister lived on the corner. Because I was able to freely roam around and explore the neighborhood, I liked living there. The five and dime store was across the street. Someone pissed at the owner set it on fire one night. It burned to the ground. A telephone booth was on the corner, which those without a phone living there used. There was a laundromat behind the house a few yards away.
While living there, I had an allergic reaction to penicillin. Bumps the size of a quarter broke out all over my body. I had an extremely high fever, which caused me to have a febrile seizure. It happened on April Fool’s Day. I almost died. We only had one car and my father drove it to work. My mother needed a ride to take me to the hospital. No one she asked believed her. She called my step-grandfather. He didn’t believe her either. It pissed him off.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Grandpa said.

From what mother told me, he had a few other choice words for her. Finally, she convinced him she was serious. He came and they rushed me to General Hospital in San Francisco. I’m willing to bet he broke records getting me there. If African Americans had been able to enter in the NASCAR races, I guarantee you my step-grandfather would have been an undisputed NASCAR champion. Whenever he was behind the driving wheel, he drove fast. No, he raced.

When we lived on S. 52nd street, I started kindergarten. Stege Elementary School was a couple of blocks up the street and around the corner. School was a strange, isolated experience for me. The strangeness of it was learning a silly dance called the Hokie Poky. It would be all I learned at that school. I knew how to read, write my name, and color before the kindergarten. My aunt and mother had taught me. The first grade primer book Dick and Jane bored me, so daydreaming became an automatic pastime. I was able to read Cherry Street while the other kids were learning to read Dick and Jane.

“She’s a very bright student,” Miss Colbert told my mom. “But, she’s not utilizing her full potential,” she added.
However, she never told my mother that she separated me from the class and made me an outcast—excluded from the circle when they had group readings. Nor did she tell my mother that she didn’t include me in the lessons she taught the class. Instead, she gave me paper and crayons to draw. It was my first lesson in marginalization, but I didn’t understand it. I thought she was giving me a special privilege—a reward for being able to read. At the same time, I felt isolated.

I’d draw pictures and daydream. Pictures I drew were not the scribbled drawings most children my age drew. I drew houses, people, horses, and trees. When our family went on a trip to New Orleans, my first grade school year ended before the school year term was over. Miss Colbert gave me a stack of blank drawing paper and some crayons to take with me.

“Here. I want you to draw a picture of me. Give it to me when you come back,” she said.

I did draw a picture of her, but I never gave it to her. The next school year, I attended a new school.

Our trip to New Orleans was a new experience and adventure for me. When we arrived in New Orleans, it was the first time I’d ever seen white people who were African Americans. Eventually, I learned to recognize which ones were white and which ones weren’t. Years later, I learned from my mother that one of my great-grandmothers was still living when we made that trip. My dad didn’t take us to see her. Apparently, we didn’t pass the paper bag test.
During that era, children couldn’t sit in the company of adults when they were talking. They always ushered us outside to play. Sometimes I’d sneak in the house to eavesdrop. However, the adults always knew when I came back in the house. The squeak in the screen door was a dead giveaway. They’d switched from speaking English to speaking French. I learned that eavesdropping in New Orleans was useless, so I gave up. I went back outside and explored the neighborhood.

The houses in the neighborhoods had eccentric, architectural structures. Most of them painted with loud colors and enclosed with iron-gates or white picket fence. Some of them had a gaudy appearance. None of them had identical exteriors. The sidewalks were brick. Mostly, the people who lived in New Orleans caught my attention. They carried themselves in a prim and proper manner. Yet, when they spoke, it had a lively tone to it, but they sounded as if they came from another country. I noticed that they used the word “nuh” a lot when speaking. They pronounced New Orleans as Nawlins.

When we came back from New Orleans, we moved into a two-bedroom duplex on S. 13th, and Hoffman. The duplex looked nice on the outside and inside, but it had mice. Those mice would run around at night, which was creepy to me. I’d jump whenever I heard the mouse trap snap. Nevertheless, my mother kept it neat and clean. There was a clothesline in the back yard. The driveway was one of the longest driveways I’d ever seen. There was one shotgun house next door to us. Other than that, surrounding us were fields of tall grass, poppies, and blackberry patches.

There was a factory next door. Inside of the factory were two deep, huge uncovered acid vats. Only two white men worked there. My brothers and I would sneak
into the factory to take a peep inside those vats. One day, a white dude who worked there happened to come out of his office and caught us.

He yelled at us, “Get the Fuck outta here!”

He chased us out of there. My dad happened to hear him cussing at us and came outside. Hearing the man cuss at us made my dad angry. Daddy walked over there with intentions of whooping his ass. One thing my dad did not tolerate—an adult mistreating his kids.

“Whoa, whoa Mister, let me explain. C’mon inside, let me show you something,” The man pleaded with my dad.

My dad and the man disappeared for about an hour. When daddy did come back, he marched us into the house. We got a whooping that day along with a warning.

“Don’t let me catch you goin’ in that factory ever again,” my dad said in a tone, which let us know he meant serious business. He left and went back over to the factory.

The two white men that worked in the factory were named Frank and Al. Frank was the one that cussed us out. My dad, Frank, and Al became lifelong drinking friends. They were regular guests in our home until my dad died. My brothers and I forgave Frank; he turned out to be good people. He and Al even brought their children over to play with us sometimes. We had fun and a great time playing together.

Al gave us our first dog. It was a Rhodesian ridgeback named T’wowser. The dog was a lion hunter. In South Africa, Africans bred Rhodesian Ridgebacks to hunt lions. I loved that dog and took him with me whenever I went to the park. T’wowser was a well-trained dog. For fun, I had him chase the teenage boys in the neighborhood
up the trees. I made them say, “Pretty please” before I’d let them come down. Actually, it was fun to them too. It didn’t make them angry, and they made jokes about it. T’wowser helped them hone their high jumping and track skills. Besides which, T’wowser was a friendly dog if you proposed no threat or harm to my siblings and me. Everyone in the neighborhood knew that.

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Hard times ended around the summer, before I entered the fourth grade. My mother saved up enough money to buy a huge vacant lot on South 13th Street on the other side of Cutting Blvd. In business matters, my mother was astute. Once at her job, she shared one of her ideas with a co-worker. He shared the idea with their boss, took credit for it, and their boss promoted him to higher position. After that episode, she never made that mistake again. Anyway, one of the managers she worked with sold her a three-bedroom house cheap. She had the house moved onto the vacant lot my father and her bought. We were so happy to move into our new and permanent home. It was a fresh start, with brand-new furnishings. The only thing we brought with us was our clothes, utensils, dishes, and pots and pans. My parents bought new appliances and furniture for the entire house. No longer did I have to share a room and one end of a bunk bed with my brothers. I had a room all to myself for seven years.

The house had a porch that stretched from one end of the house to the other side. It had more room throughout the entire house. A long hallway separated the living room and bedrooms. I had my own bedroom. Our kitchen was a square shape. It had a dining
room with a nice chandelier hanging in the center of it. The back porch had a laundry room, so tugging clothes to the laundromat every so often ended. It had a built in ironing board, but my father took it out and rebuilt it into a small bar.

Our next door neighbor was an elderly Portuguese couple. They lived in an adobe house on the right side of us. I don’t remember the husband’s name, but I remember Anna. We had a pear tree on our side of the fence. The first day in our new house, my siblings and I discovered the pear tree, we went outside to the tree, and reached up to get one. Anna stormed out of her house with a broom, and chased us away. She scared us because we thought she was crazy. We ran in the house and told our dad. He went over there and talked to her and her husband. When he came back, he was laughing. He said, “Dee, she thought the kids were stealing the pears.” Afterwards, she invited us over in her yard to make amends. She let us pick plums off her tree, and we became friends with her. We’d run errands for her sometimes and my brothers mowed their grass. She baked cookies for us or gave us candy. When she died, I missed her.

On the left side of our house was a vacant lot. White people lived in the three houses across the street and in a house at the corner. On the rest of that side of the street was a church, a vacant lot, and a two-story empty flat. The white neighbors were unfriendly. They turned their heads if my brothers or I tried to speak. All of the white families moved out immediately after we settled in our house. More African Americans and a Hispanic family moved into their houses who remained our neighbors to this day, except for Miss Henry. Even the Seven Day Adventist Church immediately vacated the neighborhood and transformed into an African American church.
The Hispanic family—the Garcia family was friendly and down-to-earth. Mr. Garcia and my dad drank beers together. Mrs. Garcia was nice. She and my mom exchanged crochet patterns. Their son Tommy played with my brothers. Tommy was a daredevil. There was a railroad track at the corner of Ohio, which was a main cross street. Tommy loved to sneak over there and play chicken with the trains. It cost him one of his legs.

There was an Asian Doctor and his wife who lived around the corner. He and she were nice. They stayed in that house until he died. His wife moved, but she didn’t move too far. In fact, she moved into a smaller house on the same street, but on the other side of the tracks. They had a beautiful, colorful garden and a backyard full of fruit trees. It was something to behold. Some boys in the neighborhood used to raid his fruit trees. He made a deal with them. If they could out run him, he gave them the fruit. Most of them failed to outrun him, but they had fun racing him.

Miss Henry was a sanctified, filled with the Holy Ghost, spinster who drove like a bat out of hell. We played baseball in the streets. Every time we’d see her turn the corner, we’d shout to one another, “Here comes Miss Henry!” Then we’d rushed out of the street and raced to her house to open her gate. Whoever got there first and opened the gate, she rewarded with candy. I used to love to go over her house and play her piano. Well, actually, I banged on it, but she didn’t seem to mind. She had sheet music that I pretended I could read. Whenever Miss Henry watered her lawn, she put on a raincoat, rain boots, and a rain hat. Miss Henry loved dark burgundy suits because that’s the only
kind she wore. She was very peculiar. Miss Henry died in a terrible car accident when I was a teenager. She ran a red light.

On the corner, there was a yellow house, which looked out of place. The round shaped roof distracted from the rest of the house. Looking at it from an outside vantage point, it gave a false impression and the appearance of a mansion. The house was huge on the outside, but inside it shrunk into a small, two-bedroom house. An old couple lived there until they died. They had a fishpond in their backyard. We climb up on the fence to watch the fish swim around in the pond. The fish fascinated us. Sometimes they’d let us feed the fish. When the old people died, it stayed empty for years. A gay couple lives there now.

Incidentally, Nystrom was the new school that we attended. It was around the corner on the next street, so we didn’t have far to walk. The first day of school would be my first direct experience with racism. My mom packed us a lunch to take to school with us. Nystrom had lunch benches outside on the playground. Eating on the school ground and outside was a new experience for me. The only thing I hated about it was the seagulls flying over our heads shititng all over the place. I was one of the lucky ones and never had a seagull shit on my head or lunch. However, a few kids weren’t so lucky, which was rare.

Two white girls sat next to me while I ate my lunch. They were my classmates. Each class ate in their group together. For lunch that day, my mom had made fried chicken, potato salad, chocolate cake, milk, and an apple.

“Hey, I’ll trade you my sandwich for one of those drumsticks,” Rebecca said.
“Here. You can have it. But, keep the sandwich,” I replied as I handed her one of my drumsticks. Trying to be polite, I didn’t want to tell her that her sandwich didn’t look too good.

“You’re new girl. Did you move from another state?” Pat asks me.

“No, I always lived in Richmond. We just moved into our new house around the corner,” I replied back to her.

“We live across the street,” Rebecca said. “Do you know how to play tetherball?” Pat asks.

“What’s that?” I asked.

She pointed to a pole with a ball attached to a rope. The rope fastened at the top in a small circular loop hole.

“Would you like to learn?” Pat asks.

“Yeah,” I replied, excited that I had made two new friends that day. I learned how to play quick. We were having so much together.

“Hey, can you come over after school?” Rebecca asks.

“First, I have to ask my mom,” I replied.

“Okay, well ask your mom. I’ll show you where I live after school. You can meet me at my house,” she said.

I agreed and after school, she showed me where she lived. I asked my mom and she said it was okay.

I went over to Rebecca’s house her mom was nice to me. She told Rebecca before we left to make sure she was back in a couple of hours. Rebecca and I walked
down the street to Pat’s house and knocked on the door. Before she answered the door, I
heard her father say in an angry loud voice, “Don’t let that nigger in my house.” I didn’t
know what a nigger was. It was the first time I’d ever heard that word. However, I
noticed that Rebecca had turned red and had a weird look on her face. Pat opened the
door.

“Rebecca, you can come in. Altanette, you can’t come in,” she said.

Rebecca glanced quickly at me and walked hurriedly pass Pat inside the house.
Pat slammed the door in my face. I stood there staring at the door and playing a rerun of
what had just took place in my head. Suddenly, I felt as if someone had threw mud on
me. Her father had defiled me with his word—nigger. I walked home in a semi-daze.
When I got home, I went straight to my room. I kept hearing her father’s words
repeatedly. It felt like it does when you cut your finger, but worse, and I didn’t
understand why or the reason. I never told my mother or father. In my mind, the word
“nigger” was a bad word—a cuss word. I didn’t want to get in any trouble for saying a
bad word.

The next day at school, Pat and Rebecca put distance in between us. They
avoided me like people do a plague—as if I had some deadly disease. I was right back at
square one trying to make new friends. It would be awhile before I would have some
friends to play with. I’d face another obstacle called cliques. It was also my first
experience with social clique circles. Those cliques stood in the way of me making
friends like a brick wall. The incident with Pat and Rebecca made me timid in trying to
make friends in the future. Adjusting to my new school never happened. I’d remain a semi-loner up until the sixth grade.

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In the middle of summer, construction began on our block to build three new houses. We helped ourselves to some of the lumber after the workers left that evening. We didn’t think they’d mind us using it to make a jump board, a go-cart, and a scooter. After all, they had stacks of it. Turns out, we were wrong. They’re boss was hotter than fish grease. He yelled at us for taking it. He made me cry, especially when he threatened to tell our parents. I hollered louder when he told us that. That’s when I realized we were in serious trouble.

“Oh, forget it! For Christ sakes just stop crying!” He pleaded.

That’s the first time ever my crying saved us. The man made us promise not to touch their lumber again without asking. He even gave us one more board for our jump board. Once we caught some of his crew jumping on our jump board, but we didn’t mind. It was funny to us.

For seven years, I was the only girl on our block. I changed from a dainty little girl into a regular tomboy overnight. In my tomboy days, I could out run, out jump, out rough-and-tumble any boy on our street. I had a mean left-hook too. Dolls became my enemy, and I mutilated them. The dolls my mom bought me would wind up headless, armless, or legless. It frustrated my mom. I lost interest in toys for girls. Toys for boys were more fun compared to the lifeless toys girls played with. The trains went around
tracks and made sounds, truck and cars were mobile, and the guns fired caps and made popping sounds while emitting smoke. All a doll did was lay there lifeless.

My siblings and I didn’t always get the toys we saw on television, so we’d make them. If we wanted to blow bubbles, we took a bar of soap, and stirred it in water. We took a piece of hanger and shaped it like the little bubbles gadget used to blow bubbles. Coke bottle and thick rope became dolls. Old discarded wheels or skates, boards and nails were what we used to make cars. If we wanted to play baseball, we filled socks with more socks and used a flat stick for the bat. We were creative.

There were rules in our household. Some were strict rules unequally commanded, depending on our sex. Two rules in our house we all understood were chores and church applied to all. If we didn’t do our daily chores or go to church, we couldn’t go outside the rest of the week. We did our chores because left undone was visibly noticeable. Back then, we attended a Catholic church. I preferred going to my grandmother’s Baptist church. That’s where all my friends attended church. If I wanted to go to church with her, I had to attend an early mass at the Catholic Church, first. For a while, we attended church faithfully. Then we wondered why our parents were not as faithful. They slept late on Sundays. However, rain or shine we had to go. We felt cheated. My brothers and I devised a plan to avoid going to church. We got up and we pretended to go. There was a local newspaper company across the street from the church. My brothers and I would sit on the stairs behind the newspaper company until church let out. Our parents thought we were faithful church go’ers. They never found out.
My parents were different from each other as night and day. Whenever my dad was home on weekends, we had a house full of company. My dad was very charismatic. His magnetic personality drew people to him. He was sociable. However, my mother was the complete opposite of him. She was selfish in a petty way and somewhat unkind, but reserved. My parents were a shining example of a mismatched couple. As an only child, her mother spoiled her rotten. Everything had to be her way or she nitpicked and nagged, which was often. She wanted to be in control, but my dad wasn’t having it. He had his way of letting her know it. He’d leave and stayed gone until the bars closed. She’d sink into a temporary depression. It took me almost fifty years to understand her. Yet, she and my dad stayed together until he died. Maybe, he understood her.

Both of my parents originated from Louisiana. Daddy was born and raised in New Orleans. His ancestors had migrated to Louisiana before the Louisiana Purchase. He had eight sisters and two brothers. In contrast, my mother was born at the opposite end of Louisiana in Rodessa. Her ancestors migrated to Louisiana with their slave masters during slavery. Slave traders sold some of them fresh off the auction block from Africa. A couple of them came on their own after slavery ended.

Although mother didn’t have any siblings, she had enough cousins to make up for it. Her side of the family was huge and close knit. None of my great-grands on the maternal side or paternal side of my mother’s side had under ten children. One of my great-great grandmothers had twenty-three children. Their children followed suit. Birthing that many children, slowed down when it got to my generation. I figured if a man wanted that many kids, he should get a hammer and nails and build some.
Sunday dinners rotated back and forth at different family members’ houses on mom’s side on up into my early adult years. All of them were excellent cooks, so dinner was never a disappointment. For some reason, we never had dinners at my dad’s people house. We occasionally visited the ones that lived in California, but I don’t ever recall any invitations to dinner. Once, we ate barbecue at his oldest sister’s house, but that’s it.

My dad and granny had a great relationship, but she was my mom’s mother. Yet, he treated her as if she was his biological mother instead of his mother-in-law. She treated him like her biological son. He called her mother. Both of them were a people’s person. I guess that’s why they got along so good. At times, my mother was indifferent toward her mother, which irritated me. I was a granny’s baby. Yet, she was jealous of anyone else that she felt granny paid more attention to or them to Granny. Mother was territorial.

Daddy was a person that people confided in and sought for advice. Boys in the neighborhood, who didn’t have a father, loved my dad. To some he was a father figure they didn’t have. Many of them came by to seek his advice. I can’t recall anything that he wasn’t able to do. Sometimes, I believe he had a sixth sense. He always knew things ahead of time, which was a little spooky. It kept us on the straight and narrow path, most of the time, but not always. However, my mother wasn’t easy to approach. Her sour facial expression kept people at a distance. It took time for her to warm up to people and them her. She wasn’t really a people’s person like my dad and grandmother. I believe she preferred it that way.
Before my dad married my mother, he was a merchant seaman. When he was a merchant seaman, he traveled to places like Hawaii, Manilla, Seattle, and Saipan. His oldest brother helped him get the job. After he married my mom, he went to work on the sugar dock transporting sugar for C&H Sugar. My mom worked at Martinez hospital. She’d come home with tales of what went on that day. “That bastard spit on me.” While working in the hospital, some of the patients and her co-workers subjected her to racism and discrimination. Nevertheless, my mother was a tough cookie and the queen of sarcasm. She could make the person on the end of her biting remarks feel lower than dirt. That person froze without any come back remark. Mother stood every inch of ground she walked on. Eventually, mother took a few college courses. She went to work for I.R.S. as a tax representative. My mother remained there until she retired.

In spite of her stubborn, ornery disposition, at times, my mother was intelligent. She loved to read and to solve crossword puzzles. When my siblings and I were old enough to obtain a library card, she took us to get one. She took us to the library every three weeks. Mother encouraged us to read books. I read books and the newspaper. One of my brothers and I were the only two that shared her interest in reading. Our other siblings didn’t. Later on, we’d also be the only two to obtain college degrees, and our children would too. Our parents constantly stressed that we get an education.

Once, my father surprised me. He took me to concert over in San Francisco. When we arrived there, he didn’t go purchase a ticket at the ticket booth. Daddy took me around to a dark alley behind the auditorium, which puzzled me. He knocked on the back door a couple of times. A big, tall, dark-skin man opened the door. Daddy told him to go
tell Fats that Leo is here. The man shut the door. He came back in about five minutes, opened the door, and told us to follow him. We followed him down this long dim lit hallway and entered a dressing room. Fats Domino, Laverne Baker, Frankie Lymon, and a couple of other men sat in chairs laughing, drinking, and talking. I stood there with my eyes wide-open, mouth gaped, and wondered to myself if I was dreaming. When Fats saw my dad, he jumped out his chair. He and my father hugged and shook each other’s hand. Then Fats turned, looked at me, and grinned. “Last time I saw you, you was a baby,” Fats said.

It turned out that my dad and Fats grew up together. They were best friends and hung out together when they were growing up. I discovered that my dad and Fats’ family were friends. It was an exciting adventure to me filled with fun. Frankie Lymon playfully said, “You’re going to be my future wife.” Laverne Baker pretended she was chasing him out the room with her shoe. The adults laughed. Fats and my dad entertained us with their walk down memory lane when they were young. Fats had reserved us two front row VIP seats. It was the best time ever.

Mostly, Daddy watched documentaries, news, and jazz musicals on television. He was a man of purpose; therefore, what he watched on television had a purpose. He didn’t watch movies or other programs television offered. The only exception was westerns. He watched the news to stay informed and documentaries for educational purposes. Westerns went under educational purposes. Daddy had another purpose for watching jazz musicals. Whenever a scheduled jazz musical came on, he invited us to watch it with him, but we never did. We didn’t know at the time what he wanted us to
see. Later, I learned that two men who had visited us in the past were on television. It was our cousin Edmond Hall and Louis Armstrong. It was daddy’s subtle way.

In my heart, I believe that my dad was ahead of times or psychic. His insight was on point about many things happening currently. I remember when a door-to-door salesman knocked on our door. He was pedaling what we now call cable television. He offered a box that he claimed only cost ten cents a day to view channels that regular television didn’t offer. My dad refused. The man left.

“They want to charge people to watch television. In the future, people will pay to watch TV,” Daddy said.

What he said came true. In order to watch anything on TV, we pay to watch it. Cable companies and television manufacturers have an arrangement between them. Televisions made nowadays have cable ready devices on them. Without cable, you cannot watch television. Gradually, the cost of watching it has rose to almost the price of buying one. I call it the screwing of Americans.

One Fourth of July, my dad took us to watch a boat race on the Berkeley Marina. We were excited. There was a comfortable size crowd there. Anyway, the race didn’t last long at all. One of the drivers lost control of his boat. People started screaming. His boat spun in circles rapidly out of control. It spun out of the water. The boat headed straight in my direction. I stood there paralyzed and scared. I felt someone snatch me out of the path of the boat. It was my dad. The accident knocked the driver of the boat unconscious. It was a traumatic experience for me. We left and went home.
In spite of watching that horrible accident, it didn’t stop my dad from buying a boat. I remember when my parents were filling out the loan application to buy it. One of the questions was what color are you?

“I oughta put mahogany brown and blue,” Daddy said in a sarcastic manner.

His comment bothered me for some reason, but I didn’t know why. It was another time when I wondered why was color so important. Once again, I felt uneasy. Through the years, I was beginning to hear the word “color” pop up more and more. Only when adults mentioned color it did not pertain to crayons or paint. It applied to people.

Anyway, our parents did get the boat. Daddy would take us for a ride in out on the Bay. Sometimes, he and my brothers went fishing in it. He taught us how to drive it. We had to wear bright orange life jackets. It was a fun adventure. I loved watching the boat leave a trail of waves behind it as we sped through the water. Although, I couldn’t swim, it didn’t seem to matter that the boat was in the middle of the bay. I knew my dad was there, and he’d protect us from any danger.

Which reminds me of the time he took us fishing up at Clear Lake one hot summer. The spot he took us to was infested with poisonous snakes—diamondback rattlers and moccasins. At first, I wasn’t aware of that. We parked on a slight slope and had to walk down a path through tall grass to the lake. I stood next to my parents to watch them fish. There was a man a few feet away from us fishing that had caught our attention. Every time, the man threw out his fishing line, he caught a fish. My brothers
were playing tag in the tall grass. Daddy happened to turn and look in the direction of my brothers.

“Watch out, stop!” Daddy yelled at them.

But, they didn’t hear him. Hastily, he picked up a big stone and threw it in their direction. My brothers stopped with scared looks on their face. Shocked, I stood there shaking because I couldn’t understand why my dad had thrown that stone at my brothers.

“Get out that grass! It’s snakes in it!” My dad yelled.

My brothers ran out of the grass over to where we stood.

“Something told me to look. If I hadn’t killed that rattlesnake, it would have bit Turk. It was a diamondback,” Daddy said.

The man fishing next to us stopped fishing and walked over to us. He introduced himself to my dad and shook his hand.

The man said, “Mister, where’d you learn to throw like that? You smashed that sucker’s head.”

Now, I understood why my dad threw the stone. He and my dad talked for a few minutes about fishing bait. The man went back to his spot. After we had calmed down from the excitement, things went back to normal. My mother casted her fishing line out in the water.

“Dee, look there’s a moccasin in the water,” Daddy said and pointed to the water.

My mother dropped her fishing pole and started to run out in the water. Daddy hurried up and grabbed her.
“Dee, why would you run out in the water? The snake is in the water. Look!”

Daddy said as he pointed at the black moccasin coming towards us.

“I’m ready to go!” My mom said.

“Me too!” I said.

My brothers said in unison, they were ready to go too. My dad shook his head and laughed, but he agreed it was time to go. We started walking back up the path to the car. Scared to death, I kept looking for snakes. We never went back there again.

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Mother loved sports and had excellent athletic skills. I believe she inherited that trait from her father. Her father had great athletic skills too. My grandfather had played in a Negro baseball league. One vacation we went to visit him and my step-grandmother. They had a ranch in Little Rock, California, which is a slightly isolated place in the Los Angeles County. Grandpa raised cows, pigs, and chickens. He also made bootleg beer.

The reason for the trip, Grandpa had butchered a cow for us to take back home. My dad’s sister, her husband, children, and her husband’s nephew went with us. During the day, the sun was scorching hot. In the evening, the weather cooled down enough to feel a gentle breeze. That trip is when I found out something about Grandpa, I’ll never forget.

Grandpa Andrew sat under a shade tree in a chair. He looked over at Bobby who was my uncle’s nephew.

“Son, they tell me you’ve won trophies. They say you can run. I don’t believe it,” Grandpa said in a nonchalant manner. I caught a glimpse of my dad and uncle
secretly nudging each other and covering their mouth. Bobby didn’t see them. I had a feeling whatever my grandpa was up to, they were in on it. Suddenly, amused I sat back and observed. It was as if Grandpa was dangling bait.

“Ah, you can’t run. I bet you can’t run. C’mon, I’ll race you.”

“Mr. Gilliam, old men don’t have any wind,” Bobby laughed and said.

“C’mon…son, ah…you can’t beat me,” Grandpa said challenging Bobby.

Grandpa got up and headed toward the road in front of his house, motioning with his hand for Bobby to follow him. Bobby got up, he was laughing, but he followed him out to the road. Uncle Willie and daddy followed Bobby and stopped at the edge of the road.

“I’ll call it. Get on your march…get set…get ready…one…two…three…go!” Uncle Willie said.

Both of them took off with Bobby in the lead, and Grandpa jogging. All of a sudden, Grandpa picked up speed; he passed Bobby with a speed of lightening. A cloud of dust from the road flew up behind him. My grandfather was seventy-eight years old and Bobby was nineteen. Grandpa could run!

Grandpa Andrew was short in stature with coffee brown skinned, silky, wavy black hair, and Asian eyes. He had a slender physique that revealed powerful strength. Grandpa wore blue jean overalls. Sometimes he tucked his thumbs behind his suspender straps, and his thumbs protracted the suspender straps away from his shirt. He carried himself in a dignified manner. Grandpa was a man of few words. He didn’t waste words. Whenever, he spoke, people listened. Whatever he said, he meant it.
One time, I was reading a magazine that had side-by-side pictures of Marilyn Monroe and Laverne Baker in swimming suits. He asked me to choose between them, which one I liked the best. I chose Marilyn Monroe and a disappointing look came across his face. He pointed to my skin.

“Do you think the color of your skin is ugly?” He asked me.

I gave him a puzzled look, not knowing, and wondering why he was asking me those questions.

“No,” I replied.

“Do you think mine is ugly?” He asked.

“No,” I answered.

His expression changed into one of satisfaction and he walked away, but his questions left a question mark in my head. What was so important about skin color that made me feel uneasy.

One thing that Grandpa Andrew didn’t believe in was wasting food. There was always plenty to eat at his house. He kept his refrigerator, freezer, and shelves stocked. Grandpa Minnie made sure the fruit bowl on the table had fresh fruit in it in case we wanted a snack throughout the day. We were welcome to eat whatever we wanted if we really wanted it and were hungry. It was one of the rules in his house. They had a small box with cards that had scriptures on them. Before every meal, Grandpa Andrew would say grace. Everyone at the table had to pull out one of those cards and read them aloud. It was their way of making sure we had some Jesus in us. So, they spoon fed us with
scriptures out of the bible. After everyone read what his or her card said, we ate. This rule was a strict ritual we had to follow before we ate.

One Christmas vacation we spent with them, my oldest brother learned a hard lesson about wasting food. He loved to eat, but sometimes his eyes were bigger than his stomach. He’d been eating nonstop all that day. My brother decided he wanted an apple, but he wasn’t hungry. He took a bite out of the apple and threw it in the garbage. When Grandpa Andrew came home, he walked over to the garbage can to throw some paper in it.

“Who threw this apple in here?” He said in a calm even voice with an authoritarian tone that flooded the room with apprehensive tension.

The room got quiet, and the room filled with tension.

“I did,” my brother replied hesitantly.

“I told you that you could eat anything you want if you want it,” Grandpa Andrew said in a stern calm voice.

“One thing I don’t like is a fellow wasting food. There are people who don’t have any food to eat.”

He picked the apple up, out of the garbage. Grandpa handed the apple to my brother and made him eat it.

“Son, your eyes were bigger than your stomach. That food not gonna run away. It’s there for you to eat. Next time, don’t let your eyes override your stomach.”

Even though, it was harsh and somewhat cruel, my brother learned his lesson that day. He would never make that mistake again ever in life. Neither would any of us.
Our grandparents divorced and remarried. It worked out for the best though. All four of them remained the best of friends. They spent some vacations at one another’s house, kept in touch with each other through letters, telephone, and bought each other gifts. To some people it might have been strange, but to us it was as normal as apple pie.

Grandma Minnie worked as a domestic maid for movie stars and rich people in Beverly Hills. She was a sanctified woman, but sweet as she could be. Grandma Minnie wasn’t judgmental, nor did she act Holier than Thou. She had a very warm and pleasant spirit. I can still hear her calling me, “Netttt!” She was the only one ever shorten my name who called me that. My step-grandfather drove trucks long distance. Whenever Grandpa Alex was back home from those truck runs, he dressed as if he had just step out of a GQ magazine. He wore tailor-made suits and smoked expensive cigars. The only times I saw him dressed in khaki pants and shirt was when he was leaving to go to work or returning from work. Grandpa Alex played poker. Every year, he bought a brand new car. His poker skills were that good.

Fortunately, our two step-grandparents truly loved us and we them. My siblings and I never experienced any wicked step-relatives or in-laws. The steps and in-laws treated us like blood relatives. However, this younger generation is different. Their way of thinking is disturbingly distorted at times. I don’t understand their way of thinking.
Curious Minds Want To Know

As a young child, I noticed a difference between my mom and dad’s family. There was always friction between his sisters. Sometimes their spats transformed into a viciousness that made me feel uncomfortable. The three brothers got along great with each other. The respect and love the brothers had for each other flooded the room with joy. However, tension hung in the air as a stinging bitterness whenever the sisters were together. The tension smoldered into thick invisible vapors that felt like gripping cat claws. We always knew when the sisters were feuding. Trips on a moment’s notice that we made on a weekend to Los Angeles was the tattletale sign. Daddy was the peacemaker in the family. He knew how to negotiate a truce between his sisters. Things would get back to normal while we were there. The sisters would start back speaking to each other again. However, the feuds would rekindle and always resurface again.

Yet, he had one aunt who there was never a dull moment in her company. I loved being around Aunt Irma. Aunt Irma was my dad’s aunt and my grandfather’s sister. She had a pleasant personality. Aunt Irma was a very likeable person. She was a good conversationalist. Anyone Aunt Irma met, she never failed to ask him or her the same question:

“What’s your sun sign?”

Aunt Irma was deep into astrology. She believed in it and lived by it.

“You’re Scorpio-Sagittarius. You’re on the cusp. But, you’re more Sagittarius.”

Then she would go into the positions of the planet at the times I was born. Aunt Irma evaluated a person’s character based on their sun sign. If that person didn’t exhibit
the characteristics of their particular sign, she justified it with the time they were born, the lining up of the planets, and the part that Venus and Mars played in it. Astrology was her bible. Me…I didn’t believe all the astrology hype.

In the past, I’d met two other aunts of his—Aunt NaNan and Aunt Marie. Aunt NaNan. I only saw them once or twice. They lived in New Orleans. However, my father introduced them as Aunt NaNan or Aunt Marie with no explanation how they were my aunts that left me clueless. All I knew is that they were my aunts. Whose sister they were, I wouldn’t find out until years later. Later on, I learned he had more aunts and uncles that were still living. Three of his mother’s sisters, his father’s brother, and another sister were still alive. However, I only recall meeting one of his mother’s sisters. When I met Aunt Ora, which was one of his mother’s sisters, she was 100 years old. She died when she was 105 years old.

When daddy’s Great-Aunt NaNan came from New Orleans for a visit, I would sneak a peek at her when she wasn’t looking. One thing stood out about her to me. Her hair was completely gray, but she didn’t look her age. She was born in 1865. Aunt NaNan was an attractive woman. Her skin was smooth as butter, she was energetic, and she still had a youthful figure. There was a mysterious aura about her. When she walked, she seemed to glide gracefully across the floor. She had the manners of nobility. Aunt NaNan had a habitual morning habit that I noticed. She poured gin in her cup of coffee. That is the only time that she drank alcohol. There was one thing I observed that troubled me about her. Aunt NaNan practiced favoritism with my light skin brothers. She ignored one of my brothers and me—the darker ones. However, her husband was a
dark skin man—the color of black coffee. His name was Joseph Toussaint. He served as a Louisiana Native Guardsman during the war. After military service, he became a Pullman Porter.

However, Aunt Marie was my dad’s aunt and my great-aunt, but she was also my godmother. Actually, she was quite a few of my cousins’ godmother. She was a very talented seamstress. Every birthday I had, she sent me a dress in the mail. I was under the impression that Aunt Marie had bought the outfits she sent to me.

“Aunt Marie didn’t buy that, she made it,” Aunt Daisy said.

“What? I didn’t know that. I thought she bought them. The dresses look store bought,” I replied, amazed.

“Aunt Marie window-shops. She does the same thing with catalogues. Whatever she sees in a store window, she’ll go home, and she’ll make it. She made that dress. Aunt Marie can sew women and men’s clothes. No one can tell the difference. She makes Uncle Gilmore and her clothes too.”

Sewing was a natural talent of Aunt Marie. She didn’t have to measure a person. Aunt Marie looked at a person and pinpointed their measurements with an uncanny accuracy. Sewing was her hobby. However, she worked at a Catholic School in New Orleans. Aunt Marie taught music—she was a music teacher. Yet, she could stir up more shit in the family than a cat could cover. She was messy. Numerous times, she caused friction with various relatives that kept them upset. What exactly she did is unknown to me. Nevertheless, I would hear her name pop up throughout the
conversation. Whatever she did, it didn’t sit too well with those having the conversation. The tone of their voices let me know that.

When my father died, he was forty-nine years old. He never was sick a day in his life; therefore, his death shocked our family. I went through the whole ordeal in a daze. It was as if I was there in body only. I could hear people offering their sympathy, but I didn’t see them. Their faces were one big blur. His funeral had a huge turnout. In fact, some people had to sit in the balcony, stand in the lobby, and the rest stood outside. Although the church was big, it wasn’t enough room for all those people. It was too much for me, so I left out and sat in the car. I didn’t even want an obituary. Accepting the fact that my father was dead is something I was not ready to face.

After my father died, it occurred to me that I didn’t know his parents’ name. Nor did I know what they looked like. He had never shown us a picture of them or talked about them, which puzzled me. They were a complete mystery. Though, he claimed that his family was huge too, the knowledge I had of his family consisted of his siblings and three aunts. Many branches on his side were missing. The closeness in family that I had observed on my mom’s side was also missing. Openness about family was nonexistent. His side of the family embedded deeply in secretiveness.

For some reason, it vexed my spirit that I didn’t know his mother or father’s name. I had trouble sleeping thinking about it. Question marks kept popping up in my mind. What did they look like? Which one did my dad, aunts, and uncles look like? Who were they? Where did they come from? Did my grandmother have any siblings? Did her siblings have any children? Did her parents have any siblings? Who were my
grandfather’s parents? Did they have any siblings? Why was it so much secretiveness? What caused the constant friction between the sisters? Those were just a few of the question marks in my head. However, there were more.

The first time I asked my mother if she knew why we didn’t know much about his side of the family, her response was, “They had a lot of secrets,” she said it as if I was irritating her. Stop asking questions is what I picked up from the tone of her voice and read between lines. So, I didn’t bother to ask her daddy parents’ name. I begin wishing inwardly that Irma were still alive. But, Irma was dead and had been dead for years.

My dad had been dead a couple of years when a few strange coincidences occurred. I felt like my ancestors were nudging me from the grave. It was as if I had a gentle pulling in my spirit to seek those answers. The feeling was so strong it was hard to shake. While I sat out on my front porch one summer, I watched some city workers prune a tree across the street from my house. When they finished pruning the tree, I noticed something odd about it. The tree branches and leaves were full on one side of the tree. However, on the other side of the tree, the branches and leaves were full at the top half of the tree, but the bottom half was completely missing.

The image of the tree resembled what was missing in my own family tree. Suddenly, it came to me why sometimes people refer to genealogy as family trees. Symbolically, families do resemble trees. They resemble the branches and leaves. Families grow, separate, die, and are distant. Some families prosper, some families stunted in growth, and some families suffer inadequate nutrition. That night I dreamed about my dad.
A few days later, I went to lunch with one of my co-workers. A conversation she brought up caught my undivided attention. She told me some dark secrets she had uncovered doing research in genealogy. A key word that perked my interest was secrets. The result of her findings was intriguing and like reading a novel. She discovered a few scandals in her family tree. Her research covered her European history all the way back to the 1400s. I sat there thinking to myself that genealogy might be instrumental in solving the answers to the mystery and missing puzzle pieces in my own family tree.

“How did you start genealogy?” I asked.

“I went to the library and checked out a few a books on the subject,” she replied. “But, I did my research at the Mormon Family History Center in Oakland.”

I filed the information she gave me in my memory bank. If she could do it, I could do it. At least, that’s what I thought. I thought it would be easy and a piece of cake. Wrong as two left shoes, I didn’t know it would take thirty-seven years for me to find out what I know now. The search continues to this day.

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One Saturday morning, I got up, got dressed, and went to the library. There was a shelf filled with books on how to do genealogy research. I checked out three beginner books and went back home. When I skimmed through the books, most of them focused on European genealogy. I didn’t have any ancestors from Europe. At least at that time, I
didn’t think I had any. I felt that the books were worthless to me, so I went back to the library. Disappointed, I took the books back and decided to ask the librarian for help.

“Do you have any African American genealogy books?” I asked. She looked on her computer.

“No. Sorry,” she replied.

When I got back home, I decided to look on Amazon. I found one book written by Charles L. Blockson, titled *Black Genealogy*. I ordered it. It turned out to be misleading and unhelpful. The chapter on slavery was limited to Pennsylvania. Records for Southern states were inadequate. Therefore, some of the most important records such as conveyance records, wills, probate, and lawsuits were devoted to three sentences. His genealogy skills were as amateurish as mine were. Explanation for Federal Census and Slave Census was useless. Blockson failed to explain that slave census only listed gender and age. Only the owner’s name appeared on the slave census. He didn’t give any information on what the purpose of the census was. There wasn’t an explanation for what to do with the Federal census once I got them. The book was worthless.

Once again, Blockson’s book proved to be useless with limited information. The book told me to start backwards with my information first, second my parents, and third my grandparents. According to his book, I needed the names of grandparents and great-grandparents if known. Next the name of the place they lived. He didn’t explain in his book that I would need to know their place of birth or year they were born. Nor did he explain other important facts I needed to know. Next, I needed to interview my oldest
living relatives. However, I didn’t have a clue regarding the questions I was supposed to ask them. Nor did Blockson give me any.

However, the only oldest relative that I knew still living was Aunt Marie. Aunt Marie lived in New Orleans, but I didn’t have her telephone number. Aunt NaNan had passed a few years after she went back to New Orleans. Aunt Irma was deceased too. She lived around the corner from us until she got old and developed Alzheimer. It was a day I’ll never forget. That was one of the saddest days in my life. I was used to her being around.

Without warning, Aunt Irma’s sudden attack of Alzheimer happened on a rainy weekend. It was storming outside. A policeman brought Aunt Irma to our house. She was soaking wet. Her behavior was like a docile child. Aunt Irma had been wandering lost in her nightgown and bare feet. The people who owned a small store around the corner knew us. They saw her walking in the rain, went outside, and brought her inside their store. The owner called the police and showed them where we lived. My parents put Aunt Irma in a nice senior home in Oakland. It was a huge Victorian house, which didn’t look like a convalescent home. The house was located near what some called Pill Hill. It had a warm homey atmosphere. She seemed content there, but her mind would come and go.

Aunt Irma had taught me how to take care of my skin, hair, and illnesses using homemade concoctions and remedies. She was forever teaching me something new. I missed her so much. When I got my driver’s license, I would go visit her every chance I got. She still recognized who I was. One Saturday, I went to visit her, but she was gone.
“Hi, I’d like to see Irma,” I told the receptionist.

“Irma is no longer with us,” the receptionist said.

My hearts began to beat fast. It scared me and I panicked. I didn’t know what to think. “Did she die?” I asked frantic with fear.

“No. She was released to a relative,” she replied.

Nervous, I turned and I hurried out the door. It didn’t dawn on me to ask the relatives’ name. I rushed home. When I arrived home, my parents were sitting at the dining room table eating.

“Irma wasn’t there,” I blurted out.

My parents stopped eating. They looked up at me.

My dad asked me, “What do you mean, she’s not there?”

“The receptionist said she was released to a relative,” I replied.

“No one called us,” my mom said.

“Dee call ‘em. Find out what’s going on,” Daddy said.

My mom picked up the telephone and called. When she got off the phone, she said, Aunt Marie came and got her. My parents were not too happy about that. It was the day I found out that Marie and Irma was sisters. A couple of months later, Irma died.

Therefore, the only oldest relative that I knew was Aunt Marie. I didn’t know her telephone number or address. I sat there pondering how I would ever get started with research if I had no way of contacting my oldest living relative. As far as I knew, none of the sisters was speaking to Aunt Marie at the time. Then it dawned on me to call my
dad’s oldest sister. I looked at the clock. It was 10:45 p.m., and it was too late to call her. I made a note to myself to

The next day, I began the first task—interviewing an oldest living relative on my paternal side. Well, next to the oldest living relative I knew that is, I called my Aunt Arthemise. She was my dad’s oldest sister.

“What were your parents’ names?” I asked.

“Huh? Flame, C’mon now. You know their names.” She replied.

“No Auntie, I don’t. Daddy never mentioned their names. None of you ever did either.” I responded. There was silence on the other end of the phone for five seconds.

“Hello, are you still there?” I asked.

“Yeah, I’m still here. Flame, you’ have to be kidding me. Well, I’ll be damn!” She said. “Auntie, I’m serious,” I said in an earnest tone.

“My mother’s name was Ruby. My father’s name was St. Cyr.” She replied.

I continued with my questions to her. “What’s your grandparents’ name?”

“Ondine [pronounced Undean] was my mother’s mother name. Gabriel was my dad father’s name. I didn’t like him. He wouldn’t give me a quarter because he said I looked like my grandmother,” she said.

I felt somewhat annoyed by her comment. It seemed a petty reason to me not to like your grandfather. But, I thought to myself, maybe, it was more to it than that. So, I continued asking her questions.

“What’s your other grandparents’ name?” I asked.
“I didn’t know any of ‘em. I didn’t know their names.” After she told me that, I thanked her and made an excuse to end the conversation.

Next, I called one other aunt whose number I had. However, she was clueless. After I finished talking to her, my head began to ache. The conversation with them left me with more question marks piled on top of question marks. “How am I gonna do the research without information?” I said aloud to myself. For some reason, the conversation with my aunts made me feel drained. I went to bed. The next day, I called my mom and asked her did she know Aunt Marie’s telephone number. She did. However, I had some appointments that day and didn’t get around to calling Aunt Marie.

When I woke up, I drank some coffee and ate breakfast. Aunt Marie was the last person I wanted to talk with. I dreaded calling her, but I’m glad I did. After I ate, I called Aunt Marie.

“Hi, Aunt Marie, do you know who this?” I asked her.

“No, honey, I’m trying to catch the voice. Wait don’t tell me. Is this Leo’s daughter?” She asked.

“Yes.” I replied.

“Hi, honey, it’s so good to hear from you. How’s everyone doing?” She asked.

“Everyone is doing great. What about you and Uncle Gilmore?” I asked.

“We’re doing fine.” Aunt Marie replied.

“Aunt Marie what I called you for… I need the names of your parents and grandparents. I’m doing genealogy research. I want to learn our family history.” I told her.
“Oh honey, that’s great! Well, my father’s name was Gabriel. My mother’s name was Elise. Her parents were Noel and Coralie St. Cyr. Gabriel’s parents name was Edgar and Marie Algere. They lived in a place called LaPlace, Louisiana. My grandmother was a free woman of color,” she said.

Before we could finish the conversation, I had a call on the other line. I told Aunt Marie I’d call her back, but I didn’t get a chance to do it.

The following weekend, I paid a visit to the Mormon Temple Family History Center. The immense size of it impressed me. It was at the very top of a hill in Oakland. The people there were friendly and welcoming considering what I had learned about their negative views regarding African Americans in the past. When my son went to Brigham Young University (B.Y.U.), he showed it to me in the Mormon bible. My son shared with me a few things about B.Y.U. He didn’t have any problems there, but he was glad to leave the culture shock. When his first quarter was over, he moved back to California and transferred to Fullerton University, which is where he graduated before the Chicago White Sox drafted him.

Anyway, the Mormon’s genealogy library had a large collection of genealogy books, magazines, and microfilm. They were well equipped with computers and microfilm viewers. However, I was a beginner who was clueless. This would be the beginning of a monotonous, boring task in genealogy research gathering basic documents. A Mormon staff member helped me get started. He gave me a can with microfilm for 1870 census in it and showed me how to work the microfilm viewer. I had
practically viewed the whole film before I got to Noel St. Cyr’s name on the 1870 Federal Census. It listed his wife and children living with him.

Not knowing that African Americans aren’t on census prior to 1870, I went and picked one for 1860 to view. I couldn’t find his name on the censuses prior to 1870, so I asked the staff member what was I doing wrong. He told me that African Americans weren’t on census prior to 1870. They were only on the slave census prior to 1870, but listed only by gender and age. I thanked him.

I discovered on the 1880 census that his oldest daughter had gotten married two years before the 1870 census, so at the time she didn’t appear. Listed in Noel St. Cyr’s household in the 1880 census were her and her daughter. I obtained census for my other paternal great-grandparents too. One thing, I noticed is that every one of my ancestors were listed as mulatto for race. I looked that word up in the dictionary. The definition of it was a person of mixed white and Black ancestry, which puzzled me. Now, I had censuses, but what to do with them I had no clue. I would spend the next couple of years gathering census. Because I didn’t make a file or record of what I had, many were duplicates.

Nonetheless, when I got home I looked at the census. I did learn the names of Elise’s siblings’ names from them. I also learned that Elise had a nickname—Lizzie. Another discovery I made was that Gabriel had a sister named Azelie. In addition, the information the staff member gave me earlier disturbed me. It made me think. Whites denied African Americans their humanity, but slave owners denied their existence by denying them a name. How would I ever find out my great-great grandparents’ mothers’
and fathers’ names if they only listed them by gender and age? What were they hiding? Why? Did they have names? Were they just a bunch of nameless people? Added on to the list were more question marks in my head.

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As I lay in my bed one night, I thought about my co-worker. She was able to name all of her ancestors back to the 1400s. I thought about the vast shelves at the Mormon library. All of them pertained to European lineages, but none pertained to African Americans. The Mormons had microfilm for Haiti, but they were of no use to me. Without names prior to the 1870s, my search seemed hopeless. There was no way I’d be able to research my families’ history back past the 1870s. At least that’s what I assumed at the time.

A couple of years later, someone told me about AOL genealogy chat rooms online. I decided to try them to see if I could learn anything from them. I spent a lot of time visiting them. The genealogy chatrooms focused on specific topics. Nevertheless, I did learn a little from them. I learned about a couple of African America genealogy websites, which I did visit. The name of one of the websites was Christine’s Genealogy. She had some useful information, but none of it pertained to my particular case at the time. In addition, she mostly focused on her own ancestors back during that time, which changed later on.

At the time, Ancestry had a different system. The only records that I had free access to were census. I had plenty of censuses. At that time, Ancestry only offered a
yearly membership, which was too expensive. My trial membership ended. I couldn’t afford a yearly membership. Besides, I didn’t see any use in it if I could. Its records for African Americans were limited to census, which changed years later as they added more records online. What I wasn’t aware of at the time is that Ancestry was the Mormon Family History Center’s website. It only cost ten cents a copy at the Mormon Center, compared to the $189 for membership with Ancestry.

After going from room to room, finally I hit a small jackpot. A professional genealogist who specialized in African American genealogy taught a course that night. She was a special guest. I learned from her to order birth certificates, marriage certificates, and death certificates from the Archdiocese of New Orleans. The Archdiocese of New Orleans charged twelve dollars a certificate. When I went to their website, I discovered there were two drawbacks. Needed in order to get marriage certificates and death certificates was an exact dates or church, detailed information such as parents’ names, birth dates, and name of the priest who performed the marriage, etc. Years later, I would find out that I could have gotten the same certificates from the New Orleans Library or County Clerks Offices of the individual Parishes for less than three dollars a copy, which I did do later on in my research.

Unfortunately, I did not have any of that required information to order from the Archdiocese. I didn’t even know all of my great-grandparents’ names. In order to tear down that roadblock, I had to find out that information somehow. How and where I could find that information added another puzzle that I needed to figure out. I decided to go back to the library and look through those books I took back to see if any of them held
a clue. While at the library, I came across a book that wasn’t on the shelf the first time I went. The book informed me that Ancestry.com had a software for family trees. In addition, I learned more about online genealogy resources. The book gave me a few more suggestions as to where I could find indexes for marriage and death certificates for the Catholic Church.

Several years later, I called Ancestry and ordered their trial software. The software was free. I signed on to my computer and googled St. John the Baptist Parish genealogy and came up with seventy-thousand results. It took time and was exhausting. However, I did come up with a list of deaths with dates; a book number and page number for funerals in St. John the Baptist Parish, which would help me get some information to obtain two death certificates after going through a few of them. I sent off for them right away. The list was only one page with a promise to that she’d continue listing more in the future. In addition, I came across a couple of people who happen to be doing research in LaPlace that had their own personal websites. One of those people would be instrumental in helping me find out about The German-Acadian Coast Historical and Genealogical Society, which would come in handy later on down the road. His name was Dwayne Montz. Montz was tremendous help to me and in the future, he saved me some money.

While surfing through the thousands of genealogical websites, I came across a site that had some helpful links. One of those links had some information about another genealogy book for African Americans written by Tony Burroughs called Black Roots. I bought the book. His book was thorough and one I’d recommend for beginners doing
genealogy. However, I was impatient. My biggest mistake was skimming through the book and skipping chapters. I was anxious to start right away. Had I taken the time to read the book, it would have saved me time and errors. It also would have prepared me for many obstacles up ahead. However, one problem arose from skipping and skimming, which cost me a major problem. Organizing, making notation of dates and names of informants, and making a file are where I made my biggest mistakes. Those were the first mistakes I made as a beginner genealogist. There would be more mistakes in the future.

A couple of weeks later, my Family Tree software arrived. I read the instructions and installed it on my computer. The software came with a free trial to more records on Ancestry for 30 days. After installing the software, the first surname I typed in was Noel St Cyr, but all that came back was the census. On an accident, I happened to click the wrong button and the software page changed to a marriage catalogue. I thought to myself, while I’m on that page I might as well see if I can find a marriage index for my grandparents. I typed in Gabriel Alger, but the results came back Gabriel Alger. The spelling for the surname was different. It left off the e. Yet, it was my grandfather and grandmother. I made copy of it.

Feeling lucky, I decided to type in Noel St. Cyr. I was surprised when the results came back. The results came back with his name and children’s marriages as well. I was excited. Searching through the marriage indexes added more names on my paternal side of the family tree. The first marriage certificate I ordered was Noel. The day it arrived, I could hardly wait to open it. It gave me more information. The certificate stated
Coralie’s maiden name, their parents’ name, and the witnesses’ names. It had the date of the wedding, who performed it, and the name of the church. The following months, I ordered the rest of the marriage certificates.

The following year, I got a call from Aunt Marie. There was a sound of hesitation in her voice.

“Hi honey. I hope you don’t mind me calling you,” she said.

I thought that a rather odd comment. She was my aunt—family. What made her say that?

“No, I don’t mind. You can call me whenever you want to. You’re family.” I replied.

“Well, honey I wanted to let you know…I’m forgetful. So, I got a tablet. I’ll write down things when they come to me. I’m keeping it by the phone. Whenever I talk to you, I’ll have it near. After you’d hung up, I thought about something,” she said.

Aunt Marie was silent for a few seconds.

Then she said, “Hmm…I was reading the paper. They still think they’re white.”

When she said that, it puzzled me. “Who?” I asked. Instead, she changed the subject. Aunt Marie never answered the question.

“I see the Landrieu family is having a charity event. Honey, listen I’m keeping this tablet by the phone. Next time I talk to you, I’ll have more information for you. I’ll talk to you later,” she said and hung up.

It struck me as weird. However, I chalked it up as her age. Being around elderly people a lot gave me an awareness that they can be rather eccentric and set in their ways.
Whatever, she wrote in that tablet, I never found out. Aunt Marie died. When I hung up the phone, I checked my mailbox. Three more of the certificates were in the mail. After I opened them, I added the information to my Family Tree Maker software.

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A year later, I called Aunt Daisy. This time, I wasn’t expecting any help or answers. I told her about the discoveries made while doing my research. She was amazed at the little bit I had found out. It was more than she knew which aroused her interest.

“Aunt Daisy, where did Grandma Ruby work?”

“She was a maid.” Aunt Daisy laughed and said, “The people she worked for had a talking parrot. When mother went to work, the parrot would say, ‘Here comes the niggers, here comes the niggers.’”

“Had it been me, they woulda ate parrot for dinner.” I said as I visualized parrot soup in my mind.

“I know what you mean.”

“Aunt Daisy did Grandma Ruby have any sisters and brothers?” I asked.

“Yeah, Aunt Ora, Aunt Gladiola, Aunt Bernadine, Aunt Pearl; she had a brother named Earl. I talked to Bebe the other day,” she said.

“Who is Bebe?” I asked.

“That’s Aunt Ora’s daughter.”

“When did Aunt Ora die?” I asked out of curiosity and so that I could notate it.
“Aunt Ora isn’t dead,” she said.

What she said surprised me. I wasn’t aware that Grandma Ruby had any siblings. Yet, she did have some, and they were still alive.

“She’s still living? Hmm…can I have her telephone number?’

Aunt Daisy, abruptly, made up an excuse to get off the phone. She didn’t give me the number. That bothered me. I couldn’t understand why she wouldn’t give me the number. If I had been anyone outside the family, I may have understood her refusal to give me Aunt Ora’s number. However, I was her niece.

Aunt Jenny came across my mind, so I called her. I knew if there was a feud going on with Aunt Daisy and Aunt Ora, Aunt Jenny would voluntarily tell me.

“Aunt Jenny, do you have Aunt Ora’s number?”

“Yes, I do. I wrote it down on the back of an envelope. I put it up somewhere. But, I don’t know where I put it. It’s around here somewhere. I’ll look for it, call you, and give it to you. I have Edna’s number. She’d probably be able to tell you something.”

“Who is Edna?”

“Edna St. Cyr. She’s our cousin. Edna is older than we are. She’s around Aunt Marie’s age or older.”

It was too late to call Edna St. Cyr when I hung up the phone. I waited until the following weekend to call her. Edna turned to be a big help. She indirectly linked me with another cousin who was doing genealogy. The information she gave me unlocked a few doors. Eventually, it led to a greater discovery later on down the road—the place in Africa Noel’s father came from.
“Hello, may I speak to Edna?”

“This is Edna.”

“Hi, I am Leo’s daughter.”

“Which Leo?”

“I’m St. Cyr’s granddaughter.”

“Which St. Cyr?”

At first, I thought to myself, “Oh Lord, her mind is gone.” But, it wasn’t. Actually, she had asked me two legitimate questions. There were two Leo’s in the family. One was a Vicknair, who was Marie St. Cyr’s son and Noel St. Cyr’s grandson. My grandfather’s name was St. Cyr, but my great-great grandfather’s surname was St. Cyr. After a few seconds passed, she asked me again. This time she made it clearer to me what she was asking.

“Are you Leo Vicknair’s daughter or Leo Algere’s daughter? She asked me.

“Leo Algere.” I replied.

“Hi. Last time I saw you, you was a little girl. How’s your mother doing?”

“She’s doing great. What about you?” I replied.

“I’m doing well as expected for my age,” she said.

“Edna the reason I called you… I’m doing our family history. I need some information.”

“What do you need?”

“Who were your father and mother?”
“My father was William St. Cyr. His father was Noel St. Cyr. William’s mother was Coralie. My mother was Marie Sheriff.”

“Did you have any sisters and brothers?”

“Yes. Albert, Charlie, Steven, and Matthew...they’re all dead. My father died after he lost his leg.”

“Lost his leg...? How did he lose his leg? I asked in a shocked voice, but curious. She had aroused my interest. I wanted to know. It would be the first interesting story compared to the boring census, birth, death, and marriage certificates.

“He was hit by a train. My father worked on trains.”

“Did Noel have any siblings?”

“I’m trying to remember. I can’t remember.”

“Did you have any cousins?”

“Wait, look for Blaise Duhe. His mother Rosetta was a St. Cyr. She used to spend the night with us. Blaise was a doctor. Rosetta was our cousin.”

“Okay. Hold up a minute. Let me write that down. Okay, I’m done.”

“Rosetta’s mother name was Marie.”

“Marie St. Cyr?”

“No. I forgot her mother’s maiden name.

“Thank you. Listen, I’ll call you back sometime this week. I need to run to the store before it gets too late.”

“I’m looking forward to hearing from you again.”
Edna was a teacher. She had retired years ago. When I talked to her, she was 94 years old, but still sharp as a tack. Her memory, actually, was good for her age.

After I returned from the store, I pulled up my family software. I typed Blaise Duhe’s name in the search box. The results came back with a census and another member’s public tree. Blaise father’s name was Evariste Duhe. Rosetta’s father name was Clovis St. Cyr and her mother’s name was Marie. Therefore, I knew I had the right one, but I needed to find something else to confirm it. I did a search for Clovis St. Cyr. The results showed two census, a marriage index, and the same member’s public tree. When I looked at the census, I discovered that Clovis and Evariste lived in houses next door Noel St. Cyr. However, Noel’s oldest daughter and granddaughter were now living with him. Then I noticed his son Auguste was married and he lived next door to Noel St. Cyr too.

I contacted the person whose tree I had gotten the information. He and I exchanged telephone numbers. Phil turned out to be a cousin of mine. We exchanged information, but he had much more than I did. The information he gave me opened up a door that in the future led to a bigger discovery. In the future, he and I kept in touch and exchanged more of our discoveries. I sent off for Clovis marriage certificate. When Clovis’ marriage certificate came back, it confirmed that he and Noel were brothers. I forwarded Phil a copy. That night Phil called me and forwarded me a copy of Evariste military records. The military records gave information about his ex-slave owner Vicknair.
Through Phil and my conversations, I learned that our ancestors were an integral part of jazz in New Orleans. One was Laurent/Lawrence Duhe, a jazz musician that played clarinet. He performed with people like Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith and toured with the Rabbit Foot Minstrel Show in Vaudeville. Lawrence performed in bands with Kid Ory, Frankie Duson, King Oliver, and had his own band. He performed at Storyville. Lawrence moved to Chicago, Illinois in 1917. His band was popular in Chicago nightclubs, dance halls, and they played in the stands at the 1919 World Series. In the mid-1920s, he also played with Armand J. Piron. The other cousin Phil told me about was Edmond Hall who played in Louis Armstrong’s band and appeared in two movies with him. Edmond played the clarinet. Edmond’s brothers were also jazz musicians. When he sent me a picture of Edmond, it was a man who came to visit my dad once. Later on, I found out through research that quite a few of our ancestors were musicians during that era.

In addition, Phil informed me of a tragedy, which was a current event at that time I talked with him, which involved another well-known relative of ours—the Investigative Reporter, Chauncey Bailey. He was the other cousin I learned about from Phil. He worked for the Oakland Tribune. In 2007, those people that owned the Your Black Muslim Bakery in Oakland murdered him. He had been working on a report to expose their business practices. The day the police raided the bakery, I saw it take place on my way to school. I passed by the makeshift memorial on the street corner every day on my way to school and watched it on the news. I wasn’t aware that the victim was my cousin—my own flesh and blood.
There was one more person Phil and I discussed. That was Blaise Duhe. He graduated and obtained his Bachelors at Fisk University in 1909. Blaise obtained two Ph.Ds. One was for Pharmacist and the other as Physician. He earned his two PhDs at Iowa University. I sent off for his academic records at both universities. Iowa University sent me his report card and graduation pictures. He graduated in 1911, and in 1917, he graduated Magna cum laude. Blaise was the only African American in his class of 1917. He was a Kappa Fraternity brother.

Results from my DNA connected me with my cousin Cindy on the white side of the Duhe family. She was very informative. Cindy told me more regarding the jazz musicians in our family. From her I would learn that the jazz musicians in our family put Storyville on the map, which was a house of prostitution. Through Cindy I discovered that Evariste and his brother Firmin were kin to me through my Great-Great-Grandmother Marie.

Unfortunately, Edna died in the year 2000. She and I talked several times over the telephone. Edna had some pictures of my ancestors. She promised to give them to me when I came to the family reunion. However, she died the same year we had the reunion before we had it. I had gained more experience in genealogy research. Now, I knew what questions to ask. But, it was too late. When old people in your family die, family history dies with them. That’s why it’s good to record it while they’re living, in order to preserve it. Edna was instrumental in helping me fill in a section of the missing St. Cyr branches. She connected me with my cousins who were the descendants of
Clovis who was Noel’s brother. However, there were still many branches missing, so my search continued.

Now that I was beginning to make a breakthrough, my free trial with Ancestry was set to expire. That worried me. There was no way I could afford $189 on a fixed income. Luckily, I got an email from Ancestry offering me a monthly membership for $25.95. I took them up on their offer. The price never changed until I decided later to upgrade to World Deluxe. It was only an $11 dollar difference. The price remains the same to this day.

Anyway, Ancestry had a message board. I decided to explore the African American message board. Someone left a message on the board that inquired about Cecilia St. Cyr. I replied to that message. The person gave me their email address to contact them. When I contacted them, I gave her my telephone numbers. I wanted to know if she had any information that would help me in my search. When she called me, she told me that Cecilia was on her husband’s side of the family. She didn’t give me her phone number, so I sent her an email and requested it. I needed to ask her a question that I had forgot to ask when I talked to her. Strange, but she never replied to my email after that. I discovered that she blocked me from sending her an email. She completely cut off communication with me.

One day I dropped by my mother’s house. I happened to mention it to my mother. It disturbed me that my aunts didn’t know anything, but the woman’s actions
disturbed me too. That’s when my mother broke down and told me, “They’re probably passing.”

“Huh?”

“His people passed for white. That’s why they don’t know their people. That’s why your daddy didn’t take y’all to see your great-grandmother. She was still living. That’s why they’re so secretive.”

What my mother told me shocked and confused me. I couldn’t understand why anyone would want to disown his or her own race. Worse to me was that they denied their own flesh and blood in order to keep up a charade. It made me think about that movie *Imitation of Life*. What’s wrong with being black? That was a question I asked myself and answered. Nothing! It made me angry the more I thought about it. It didn’t make sense to me. Skin color is superficial. In my opinion, what is in a person’s heart is what counts and matters the most. A person can be white as snow or black as tar, but if what’s in their heart is ugly and evil, it reflects on them as an individual. No one in the human race has a copyright on intelligence. Skin color has nothing to do with either one.

That evening, I sat propped up in my bed. It dawned on me that the census listed all of my ancestors as mulatto. I thought about Grandma Jane who looked like a white woman. Yet, never once did she pass for white. All of her half-brothers and half-sisters looked white and none of them passed either. What would make a person do that? I picked up the book by Burroughs and went straight to the index to see if he had anything on passing. He did. The index listed three pages. His explanation was white privilege
benefits. After reading his explanation, I had no clue what white privilege benefits were. Whatever this unfathomable white privilege was, it caused people to deny their bloodline.

When I signed online, I found an email in my Ancestry inbox. It was from someone researching the Algere surname. The message was a request for information. She told me who she was, who her father was, and she wanted to know my relation to them. I wrote her back and gave her my father’s name, my grandfather, and names of my aunts. From that exchange of information, we discovered that she and I were cousins. Her father was my grandfather’s brother. We exchanged telephone numbers. She told me that she would call me Saturday afternoon.

Saturday afternoon, I discovered that Lucy was just as much in the dark as I was. Apparently, our family practiced distance with each other. Though, Lucy and her husband were prosperous, upper middle class, she wasn’t snobbish. She and I bonded with each other right away. It was as if we had known each other all our lives. Lucy and I became close and made it a point to talk to each other once a week. I learned from her that she and all her siblings had graduated from Harvard or Princeton. Her husband was the President of his company. Two of her daughters were lawyers in Washington D.C. Aunt Lucille’s grandson was an anchorman in Southern California, and her husband was Matthew Collins whose family owned the Shreveport Sun Newspaper. We exchanged information about our children, grandchildren, and siblings.

In one of our conversations, Lucy informed me that Aunt Lucille’s daughter stayed in Los Angeles. When she told me where her daughter lived, I told her that my aunt lived nearby. I called my aunt, she called our cousin, and we connected them on a
three-way call. During that conversation, we learned that they had been neighbors in New Orleans. While growing up, none of them knew each other. Yet, they lived a couple of blocks from each other. After Lucy and I disconnected the three-way conversation, we said in unison, “Our people are crazy.” Both of us were stunned with disbelief. Neither she nor I understood their behavior or the lack of communication.

“Yep, Lucy, they’re crazier than a road lizard.”

We felt cheated out of knowing our paternal side of the family. Lucy invited me to spend a summer with her at Martha’s Vineyard. She and her husband own a house there and that’s where they spend their vacations. I promised to take up her offer in the future, but never did. One Halloween Lucy had a terrible accident. There was a blackout in her area. She went down in the basement to get her grandchildren some toys. She slipped and fell down the stairs. The accident paralyzed her. I miss talking to my cousin.

Before Uncle Edgar passed away, Lucy gave me her dad’s telephone number. I called Uncle Edgar. I told him whose daughter I was. He seemed glad to hear from me. I could hear the fondness he had for my father in his voice. Which is why it made it harder for me to understand why he and my grandfather didn’t associate with each other. I never bothered to ask Uncle Edgar either. I only remember asking him one question. He answered it, and we said our goodbyes.

“Uncle Edgar where were our ancestors originally from?”

“They came from San Domingo or San Dominican.”

What Uncle Edgar told me conflicted with what Aunt Marie had told me. Aunt Marie said they came from France. However, the only Algere I could find in another
country was England at the time. Now, I’m finding some in Italy, Canada, and other places, but I haven’t had a chance to research them. The variation surname changed from Alger to Algere. The Algere surname was rare.

However, I discovered a couple of things that surprised everyone, including me. Listed in a New Orleans directory were the names of three Algere males living in the house with Grandpa Gabriel before he remarried again after my great-grandmother died. I asked my aunts if they knew them. None of them did. Those three men were not on any of the census I had for Edgard, Joe, or Gabriel. It was as if they appeared out of thin air only to disappear again after that one time. My belief is that they were Gabriel’s uncles or cousins. The 1900 census stated how many children women birthed and how many children were still living. My great-great grandmother Marie told the census taker that she birthed only two children and those two were living, which was Gabriel and Azelie.

Getting past the 1870s census was the biggest challenge on the paternal side. That information was common knowledge on my maternal side. The storytellers in our family were the medium, which oral history passed down generation after generation. Some of it was in books. I became a little frustrated when it came to the biggest obstacle—slave research for the paternal side. There were no storytellers on the paternal side. I had collected all census, marriage, birth, and death certificates that were available. The next step was to get past the 1870s. There was no way around it, nor any shortcut to
take. I couldn’t afford a professional genealogist. Their rates start at $2,300 for 20 hours. A person can use 20 hours up quick searching vital records alone.

In Burroughs’ book, he suggested that people read books on slavery in order to understand and get past the 1870s. I went online to see if Amazon had any books, which would help me knock down a brick wall. Little did I know, I was about to embark on a journey through time, a journey that would enlighten me to the world around me. Many books on Amazon cost one cent plus $3.99 shipping cost. Therefore, I bought several books in addition to a couple more genealogy books. One on genealogy caught my eye. The name of the book was *Unpuzzling Your Past*. Author, Emily Anne Croom did research for her own family in the same area as my maternal side. I bought the book for $1.99, which was a great deal. The regular price of her book was $37.95. Even though, I was working on my dad’s side at the time, I decided to get her book for the future just in case. Similar to Burroughs, Croom was thorough, and she gave case studies. I’m glad I did. Croom also suggested studying African American history (Croom 68). While I studied history, I put genealogy away for a few years.

Reading many African America history books enlightened me. Textbooks in school failed to teach what I learned reading books. Knowledge of my people’s history was the one thing I lacked. I can’t count the times that the horror of slavery in books stunned me into tears and anger. I was alive when Jim Crow was in effect, but my parents sheltered us from as much of it as they could. An earlier historical event I watched on television that involved one of my cousins who the National Guard escorted to school had traumatized me. I had completely blocked it out of my memory blank.
There were even those incidents that I had experienced as a victim that I had completely shut out of my memory bank.

In many ways, I was naïve about racism as a child. I didn’t connect the stories my granny told me to racism. Nor did I connect the discriminating treatment to it. But, I learned as time went by. I’d be an adult when I grasped the full meaning of it. Studying genealogy was my teacher. It all came back to me as the books I read educated me. I began to have flashbacks of all of those incidents in the past. It was as if all those memories were set aside—hidden under a cloak in my subconscious mind—locked away until education enabled me to understand it. There’s healing in tears and the truth will set you free.

At first, the history of slavery shocked me, angered me, and depressed me. It was an extreme, barbarously brutal crime against mankind. After reading so much of it, it desensitized me and made me immune to racism in a strange way. A sense of pride replaced my anger and depression. Beneath the surface, it was a revelation of the strength of my ancestors. My ancestors survived everything they went through and still lived to a full ripe age. With all odds stacked against them, they were survivors and resourceful. They were determined and strong.

While studying African American history, I learned that the laws in New Orleans and surrounding Parishes depended on which country was the ruling oppressor. When the Spanish ruled, they allowed slaves more freedom. The Spanish allowed marriages between free people of color and slaves and interracial marriages. In fact, they were free to marry whom they chose. They allowed slaves to own slaves. Slaves could buy their
freedom, sue whites in court, and testify against whites. They allowed people of color to own property. However, when the French were in charge some of those rules changed. The French prohibited interracial marriages. They sold children procreated through interracial relationships into bondage. No longer, could free people of color marry slaves or slaves buy slaves. When Anglo Saxons ruled, slaves lost all of their rights and were dehumanized.

After I felt I had learned enough to continue genealogy, I began doing research again. This time I knew what to expect. Ancestry’s African American document and index database had expanded over the years, which enabled me to access to more documents. Genealogy websites expanded as well. Therefore, there was more information available. Gwendolyn Midlo Hall created a slave database cd, which I bought. The only thing is that her database did not include surnames for slaves; it only included surnames for slave owners. Her cd advertisement was full of promises, but misleading. The advertisement claimed the database would enable people to discover where in Africa their ancestors originated. First names and lack of knowledge of slave owner’s name were obstacles. There were thousands of slaves with the same first name and in the same locations. Names proved to be a major problem all throughout research. The common use of name repetition concealed any trace of their individuality.

In search of Noel’s slave master, I decided to examine some of the documents I had so far. The military record for Evariste that Phil had given me was in the pile. I picked it up and read it. Evariste said that his master was a man named Vicknair. At the bottom of the page, appeared the signature of Leon Vicknair. So, I decided to search to
see if I could find Leon Vicknair’s name in that vicinity. I found Vicknair’s name. He was a sixty-five year old man in 1880. Vicknair could read and write, so whether or not he kept records was the question. However, I noticed that he was only a couple of years older than Noel. Evariste was born in 1851, so he was a young boy during slavery. He was around 12 or 13 years old when slavery ended. Therefore, he was only a boy when he served in the military. If Leon was his master, than could it be that his father whoever that was, was Noel’s master?

Several questions arose about the surname that Noel chose when slavery ended—St. Cyr. There were a few slave owners with the surname St. Cyr, but they lived in the surrounding Parishes. Could one of them have been Noel’s master? When slavery ended, some ex-slaves chose their master’s surname, but many of them didn’t. Slaves chose their surnames for various reasons. For example, some chose the surname Freeman, which signified they were free. Others chose names of places or their prior owners as a link to the past. Those who chose their current slave owners name. Or did Vicknair buy Noel from one of the St. Cyr’s? Naming patterns practiced in the slave community, especially common names proposed a problem. In addition, some slaves named their children after a parent, grandparent, and sibling. It made my job much harder. Piecing the puzzle together wasn’t easy.

On the marriage certificate I obtained for Noel, it stated that his mother’s name was Victorine and his father’s name was Noel St. Cyr. However, the church omitted Victorine’s maiden name and Coralie’s mother’s maiden name. Other marriage certificates I obtained didn’t omit the women’s maiden name. The Catholic Church
shared in the complicity of hiding their identities. It depended on the priest’s views about slavery. Some priests had slaves too. An alternative I had was to search through Wills and Probate records. I typed in St. Cyr in the surname box and Louisiana, USA for the place since it was more than one who owned slaves. The results came back with five results. The dates eliminated four of them. The dates eliminated were 1878 to 1901 since slavery ended in 1863.

When I clicked on George St. Cyr, the will was in French. The date on the will was 1836. I had no one to translate it for me. It was four pages. However, I understood some it, so I scrolled through it. It was an inventory sheet for George St. Cyr. The inventory listed an old creole female fifty years of age worth $250, but I couldn’t make out her name. The next slave’s name is Adele. She is fifteen years old, mulatto, and a domestic servant worth $600. Next on the list is Michel, a mulatto. I couldn’t decipher what else it said about Michel, except that he’s worth $500. Listed on the next page were Eugene St. Cyr, Firmin St. Cyr, Joseph St. Cyr, Numa Chattelier, Francois Delattes, and Baptiste Similian, which were the heirs of George St. Cyr. All of them signed their names with an X mark, including George St. Cyr, which meant that none of them could read or write. Noel’s name did not appear anywhere on the list. Somewhat disappointed, not knowing what to do next, I decided to search Gwendolyn Hall’s Louisiana Slavery database again to see if I could find any St. Cyr slave owners. There were several Vicknair slave owners, but no St. Cyr slave owners in her database. The Vicknair surname had two variations—Vicknair/Vicner in its database. Therefore, I decided to dig into the records for the Vicknairs.
Before I could search through the Vicknair/Vicner in the database, a cousin of mine sent me an email about a promotion 23andme had for a DNA test. The test was free for the first 10,000 people. Professor Henry Louis Gates used the same company for his television program *Finding Your Roots*. I had watched *Finding Your Roots* several times on television. I recalled the time he had the actor Blair Underwood on his show. With Underwood’s DNA results, Professor Gates was able to trace Underwood’s ancestors to a tribe in Africa. In fact, he connected him with some of his African relatives. She gave me the address. I sent off for two DNA tests, and I received them back a week later. My oldest brother took the one for paternal. I took the one for maternal. The analysis includes DNA received from all of your recent ancestors, on both sides of your family. The results reveal where your ancestors lived before the widespread migrations of the past few hundred years. There is also a relative chart and a well-known people chart of relatives who’s DNA matches yours.

When my results came back, 23andme sent me an email with instructions to follow. They instructed me to sign on to their website to see my results. When I signed online to see my results, I was surprised. I knew that I had whites in my family tree, so that wasn’t what surprised me. What surprised me is that my DNA composition consisted of all of Northern and Southern Europe, Southeast Asian, Sub-Saharan Africa; West Africa, Northern Africa, Central Africa, and Native American in South and North
America. The website had another chart that broke it down into countries of ancestry. In essence, I have many nations flowing through my veins. It blew me away.

Other charts included one that displayed what segments of DNA you shared with close and distant family on your relatives chart. Another chart separated the maternal and paternal relatives and the other one listed all of my relatives. Many of my cousins who did the DNA test that I know personally showed up on my list as well, so the charts are accurate. If any of the relatives are unknown or it’s unknown how they’re related, they can introduce themselves to unknown relatives and contact them to share and compare information. In some cases, the relatives are related in the distant past or a missing branch of each other’s tree. The results for 23andme gave me the maternal and paternal Haplogroup.

Amazingly, the results of the DNA test connected me with a few cousins who thought they were white. One cousin, in particular, was part of the missing branch on my dad’s side. They were totally, unaware that they were African American. His daughter was doing genealogy. Since we shared a large amount of DNA, she sent me an introduction. When she and I contacted each other through email, she gave me her great-grandmother and great-great-grandmother’s name. I told her that my great-grandmother was her great-great grandmother’s sister. At first, she was skeptical until she obtained the marriage certificate for her great-great grandmother that listed her parents, which confirmed what I told her.

For a while, her dad felt guilt and anger. He blamed his great-grandmother for running away from her identity—her African American identity. However, she didn’t
actually run away from it. Passing for her was a useful survival tool. His daughter began reading African American history. Periodically, she’d break down and cry over the horrors of slavery and Jim Crow. I had to help them get over what happened in the past.

“Stop blaming her! She did what she had to do to survive. Learn what they had to go through during that era. Then, you’ll understand why she did what she did. Stop blaming her. Stop being upset with her.” After that talk I had with them, they finally got over it. Now, we’re enjoying one another. They’re excited about coming to the next family reunion in August. Both can’t wait to meet family, and my aunts can’t wait to meet them.

Amazingly, the DNA results connected me with one of my African cousins whose name is Kwasi Tawiah who lives in Ghana. Interesting was that Kwasi told me that he was from the original Fanti tribe. He was born in the western region of Takoradi, Ghana, West Africa, and he descended from the Nsona Royal family.

Unexpectedly, I got an introduction email from a member on 23andme. She told me that she and I were kin. After I talked to her, I found out that her father was a white Duhe. He was on my DNA relative chart. Anyway, she sent me an invite for her family tree. Through her conversation, when I mentioned the Algere surname, she told me I was kin to the Vicknairs. She had an extensive family tree. It dawned on me that missing were surnames for two of the great-great-great grandmothers’ on the marriage certificates. After I talked to her, my curiosity grew regarding maiden names, especially for Victorine and Cecilia.
After I went over the DNA results I got back from 23andme, I ordered the one Ancestry.com offered. This time, only I took the test. When the results came back, many of my relatives on 23andme showed up on Ancestry’s results too. Yet, the company used for Ancestry’s DNA testing was different from the one used by 23andme. Both charts displayed the countries in Africa that my ancestors originated. My ancestors, mostly, came from Cameroon/Congo, Senegal, and Ivory Coast/Ghana. However, a few came from Mali, Benin/Togo, and Nigeria.

Word spread throughout my family, that I was doing genealogy. When I reported to my aunts and uncles what I had learned, they became more open. Even my cousins’ interest was aroused. They wanted to learn more about family. I had unlocked a door for them to get to know our family history—family they didn’t know they had. They admitted to me that they didn’t know their people. My aunts and uncles were in the dark. They weren’t even aware that Gabriel had a sister name Azelie. Yet, they knew Azelie’s daughters, but didn’t know that they were Azelie’s daughters. Her two daughters lived with Gabriel, until they married and moved out on their own.

When Azelie married George Steward, she and George disappeared from LaPlace. At first, I thought that they were both possibly dead. It took me years to find her again. Azelie still lived in the house she and George rented on Perdido St., but George was no longer living. I found her listed in the New Orleans directory. Azelie was still living in New Orleans in 1926. After that, she disappeared again. The directory lists her occupation as a cook. Three of my dad’s oldest siblings were living when she was alive.
However, not one of them mentioned her. Currently, LSU Medical Centers sits where Azelie’s house used to be.

Eventually, my aunts and uncles began to open up. Each of them told me about two cousins of theirs. Aimee and Annie Roussel used to come to their house in a taxi. They were Amelie St. Cyr’s daughters. Amelie married Lucien Roussel. Aimee and Annie passed for white. Apparently, the Roussel family passed for white when it was convenient. When I looked at some of the census, not all of the Roussel family passed for white. However, I noticed that Lucien and Amelie passed for white or were mistaken for white, at one time. It’s hard to say if it was convenience or an error since it was a known fact among the family that Aimee and Annie passed for white.

Marie St. Cyr married Frank Vicknair and the census listed them as white, but listed in their household was Aunt Irma and Aunt Marie as their nieces and listed as black on the same census. Mother told me that the reason my father and his siblings didn’t know their people, many of them passed for white. My aunts and uncles specifically said that Aimee and Annie passed for white. Most genealogist claimed as an explanation for African Americans appearing as white on one census and black on another was due to the census taker mistaking them for white; therefore, that’s debatable.

Recollecting one family reunion we had, an uncle through marriage shared with me a story of his and my father’s childhood. He told me there was a store that didn’t allow African Americans in it. My uncle told me that they’d send my dad in the store for them. “If a store didn’t allow blacks in it, we’d send Leo in for us.” His story surprised me. I had never heard tell of my dad passing for white. Suddenly, it dawned on me. The
picture that my dad, Al and Frank took together, it was a black and white picture. The three of them stood on the side of my dad’s car. However, the picture looked like three white men standing together. Only Frank and Al were white. Then, I remembered the strange looks on some of my teachers’ faces whenever my dad came up to my school. There was one incident when a teacher mistakenly thought he came to pick up a white student in my class. Whenever it was hot outside, my dad’s neck turned red, but he was an African American. That’s when it came to me that my dad could have easily passed. It was plain as day right under my very nose, but I didn’t see it. I didn’t see my own dad’s color.

Eventually, I paid for a yearly subscription to German-Arcadia German Coast Historical Genealogy Society magazine. Through that subscription, I learned a little about Noel and Clovis. I found out that Noel and Clovis had a business. They were rice farmers. The name of their business was Noel St. Cyr & Company (Terrio 34). Noel built a house on his land and a six foot fence to keep out prying eyes. He and Clovis also purchased some land together from a man named Joseph Hymel on January 13, 1876. The copy of the purchase was illegible in some places; therefore, hard to read. A Victorine Deslondes had some type of business connection with Hymel. I wondered to myself, if that Victorine was Noel and Clovis mother. Noel died September 18, 1886, and they buried him the following day. Coralie died shortly after or before, but when, I don’t know. She disappeared after the 1880 Census, so it had to be sometime in between 1880 and 1900.
Thus, I learned from the census, marriage certificates, and death certificates that Noel’s oldest daughter Constance married Floreville Picou, but he died young of an illness. They had one daughter together named Antoinette. She and her daughter moved back into the home with her mother and father. Constance was also the Noel’s oldest child. Somewhere along the line, she married again a man whose last name was Poree. That husband died too. She moved in with Gabriel and Coralie. Thereafter, she remained a widow. Something else I learned was that the Picou and Landreau family had a history together, which I’ll get back to later. Noel’s oldest son Auguste and Clovis’ son-in-law, Evariste Duhe, were overseers, which I learned from the 1900 Census. Auguste was also a carpenter later on. He named two of his children after his parents, one of his sons after him, and one after his deceased brother Oscar.

During Reconstruction, Rosetta’s son Blaise and Auguste’s daughter Amelie were teachers on that same census. Amelie continued her career as a teacher throughout her life. Oscar who was Noel’s next to the oldest son had died during the yellow fever epidemic. He was thirteen years old when he died. Celeste’s husband was a Louisiana Native Guardsman whom she evidently met through Evariste. When Evariste married Rosetta, there were soldiers from both the Union and Confederate side at his wedding as witnesses. However, the Confederate were actually Louisiana Native Guardsmen, at least that’s what I believe. Cecilia married Edward Hilaire Marmillion. They had five children together. When Edward died, Cecilia moved to Chicago with her daughter Corrine. Corrine was married three times. She had boarders who rented from her.
According to my cousin Maria, the family bible recorded our great-great grandmother Coralie as a free woman of color. Maria is a descendant of Auguste. Her maiden name was Landreau. Her brother was William Landreau. Coralie’s mother was Louise. I had heard the name Louise mentioned before and recalled my dad’s oldest brother telling me it was our great-great-great grandmother’s name. Supposedly, Coralie and William were twins. William married Celeste Cureau/Curo. Coralie named her son William after her brother and her daughter Celeste, which was NaNan, after her brother’s wife. Noel and Coralie’s son Auguste married William’s stepdaughter Agnes Cureau/Curo. I recalled that Aunt Marie mentioned to me in one of our conversations that one of the great grandmothers’ maiden name was Delandreau and that she was free woman of color. It came back to me something I read once on one of those informative help tip message boards for genealogy. It said that African Americans used prefixes such as De or Da and La to distinguish African Americans from whites.

Anyway, there were discrepancies with the marriage certificates, death certificates, and information recorded in a family bible given to me orally by Maria. I told Maria what the documents stated.

“Those people lied. You can’t believe anything they say. The church lied!” Maria said.

I thought to myself that it was possible since the Catholic Church played a complicit role in slavery. Not only did the Catholic Church condone slavery, they participated in it. The Catholic Church owned slaves, discriminated, and practiced segregation in recording vital records. They also played an indirect role in the separation
of children and children being sold from their white and black mothers when it involved interracial unions that procreated children, which were against the law. The church sent African Americans to the back of record books when recording information, just as whites sent African Americans to the back of the bus during Jim Crow. Not only that, the recorded information on marriage records conflicted as well, including some death certificates. Parish Clerks and the church recorded misinformation and misspelled names. Yet, the marriage and death certificates confirmed what Maria told me in an odd way.

Marriage certificates I had for Noel and Coralie’s children stated different maiden names for Coralie. The priest recorded her as St. Cyr and Sanders on her and Noel’s marriage certificate, which didn’t make sense. The certificate recorded her mother as Cecilia. On the 1896 marriage certificate for her daughter Celeste, the Parish Clerk recorded Coralie’s maiden name as Landreau. Celeste’s death certificate states Landrow, which I noticed had other variations on censuses. However, Grandma Elise’s baptism certificate omitted Coralie’s maiden name. Auguste’s daughter Augustine’s marriage certificate lists her mother’s maiden name as Agnes Cureau. On Marie St. Cyr’s death certificate the Board of Health recorded her mother’s maiden name as Dunbordreux, a surname that didn’t exist.

Incidentally, Laplace was a small town. Most of the whites that lived there had a blood connection to African Americans. When they were in a position to hide those ties in records, they did, and the racist laws had a lot to do with it. Actually, they did it to protect all parties involved. During that era, free people of color associated with those of
like status. They sponsored each other’s children for baptisms and married within the free people of color community.

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When I joined the German-Arcadia German Coast Historical Genealogy Society, as I read the names of the members who held offices, I noticed that many of them were on my DNA results. One of them I had emailed for some information, I mentioned to her that she happened to be on my DNA results. She and I shared a large segment of DNA. As she and I talked, she gave me the impression that she didn’t believe it to be true. I reminded her that DNA results were accurate and didn’t lie. Suddenly, she recalled some of my ancestors lived next door to her when she was growing up.

“Her grandmother let her play with me. Their mother wouldn’t,” she said to me.

Funny, it wasn’t long after our conversation that she locked her account and changed it to private. Eventually, her account disappeared completely. Some people run from—deny their blood ties, half of their identity, and half of their heritage. Both whites and African Americans are guilty—SOME that is. Whites who do it have attached a stigma to being African American as if it’s a dirty word. Or they act as if having an African Americans in the family disgraces their family. African Americans who do it hold on to old grievances of slavery and rapes committed in the past. Neither one of them seem to want to face the fact that what happened in the past had do with ignorance, selfishness, and greed. In some cases it was love—a normal human emotion. Instead, they keep the past between them like wedge. Both harbor ill feelings that divide. If both
are stuck in the past, how do they go forward in the future? It’s similar to a person stuck in the middle of a burning house. Instead of at least attempt to get out, they freeze, and die.

When my aunts and uncles began to talk more, I learned more about them growing up. The conversations revealed what was hidden below the surface. Jealousy, poverty, voodoo, and skin color played a major role with the separation of family. Some of the great aunts and uncles were better off financially then others. My Aunt Marie thought that my grandfather could do better than he was doing, which is true. However, he had more children then all of them did. She meddled in her siblings’ affairs. Aunt Marie played an instrumental part in the bickering between my dad’s sisters as well. In one conversation I had with Edna, she told me what caused it.

“I helped deliver the twins. Marie persuaded them to let one of the twins live with her. I was against it. Marie was better off financially than St. Cyr was. That twin had better clothes. She lived in a better house. Anything that twin wanted, Marie provided her. Marie wouldn’t even let that twin associate her sisters. It caused a lot of jealousy between the sisters. They began to deny that she was their sister. But, she was their sister. I know that as a fact! She was! I helped deliver them. I’m coming to the family reunion. I plan to set them all straight. It’s time to put a stop to it. I’m sick of it! It’s time for healing.” Edna said in an angry tone.

Edna never made it to the family reunion. She died a month before it. However, that twin obtained her birth certificate, which confirmed what Edna said. Though, it didn’t end the bickering between the sisters. I believe the damage was too deep, so were
the wounds. The only problem, my dad is not around to negotiate a truce between them anymore. Hopefully, one day they’ll get it together, but I seriously doubt it. They’re old and set in their ways. Only four of the eight sisters remain living. All of the brothers are deceased.

Many of those on my paternal side of the family were color struck. They practiced skin-color favoritism throughout the family. Knowing what I know now, it all goes back to slavery, survival, and passing. It’s the attitude of that era that their generation inherited from their elders, which caused a color struck mindset, but when it got to my generation, I say it like this on purpose, “Us children is free.”

As for my research on the paternal side, figuring out which Victorine is the right one remains at the top of the list. She is one of the mysteries I’m still trying to solve. Noel and Clovis were definitely brothers. Edna confirmed that Clovis was his brother. After slavery ended, Clovis and his brother got back together. The two brothers remained close until Noel died. Maria told me that they had a sister too, and her name was Eugenia. She never did get a chance to tell me what happened to her though.

Still missing are the branches on the Algere side and my grandmother Ruby’s paternal and maternal side. Although, there are several history books written by others regarding the Duvernay branch, figuring out which white branch the Duvernay descended from is the challenge—naming patterns are the problem. My grandmother’s maiden name was Duvernay. I found out from one our kin on the white side of the Duvernay family that many of African American Duvernays passed for white. “They passed because they could. They looked white,” she said. It’s true that they looked white. My
grandmother’s sister looked like a white woman. If any of her siblings passed, I don’t know. Her mother admitted her into an orphan home and left her there. Grandma Ruby’s sister rescued her out of the orphan home after she got a job. Troubling is the fact that my great-grandmother didn’t put my grandmother’s siblings in the orphan home. Her mother was still living at the time. She was the great-grandmother that my father didn’t take us to see when we made that trip to New Orleans.

In a conversation with Aunt Jenny, I remember her telling me that they didn’t fool with some of her mother’s people, which was the Ledet and Ross branch. The Ledet branch was her grandmother’s side of the family, the Ross was her grandmother’s paternal side of the family. “I didn’t know any of the Ledet side. My mother’s people had a lotta’ Irish in their family. They didn’t get along with my daddy’s people. The Ross believed in Voodoo. They didn’t fool with them,” she said. When she told me that, the first thought that came to my mind was Congo Square. I learned that the African Americans would gather in Congo Square to dance, and to do their Voodoo rites. They danced with snakes in their rituals. Actually, Voodoo is a religion. The stories told to me, which pertained to Voodoo, were chilling. I wouldn’t want to piss any Voodoo priest or priestess off myself, especially those who learned the real McCoy from their ancestors.

Nevertheless, three branches on my paternal side remained missing—the Ross, the Algere, and Ledet family. I reckon all were passing, except the ones we know. The three Algere men that stayed with Gabriel appeared once and disappeared again, they remain a mystery too. Victorine remains a mystery as well. The DNA results for my brother are also puzzling. His haplogroup is R1b1b2, which is the most common
haplogroup in Western Europe, with distinct branches in specific regions—Irish, Basques, British, French. He is a male descendant of the Algere line. There are a quite few pieces of the puzzle missing; therefore, my search continues.

Studying genealogy produced some positive results. I learned the occupation of my grandparents. I gained a better understanding of my paternal side of the family. It helped my dad’s siblings learn about their family history and get to know their family. It aroused my families’ interest in knowing their history. Most of all, it helped me to understand why many of my kinfolks on the paternal side chose to pass. It helped me to connect with missing family that was passing. The DNA test connected me with one of my African relatives. In addition, it showed me where my ancestors originated from in Africa and other countries. “When you start talking about family, about lineage and ancestry, you are talking about every person on earth” (Haley). I discovered that I have nations flowing through my veins. It gave me a deeper insight on racism. I learned that genealogy is not just a bunch of vital records; it teaches history, it enables people to learn about their ancestors—their strengths. Marcus Garvey said, “A people without the knowledge of their past history, origin and culture is like a tree without roots” (Garvey). If a tree doesn’t have roots, it dies. Therefore, knowledge of our families’ history, origin, and culture planted strong roots that continue to bless our family to be fruitful and multiply.

Even though there’s still work to do on the paternal side, I’ve started on my maternal side. My mom wants me to do hers. Most of her family history is intact, which makes it easier to research. There are quite a few political, historical figures on her tree
from the White House to the Courthouse, and even more than that—regular kinfolks that
made it into history books. Her family history is turning out to be an intriguing novel. I
think that Alex Haley said it best. “In every conceivable manner, the family is link to our
past, bridge to our future” (Haley). I believe my ancestors would be proud to know that
they paved the way and they birthed generations of descendants who rose from ashes like
the Phoenix Bird to become professors, doctors, lawyers, politicians, professional
athletes, musicians, movie stars, and entrepreneurs, etc. We’re a colorful family of many
nations. Mostly, they would be proud to know that the family has come full circle in
strength.
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