

## Chapter 1

# Roots

I was born in 1935 and like many African Americans of my generation—particularly those who, like me, are descended from slaves—I lack concrete details about my early family history. Our origin story is muted, often intentionally so. There is too much pain in a past marked by bondage and subjugation at the hands of white masters. Thus, the narrative remains opaque, or missing key elements.

Many people want to know how my family's history and my own beginnings informed or defined my sense of identity as an African American. Essentially, they are inquiring about my inherent understanding of my blackness. I try to tell them that I have mostly a void where so many of my friends have a rich and detailed family history. There are gaps and unanswered questions and so much I do not know about my ancestors. My friends who are Irish American or Italian American or Greek American tell wonderfully detailed and heartwarming stories about their heritage passed down from great-grandparents, grandparents, and parents. Many have traced out the branches of their family trees and have written extensive genealogies. As these stories were being told and shared, I sat silently and listened. I wished I had stories like theirs to contribute. I felt a dull ache in my heart and I always wanted to know more about my family history. I had a longing for a firm foundation and wished that I, too, could describe all the branches in my family tree.

Instead, I had a sense of rootlessness, of not knowing much about my family's earliest history. Although I did not know the term growing up, I would come to understand that I am part of the African Diaspora. Large-scale enslavement dispersed millions of people from Western and Central Africa on slave ships to regions throughout the Caribbean, the Americas, and the United States. These slaves served as indentured servants on plantations, in factories, as servants in the homes of wealthy homeowners, and anywhere that slave labor was deemed necessary and accepted.

I have since come to know and understand the term African Diaspora. I am descended from slaves and I am part of the African Diaspora. It was a rootless, nomadic existence for my ancestors. For countless people like myself, a deep understanding and knowledge of my family's history going back generations was, for all practical purposes, unattainable.

Therefore, what I know about where I came from fills only a few short sentences. My grandparents chose not to talk much about their past because it was generally not a positive experience. Like all children, I was curious, of course, and I remember when I was young asking my grandmother and grandfather about the South, which they had fled in order to migrate to the North.

About the South I can remember my grandfather saying only this: "It was a place you had to get away from."

Period. Nothing more. I did not get to ask a follow-up question or, even if I did, he declined to tell me anything more.

I do not even know the names of my forebearers.

What I was told by my mother and grandmother and managed to piece together is that my great-grandmother was a slave. Her name was never spoken to me and even my grandmother, the daughter of a slave, knew very little about her family history.

My consciousness of race and a deeper understanding of my past began with my maternal grandfather, Calvin Ray. He grew up in North Carolina and he was the one who often voiced the sentiment that the South was a place he wanted to leave. He offered few details, but he did talk about migrating from North Carolina to Boston around 1905.

Calvin Ray was ahead of his time. Without strictly fitting its historical parameters, he was part of the Great Migration, at least in spirit. The

Great Migration involved the voluntary relocation of six million African Americans from the rural South to cities in the industrial North, Midwest, and West beginning around 1916 and continuing through 1970. Although Calvin Ray was more than a decade early, his exodus fit the paradigm of the Great Migration. These huge numbers of Black people were driven northward out of the Southern states due to the harsh reality of Jim Crow laws that enforced racial segregation and fueled discrimination in many forms. This racial caste system was rigorously enforced until 1965.

My grandfather never explained to me the motivations for his migration, or why he chose to settle in Boston. He suggested in oblique ways that he left North Carolina both to escape discrimination and overt racism but also to find better economic opportunities.

The few details I managed to glean from my grandfather Calvin was that he had three brothers. The brothers all left the South in the same era, the early 1900s, but took different paths in their journey from the oppression they experienced in the South. One brother ended up in Washington, DC, and worked for the United States Postal Service. One of the brothers settled in New Hampshire, but I was not told what he did for a living. And one other brother came to Boston along with Calvin, but, once again, my knowledge of these great-uncles of mine was extremely limited.

Around the same time, the early 1900s, my maternal grandmother, Mamie Brooks, relocated from Richmond, Virginia, to the Boston area. She said her mother was born after slavery, but her grandmother, who would be my great-great-grandmother, was born into slavery and she was owned by a plantation owner in the South. She told me that her grandmother was assigned to work as a domestic servant for the wife of a wealthy plantation owner. The story passed down to me noted that she slept on the hardwood floor at the foot of the bed and, among her other duties, she looked after the personal needs of the plantation owner's wife, cooked and cleaned their large house, and was also responsible for raising their children. She said she was one of several enslaved females who were assigned various domestic duties on the Virginia plantation.

Again, she either did not know her enslaved grandmother's name or she chose not to share it at family gatherings, because I was an astute

and inquisitive child and I am sure I asked what it was. But I have no recollection of ever being told her name.

Mamie Brooks and Calvin Ray migrated to Boston, where they met, four decades after the end of the Civil War and the abolition of slavery. Calvin worked as a janitor who maintained and repaired coal-burning furnaces and was put in charge of maintenance of commercial buildings in downtown Boston. They married in 1909 and their first child, Calvin Jr., was born in 1910. Their second child, Caroleasa, my mother, was born in 1912. They had a son, Donald, who died as a toddler of a childhood disease. Mamie Brooks Ray gave birth without complication to three more baby girls—my aunts Inez, Eunice, and Hazel.

I have fond memories of my grandfather Calvin. He was a tall, dark-skinned Black man with thick, gray hair. He spoke softly and with only the trace of a Southern drawl. He was reserved in his demeanor and very quiet, a man of few words. I remember he'd come home from his job as a maintenance worker and furnace technician and he decompressed from his long work day by listening to the radio. We understood intuitively that he did not want to be interrupted, especially not by a young grandson. I remember hearing his heavy sighs and he would confide to me, in a low voice, what grinding toil it was to shovel coal into the furnace and to make sure the boiler and the other parts were functioning properly through the long, cold New England winters. I did not know who his friends were, because he did not socialize much and they rarely invited visitors into their apartment.

I wondered about their education, but neither my grandfather Calvin nor my grandmother Mamie ever told me how far they got with their formal schooling. I had the sense that both of them dropped out of school at a young age to work full-time to help support their families.

Mamie was aided by a force of personality. She was short of stature but large in other ways. She was very sociable, a big talker in contrast to her husband's long silences. Whatever Southern drawl they might have once possessed was worn away by their years in Boston, although neither of my grandparents developed the elongated flatness and lack of the *r* sound that characterized Boston natives. Mamie occupied the center of our extended multigenerational family. She was deeply involved in the rearing

of all her grandchildren and also our babysitter when our parents went out at night to socialize or when my mother entered the workforce full-time.

My Grandma Mamie and Grandpa Calvin lived in a rented brownstone on Hammond Street in the South End of Boston, an African American enclave. The streets were cobblestone and the nineteenth-century brownstones were well maintained. It was a haven for Black people, where they felt comfortable and where their culture flourished. Boston's South End was one of the only places in the city that had not been racially redlined, a rare locale where Blacks were welcome and encouraged to rent or buy homes. In essence, it was a ghetto, but it was also a place of pride and solidarity. If Mamie and Calvin were victims of overt racism, I never heard about it, although I have no doubt that once they left the confines of Hammond Street they faced issues of the institutional prejudice and discrimination embedded in the nation at that time, including in New England.

One of my earliest, strongest memories of my grandmother Mamie was her fascination with a form of numerology, particularly when it came to playing the numbers, and her role in the underground gambling culture among Black residents in her South End neighborhood.

Mamie was a devoted player of the numbers, a form of gambling that involved picking three random numerals. Players picked their three digits in the morning and when they picked up a copy of the evening paper, the *Boston Record*, and they would find out if they had the winning numbers by looking at horse racing results buried deep in the sports pages from Suffolk Downs, a racetrack in East Boston that opened in 1935. The first three numbers of the previous day's parimutuel betting handle at Suffolk Downs—which were completely random and could not be manipulated—were the winning numbers for thousands of small daily wagers on the numbers that ranged from a dime to \$1 or more.

Playing the numbers was a staple in working-class neighborhoods in Boston and cities across the Northeast and the nation, long before Massachusetts and other states created state-sanctioned lottery games of chance.

At least in her telling, Mamie was especially adept at picking the winning numbers. She had an elaborate system of picking her numbers that bordered on religious devotion. Her “Bible” of gambling on the numbers was a dog-eared copy of *Dr. Buzzard's Dream Book*, a thin

pamphlet that assigned numbers to interpretations of dreams. This book was widely sold at the five-and-dime, at drugstores, or corner stores. It looked like Mamie had owned hers for many decades and she preserved it like a talisman. The *Dream Book* was a kind of glossary of dreams, arranged alphabetically, with numbers assigned to each category of dream. A dream about being caught in floodwaters, for instance, might carry the number thirty-six, and Mamie would play the numbers three and six and find another single-digit number in the *Dream Book* or by some other method to come up with the three numbers she would play for that day. She also liked to use combinations of the birthdays of her grandchildren, but she swore by the power of her dreams. Nobody, myself included, ever expressed skepticism or questioned the scientific efficacy of *Dr. Buzzard's Dream Book* or, for that matter, what branch of medicine this sketchy author and numerologist claimed to represent. No matter. For Mamie, recalled dreams and consulting her ever-present *Dream Book* formed the foundation of her gambling tools.

Mamie did not have a large amount of discretionary income, but she wagered a dime or a quarter each day, hoping to win a six-to-one payout. She hit her share of winning numbers, but she also made herself an indispensable part of the daily numbers landscape in the South End of Boston. Her brownstone on Hammond Street became a drop-off point for neighbors who wanted to play the numbers on their way to work in the morning. In her living room, she had a tidy stack of slips of paper with names and numbers scrawled on them. Various runners would stop by, Mamie would hand over the stack of paper slips, and the person would hustle off with that day's entries. If one of the players hit the three-digit number, the runner would return to Mamie's house with the winnings.

At some point, our family lore goes, Mamie's brownstone was raided by Boston police. Mamie's son, Calvin Jr., was arrested for serving as a Hammond Street runner and for playing a central role in the numbers game. Although he never implicated his mother and refused to cooperate with the investigation, the scandal and the time he had to serve derailed a promising academic career. He had been an excellent student up to that point, but his arrest led to his expulsion from high school. The damage had been done and Calvin Jr. never fully recovered.

“Moving up the hill” is what we called it in my family, this relocation from the South End, which in reality was only a slightly more upwardly mobile locale from where we had lived before. We moved to the Boston neighborhood of Roxbury, which was known as the heart of Black culture in the city, and the numbers operation established a foothold there as well. The numbers game centered on Humboldt Avenue, the main commercial thoroughfare, which is where we lived and where the life and action was. I got to know Mr. Wright, who was an usher at Mamie’s church and who owned a corner store on Humboldt Avenue that was primarily a newsstand that sold a few sundry items and also stocked a selection of magazines and newspapers. My limited involvement was to drop off Mamie’s numbers at his store as a favor to my grandmother.

This was gambling on a small scale, a dollar-and-a-dream respite for poor, Black working-class families like mine. It was grassroots and benign as far as I knew—based upon the little nuggets of incomplete information I gathered when I asked Mamie about it in later years. She didn’t like to delve too deeply into the past and never offered me much detail, whether I wanted to know about our family’s connection to slavery or how she had gotten involved in the numbers and how the operation worked. She did concede she did not read much, but she purchased the *Boston Record* each evening because she wanted to look at the horse racing track’s parimutuel betting handle in order to find the three digits that determined who hit the number that day. She also confided she was not much of a churchgoer, but when she did attend Sunday service, she memorized the row of three digits on the board near the choir. Those numbers corresponded to that Sunday’s hymn selection and Mamie believed strongly in using the hymn numbers because she thought it brought her divine luck when she played them for money in the game.

I never saw Mamie work outside the house, which is why she needed me to serve as her runner. She raised me and my five siblings and she also took care of five additional grandchildren. I remember that Mamie was in charge and we young ones dared not challenge her authority. Even though she was low-key and never raised her voice to us in anger or frustration, she had a firm sense of rules and decorum and we learned to follow what she laid down without argument or complaint. For us youngsters, it was

Mamie's world. We just lived in it. She was a cross between a field marshal and den mother, whose daily attire consisted of a house dress and slippers. She just had little need to dress otherwise. Mamie occasionally yielded the kitchen, where she also ruled, to her husband. He loved to reconnect himself and his family members to their native North Carolina by serving a dinner of Southern-fried chicken, smoked ribs, and collard greens.

Calvin Jr. never bounced back from his downward spiral after being expelled from high school. He married and had four children. They moved off Hammond Street so he could put the difficult episode behind him. He never seemed to be able to outrun his past. He worked in the upholstery business until the company shut down for lack of customers and he was forced to do domestic work—the only steady job he could find. Several female members of our family had made their living cleaning up after wealthy white families, including my aunt Inez who worked for an heiress to the Pabst Blue Ribbon fortune and lived in Westchester County. She seemed to enjoy her work. But I think it grated on Calvin Jr. that this was the only kind of employment he could find. Unfortunately, he was not highly skilled and lacked the kind of employment history that would lift him out of domestic work. That was what was available and the need to feed, house, and clothe his family took precedence over his ego.

My family put down roots at 27 Harold Street in Roxbury. Multiple generations of family members lived in two connected buildings. My grandmother and aunts lived on the second floor and my parents and my sisters and I lived on the third floor. It was north of Fenway Park and near the Franklin Park Zoo. It was a neighborhood in transition during the 1940s. It had been a predominantly Jewish neighborhood, but many of the Jewish families had moved out and relocated to more affluent areas outside the city. Despite the exodus, most of the small businesses and the daily economy of Roxbury were controlled by Jewish merchants. That's just the way it was. I did not sense any racial tensions between Jews and the Black community. Everyone seemed to get along fairly well.

My aunt Inez was an influence on me in many ways, particularly in how she taught me about proper deportment and protocol and how to feel confident and comfortable in the world of wealthy white families—lessons I would draw upon throughout my adult professional and personal life.



Inez married the butler at the Purchase estate, where they both worked. His name was Luther and he was a kind man. After their marriage, Inez moved with her new husband to Washington, DC, but he died tragically in an automobile accident shortly after the newlyweds settled in the nation's capital. She grieved his loss but eventually remarried a few years later to the postal carrier who delivered mail to her home in DC. His name was Richard. They struck up a friendship that led to a courtship and a marriage proposal. They were happy together, they had a strong union, and they had an influence on me.

I can still picture Aunt Inez running me and my siblings through our paces about how to function at formal dinners. She taught us etiquette and proper manners, such as how to set a table formally; which forks to use for salad, entrée, and dessert; where to place one's napkin and how to act during dinner. She had great references and work experience as a maid and she never had trouble finding work with wealthy white families. She was a wonderfully positive influence and she also encouraged us to work hard and to strive to get ahead. In practical terms, she also helped out her sister, our mother, when we struggled financially in later years. Aunt Inez was our rock during turbulent times. My mother relied on her generosity and kindness and, by extension, so did we children.