



ONE

Life Inside the Black Box

“The hunger for love is much more difficult to remove than the hunger for bread.”

~ MOTHER TERESA ~



Pain.

Burning, searing, indescribable pain—that’s my first memory. I was three years old and, for some reason I’ll never know, my mother had waited three years to have me circumcised. With the anesthesia wearing off, I was in agony. I didn’t understand what was happening, and I certainly didn’t understand why my mother didn’t seem to think it was a big deal. I kept looking to her for support, reaching out to her to comfort me and soothe my screams of pain. But that support and comfort never came—not that day or any day since.

The doctors bandaged my wound and sent me home. Over the next week, my mother or older sister casually ripped the bandage off once a day to change the dressing, each time reigniting the fire that sent my three-year-old mind reeling in pain. Days and weeks passed, and the pain eventually subsided. The physical wound healed but left in its place was a psychological wound that never would.

My first memory, my most enduring memory from my childhood, is pain ... and the realization that no one cared.

— THE GOOD OLD DAYS ... BUT NOT FOR ME —



I was born on February 25, 1951, right at the start of the decade many believe was the pinnacle of human civilization. Years earlier, the nation's men had returned home from war and settled down to start families. A decade marked by war and loss had given way to a decade filled with hope. *I Love Lucy* debuted on television that year, giving America a glimpse of the good times and family-friendly values everyone aspired to have in their own homes. "The shot heard 'round the world," a phrase that would have evoked wartime horrors only six years earlier, now described the famous crack of Bobby Thomson's bat as he sent a game-winning, three-run homer flying over the fence at New York's Polo Grounds, cinching the National League pennant for the Giants.

This was set to be a golden decade ... but not for people like me. Like many people of color, my family didn't share in America's golden decade of glory. My focus wasn't on baseball or television; it was on survival. Every day, I woke up scrambling to find food and shelter, fighting prejudice and discrimination, desperately seeking support and affirmation, and struggling to get through life. Welcome to life in the Black Box.

Born into Poverty

I was one of five children born to my mother, Bertha. I never knew my father and suffered through a long line of my mother's live-in boyfriends and soon-to-be ex-husbands. While I was born in New York, my family moved to Daytona Beach, Florida, when I was very young. We were dirt poor, so housing options were limited. We ended up in a particularly bad part of town called the Black Box, a ghetto mostly filled with other impoverished people of color.

The Black Box was a two-mile block of land literally on the wrong side of the tracks. A rail line separated Daytona's white population from us, and 98 percent of the black community was crammed into this tiny box. Like many public housing projects, the Black Box was overcrowded and underfunded. Row after row of ugly, dilapidated tract-style homes lined each side of the street. Just picture an endless stretch of drab, tiny, and indistinguishable storage units lined up as far as the eye can see. That's what the housing situation looked like in the Box.

My family moved into a 750-square-foot rental unit made up of two small bedrooms, one bathroom, and a living area. Two of my brothers and I shared one bedroom (our older



brother lived with his father), my mother took the other, and my sister Mary, who was nine years older than me, slept on the couch near the front door. We had no heat in the winter, so when the temperature dropped into the thirties, it was cold. The summer was even worse; we had to endure the oppressive

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Florida heat and humidity without air conditioning. The temperature in the house sometimes exceeded one hundred degrees, and just walking from one room to another left me bathed in sweat.

It sounds bad (because it *was* bad), but it's all I knew back then. With nothing but poverty all around me, I had no idea how desperately poor we were. Everyone else lived like we did, so we never had a concept

of any other way of life. If you lived in the Black Box and never went beyond it, you didn't know how people with money lived. I assumed *everyone* lived without air conditioning. How could I miss it when I didn't even know it existed?

Health care was another limited resource in the projects. In poor communities like ours, people didn't have money for doctors. If you got sick, you toughed it out. Or, as a last resort, you went to the hospital emergency room, but that was an option few people considered. In fact, one of my sister's kids died because she waited too long to take him to the hospital. As for me, I was given medical assistance only twice between the ages of four and my high school graduation: once by a dentist, who took care of an abscessed tooth that swelled

my jaw to the size of a handball, and once by a physician who treated me for pneumonia. I knew that illness must have been bad, because my mother called a minister to our house and he stayed at my bedside for five hours. I remember wanting to reach out and to thank him, but I didn't have the strength to lift my arm.

And we can't overlook the impact poverty has on something as important as our clothes. For example, I don't remember wearing shoes one time before I started first grade. Kids in the projects *never* wore shoes, especially in the summer. I got my first pair from the Salvation Army when I started school. From then on, I never had more than one pair at a time, and I wore them until they literally fell apart. In fact, I wore them long after holes began eating up the soles. When my shoes got to that point, I had to stuff them with cardboard to plug the holes and get a little more life out of them. Cardboard isn't waterproof, though, so that didn't stop my feet from getting soaked when it rained. To this day, I have fungus on my toenails from walking to and from school in wet shoes. It's a small daily reminder of the life I used to live.

I certainly never got any *new* clothes. Everything I had was either from the Salvation Army, a hand-me-down, or purchased second- or thirdhand for pennies. I didn't get my first truly new piece of clothing until I was sixteen years old, and I had to use my own money for that. I had worked a lot over the summer cutting yards and doing odd jobs. Every dollar I made was precious, so you can imagine how special that first pair of new pants I bought was to me. I remember the

feeling of pride I felt as I walked into the first day of eleventh grade wearing my new pants. It's a feeling I'd never had before. It's hard to describe that level of poverty to many people today. You really can't understand unless you've lived it.

The Thirty-yard Rule and Fifteen-foot Beatings

Living in the ghetto meant safety was always a challenge. Crime was rampant. Switchblades and brass knuckles were readily available, and they were used often. To keep an eye on us and protect us, my mother had a standing rule: no one was allowed to wander more than thirty yards from the front door—where she could see us—unless it involved a specific task she needed done. It felt like my brothers and I were under house arrest whenever we weren't in school or running an errand. Mom meant it, though. If she stepped out the front door and couldn't see me, I'd get a beating. Staying no farther than thirty yards from home meant I had no chance of meeting people and making friends when I was young. So, until I started school, my only playmates were my brothers and the kids who lived next door.

When we were out of sight or out of line, her punishment was hard and swift. By today's standards, my mother probably would've been arrested for child abuse from the beatings she dished out to me and my siblings. We were beaten badly and often, mostly between the ages of three and six. My younger brothers were more mischievous than I was, so they took the brunt of it. I remember cringing in fear when my mother

tore into them. I often screamed even though I wasn't the one getting hit, just because I knew just how it felt.

Her instrument of choice was a fifteen-foot-long extension cord, which she used when ironing clothes. When it was time for a whipping, she removed the extension cord from the iron, wrapped part of it around her hand, and used the rest as a whip. It was a cotton-wrapped cord, but it still hurt plenty when it slammed into our backs and butts. That cord left welts all over our backsides and legs even through our pants. And the severity of the beating depended on how mad she was at us. If she was *really* mad, look out! My mother was no lightweight, either. She stood tall at five foot eight—plenty big enough to swing her whip with power.

The beatings were horrible, but there was one bright side with Mom. At least with her, she'd beat you on the spot. During the years we lived with my stepfather, Mom often waited for him to come home so he could get a few lashes in. We routinely got beaten ten hours after we did whatever it was that made her mad. And the fear of waiting for a beating was almost as bad as the beating itself.

Fear was only one of the emotions the beatings brought out in me. As bad as the physical beatings were, I think most of their damage was emotional and psychological. They have had a negative, lifelong impact on me. The trauma of being beaten and watching my brothers get beaten with a fifteen-foot whip made me so severely introverted that I never wanted to come out of my room or do anything with anyone. I was scared that anything—*anything*—could lead to a whipping

session. I can still hear my brothers' screams echoing in my head as they pleaded, "Please! Please stop, Mama! I won't do it anymore! I'll be good, I promise!" You just can't shake off those kinds of memories. You feel them in your bones for as long as you live.

I know the trauma of those beatings had a destructive, lifelong effect on me. They contributed to my constant struggles with extreme introversion and bouts of depression. I also believe that abuse is why I so desperately sought affection from my mother. I wanted to be her best child, the kid who always did good things. The son who never needed a beating. Little did I realize that there was *nothing* I could have done to please or impress her. Nothing I've done since then has either.

I view the abuse I suffered as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it made me depressed and introverted, feeling lousy about myself and not wanting to be around others. On the other, it made me stay in my room and study twice as hard as my peers. Staying in the house like that kept me out of trouble. Plus, studying all those extra hours helped me please my teachers, who appreciated the efforts I made to be a good student.

They gave me the affection I so desperately craved and the affirmation my mother could never give. All that studying also helped me achieve the grades I needed to go to college and escape a life of poverty.

There is no excuse or justification for what my mother did

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to me. It was a nightmare that I was trapped in throughout my entire childhood, and it was something no child should ever be forced to endure. However, with the benefit of time and therapy, I've been able to extract some good from the bad. Even the most horrible experiences can provide windows of opportunity. If you're facing terrible times right now, don't let those challenges stop you in your pursuit of personal success and happiness. In fact, you can learn to use them as your fire and motivation to push forward. Hopefully I can give you a glimpse of how to do that throughout this book.

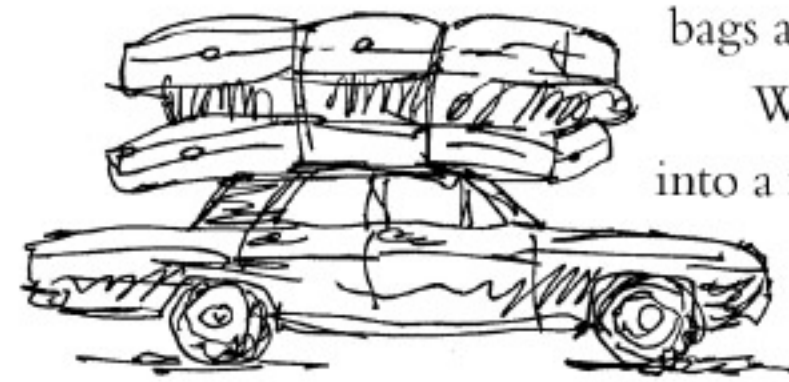


— ALWAYS ON THE MOVE —

The poverty, substandard housing, and frequent beatings made my life stressful to say the least. Adding to that stress was a total lack of stability. I lived at seventeen different addresses before graduating from high school. Seventeen! That constant sense that I'd have to pack up and move at a moment's notice was traumatic for me. Children *need* some sense of permanence and stability in their lives, but my siblings and I had none at all. The change was nonstop, and we'd sometimes get no more than twenty minutes' notice that it was time to move somewhere else.

The moves were for a variety of different reasons. Sometimes it was financial, and other times my mother would move us into the home of a man she was seeing. Wherever we were, no matter how long we had lived there, we knew a move was coming soon.

It was inevitable. So, it was rarely a surprise when Mom stuck her head in my bedroom door and told me to pack my things. My brothers and I had it down to a science. It took no more than fifteen minutes to pack all our belongings into grocery bags and throw them in the car.



We could move our entire family into a new house in two carloads with the mattresses tied to the roof of the car. We did that a lot.

Aunt Katie

My favorite place to stay was always at my Aunt Katie's house. We were in and out of her house all the time between moves or when my mother needed a babysitter. Her house was a happy place for me. Aunt Katie had a regular job as a seamstress. She was strong-willed and independent, and she had enough income to feed me when I was with her. That meant so much to me as a child. Up until the time I left for college, Aunt Katie's house was the only place in the world where I didn't have to go to bed hungry.

She was forty-three years older than me and, as time passed, she became the matriarch of our family, lending money to family members when they needed it and taking care of them when they were sick. She even gave one of her houses to my nephew. Although Aunt Katie was generous, she was a tough lady and was not to be taken lightly. Her first husband found that out the hard way.

One night, he tried to break down her door, and she blew him away with a shotgun. Another time, an intruder came up the stairs unannounced, forcing Aunt Katie to use the shotgun once again. Fortunately for him, the blast didn't kill him. Katie's husband hadn't been so lucky. Such was life in the Black Box.

Aunt Katie lived a long, interesting life. She married her final husband at ninety-three years of age and lived with him until he died (of natural causes this time) before passing away herself at 105 years old. She and I grew very close, and she often told me I was her favorite of all her nieces and nephews. Considering the fact that she had *twenty* brothers and sisters and an army of nieces and nephews, that was a huge compliment.

I considered Aunt Katie to be my mother. She was the only adult in my family who gave me not only affection but a sense of my family history. She loved telling stories about our family; about 95 percent of what I know about my genealogy came from her. We often sat down together with her big family Bible, and she'd show me where she recorded the births of everyone in our family, starting with all twenty-one of my grandmother's children. In those days, the Bible always had a place to record your family tree, and Aunt Katie never failed to record a birth in our huge, sprawling family. Aunt Katie would go through that list of names, telling me stories about each of the siblings—when they were born, when they died, and how they lived their lives. She spoke about many of them growing up as sharecroppers on plantations and how poorly they had been treated by their owners.

Learning about my roots with Aunt Katie was precious to me. I could feel a sense of personal history and connection. I heard about their difficulties and I knew I could overcome my own problems. The more time I spent with her, the deeper and more special the bond between us became. When it came time in her later years to appoint a legal guardian, even though her only child was still living, Aunt Katie chose me. One of the saddest times of my life was in 2015, when I arranged the service and burial of the small, selfless powerhouse I considered my true mother.

On her death bed, Aunt Katie made me promise to take care of the family and take up her role as the family leader. It wasn't an easy promise considering everything my family put me through over the years, but it's a responsibility I took on for her. To this day, I work hard at keeping that promise.

An Orphan Overnight

As much as my Aunt Katie made me feel like a son, my own mother often made me feel like an orphan—sometimes figuratively, but one time all too literally.

We moved so often that I got into a groove. Moving was a huge hassle every time, but I took most of the seventeen moves in stride. Compared to the constant hunger and endless beatings I faced, moving around wasn't that big a deal. One move, though, truly affected me, and it left a lasting feeling of abandonment in my heart and mind.

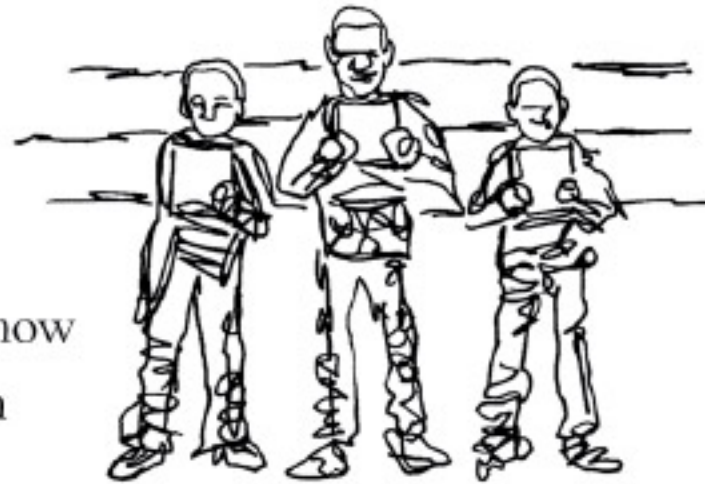
One morning when I was twelve, my mother woke me, my twin brother, and my younger brother (age eleven) early and said we had to move. She'd already packed our stuff in bags. We all got in the car and Mom started driving us away without telling us where we were going. I could tell this move was different than the others. There was something Mom wasn't telling us.

Finally, once we were on the road with no way to escape, Mom told us the heartbreaking news: she was dropping us off at the local orphanage home. We were stunned and terrified because we'd heard about that place and the kids who lived there. They were looking for someone to take them home, and we always felt sorry for them. Children who weren't adopted were teased by the others, who'd say, "You're too ugly to be adopted" or all kinds of other horrible remarks to make them feel unworthy and unwanted. And now we were going to live among them.

With no warning or real explanation, my mother had decided that my brothers and I were going to be orphans. All she said was, "I need to drop you guys off here for a while because I got some work in New York state. I don't know when I'll be back." That was it. That's all we knew. She got us through the door of the orphanage and disappeared from our lives for three months. Not one time over those months did she ever call, write, or contact us in any way. Even worse, she gave us no indication of when—or even *if*—she would return. We weren't just orphans; we were *unwanted* orphans.

As time passed, I grew more and more terrified that

Mom would never come back and my two brothers and I would be split up by someone adopting one of us and not the others. There were people coming in every day, all day long, interviewing the kids. We knew that children who were there one day might be gone the next. It was like living in an animal shelter. The staff always wanted us to be cute and presentable, saying, "You never know when someone is going to walk in the door and choose you, so you need to be your best at all times." Prospective parents were shown photographs of each child and, if the couple liked what they saw, they'd bring them in to meet the boy or girl. I didn't exactly understand the process, but I knew we didn't want anyone to ask about us. We didn't want to be adopted into another family; we already were a family—broken and abused, but a family, nonetheless.



Every day, I lived with the trauma of worrying I might be separated from my brothers. We were haunted by my mother's words. She said she was coming back for us, but why hadn't we heard from her? When would she return? And would it be too late when she did?

The bright side to our time in the orphanage, though it was hard to call *anything* there a bright side, was the fact that we got to eat three meals a day. However, that benefit was far overshadowed by our fear of being separated—and by having to live such regulated lives. It was a very strict place. They woke

us up at 6:00 a.m. every day, and we had to be downstairs for breakfast thirty minutes later. After breakfast, we were assigned chores, like washing dishes or cleaning. Every kid was given a task to keep the orphanage running. After lunch, we could earn some free time, but we always had to stay inside the intimidating chain-link fence that surrounded the orphanage grounds. We had dinner in the evening, after which we had to go directly to our rooms and stay there until the next morning. Nobody was allowed outside their room after dinner except to go to the bathroom. It was like living in a youth prison inside the Black Box.

I talked to a lot of kids in the orphanage. Probably 30 percent of them believed their parents would return and take them home. When those parents didn't show up, the other children would tease them and say, "Forget it. Your parents are never coming back." I always argued that it would be different for me, that my mother would be different. Of course, I had nothing to base that on.

A few times, the stress and fear got the best of me and I went downstairs to see the head of the orphanage, a tough, seemingly heartless woman we called *Mrs. Gestapo*. I asked her when my mother was coming back and she replied bluntly, "I don't know. I haven't heard from her." I asked her over and over again, but she never changed her answer or said anything to reassure me. What other kids said didn't bother me that much; I could take their constant ribbing. But *Mrs. Gestapo's* complete lack of hope or assurance shook me to the core. Despite the brave face I put on for the other

kids, I was worried my mother would never come back and rescue us from the cold, fenced-in land of lost children.

We went to church at the orphanage, and the minister always told us to “keep [our] hope alive.” All three of us tried our hardest to follow his advice, believing that Mom would soon return, no matter what the other kids said. But, as time passed, and as we heard nothing from her, our bravado and courage began to fail us. We asked one another, “Why hasn’t anyone from the family come to visit us? Where is our sister, Mary? Where is Aunt Katie? Has everyone forgotten about us? Doesn’t anyone care?”

If you haven’t lived these experiences, you probably can’t imagine the hurt of being abandoned by a parent in this way or the fear of being separated from your siblings—not to mention living locked inside the grounds of an orphanage like a prisoner, with no idea what will happen to you. The experience brought us closer together as brothers, but it also showed us how powerless we were at that age to control the world around us.

Then, magically, my mother showed up one day and took us away. She picked us up as though we’d just spent the night at friend’s house. No apologies. No explanations. No excuses. If only she had called us when she was gone! If only she had let us know she was coming back, we wouldn’t have lived in such fear. But she didn’t. She probably never even thought about checking in with us. That was my mother, and that’s the way she behaved.

It’s been more than fifty years since I spent those three

months in a Black Box orphanage, but I think about those hopeless days and sleepless nights often. As extreme as that experience was, it was just one of many examples of the kind of psychological warfare my mother inflicted upon me growing up. And it’s just one of many wounds I’ve had to live with in the decades since.

— FIGHTING DYSFUNCTION, ABUSE, AND RACISM —



rowing up poor is tough, even when you’ve got strong survival instincts. But add in a dysfunctional family life, the lack of a strong father figure, a history of physical and sexual abuse, and, of course, the constant oppression of rampant racism in the 1950s and 1960s (and beyond), and the likelihood of breaking free from poverty and moving into success goes from burdensome to improbable. I’m afraid I had to face all of that and more before I escaped the Black Box.

The Missing Man

I was a poster child for life in a dysfunctional family environment. My mother gave birth to one daughter, Mary (1942), followed by four sons: Gary (1950), my twin brother Bernard and me (1951), and Gustavo (1952). Despite the full house, I never knew who my real father was. For a while we were told our older brother Gary’s father was our dad. But