

**WE
FLEW
OVER
THE
BRIDGE**

Children's Books
by Faith Ringgold

Tar Beach

Aunt Harriet's

Underground Railway in the Sky

Dinner at Aunt Connie's House

Bonjour Lonnie

My Dream of Martin Luther King

Talking to Faith Ringgold

(with Linda Freeman and Nancy Roucher)

Invisible Princess

Counting to Tar Beach

Cassie's Colorful Day

Cassie's Word Quilt

If a Bus Could Talk:

The Story of Rosa Parks

Oh Holy Night

WE FLEW OVER THE BRIDGE

*The Memoirs of
Faith Ringgold*

Duke University Press Durham & London 2005

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Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞
Originally published in 1995 by Bulfinch Press.

*Duke University Press gratefully acknowledges
the support of the Mary Duke Biddle Foundation,
which provided funds toward the production of this book.*

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Ringgold, Faith
We flew over the bridge : the memoirs of Faith Ringgold /
Faith Ringgold. — Pbk. ed.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-8223-3564-6 (pbk. : alk. paper)
1. Ringgold, Faith. 2. African American women
artists—Biography. I. Title.
N6537.R55A2 2005
709'. 2—dc22 2004028226

Faith Ringgold is Professor Emerita of Visual Arts
at the University of California, San Diego.
She is the author of several children's books,
including *Tar Beach*, *Aunt Harriet's Underground
Railroad in the Sky*, *Dinner at Aunt Connie's House*,
and *My Dream of Martin Luther King*.

*This book is dedicated to my father, Andrew Louis
Jones Sr., who bought me my first easel and has always
made me feel special. If he could see me now...*

Photographic Credits:

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CONTENTS

Preface	ix
Acknowledgments	xi
Introduction	xiii

PART I: HARLEM BORN AND BRED

1	From the Cradle to the Classroom in the 1930s	3
2	Growing Up on Sugar Hill in the 1940s	25

PART II: MEN, MARRIAGE, AND MOTHERHOOD

3	Men and Marriage in the 1950s and 1960s	39
4	My Mother Was Perfect, or So She Said	67
5	Parental Politics: My Daughters and Me	81
	<i>Color Plates</i>	97

PART III: MAKING ART, MAKING WAVES, AND MAKING MONEY

6	A European Trip Ends with a Death in the Family	131
7	The 1960s: Is There a Black Art?	143
8	The End of the 1960s: Out of the Studio and into the Streets	165
9	The 1970s: Is There a Woman's Art?	173
10	Teaching Art: Those Who Can Should	217
11	We Flew over the Bridge: Performance Art, Story Quilts, and Tar Beach	237

Appendix: Matisse's Chapel	273
Faith Ringgold Chronology	275
Public and Private Collections	283
Index	285

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PREFACE

I have always wanted to tell my story, or, more to the point, my side of the story. As the youngest of three children, I grew up in a family of wonderful storytellers. My older brother Andrew, my sister Barbara, my father, my mother, aunts and uncles, as well as cousins and family friends, had endless tales to tell based on their own experience. Being “the baby” in my family, my experiences were not much to tell—thank God—so I kept quiet and listened.

My life as an artist began as a child during the many hours I spent bedridden with asthma, picturing my small world and the people in it. By the time I became a teenager I started using my art to tell my story. When images alone were not enough, I added words to my pictures and later quilted them. *We Flew over the Bridge* was my first attempt (in 1980) to write a book, and it took all of fifteen years to get it published in 1995.

My first version of *We Flew over the Bridge*, then titled *Being My Own Woman*, was begun in the late seventies when I returned from a trip to West Africa. I completed it in 1980 and submitted it to an agent, who rejected it. It was then that I hit upon the strategy of self-publication through masked performance pieces and readings of my story quilts at college lecture dates and exhibitions. I created the story quilt, *Tar Beach*, in 1988. Andrea Cascardi, a children’s book editor at Random House, suggested that *Tar Beach* would make a good children’s book, and since then I have written and illustrated a total of eleven children’s books. During slavery, it was said that some slaves were able to fly to freedom. *Tar Beach* is about a little girl named Cassie, and writing and illustrating the story constituted my own metaphorical flight to freedom, although at the time I wrote it, I hardly knew I was writing a children’s story, much less flying to freedom. Writing and illustrating children’s books kind of sneaked up on me in a delightful way. What a joy not to struggle against interminable odds, to have the freedom to write and illustrate eleven books for children, all with the greatest of ease. My stories and illustrations are a tribute to the endless beauty and creativity of children.

I am so grateful to all the wonderful editors and art directors I have worked with

PREFACE

since 1991, for the greatest experience of my life after a veritable lifetime invested in the struggle to become an artist. Children are the greatest, most consistently innovative artists of all. Their parents and teachers, together with the added joy of having completed the building of my beautiful home and studio in New Jersey, have made my happiness as an artist complete.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, I'd like to thank my mother, Willi Posey, who was our family photographer and historian-storyteller. She left me a million stories and almost as many photographs documenting the details of my life. And second, I want to thank Hilary Breed for suggesting that Marie Brown, my literary agent, send Brian Hotchkiss, a senior editor at Bulfinch Press, the 1980 manuscript titled "Being My Own Woman." After four years at Bulfinch Press, Brian moved on to other things, and Karen Dane, my present editor at Bulfinch Press, and I are doing just fine, though I certainly miss Brian. And many thanks to my good friend Moira Roth, who did the laborious and brilliant editing job of helping me transform "Being My Own Woman" to "We Flew over the Bridge." Although we live on separate coasts, we began work in Paris in person in January of 1994, then had extensive contact during the year on the various drafts — phone conversations, Federal Express packages — and finished a year later faxing back and forth between Berkeley, California, and Englewood, New Jersey. Whew! And we're still friends. Moira and I both want to thank her assistants, Kristine Kim and Anne Fischer; and we especially want to acknowledge Janet Everett's invaluable and extensive help. And a very special thanks to Annika Marie, who meticulously entered the final edits to the manuscript. And to my assistant, Vanessa P. Williams, who labored endlessly over the photograph selections to get them just right. And to my husband, Burdette Ringgold, who put up with massive disorder in our house and my twenty-four-hour work schedule. What I really want to say is thank God it's over.

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INTRODUCTION

Tangiers and Paris, Englewood, New Jersey, and Harlem, New York, San Francisco and La Jolla, California, have been sites for my many meetings with Faith Ringgold over the last fifteen years. We met first as artist and critic. Since then we have become close friends, staying frequently in each other's houses; eating and traveling together; confiding and sharing personal stories; discussing our mothers and the process of aging. From our different perspectives — that of a black American-born artist and a white European-born art historian/critic — we have planned actions and compared notes, analyzed and argued over the history of art and politics in this country.

During the time I have known Ringgold I have watched dramatic changes and shifts in her art, life, and status in the art world. The first time I saw a sizable body of her work was in 1983, when we spent several days viewing it together in her rented storage bins on 132nd Street and Broadway. There for the first time I saw her now-legendary powerful 1967 paintings, *The Flag is Bleeding* and *U.S. Postage Stamp Commemorating the Advent of Black Power*, and what she described as her “art trunks,” in which her soft paintings and sculptures were neatly rolled up — waiting to be taken on the road, so to speak. In 1983 she was a nationally known artist who, shrewdly and ingeniously but somewhat precariously, supported herself through exhibitions, performances, and lectures around the country on college campuses. She had not exhibited in New York City for many years and it was only a year later, in 1984, when, in the context of her first major retrospective in New York, she boldly showed *Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima?* — the first of the story quilts for which she is now internationally known. This event was followed by more mainstream success. Her work, especially the story quilts, has been purchased by many major museums and collections, and is exhibited all over the world, in Japan and Egypt as well as in Europe. In contemporary American art generally, as well as in African-American and feminist circles, Ringgold is now a major figure recognized and sought out by critics, historians, and audiences alike.

A few years ago, I wrote an article entitled “A Trojan Horse” in which I praised Ringgold as a “terrific and successful troublemaker during the 1960s,” contrasting this time to her later, more covert actions as a troublemaker. Ringgold has always taken great delight in this description of her smuggling subversive material into the citadel of the art world in seemingly benign forms. But, whether one thinks of Ringgold as the young firebrand of the 1960s or the distinguished world-famous older artist of the 1990s, there are constants — her boldness and originality as an artist and human being; her fiery independence, remarkable pragmatic savvy, and strategizing abilities; and her steadfast passionate political and feminist goals. She is also inveterately inventive — in her subjects, approaches, and materials. And increasingly, she has turned to writing: first the texts of her story quilts, then children’s books, and now this autobiography.

In assuming the roles of writer and editor, Ringgold and I added another layer to our relationship. The last year has been an intense year of exchanges while she wrote and I edited *We Flew over the Bridge*. In February 1994, we spent a heady week in a small hotel on the Place du Panthéon in Paris while we participated in a conference at the Palais du Luxembourg (“A Visual Arts Encounter: African Americans in Europe”) and worked late each night on drafts of the first two chapters of the book. More important, we spent time exploring the dynamics and parameters of the editing process. After that, we communicated between East and West Coast by mail, fax, and telephone. Drafts went back and forth: sometimes sporadically, almost languidly, over weeks; at other times frantically over the space of a few hours. Pages covered with handwritten notes and questions, explanations and arguments, poured in on our respective fax machines. We invented “East Command” and “West Command” headquarters and sent imperious orders back and forth in high-spirited faxed notes. In July 1994, Ringgold and her husband, Burdette, went to dinner at the White House, and I waited with impatience for her report on this event. One lovely morning, a drawing of me flying to the post office appeared. Occasionally, we disagreed over ideas and attitudes in terse exchanges and abrupt faxed memos. There were long early-morning telephone conversations, and even longer late-night talks in which we discussed content, style, pacing, and the emotional and political implications of the text — as we moved through her life and art.

This experience with Ringgold has been extraordinary for me. On one level, I found it endlessly demanding, fascinating, and full of surprises; and on another level, intensely difficult, sometimes deeply troubling. It seems to me that at the heart of successful

editing is trust and respect on both sides. But there is also an element of risk — one has to take risks in editing and that is unnerving. Frequently I would ask myself, particularly late at night, was I too intrusive, too demanding or editing from an ignorant vantage point? Was I displaying a Eurocentric attitude in my suggestions? Was I insensitive to the issues of motherhood as I have no children of my own? (In retrospect, one of the funniest editing moments came when I squeamishly and absentmindedly edited out much of the description of pain in a childbirth scene, only to realize what I had done, and shamefacedly restore it.) Sometimes, too, I became enthralled with Ringgold's thoughts and memories and blithely and eagerly read page after page, forgetting that I was supposed to be reading slowly with a diligent critical eye.

I would like to thank Faith Ringgold deeply for inviting me to be the book's editor. It has made me think anew about the nature and importance of autobiographical narratives and of their history, particularly in this country, and of Ringgold's contribution to all this. The experience of reading and editing *We Flew over the Bridge* has moved and inspired me. Clearly, I am only one of the first among thousands of readers whose lives will be positively imprinted by this book, and who will respond strongly — emotionally, intellectually, politically, and psychologically — to the brilliant, tough, and insightful voice of Faith Ringgold, a voice that speaks with equal eloquence on the printed page and on the painted canvas.

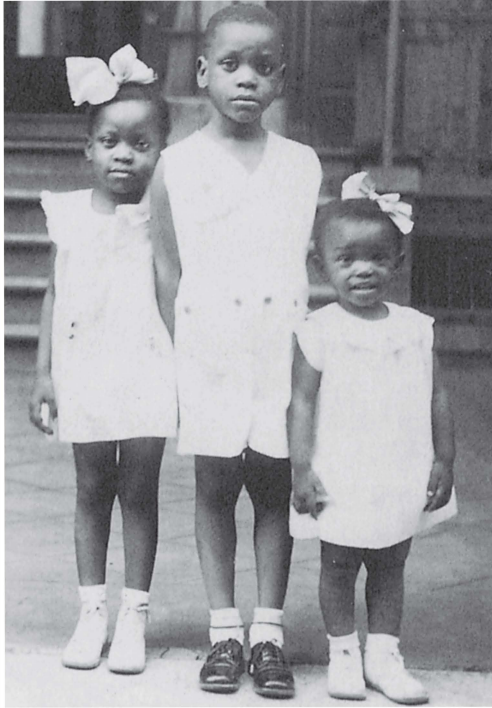
Maira Roth
Trefethen Professor of Art History, Mills College
February 5, 1995, Berkeley, California

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PART I
HARLEM
BORN
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CHAPTER 1: FROM THE CRADLE TO THE CLASSROOM IN THE 1930s



Barbara, Andrew, and me, 1931

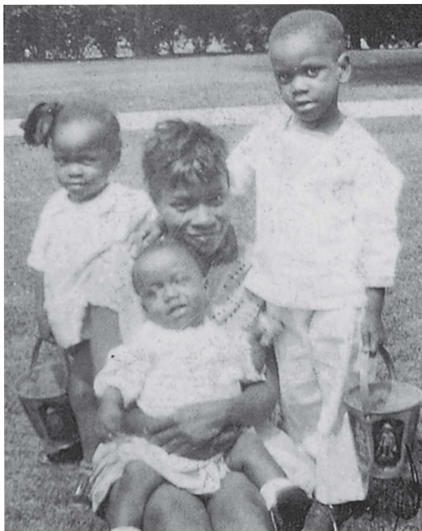
I was born on October 8, 1930, in New York City's Harlem Hospital. My mother, Willie Edell Jones, told me that no sooner had she arrived at the hospital than she was rushed to the delivery room. The nurse, a stern black woman, tried to tie Mother's hands with a cord. Mother protested, saying she would rather die than be shackled, and promised to be good. But the new life inside her was compelling her to push forward before the doctor was ready. So, despite her promise, Mother pushed even harder. The doctor was still scrubbing up when the hair on my head began to show. The nurse became furious and nervously slapped Mother's face, and crossed Mother's legs together. "Hold back!" she yelled. "The doctor's not ready yet." Once he was, Mother gave one grunt and the doctor's huge hands guided me effortlessly into the world. I came out screaming.

At the time of my birth, Mother was still mourning the death of Ralph, her sixteen-month-old baby, who had died of pneumonia. She was already three months pregnant with me at the time of Ralph's death. Was I to be a replacement for him? Had Mother prayed for a boy instead of me? When I asked her, Mother assured me that she had always expected a girl because her children had been born that way: first a boy, then a girl, then a boy, and now, a girl — me. I accepted that.

Before leaving the delivery room I had to be named, because some babies had gotten mixed up in the hospital. Mother didn't have a name for me, and it was not like her to be caught so unprepared. The nurse must have sensed that her indecision was the result of more than the normal trauma of giving birth. She suggested, "Name her Faith," almost as if she knew faith was what my mother really needed now. Mother agreed.

There were five of us in our family. My father's name was Andrew Louis Jones Sr. My mother called him "Big Andrew," and she called my brother "Little Andrew." Andrew was six years old when I was born, and my sister Barbara was three. Barbara shared my mother's middle name (Edell) and I got Mother's first name (Willie) — but I never knew this until I was twenty and getting married. Then I saw it on my birth certificate: "Faith Willie Jones." All through school I had been known as Faith Elizabeth Jones. (Mother had intended to change my middle name from Willie to Elizabeth but she never did so officially.)

Our family was usually extended to include more than just the five of us; there was always an aunt, cousin, or close friend living in our four-room apartment on West 146th Street. They might have just come up from Jacksonville, Florida, my mother's home-



Barbara, Mother, Ralph, and Andrew, circa 1929

town, and needed a temporary place to stay while looking for a job and a home of their own. Or, they might have hit a stretch of bad luck in New York. Twice Daddy's nephews came to New York from Tampa, Florida, but only for a short visit. However, Baby Doll Hurd, Daddy's mother, stayed with us. Grandma Baby Doll woke us up each morning at the crack of dawn to go to the store for fresh milk, butter, and eggs. She then made a huge down-home breakfast that was delicious. I was surprised to learn she was divorced and remarried to a man who owned a plantation. Daddy's father had been a minister and, as far as I know, he never came North. It was a fine experience growing up in an extended family. When mother was tired, or didn't want

us to go somewhere or do something, there was always another adult to help her.

My father spent very little time at home. I saw him in the morning having breakfast before going off to work; it was still dark when he left home. He came home in the evening just in time for dinner, frequently with a friend. Most nights, soon after he arrived, the downstairs bell would ring. "Is Andrew home?" a voice would yell up the stairs. "Dad-blab-bitt, you son of a gun," my father would invariably respond, and then he would call out to Mother, "Look who's here, Bill?" (Daddy called Mother "Bill" — short for Willie.) Mother, drying her hands on a starched and ruffled apron, would then come out of the kitchen to greet Daddy's friend. Mother was very



My parents, Willie and Andrew, circa 1920

good looking, so the visitor usually gushed, grinned, and stammered, "Pleased to meet you, ma'am." If he was Mother's friend too, he would hug her and tell her she was "a sight for sore eyes," and warn Daddy that he was "gonna steal" her. Then he'd inevitably ask Mother, "How's this boy treating you?" and Mother, smiling, would say something that wasn't meant for a child's ears.

By this time Andrew, Barbara, and I were lined up to meet the guest. Even if we knew the person, we still had to pay our respects and hear that we were "growing like weeds," and that the last time we'd been only "knee high to a tadpole." Andrew, as the oldest and the only boy, got to shake hands with our guest. My parents would tell him to "stand up there, boy," and Andrew would stand tall like a little man. Daddy would beam with pride. The guest would remark that Andrew was the "spitting image" of Daddy, and Barbara would be told that she had become "quite a young lady." At this point Daddy would remind everyone that Barbara was "The Princess," a name my uncle Cardoza gave her in response to my sister's rather superior image of herself. Then they would turn their attention to me, "The Baby." (My father never called me anything else, even after I

had obviously outgrown the title.) He would pick me up and tell people that I was “one of a kind.” “Yeah, we tore up the pattern after that one.” Everybody would laugh.

During these introductions, Mother stood guard over us to make sure that we were well behaved, and, terrified of tuberculosis, she watched to see that we didn’t get “kissed-in-the-mouth.” Tuberculosis, the scourge of the 1930s, was a disease of epidemic proportions for which there was no known cure. Anyone who got TB was banished to Welfare Island, a place people only whispered about.

During the week our meals were simple, consisting of a boiled vegetable with meat and either rice, potato and cornbread, or hot biscuits. In summer, we drank lemonade or Kool-Aid, and in winter there was Ovaltine for the kids, and coffee or tea for the adults. If we were out of tea bags, we’d all have “Cambridge Tea,” which was a cup of hot water, evaporated milk (which you could buy for three cents a can), and sugar. One more person for dinner was never a problem, especially since Mother was in the habit of cooking a big pot of food. When we had someone else living with us, this made almost every night seem like a party, with all the adults talking and several pots of food on the stove.

The unexpected guest was always welcomed to dinner. We children had usually eaten, so Mother just had to set out an extra plate. My father, a big talker, would ramble on and on. At some point he’d say, “For crying out loud, how the heck did you find me?” Then the friend would relay a detailed account involving many people they both knew. I was fascinated by these stories.

Conversation was the high point of every meal in our house. Daddy’s voice could always be heard above all the others. “I’ll bet you a fat man” was a favorite expression of his — then he’d stand up, dig deep in his pockets for money while the guest begged off. I could never figure out what they were betting about — perhaps on Joe Louis; or Daddy’s favorite baseball team, the Giants; or one of Daddy’s beloved trivia questions (Is a tomato a vegetable or a fruit, and why?). Talking, teasing, and testing were real passions for him, along with drinking and playing cards. Shortly after dinner, Daddy and his friend would go out and Mother would settle down for a quiet evening at home. There were nights when she went out, too, and we had a baby-sitter, but that was rare. By the time Daddy got home, we would all be asleep.

Every night at seven o’clock we were put to bed, no matter if other kids were just going out to play. We had been to school and the park, our homework had been checked, and we’d had dinner and our bath. Once we were settled in our beds, Mother

was often visited by friends who knew that she was now free to talk over coffee and cornbread. We would lie awake listening to the adults as they spoke of family gossip, dreams, daily news, reminisced, and speculated about the future. I was always amazed that adults knew about so many people, places, and things.

Sometimes the three of us kids would have our own nighttime conversations. Barbara and I would curl up at the foot of our beds and listen to Andrew, who would lie in the doorway of his room. He told outlandish stories in whispers so that Mother could not hear us. We could always tell when she did because we saw her approaching through the lace curtains on the French doors that separated our bedrooms from the living room. Andrew would scare us with tales of the boogeyman who was surely going to get us. We didn't have television to entertain us; instead, it was books, movies, radio, people, and everyday experiences that sharpened our imaginations. Andrew was an expert storyteller. We would laugh till we cried or shuddered with fear, our heads buried in our pillows, and our hands covering our mouths.

Mother was strict with us. If we misbehaved we were sent to bed early, sometimes without dinner. A bath always followed a spanking. I rarely got one of those, but Andrew and Barbara got their full share. Indeed, Barbara might get two spankings in one day. When I was growing up, I never heard anyone mention giving children love. We got attention, care, a comfortable and good home, clothes and food, and all of Mother's time and energy. What more could "love" bring? My mother gave us the kind of love that was lived, rather than verbalized. She never actually said the words "I love you," but we all knew she did.

I don't remember when Mother and Daddy actually officially separated (perhaps when I was two or three), since Daddy was apt to be at our house at any time after the separation. Mother would send a message for him to come by when she needed money or something was wrong. Daddy would show up after work, just as he had when he'd been living at home. If Andrew had misbehaved, Daddy would take him to his room and they would talk. Afterward they would put on the boxing gloves that Daddy had bought for Andrew and they would go a few rounds. Although Daddy was a gentle man, he was committed to giving Andrew "boxing lessons," which were a kind of beating. Daddy would have been hurt, however, if someone had suggested he was beating the hell out of his son. He would have said, "I don't believe in beating children. Andrew and I are just boxing. He's a man; he can take it." And Andrew did.

My father looked rather like Joe Louis. He was a big handsome man with powerful arm muscles. Barbara and I used to swing on his arms, and he'd hold us up with our feet off the ground to show us how strong he was. I used to think my father could beat Joe Louis, but then I found out there were a lot of kids who also thought that about their fathers. Little Andrew, on the other hand, was a skinny boy. When Daddy roughed him up he would laugh good-naturedly. Even though those punches Daddy gave him had to hurt, Andrew had been taught that a man doesn't run from a fight: Daddy was clear about that.

Any hint that one of us had told a lie was enough to cause my father a lot of grief. He never spanked us, but instead chastised us. We were used to getting long talks about honesty, another thing he was dead serious about. Lying and stealing were wrong. Daddy's father, Grandpa Jones, was a preacher who lived in Tampa, Florida. We never saw him, but he must have been good in the pulpit because Daddy himself was such an effective speaker and actor. When he chastised us, he would sit and pause, lean over and place his elbows on his knees, with his head in his hands. Sometimes we had done nothing, but more often it was that Andrew had failed to do his homework, or that Barbara had refused to eat her dinner or had thrown her milk down the drain. The way Daddy delivered his message was very effective, and I'll never forget it.

Around the age of two, I had my first asthmatic attack while Mother was in Atlantic City for the weekend. She had left us with Mrs. Brown, a close family friend and neighbor. Having asthma was a frightening experience — gasping for breath for hours, and my chest feeling like a house was on top of it. I remember often feeling so sick that I wanted to die. Now I know that indeed I must have been near death on more than one occasion. Yet I remember Mother telling me that no one had ever died from asthma, and, since the doctor never said anything different, I believed her. How much that lie affected my survival I will never know, but I am sure it did no harm.

After my first asthma attack, Mother was very careful with me. I had to eat a special diet, which meant no fried food or pork, no whole milk or store-bought ice cream, no white bread, cake, potato chips, or anything that today we would call junk food. My vegetables had to be steamed and I could eat meat only if it was baked, boiled, or broiled. What's more, the whole family had to eat according to my diet as it would

have been too expensive to cook two pots of food. Thus we grew up eating rather little soul food. Except for fish every Saturday, Mother never fried anything. Nobody else we knew then had ever heard of broiled porgies.

On the days when I was recuperating from an asthma attack, Mother would prop me up on pillows in my bed. She would do her housework, cook and clean, wash and iron while I would read, write, and draw and color in my books. I can't remember a time when I was not doing some form of art. Having asthma was perfect for making art. I could sit in my room without exerting myself and draw and make things with bits of cloth my mother would give me. I got a chance to do all the things I really liked to do and I can't recall a time I missed anything of consequence, including important exams at school. Like magic, I was always well enough just in time.

I never did go to kindergarten and I hardly remember the first grade. The doctor felt that going to school might expose me to possible infections from the other children, which might only complicate my already delicate asthmatic condition. So, for me, school really started in the second grade.

Despite the asthma, I had a happy childhood. Going to the hospital for my frequent stays of five days or so was fun. The nurses and doctors at the Presbyterian Medical Center always made a big fuss over me. They would take me on tours of the hospital to look at the operating rooms and I remember being the subject of lectures held in spacious rooms for groups of doctors. Of course, I never understood a word that was said, but it was all about me.

Mother was an energetic person, so if I was well, we often went out. While Andrew and Barbara were in school, Mother and I went to museums and the park, or shopped at Bloomingdale's and Klein's on 14th Street. (Klein's is now out of business and Bloomingdale's is a trendy remake of its former self.) Every so often we went downtown to the Paramount Theater and the Roxy Theater on Broadway, or to the Apollo Theater on 125th Street in Harlem, to see a stage show.

I saw all of the stars. Mother paid fifty cents for her admission, but I got in free. Each time we got a packed show with several big-name stars, two bands, a comic, a dance act and one or more singers, a feature movie, and a newsreel. We had to meet Barbara and Andrew after school, so we couldn't ever stay for the movie, but I will never forget the stage shows. I saw Jimmy Rushing, Cab Calloway, Chick Webb, Count Basie, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Benny Goodman, Gene Krupa, Glenn Miller,

and Lionel Hampton. Singers with the bands included Frank Sinatra, Billy Eckstein, Billie Holiday, Ethel Waters, Ella Fitzgerald, Lena Horne, and Fats Waller. Bill Robinson and Peg Leg Bates and the Ink Spots were also favorites.

I always had a story to tell Andrew and Barbara about the show I had just seen. I would also bring them candy from Woolworth's, which Mother had grudgingly let me buy, although I was not allowed to eat it. The candy was a peace offering to them, so they wouldn't be angry with me for having so much fun while they were in school.

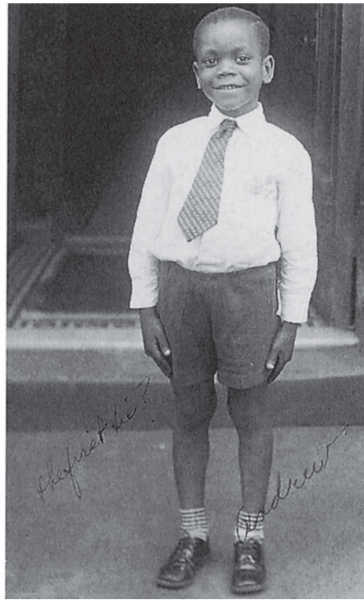
Daddy took me out, too. By order of the family court, he could spend time with us on his day off, weekends, and holidays, as long as it did not interfere with our daily schedule or school. Since I wasn't in school, I got a chance to go out with him more often than Andrew or Barbara. Mother objected to the places we used to go, but there was nothing she could do. The court was on Daddy's side about this. We went to see his lady friends and then we would stop off at the bar on Seventh Avenue around the corner from our house.

Reading the signs in the bar was my earliest reading lesson. Daddy would sit me up



Mother and me, circa 1933

on the bar, and have me entertain his drinking buddies by reading all the signs and the labels on the bottles. I mistook "Bar and Grill" for "Bar and Girl." Daddy loved things like that. He would pick me up and laugh and laugh, and repeat what I said to anyone who came into the bar. And then he would explain to me with great care that a bar had to have food in it by law, that a grill was a stove, thus "Bar and Grill." Many bars didn't allow women, and those that did often had a sign in the window saying "Ladies Invited." I always thought that meant it was all right for me to be there. When I told my father this, he roared with laughter. "No, baby," he said, "that sign is for ladies to come in and sit at the tables. You're with your daddy."



Barbara, circa 1928 (far left); Andrew, circa 1928 (near left)

He always gave me pennies (as many as I could hold) to buy penny candy at the candy store up the street before bringing me home from our trip to the bar. I bought all our favorites — gumdrops (you got five big pieces for one cent); Mary Jane's, a peanut-filled taffy; Torpedoes, a chewy bar-shaped lollipop; and, our absolute favorite, Hooten, a dark chocolate square that could be purchased with or without peanuts. I hid these candies in the dresser drawer by my bed for Andrew and Barbara to eat after dinner. They always diverted my attention and later I would find they had eaten their candy long before dinner. Andrew ate his in a few mouthfuls, with bulging cheeks and his hand conspicuously placed over his mouth, laughing and teasing all the time. Andrew was my idol. Whatever he did may not have been right, but it could never be wrong.

I idolized Barbara, too; after all, she was my big sister and I wanted to be like her. She was cute, dainty, smart, and always the class president and teacher's pet; and she had a book bag full of school books and a lot of studying to do. All of these she handled like "The Princess" that she was. Barbara had many friends, but they were too big for me to play with. Mother made Andrew and Barbara stay with me despite our age differences. She knew we would protect each other, so, for as long as she could, she insisted

that we play and stay together. When we were kids Barbara would constantly remind me that she was a princess and that I was her lowest slave. When we became adults she would call me up and order her dinner to be delivered and I'd send it to her by Michele and Barbara just as she commanded. It never felt demeaning; rather, it was a duty. Barbara had us all trained that way.

Every summer, as soon as school closed, we all went off to Atlantic City on the Greyhound bus. Mrs. Brown and her two daughters, Catherine and Bernice, went along too. Catherine was close to my age, and Bernice was close to Barbara's. Mother's friend, Florence Patterson, and her son, Junior, lived in Atlantic City. Junior was Andrew's age and Mother, Mrs. Brown, and Florence were all the best of friends. We were perfectly suited: we had our friends and Mother had hers. From time to time during the summer, Lottie Belle and Agnes and other friends of Mother's and Mrs. Brown's would come and stay for a day or two. All these women had husbands or boyfriends

who would come along. The men were always lots of fun and as talkative and entertaining as the women; and they gave us spending money, too. Mother was a different person in the summertime. She got a chance to enjoy herself and relax — something she couldn't or wouldn't do during the rest of the year.

The high point of the summer was our trip to the Steel Pier, a huge amusement center that extended out a mile or more into the ocean on the boardwalk in Atlantic City. The Steel Pier had everything: joy rides, movies, 3-D movies, water shows, ice skating, stage shows, a circus, and side shows.

The culminating event of the summer was the Miss America Day Parade on the boardwalk. Mother was the family photographer, so she took pictures of all the beauties on the floats. We all tried to be enthusiastic about Miss New York, but what really spoke to us was that none of the participants was black. Most people accepted this, but



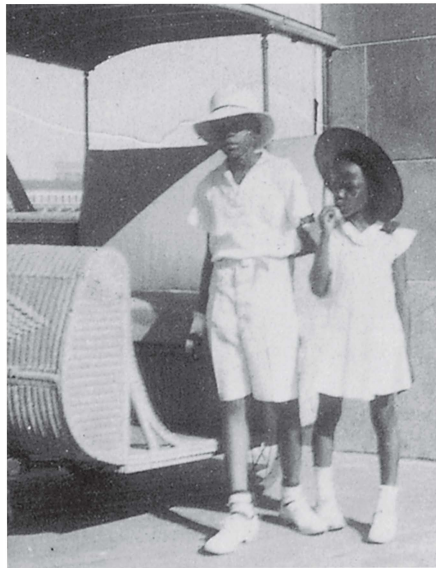
Mother in Atlantic City, late 1930s

not my mother and her friends. They knew that the Miss America Pageant would not be truly representative until they put a “little black gal” up there on one of those floats. But I never saw a black woman on one of those floats in all the summers we spent in Atlantic City. (In 1983 Vanessa Williams became our first black Miss America.) The next day after the parade, we returned home to Harlem to see the kids on the block and go back to school.

No matter whatever else I have become over the years, I am Harlem born and bred and proud of it. Harlem of today is very different from the way it was in the 1930s. So, if you didn’t know that Harlem, don’t try to imagine what life was like for us. Let me tell you.

We lived at 222 West 146th Street between Seventh and Eighth Avenues (the streets have since been renamed Adam Clayton Powell Drive and Frederick Douglass Boulevard, respectively). We had a comfortable four-room apartment, facing the street, on the fourth floor of a walk-up. My mother was a housewife and kept us and our home as clean as a pin. My father was a truck driver for the Sanitation Department, and his pay of \$36.20 per week was a good wage in those days. Most people made only half as much, and many had no jobs at all.

The stock market crash of 1929, which devastated the rich and sent them flying off their roofs, had just the opposite effect on poor black people. It drew us closer together, and most people were very serious about their jobs. There was no public money to be tapped, no grants or stipends. It was not until the late thirties that the New Deal made welfare and unemployment insurance available to those who qualified. Many poor families were too proud to apply for it, fearing the stigma attached to asking for a handout. This was just a bad period and everyone said that things would be better soon when they “hit that number” or their “ship came in.” The future was viewed as something to look forward to with hope. Besides, the regular tasks of each day kept us busy. Our clothes had to be washed by hand, scrubbed on a washboard, and white things boiled



Andrew and me on the boardwalk in Atlantic City, circa 1935

on the stove, and then starched and ironed. There was no time to reflect on the quality of life, nor was there an Oprah Winfrey show to make us aware that we should.

Being poor was acceptable. Everybody was poor except rich white people, and we never saw any of them except in the movies. There was no television to flaunt before our eyes the good life of the “Joneses” next door. Our teachers were mostly Irish Catholic, and many of our classmates were Jewish refugees who had recently come to America to escape Hitler. Their parents worked with our parents, so we knew firsthand that white people could be poor.

In our household Mother managed the money. There was never any waste and she always managed to make ends meet. She rarely gave us money just to spend. Movie money for Saturday morning came from Daddy or from Aunt Bessie, Uncle Hilliard, or a family friend. Mother kept quiet about the details of our family budget. I used to hear her in the morning before we were out of bed, scrubbing her clothes on the washboard, and saying, “If God spares me, I’ll take Faith to the Medical Center to get her allergy shot; then we’ll go down and pick up Big Andrew’s check from the family court; stop by Klein’s and catch that sale on boys’ coats; pick out one for Little Andrew; and see if I can find a nice dress for Barbara to wear when the teacher takes her class to see Shirley Temple next week.”

Some of my best childhood memories were of mealtimes. I wasn’t a fat child, but I never missed a chance to eat. Mother did not allow us to snack or eat out. We had three square meals a day, and after dinner the kitchen was closed for the night. (None of us kids dared to open the refrigerator without permission.) We had simple meals. On Sunday, when other people had fried chicken, we had leg of mutton or fricassee chicken. In the morning they ate Wheaties, “the breakfast of champions,” and we had oatmeal. Like other families, we, too, ate pancakes; especially on Sunday morning, although we never had bacon and sausage to go with them. I couldn’t eat pork, and anyway Mother considered bacon and sausage something we could do without. Instead she would buy a calli ham (the least expensive cut) and boil it — I could have that. Or, for breakfast she would get the butcher to slice the calli ham into thin steaks and we’d have them with hominy grits or Cream of Farina and butter.

Although I missed having the food and things other people had, there was no pressure to conform as there is today. Others might eat bacon and fried chicken, but we had trips to Atlantic City. People were doing the best they could with what they had, and in my day kids had to accept their parents’ decisions in such matters.