

Chapter 1

Coming of Age

Daybreak is and has always been a special time for me. Whether it was the inviting embrace of the morning light starting its ascent over a distant horizon or the early illumination piercing its way through the barely visible slits of my bedroom curtains, the meaning was the same—the promise of a new day. The first light of dawn enthralls me with the hopeful arrival of something new, something good. But there is one ironic twist, an inescapable fact that I could never ignore: the morning is always its darkest before dawn.

Lying in my bed, waiting painstakingly in the dark for the first light to signal the start of morning was when time seemed to drag out endlessly, creeping along without any hint of relief. My mind, fully awake, would race ahead and attempt to accomplish every task on my list, but the darkness firmly anchored my reality to my bed. And while part of me was anxious for the darkness to pass, I often used this quiet solitude to pray and reflect.

During these moments of contemplation, I often thought about my purpose in life. My mind would invariably drift over my past, recounting the ups and downs. It was easy to separate the passage of time into convenient parcels of good days and bad days or to simply label past experiences as pleasant or unrequited. But life is never that simple and its lessons are far more complicated than the sum of its parts.

Embracing the good in the light of day is natural and rewarding; but the dark brooding times...that's a different matter. For years, I had lumped every failure and disappointment into the usual pile of difficult memories. Whenever those memories resurfaced, I would either mentally replay them till I could no longer tolerate the familiar sting or glance over them to avoid the discomfort. This was my state of affairs as my trials and tribulations in life continued to mount. Yet, interestingly, my plight of disappointments and mishaps did not breed the bitterness that may have been expected; instead, something else happened.

Somewhere along my journey I began to look past my problems, past the darkness and see my hardships with a different perspective. Maybe, the closed doors of rejection were really detours to open doors of opportunity, or the perceived failures were actually corrections that directed me to the right path of success. Then, it became clear. Every

financial and cultural obstacle that I had encountered in my quest to fulfill my dream was not just a hindrance; it was a valuable commodity, a required element that was needed to propel me and strengthen my resolve. In this light, failure and success were not existential enemies of one another; they were symbiotically linked together as strands in the thread of life and success.

So, for those who doubt and want proof of this type of “coming of age,” all they need to do is look at my life.

Chapter 2

My Hometown

Away from the illustrious concert stages of Carnegie Hall and Europe where I would eventually bow in triumph, there was Memphis, Tennessee, my birthplace. A river town, nestled on a small bluff above the Mississippi River and geographically wedged between the states of Mississippi and Arkansas, Memphis in 1938, at the time of my birth, was worlds away from my future. Composing classical music is not the most likely career that one would expect to come out of the Deep South. Such a career choice is unimaginable when you consider that I grew up during an era blighted with despair in the midst of

segregation. Yet, it happened to me.

Freshly scarred by the influenza pandemic and the Great Depression, Memphis was still caught in the hypnotic haze of the antebellum South. People, who were old enough to have spent most of their adult lives before I was born, talked about an existence that sounded dismal. They often spoke of seeing lines of colored men drenched in sweat, pulling bales of cotton off of riverboats and barges at the downtown harbor. Their faces were stained with the despair of the past and frozen with the emptiness of their destiny. Even the hot, humid air surrounding their bodies, lazily hanged and drifted – waiting for a breeze of change. But they knew better; after all, they were living in the heart of Dixie, and things were not changing. Memphis was surrounded by hundreds of miles of nothing but cotton fields, which, at that time, strategically crowned Memphis, the world's largest cotton producer. Cotton was king, and there was little chance of anything else for Negroes. Yes, this was Memphis, my hometown at the time when I was born.

Lying on the outskirts of the city was a segregated community called Douglass, named after the famous statesman and former slave, Frederick Douglass. This small neighborhood was surrounded by a complex of cotton mills and rubber tree work plants which created an industrial moat that seemed to further isolate the tiny cluster of homes and unpaved streets from the outside world. It was here that my journey started and almost ended in death just as it was beginning.