You Don’t Know Me
Reflections of my father, Ray Charles.

Ray Charles Robinson Jr.
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Reflections of My Father,
Ray Charles

HARMONY BOOKS NEW YORK
To the memory of my father, Ray Charles Robinson, and all that you were to me and all that you dreamed you wanted to be.

I love you come rain or come shine.

To my loving mother, Della B. Robinson.

To my daughters, Erin Brianne and Blair Alayne.

My prayer for all of you is that God continues to bless you, heal your hearts, and answer your prayers. I am so blessed to have you in my life.

I love you.
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FOREWORD

I FIRST MET Ray Charles Robinson Jr. on the first anniversary of his father’s death, June 10, 2005. At that time I was working on the series “Silhouettes & Shadows,” and I welcomed the opportunity to paint Ray Jr. Nearly fifteen years earlier I was introduced to his father, who had shown an interest in my art. I had developed a relief style of painting, and Ray Charles was fascinated with the textural surface of the canvas and artwork he could feel with his fingertips. It was ironic that a blind man would take to my work—using senses other than sight. Ray Charles responded to my paintings with insights that were astonishing.

That Friday afternoon, Ray Jr. was calm and focused as I traced his silhouette on the paper taped to the wall behind him. We spoke about my encounter with his father, and soon we were taking on deeper issues that connected our lives—like drug addiction and sobriety. Ray Jr. had been struggling to stay clean, and I shared my similar struggles with drugs and how they nearly cost me my life. My nexus to father and son was as much about breaking the chains of addiction as it was about the creative process. When we were done with the sitting, Ray Jr. left for the cemetery to visit his father.

_You Don’t Know Me_ is an extraordinary personal story full of heart, heartbreak, and healing. Ray Jr. shares his dreams, his struggles, and a dysfunction inherited, in part, from his father. It is also a shocking and gripping story of Ray Charles that could only be told through the autobiographical lens of his namesake. This is a family history that is conveyed with honesty and tenderness. This is also the chronicle of a man who overcomes despair, and it renders all of the other biographies, films, and accounts of Ray Charles’s personal life and public persona meaningless. Ray Jr. is fearless in his frankness about his humbling journey and a forgiveness he finally adopts.

_You Don’t Know Me_ is an elegy delivered by the prodigal son of a prodigal father.

Andrew Lakey, Artist
DELICIOUS AROMAS FILLED THE HOUSE. MY MOTHER HAD been cooking all day. Barbecued chicken, sweet potatoes, biscuits and gravy, food for the body and the soul. My brothers and I were squirming with excitement, trying unsuccessfu7ously to concentrate on the toy soldiers scattered across the den floor. The sound of a car door slamming brought us running past the living room toward the front door, and I heard my mother call out, “You slow down, you hear me? You all are going to break your necks!”

I skidded to a halt in the entrance hall, my younger brothers piling up behind me like train cars on a railroad track. We heard the rattle of a key ring and the door opened. The man who walked into the foyer wore a white shirt, black suit, and dark sunglasses. I glanced back at my mother, who had come up behind us, and she smiled and nodded at me. “Go on, now.”

As I ran toward the open door, the man’s dark face split wide with a brilliant grin. “Baby,” he murmured, as he knelt down to meet me. His fingers sought my head, feeling its shape, then moved gently over my eyes and down my face. He gripped my shoulders, running his hands down my arms, squeezing my wrists, feeling the shape and the height of me. He nodded, saying, “All right, then. You’re gettin’ big.” Only then did I throw myself into his arms, his silk shirt liquid against my face, his cheek rough as he turned to kiss me. I breathed him in, that trademark blend of Brut and cigarettes that was my father. Daddy was home. Nothing else mattered.

I spent most of my childhood waiting for my dad to come home from the road. It always felt like he was never coming back. It has been six years since he passed away, but I still feel as though I’m waiting. Not a day goes by that I don’t think of him—each time I look in a mirror, each time I introduce myself, each time I remember who he was, each time I wonder who I am. My father
was Ray Charles, and I have the honor and the burden of carrying his name. I have never been certain what I was supposed to do with that name. When he left us for good, I knew it was time to figure it out. If I am to have a future, I must begin by understanding the past.

MY FATHER WAS BORN in Albany, Georgia, on September 23, 1930. His mother, Aretha Williams, was only fourteen when he was born, and she had been sent away to relatives to have her baby, where the gossiping neighbors couldn’t reach her. She returned to her hometown of Greenville, Florida, a few weeks later with my father in her arms. She named her tiny son Ray Charles Robinson. My grandfather, Bailey Robinson, had given his son a last name but little else. He was already married to another woman named Mary Jane, and there would be other women and other children as well. I don’t know much about my paternal grandfather. My father never spoke to me about him unless my brothers and I asked questions. I’m not sure how much he even remembered. My grandfather had passed by the time my father was ten. He remained in my father’s memory as a shadowy figure, a tall presence that showed up in my grandmother’s tiny home every now and then to be with her, leaving before the sun rose the next day.

Greenville was no more than a speck on the map when my father was growing up there. The entire town was less than a mile and a half wide, and everyone was poor. It was just a question of how poor. My father’s family was at the bottom of the economic ladder. As he put it, there was nothing between him and the bottom but dirt. Still there were blessings. A year after my father was born, my grandmother gave birth to another son, George. George and RC, as everyone called my father, were inseparable. Wherever my father went, neighbors recall, George was right behind him, a small shadow struggling to keep up with his big brother. And they went everywhere their feet would carry them. My father still had his eyesight then, and he and George loved to explore, running barefoot down the dirt roads, through the fields, and in and out of the small jumble of buildings that made up the town. George was a whiz with numbers, and by three years old had such a remarkable ability in math that people came just to watch him do problems. The brothers had no toys, so George made little cars and gadgets out of scraps of wood and wire. He had a gift, my father said. George could make anything.

Then there were the Pitmans, the couple who owned the Red Wing Café and general store. My father called Wylie Pitman “Mr. Pit.” He loved to run through the little town to Mr. Pit’s store, sometimes to fetch things for his mother, sometimes just to see Mr. and Mrs. Pit. He still spoke about Mr. Pit when I was growing up. It was Wylie Pitman who taught my father his notes on the old upright piano in the store. I don’t know if the Pitmans recognized my father’s musical ability or if they just liked him. Either way, it was Mr. Pit who gave my father his start in music when he was just a little boy.

Most important, my father had his mother, and he also had the woman he
called his “other mother,” Bailey Robinson’s wife, Mary Jane. Mary Jane and Aretha could easily have been divided by jealousy, but that was never the case. Mary Jane loved and watched out for young Aretha, and she watched out for my father and George, too. Mary Jane had lost her own son shortly before my father was born, and Aretha’s small boy helped fill the hole in her heart. Much older than Aretha, Mary Jane became the only grandmother my father ever knew. She nurtured him, bought him little presents, and was lenient with him. My dad said his mother was the exact opposite of Mary Jane, very strict, always trying to instill discipline in him. He would tell us about his mother if we asked him. He spoke of how strong she was in her spirit, how beautiful she was, how he loved to touch her long, soft hair. It seemed like his mother was my father’s world when he was a child. My grandmother didn’t have money to buy her sons shoes or much else, but she gave her boys freedom to explore and a safe place to come home to. Those first years were dim in my father’s memory, but the memories were all good ones.

When my father was five years old, his small, safe world began to fall apart. The first blow was one he would never recover from—the death of George. My grandmother was working inside the cabin one afternoon while my dad and George played outside. The big tubs she used when she took in washing were next to the cabin, and she had already hauled the water and filled them. The boys loved to splash around in the rinse tubs on a hot day, pretending they were swimming. She had told my father, as she always did, to watch out for his little brother. That afternoon four-year-old George climbed into one of the big tubs to cool off. My father didn’t think anything of it at first since they both splashed around in the tubs all the time. Within minutes, though, my father realized something was wrong. George had begun to flail, gasping for air and trying to scream. My father froze in panic for a moment, but then he ran to the tub as fast as he could. By then George was upside down in the water. My father grabbed George’s ankles and tried to pull him out. He pulled with all his might, but my father wasn’t much bigger than George. The tub was bigger than both of them, and my dad didn’t have the strength to pull his brother out. My father began screaming for help, and his mother came running out of the cabin. She pulled George from the tub, laid him on the ground, and tried to breathe life back into him. Sobbing and praying for God to save George, she screamed at my father, “This is your fault! You were supposed to be watching out for your little brother!” The last thing my father remembers about that day is the sight of his mother, her face streaming with tears, carrying George’s lifeless body into the cabin.

There was a funeral, a time of mourning, visits from neighbors, but my father was never able to remember any of it. He knew his brother was dead, and his mind went dark. In that inner darkness, his mother’s voice echoed endlessly. He could hear her screaming and begging God for help as the words “This is your fault!” burned more deeply into his heart each day. I doubt my grandmother remembered telling him that, and I do not think she really
meant it. In a moment of unbearable grief and pain, she had lashed out at him. But the damage was done. My father blamed himself. Decades later, near the end of his own life, he still suffered from the belief that it was his fault his little brother had died.

Not long afterward my father’s outer world began to go dark, too, for his eyes started to fail him. He did not lose his sight all at once. First the objects around him blurred. Gradually, it became harder and harder to see into the distance. People in town thought maybe his sight was failing because of George, that watching his brother die had been so painful that my father could no longer look at the world. His eyes would crust over with mucus, and his mother would have to wash them gently with a cloth so he could open them in the morning. Knowing he would not be able to see much longer, he started to memorize colors. When his mother saved the money to take him to a doctor, the doctor shook his head sadly and told her that her son was going blind. There was nothing the doctor could do to help. Soon my father could tell the difference between dark and light but nothing else, and before long, even that distinction seemed to fade. Many years later doctors told my father it was severe glaucoma that had stolen his sight. No matter, for there was nothing that could be done. My father says that except when George drowned, he never knew his mother to cry out against God or weep with despair. Stoically, she accepted the news that her surviving son was losing his sight. She had barely left her teens behind her, and she had already lost one son and now the other one was going blind.

But my grandmother was a remarkable woman. She refused to feel sorry for herself or to let my father give in to self-pity. My grandmother had never been strong physically. Her health was already failing, and I think she knew that she might not be there to see my father through to manhood. She knew for certain that he was not going to have a father around. There was a job to be done. If her son was to go through life sightless, she was going to make sure he was well prepared.

So despite having no education herself, she taught him what little math she knew, and, most important, how to truly take care of himself, how to be self-reliant. Long after his sight was gone, he continued to do chores—to clean the house, to chop wood, to cook, to run errands, to bathe and dress himself. People in town criticized my grandmother, thinking she expected too much of her poor blind boy. She ignored them. In a time and place where the most a blind man could aspire to was a banjo and a tin cup, she wanted more for her son. I don’t know if she realized how gifted he really was. I do know that whatever his gifts were, she wanted him to use them.

It was because she loved her son that she made the hardest decision of her life. She knew that she could never teach my father all the things he needed to learn. So she enrolled him in the Colored Department of the Florida School for the Deaf and Blind in St. Augustine, Florida. It was funded by the state, which would pay all the expenses. My father was seven years old, and he
didn’t want to go, didn’t want to leave his mother and Mary Jane and Mr. Pit and everything he knew and loved. He begged his mother not to send him away, but she stood firm. When fall came, my grandmother put him on the train and watched as he was carried far from home, alone and terrified. It was the best thing she could have done for him, and it gave him a life, but I am not certain he ever forgave her. My mother believes the hurt of that separation stayed with him for the rest of his life.

It was at this school that my father learned to read and write and make music, to do all the things that he would need to live his life. He was there for seven years, coming home only for summers. And it was while he was there that he suffered two more significant losses.

The first loss occurred during his first year there. By the end of winter, the pain in his right eye had intensified. The doctors couldn’t find a way to relieve the pain, and eventually his suffering became unbearable. The school doctor told my father that the only way to stop the pain was to remove his eye. He was terrified, but there was no help for it. Eight years old and all alone, my father was admitted to the hospital, where doctors removed his right eyeball. No one even told his mother about the surgery.

The second loss was the one that transformed his life, even more than blindness. My father was fifteen years old when one of his teachers came into class one day and told him he was going home. His mother was dead. With no warning, he was informed that his mother had died. My father never spoke to us of that moment, not even to my mother, but years later I read about it in his own words. He said that in that moment, the world became a series of shadows, of silhouettes, and he sank into a sort of trance. He could not comprehend his mother’s passing. It was unthinkable that she was no longer there to stroke his face, to soothe him, to hold him when he was afraid. The last thing he remembered was the school putting him on the train for home. He had no memory of the remainder of that week. He could neither speak nor eat nor respond to anything around him. Modern psychologists would say that he was in deep emotional shock, but he simply said that for a while he went crazy, and he almost didn’t come back from the darkness. It was a Christian lady in town named Ma Beck whom my father credits with saving him. She came to him and spoke of his mother, reminded him of all the things his mother had taught him, had hoped for him. She admonished him, reminding him of what his mother would say to him if she were there—that he had to carry on. Ma Beck was somehow able to get through to him. He collapsed into her arms and sobbed for hours, and afterward he went with her to his mother’s funeral to see her one last time, stroking her face and her long, soft hair.

I wish I could have known my grandmother. She probably never knew that she had birthed a prodigy in Ray Charles Robinson, but she did know that he was special and that she probably would not be there with him for long. She never had the chance to get an education herself, but she showed her own
genius in the way she raised him. She only had him with her for seven years, but somehow my grandmother knew she could shape his life at an early age. She taught him to be independent, not to rely on others to help him through life. She taught a blind son how to succeed in a seeing world. She taught him everything he needed to know—except how to say good-bye to her.

Two years before he died, facing his own mortality, my father wrote a song about his mother. He also spoke of Ma Beck, for he firmly believed that God had sent her to save his life in the midst of unbearable loss. I have no doubt that she did save his life that day, but the truth is that my father had been given a death blow nonetheless. He never recovered from the emotional trauma of that loss. He never recovered spiritually, either. Everyone told him that Jesus had taken his mother away. He hated Jesus for taking her, but he feared Jesus, too. Who was this Jesus that he would take a boy’s mother? And why? People at church said one should not love the things of the world too much. Is that why Jesus took her? Because he loved her too much? At the end of his life, he told Mable John, a close spiritual adviser and friend, that he was afraid of loving anyone that much again. If he did, Jesus might take them, too. When his mother died, she took a part of him with her that we never got back.

God understood the kind of mother my father needed, and He gave him that mother for fifteen years. God also understood that it would take another special woman to love a man who was so wounded. That woman was my mother. If my dad had not met my mother, there might never have been a Ray Charles.

MY MOTHER, Della Beatrice Antwine, was born two years before my father, a fact she still hates to admit. Her family lived in Richmond, Texas, a town fifteen miles southwest of Houston that boasted fewer than 1,500 people when my mother was born. Richmond was cotton and oil country, and it wasn’t hit as hard as most of the country during the Depression. Visitors from those days described the town as a surviving piece of the old South, with residential streets still lined with fine white plantation-style houses with large verandas. Richmond had been a refuge for emancipated slaves after the Civil War, but by the time my mother was born, the train tracks running through the middle of town was a racial divide as absolute as a razor-wire-topped wall.

The colored section of town, as it was called then, was about three blocks long. It consisted mainly of barbecue places and beer joints where people could dance on a Saturday night. Our family owned about eighty acres of land, divided among the various households. My mother lived in a one-bedroom frame house on ten acres of farm land with her grandmother Mama Lee and her uncle George. They raised cotton, corn, peanuts, and potatoes, and kept a truck garden for vegetables, which they canned. There were many fruit trees and wild blackberries and dewberries to pick, and the fruit and
berries were made into cobblers and pies. There were horses to pull the wagons and cows for milk. And with hogs and chickens, ducks and geese, there was no need to buy meat. There were snakes, too, and they scared me to death when we went to visit Mama Lee and Uncle George years later. There was little money for extras, but there was always plenty to eat. My mother could eat as much as she wanted and never left anything on her plate. If she wanted ten biscuits, she could have them, but she could only take one at a time. It was ingrained in her that nothing was ever wasted. Everyone worked the land, and during planting and harvest time, the children stayed home from school to help out. If a family finished their harvest first, they helped the neighbors with theirs.

If things got rough, the younger women sometimes moved to the city looking for work. When my mother was young, her mother and two aunts moved to Houston and took jobs as live-in housekeepers. Every two weeks they would come home to Richmond and bring Mama Lee money and clothes for my mother and cousins. Families stuck together, and they shared. Everyone was expected to do their part.

Children went to school when they weren’t needed at home, but school wasn’t a priority for country children in those days. The colored school was a two-room building. The younger children went from primer (kindergarten) to the sixth grade in one room. The older children went from the seventh to the twelfth grade in the other. The school was eight miles from the colored section of Richmond, which meant the children had to walk sixteen miles each day. They were expected to study hard when they were there, but the teachers were lenient about tardiness and absences, especially during harvest time. Not all children were able to finish school, though many did. My mother attended school there until the fourth grade, when she moved to Houston.

My mother’s family was very religious. They had built a small church called Zion Watchtower on the family property. The congregation’s faithful were made up almost entirely of relatives. There was praying and Bible reading at home as well. As a child, I was fascinated by the fact that Mama Lee and Uncle George had never learned to read, yet they could read the Bible. I still don’t know how they did that. I guess they must have memorized the passages from “lining” them at church. (Lining is a Southern custom where the preacher or church leader reads a line of song or Scripture and the congregation repeats it. It originated as a way to get by in a church where there was no money for books, and most of the worshippers couldn’t read.) Mama Lee sang hymns around the house, and she rocked my mother to sleep singing the old Negro spirituals. When my brothers and I went to visit her in later years, she would do the same for us. I no longer remember the names of the songs, but I can still feel her arms around me and hear the sound of her voice and the rocker on the wooden floor.

Not everybody waited to marry before having sex, but if a girl got pregnant, the couple was expected to marry, at gunpoint if necessary. The young couple
was not left to survive on their own, though. They would live with the family and help out with whatever was needed. My mother’s parents had not married. She never knew why, for it was never spoken of in her presence. Years later my grandfather did marry, but it was to another woman. It bothered my mother that she didn’t have a father like other children. She knew who he was, and she carried his name, but he never came around when she was small. He lived in Houston.

When my mother was ten years old, she left Richmond and Mama Lee and went to live with her mother in Houston. The move to Houston was a struggle. Before long, she dropped out of school.

She fought with my grandmother from the beginning. Accustomed to a quieter life with Mama Lee, she disapproved of her mother’s late nights and partying after work. Things got worse when she dropped out of school. Now my mother’s new responsibility was her new baby brother, James. She was expected to babysit while her mother went out, and like all teenagers, she resented it. James would cry until my grandmother got home; my mother would become angry and frustrated. She started talking back to her mother, something that simply was not tolerated in their home. One day my mother announced that she was moving out on her own. By the next day she already regretted her announcement, but she had too much pride to back down. She moved in with the only person she could think of, her cousin Robert Lee. She cried every night for weeks, but she was determined to make it on her own. To this day she says leaving home so young was one of the worst mistakes of her life.

When I asked my mother how she survived, she answered with one word: “Lying.” In those days nobody asked for a birth certificate, and my mother was so tall that she could pass for eighteen. So she got a Social Security card and a health card and went to work waiting tables. Soon she found a second job as well—singing with a gospel group. She saw singing as a way to do something she enjoyed, serve God, and make a little extra money at the same time. My mother moved in with Ella Dooley, one of the older women in her group, staying in the bedroom Mrs. Dooley’s daughter had vacated when she got married. The group wore matching dresses and sang at different churches. They were paid with part of the offering. My mother’s world of gospel was an innocent one in those days. There was always an older person to chaperone the young girls, and they worshipped along with the congregations they entertained. None of them smoked, drank, or used drugs, and they maintained a good reputation where men were concerned.

My mother was sixteen when Cecil Shaw came into her life. He heard the gospel group she sang with and immediately recognized their talent. He began to rehearse the girls and prepare them for a professional career. They purchased choir robes and began singing on the radio and in concerts. Once they were under contract, they moved on to concert halls and bigger churches. Soon there was a recording contract and a series of 78s. Some of the
records survived to become CDs and are still available. My mother’s face appears on the covers, smiling into the camera, looking beautiful and so young. By the time she was out of her teens, my mother was on her way to a successful gospel career.

The worlds of gospel and secular music didn’t have that much in common in those days, but though they might not share a stage, gospel and R & B singers shared a common struggle to succeed. My father was in the early stages of his own career at that time, touring the Jim Crow circuit and barely eking out a living with his music. Listening to the radio helped keep him going on the road. Traveling through Texas one day, he happened to hear the Cecil Shaw singers on the radio. The song was “Pray On, My Child,” and the lead was sung by the clearest, most beautiful female tenor he had ever heard. He was deeply moved. He had to meet the woman behind that remarkable voice. That woman, of course, was my mother.
I do not believe it’s a coincidence that my parents met the year my father lost his “second mother,” Mary Jane. Though he never again lived in Greenville, my dad visited Mary Jane and Mr. Pit over the years and kept in touch with them as best he could. When Mary Jane became ill in 1953, my father helped with the doctor bills. He knew she was very sick, but he was still unprepared for her death. The news came in the middle of a recording session. My dad had recently signed with Atlantic Records, but with a hit still eluding him, each session was important. When the phone rang in the recording booth in the middle of a song called “Losing Hand,” it was someone calling from Greenville to tell him that Mary Jane had passed. My father received the news impassively, silently, as he did all the deepest shocks of his life. And as always, once the pain hit, he immediately escaped into his music. After a moment’s silence, he told the others he wanted to keep going. That session became a professional turning point for my father. All the emotion he was suppressing was poured into the music. “Mess Around,” his first major hit, came out of that session. When it was over, he went home to Greenville to bury Mary Jane in the tiny church he had attended as a boy. Then he went back on the road and continued as if nothing had happened. But the aching grief he carried with him took him to a new level of loneliness. For the first time, there was no woman in his life who really loved him. Not with the kind of love that abides.

Neither of my parents had had a successful relationship when they met. Both were in their mid-twenties. Both had been married and divorced, and though my father had no difficulty finding a woman, he had never found the one. Between them, they had more than their share of emotional baggage.
Some of my father’s affairs were as famous as his name. The serious side of his romantic life is less well known. When he was eighteen, he fell in love for the first time with a girl named Louise. The result of that relationship was my half sister Evelyn. Louise’s parents objected strongly to their daughter’s relationship with an unknown musician, however, and convinced their daughter to come home. My father was heartbroken, and though he supported Evelyn financially while she was growing up, his relationship with Louise came to a painful end. Two years later, tired of meaningless relationships with women on the road, he met and hastily married a woman named Eileen. They hardly knew each other and, inevitably, the marriage ended as quickly as it began. My father was traveling constantly and barely had two dollars to rub together, so meeting a woman he could build a life with was no easy task.

My mother’s romantic history was equally dismal. In the early fifties, it was considered unnatural and even scandalous for a woman to remain unmarried past her teens. By the time my mother was twenty, she longed for a home of her own and children. So when she was introduced to a tall, handsome minister’s son after a church service one night, she thought she had found the man of her dreams. He certainly looked the part: six feet four, with skin like ebony and thick, curly black hair. The minute things got passionate between them, she did what good girls did in those days: she married him and moved to a house in the country. For a few weeks she was content with a life that consisted of keeping house, going to church, and singing at concerts with her group. Unfortunately, her newfound happiness lasted for what she refers to as a hot five minutes. This good Christian man began to abuse her physically whenever he was unhappy with her. As the man of the house, he expected her to put up with it. Now my mother will put up with a great deal from a man if she feels it’s her duty, but she draws the line at physical abuse. Fighting with words is one thing, she will tell you. Fighting with fists is simply unnecessary. No woman should have to put up with being struck. So she divorced him and went home to Houston. Looking back, she recognizes that she really didn’t love him the way she should have anyway. She still wanted a home and family, but it would have to be with a man who treated her with respect.

I believe it was inevitable that music first brought my parents together. The most intimate relationships of my father’s life, personal or professional, revolved around the music. My dad’s professional prospects were just beginning to look up when he stopped in Houston to do a radio commercial advertising his next concert. In those days every up-and-coming musician relied on live radio spots to bring in audiences. In the course of chatting on the air, the disc jockey said, “I understand you’re really into gospel.”

My father replied, “Yes. I love gospel.”

The DJ asked, “Who’s your favorite group?”

My father called out my mother’s group, the Cecil Shaw Singers. Then he started talking about how much he loved the song “Pray On, My Child” and mentioned that he had bought all the group’s records.
My father had no way of knowing that this was a difficult time for the Cecil Shaw Singers. They had been very successful on the gospel circuit, where churches became accustomed to paying them out of the Sunday offering. But when Cecil Shaw got them a record contract, everything began to change. Being under contract to a recording company meant they could no longer sing for their supper at local churches. They had to charge a fee, and some of their fans resented it. People expected them to carry on like they always had. The criticism and cold shoulders were hard on my mother, so when she heard my father compliment them on the radio, she said to herself, “Well, somebody likes us.”

She decided to call the radio station and asked the man who answered to thank my father for his kind words. The man told her she could speak to him herself, and they put him on the phone. She shyly introduced herself, and something about her voice captured his attention. She thanked him for mentioning them on the air and said if he wanted to meet Cecil Shaw while he was in town, she felt certain Cecil would welcome a call.

My father responded, “Well, I know how to get in touch with Cecil Shaw. I’ll give him a call.” He called Cecil as soon as he got off the phone with my mother.

My father was staying at the Crystal White Hotel in Houston. It was a popular stop for black musicians at a time when Texas hotels were still segregated. The Crystal White was something of a one-stop service: the man who owned the hotel also owned the taxi stand and the restaurant. That night when Cecil met my father at the hotel restaurant for dinner, my dad started asking questions about my mother. Cecil told him that my mother was the one who sang tenor on “Pray On, My Child.” My father said, “That’s the prettiest, clearest tenor I’ve ever heard in my life. I’d like to meet that sweet thing. Would you have her come on over?”

Cecil started laughing and said, “Man, she’s not comin’ over here!” He explained that Della Antwine wasn’t the sort of woman who met strange men at hotels. She was a good Christian woman who didn’t smoke, drink, use drugs, or meet men at hotels. She was accustomed to meeting eligible men at church. But my father really wanted to meet her, so after thinking about it a minute, Cecil said, “Well, here’s what I’ll do. If you want to meet here, I’ll bring her. She’ll come with me.” Cecil liked my father, and he didn’t see any harm in their meeting. My mother still laughs when she tells the story. She says that it wasn’t until much later that Cecil confessed to his part in the plot to get my parents together.

Listening to my mother talk about meeting my father is downright funny. She was not impressed. My father had been through many struggles in his life, but getting women was not one of them. Girls had been falling for him since he was twelve years old. My father’s charm usually attracted women powerfully, but it was completely lost on my mother. To begin with, he was too short. At five foot nine, he and my mother were the same height, which
meant she towered over him when she put on high heels. And she loved high heels. Besides being short, he had medium brown skin, and my mother liked her men dark—tall, dark, and handsome, with thick, curly black hair. None of this description fit my father. As for his singing, he was still imitating Nat “King” Cole and Charles Brown. She didn’t think there was anything special about his style. Worse, he traveled in the world of secular music where people smoked, drank, took drugs, and slept around. My mother did none of those things. And to top it all, he was blind. He would never be able to keep up with her. She liked my father. He seemed nice enough, but he was not at all her type. When she left the hotel that first evening, she never expected to see him again.

So naturally she was baffled when she kept running into him on the road. Both of them were traveling with their groups, and it seemed like every time she turned around, he was there. It was only much later that she found out the frequent meetings were not a coincidence. My father had made a secret agreement with Cecil to keep tabs on my mother, so he always knew what city she was going to next. Cecil would go to the radio station to meet my father, who would be there advertising his current concert. Then Cecil would bring my father back to the hotel where the group was staying, and of course, my mother would be there. Cecil and my father would start talking music, and soon they would be singing and working on arrangements together. My mother came to dread these sessions because the two of them would be up singing gospel all night, and Cecil made the girls sing backup for them. At first it was a joy, but after a day on the road and a concert, my mother was exhausted and desperate for sleep. She and the other women would beg them to stop so they could go to bed. When Cecil told my father it was time to go home because the girls were too tired, my father would always say, “Hold on just one minute—just one—let’s just get this note right here.” And they would be at it again. It never occurred to my mother that my dad was keeping them up on purpose so he could have more time with her.

Midnight would pass and become a distant memory, and Mother would turn to the rest of the group and say, “What’s wrong with them? Why doesn’t that little man just go home and let us sleep?”

Meanwhile, my mother had jumped into a second hasty marriage with another tall, handsome churchgoer. She was twenty-four years old by then, an old maid by her generation’s standards, and she was beginning to fear that she would never have a child. She had always dreamed of a husband and family of six children, and this man appeared to be someone to start a family with. From the outside, he seemed ideal. But this marriage failed even faster than the first one. Her second husband was more violent than the first, and she was frightened of him, too frightened to return home when the group’s next tour was winding to a close. Instead she left the tour on an impulse and ran away to New York City. It was winter. She had no job, no prospects, and no winter clothes. But she was desperate and afraid, and she didn’t know what else to do.
She vividly remembers arriving in New York. There were six inches of snow on the ground, and when she stepped off the bus in her pumps, the snow came up to her ankles and filled her shoes. She went to the only hotel she could think of, the Hotel Theresa. It catered to a black clientele, and its claim to fame in those days was an infamous stay by Fidel Castro. Castro had shown up at the posh Manhattan Shelburne Hotel with his entourage and refused to stay there because of their unacceptable cash demands. Castro and his entourage would then go to the Hotel Theresa and rent out eighty rooms for $800 per day. The story quickly became legend, and when my mother checked in, that was about all she knew about the hotel except that famous black performers often stayed there. She found a job filling in for a sick waitress at the hotel restaurant and tried to figure out what to do next.

After a week of hiding out in the hotel and eating all her meals there, she got sick of it and went down the block to a nearby coffee shop one afternoon. The snow had been cleaned off the sidewalk, which made it easier for her to make her way down the street. She had decided to get a couple of doughnuts and some milk for lunch. When she walked in, she didn’t look around. She felt shy and uncomfortable, so she sat down quietly and waited for someone to take her order. No sooner had she given her order than a strange man approached her and asked, “Is your name Della?”

My mother panicked, assuming the man had been sent by her estranged husband, and thought, “Oh my Lord, he found me. He’s sent somebody to get me.”

She swallowed and replied, “Yes. Why do you ask?”

The man nodded his head toward the lunch counter and said, “Mr. Charles …”

She went blank and said, “What? Who?” her mind still on her husband. But then she looked in the direction the man had nodded, and there was my father, sitting there listening and playing with his keys. He had recognized my mother’s voice the moment she ordered and sent the man to speak to her. Realizing what had happened, she went over and spoke to him.

My father said, “What you doin’ here by yourself, Bea? Where’s Cecil and the girls?”

She replied, “Well, I’m not with Cecil right now. I’m here for a while.”

He said, “Oh. Where you stayin’?”

She told him, “The Hotel Theresa. Right next door.”

And my father said, “You don’t say. So am I. Ain’t that somethin’?”

My father played it very cool, like he had no idea she was on her own. But he knew. He had kept in regular touch with Cecil about my mother for over a year by then. My father pursued her with the same single-minded determination he used in his music. He would keep after a piece until he got the notes just right, and he kept after my mother long after most men would
have given up. He had faith that she would come around one day. He could wait as long as it took. When my mother finally found out that Cecil was helping him, she told my father, “If it was legal, I’d kill both of you.” In the coffee shop that afternoon, he told my mother he was in New York doing gigs there and in New Jersey. He had several appearances lined up in the area, so he would be around for a while. He would keep in touch. They talked for a long time that afternoon.

As the weeks went by, my father was true to his word. Every time he got back to town, he checked on her. He worried about my mother. He asked her what she was doing for work. She told him she’d found a job waiting tables, but it wouldn’t last long because she was replacing someone who was ill. She was still looking for a more permanent job.

He worried about her getting cold. He told her, “You don’t have the clothes to stay here.” It was bitter cold, and she couldn’t afford the clothes needed for a winter in New York. He wanted her to leave and return to Texas, but she told him she was afraid to. She was still married, so she couldn’t return to Houston. It wasn’t safe. She had nowhere to go.

He told her, “I’m goin’ to Dallas, and I have a place there. Why don’t you come on back with me when I leave? You can stay there as long as you want, ’til you find a place of your own.”

Mother replied, “No. I don’t think so. I can’t do that.” So they continued to talk, and he continued to ask, and she continued to say no.

Finally he told her, “Well, I’ve got a couple more gigs around here, and I’ll let you know before I leave.” A few days later, he left for Texas.

The minute he was gone, the loneliness hit her hard. To make things worse, money was getting really low. She didn’t have enough to pay the whole week’s rent, and she was scared to death they were going to throw her out in the street. She didn’t know a soul in New York, and she kept thinking about how cold it was outside. She pictured herself slipping and sliding in the snow in her flimsy shoes. The day after my father left, she went down to pay what she could toward her rent. Her plan was to pay part of it and let them know she would pay the rest the next day, as soon as she got another paycheck. Her hope was that if they knew she was good for the money, they wouldn’t throw her out.

But when she got down to the lobby and began to talk to the desk clerk, he said, “Oh, you’re already paid up.”

“No, I’m not paid up. Tomorrow, I’ll stop by the desk and pay my balance.”

He repeated, “No, you’re paid up, says so right here.”

She didn’t know what was going on. She thought he must be new. Maybe he had confused her with someone else. “How long have you been working here?” she asked.

Finally the clerk said, “Well, I guess I better tell you. I wasn’t supposed to,