

# Autobiography Draft 1: Before the Final Curtain

## Dedication

This book is a written anthology of my life and is dedicated to my deceased son Timothy Clarence Gray (November 9, 1967- June 14, 2016), who was continuously persistent that I tell my story. In honor of his memory, I have decided to share my story.

## Introduction

How does a person write about **their** life in a way that holds the readers interest? My book is not a fictional story in which I can write to amuse or astonish the reader. It is a book not about the life of some famous or infamous person. I am just an ordinary person who has been blessed to have had some extraordinary experiences. Initially, I had a difficult time deciding what my focus should be. The more I thought **about it the more questions I had**. Should I focus more on my early years or the middle parts of my life? How much can I include in my story about my unbearable loss without taking you to a place darker and sadder than you may wish to go? How do I want the reader to feel after reading my book? How do I want to feel after reading my book?

Meditation has been my go-to when I am faced with indecisiveness. In the stillness I seem to always find the answers **that I seek**. So in my meditation, I asked the Universal Spirit to guide my thoughts and words. Throughout this book, I speak about my experiences with life and death, hate and love, pain and forgiveness. My desire is that each person who reads my book will find a part of **themselves** in these pages as well as the knowledge that faith and resilience will see us through even the darkest of times.

**I hope you enjoy.**

Billie Gray

Chapter 1 (actually): The most significant people in my Life\*

Grandmother

Grandfather

Mom

Dad

Tim

Paternal grandparents

\*Each of these significant people will be given a brief explanation of their lives so the reader better understands who they are.

Chapter 2: A Beautiful, Broken Baby

I was told that at birth I was a beautiful baby, perfect in every way. However, I was a baby with an invisible imperfection. I was born with a defected heart valve causing a heart murmur. The doctors predicted that I would only live a few years if I **was** lucky. They informed my parents that should I live, this condition would severely restrict my activities and my quality of life would be greatly diminished! I'm so grateful that Spirit had a different timeline than that of the doctors. I am writing this book at the age of 83. The doctors' predictions influenced how my parents and grandparents treated me. Their desire to keep me alive became an obsession. They decided to treat me like a porcelain doll who would break at any minute.

I was a shy lonely child. I spent most of my time alone or with adults. They severely restricted my activities, mainly to reading, board games, and paper dolls cut from the Sears Catalogue. I couldn't participate in any of the activities that the "normal" kids were doing such as sports, or even such minor fun things as hide and seek. Sometimes kids would tease me and ask why I was different. I longed to be like all the other kids and sometimes in my nightly prayers I would ask God what I had done to receive this punishment, because I was just a child.

My grandmother and mother, when she was present, often talked about my impending death. My grandmother even had my burial shroud in a trunk that she sometimes showed to people who came to visit. Guests would come to our house and be delighted to meet me. They would comment on how lovely I was and what a sweet child I was. Then my

grandmother would show them the shroud and the energy in the room would completely shift. She would start to cry and say how sad she was that she wouldn't have me for much longer. People who were so happy to see me before were now saddened just by the sight of me. Instead of seeing me they were seeing my impending death. Living underneath the cloud of death from the **dawn of my conscious memory** was a lot for a young child to handle emotionally. I developed an intense fear of death and believed almost anything I did would kill me. Each day that I was alive I felt like I had been very lucky and that soon my luck would **run out**.

### Chapter 3: Living with My Maternal Grandparents

My memory of living with my grandparents, Papa Clarence and Mama Carrie Robards, from ages 2 to 8 **is filled with** both joy and sorrow. I came to live with **them** because my dad had gone to war and my mother had moved to another city for work. During this time my parents also got divorced. My grandparents had already raised 5 children and another grandchild by the time I came to live with them. My grandmother had already given as much of herself as she could give. She was tired and had very little emotional energy for this very sick child. My grandmother never got to live out her dreams, whatever dreams she held. She married her high school teacher at the age of 16 and never had work outside the house. She carried an anger and sadness that only as an adult did I understand. I felt that she longed for a life that she could only enjoy in her **own** fantasy world. I never got to find out what those dreams or fantasies were. She did all **that was expected of her** for me, but she wasn't warm and nurturing like Papa. I came to realize that having the responsibility of caring for a sick child was no easy task, **so** I tried hard not to cause her any stress **and stay out of her way as much as possible**. These experiences **were how I first learned to make myself appear invisible in the midst of challenging situations**.

While Mama was distant, Papa was warm and welcoming. Papa Clarence was an amazing man. He was kind, patient, and loving. He had a way of making me feel special. I loved him in a way that **cannot be conveyed with** words and I felt that he loved me in the same way. I never believed that he saw me as **a** flawed or broken child the way some other people did. He never talked about my illness or that I may die soon. He understood my

limitations and planned our activities accordingly. Our time together was spent on picnics, fishing, short walks, and of course going to church every Sunday. My favorite way to spend time with him was playing Chinese checkers. Almost every Saturday we would have our checkers game. When he first started teaching me, I was sure that he was letting me win, since I wasn't very good at the time. Grandfather Clarence gave me beautiful and lasting memories that I cherish to this day. I was so blessed to have had him in my life. As far as I saw, he never disagreed with Mama over how I was treated, but this seemed to be his way of making up for that. An example of this is my grandparents approach to my schooling.

The fear that doing anything other than staying home would kill me caused my grandmother and mother to decide that I couldn't go to school. It would be too taxing for me, so I was kept out of school until age 7. My grandfather on the other hand, had been teaching me at home and telling me that soon I would be going to school and he wanted me to know the work because I was smart. School sounded both interesting and terrifying to me. While I wished to go with all the other children I knew, but at the same time I was terrified it would harm me.

My father, home from the war, had come to see me. He wasn't aware that I wasn't in school and I remember his near rage when he learned about it. He told my mother and Mama that he would be enrolling me the following day and that was final. He would rather have me go to school and die than stay home and be dumb. They resisted at first but ultimately agreed to let me know. He took me to school the next day. I was put in first grade and the oldest child in my class. I was moved to second grade within a short time because I knew all the first grade work thanks to Papa.

The best part of school for me was being able to walk home most days with my grandfather. In the morning, he left earlier than I did and so I was sent to school in a cab paid by the state of Kentucky. I went to an all black school and everyday on the way their I watched the school bus take the white children to their school. I, of course, couldn't ride their bus even though it passed right passed my school. It took a while time for me to get used to being around so many other children, but by the second year of school I had started to make friends and become more accustomed to the school environment.

### Chapter 4(?): My first Major Loss

I was almost 9 years old when I had an experience with my first major loss. My first year of school was about to end and I was so excited about all the fun Papa and I were going to have that summer. We had been planning our summer activities for awhile. We were going to fish, take short walks, and have our weekly picnic near the lake. The Saturday before school was to end for summer vacation, my grandmother said that she wanted to talk to me and told me to sit beside her. I knew something wasn't right because my grandmother was acting strange and she seemed sad. She told me that my parents had gotten back together and were coming next Saturday to take me to live with them. I couldn't speak and I believe I went into shock. Finally, when I could speak, I started screaming and crying. I told my grandmother I wasn't going. I ask her why she didn't just tell these people that I belonged to her and Papa.

I told her I wasn't going to worry because Papa would straighten everything out and they would not take me away. I ask my grandmother why they couldn't just get another little girl. My grandmother didn't answer any of my questions nor did she hold me during my hysterics. She only told me to stop crying or I would make myself sick. She got up to make me a snack, saying it would make me feel better. I didn't want a snack. I just wanted to keep living with her and Papa.

Papa came home in the afternoon with my favorite ice cream. He didn't mention my leaving and I didn't mention it either. And Mama didn't tell Papa she ever told me. We all acted as if we nothing was going to change. A week later, early on a Saturday morning, two people who called themselves my parents, Leonard and Mary Miller, came to take me to Paducah, Kentucky to live with them. When they arrived Mama was preparing breakfast. Papa had already left for his part time job as a paper hanger. I refused to eat breakfast, nor talk to these strange people.

Once everyone else had finished eating, Mama started packing my clothes. I cried, telling everyone I wasn't going anywhere. I felt helpless and without hope. I realized I couldn't trust anyone to keep me safe. Where was Papa? Why didn't he come home? Everyone kept telling me

not to get too excited or I would get sick. I told them that if I had to leave Papa and Mama I wanted to die anyway. As it started to get later in the day, the strangers said it was time to leave. I begged them to wait until Papa came home so he could straighten out everything, and if he couldn't at least I wanted to say goodbye. Papa never came.

My leaving my grandparents' home was my first experience of deep loss and grief. My world as seen thru the eyes of a 9 year old was coming to and end. My grief was unbearable. I had adjusted to having a health challenge that altered my life. I had gotten used to being teased by other kids and having few playmates. I had adjusted to the loss of physical activities and childhood fun. But I couldn't, however, deal with the loss that came with leaving Papa. Why hadn't he come rescue me? Why hadn't he at least come to say goodbye? I was very confused, and his absence made the hurt that much deeper. I know how much he loved me. So, it didn't make sense. It was much later that I realized his own pain was as great as mine, and he didn't want to see me knowing that he couldn't do anything to change the outcome.

### Chapter 4(?): Adjusting to my New Situation

The adjustment to my new environment in Paducah, Kentucky was a difficult one. I was becoming familiar with a new neighborhood, new people, and in the fall I would be starting a new school **year**. How would I tell my new classmates that I wasn't normal, **at least according to everyone in Hardinsburg**? How could I explain that **I would be the oldest in the third grade class** because I had been kept out of school due to my illness? Would I be forced to take gym or play sports because the teachers may not know about my heart condition? Should I tell them?

I also had other adjustments to make in addition to a new school, **the main one being my living situation**. I didn't like my new parents. My mother was distant and detached, similar to my grandmother. My father seemed to be away from home most of the time. When he was at home, he was usually busy fixing something in the house or yard and was seldom available to me. I missed Papa so much. At least he was warm and always had time for me. I felt like someone had cut away half of my already heart. My most difficult adjustment **was getting used to these new people** that I called strangers, my parents. I didn't want to be with these people and I didn't feel that they wanted to be with me. Time did very little to change my feelings.

### Chapter 5(?): Life in the Segregated South

I had to make a big adjustment to living in segregated and racist Paducah, Kentucky. Hardinsburg, Kentucky where I was living before, was also segregated, but somehow I never seemed to notice or experience it. I was too young to understand and most of my friends were white because my grandparents lived out in the rural part of Hardinsburg where most of their neighbors were white. As I got older however, and looked back on those years, I remembered several situations that I was just too young to understand. I had to learn how to navigate situations to which I was very unfamiliar, like sitting at the back of the bus, white and colored restrooms/drinking fountains, not being able to eat in restaurants, and - most humiliating to me - having to wait until all the whites had been served in department and grocery stores before we could be, even if they had come in after us. Even if a clerk had already started to help us, they would stop and help the white customers and then come back to us when they were done.

I'm sure that this was also happening in Hardinsburg when I lived there, but I was too young to realize what was happening. I didn't even have an awareness of what the KKK cross burnings really meant. I did have an awareness that white kids and black kids didn't go to the same school because the white kids that I played with went to a different school than I did. For some reason that didn't bother me. What I didn't know at the time was that the schools were not only separate but very much unequal. I write more about this in a later chapters.



Chapter 6(?):The Ku Klux Klan(KKK)

A highlight to the fact that I was really too young to understand the true racism of my grandparents' town was the fact that my grandparents lived across the street from a Civilian Conservative Corp(CCC) camp, which the KKK would use for their night hooded rallies and cross burnings when it wasn't occupied. I didn't even have an awareness of what the KKK cross burnings really meant back then.

Someone would always inform Papa about the rallies and we had a routine: turn off the lamps, pull down the window shades, stay away from the windows, and be very quiet. My grandmother would also get out the Bible, read it quietly, and pray. Papa was the usual calm self and reassured us that we would be fine. He had such a profound faith. I felt that as long as he was with us, we would be alright. There was always the chance that some renegade Klan members would break away from the rally and come into the neighborhood. They knew which houses belonged to the black people. I knew when the rally was over because the noise would stop and we could hear the people leaving.

I was too young to understand the full impact of what was occurring but I did know that things got out of hand we could be hurt or killed.