

---

In 1939, my mother took me and my younger brother, Jerry, from Philadelphia to Wildwood, New Jersey, for a week's stay at Mother White's hotel. Mrs. White was a cheerful woman who made the very best ice cream in the world. The smell of her lightly crusted waffles with crisp bacon layered over them could make a dawdling child leap out of bed in the morning.

After breakfast my mother would take us down to the "colored" area of Wildwood's beach. We didn't think about that. We'd make sand castles and see them washed out to sea, dig deep holes in the hope of tunneling all the way to China. Those were happy days—the ocean before us, small sailboats out on the water, clean white sand beneath our feet. What more could two little kids want?

I knew how to swim, though not very well, and one morning I waded out into the water to play. I waited, jumping up and down until the moment before a breaking wave crested, then I'd plunge into the foaming white mass and emerge into the bright sunshine on the other side. I'd stand up, beat my chest like Tarzan, throw the sea a challenging shout, then start the game again.

I'd been doing this for about fifteen minutes or so when a really, *really* big wave suddenly loomed, crashed down, and tossed me on my side. I tried to stand but was knocked down by another wave. Great fun, but this time I was pulled into the sea's grasp by an undertow.

I tried to use the swimming technique I'd learned up at summer camp, twisting and turning my body in a desperate effort to make it back to shallow water. But my nine-year-old strokes were too weak. My feet touched the bottom for a fleeting second, but another wave engulfed me and I found myself thrown downward. I managed to

stand up one more time. I was facing the beach and could have raised my hands and shouted.

I heard my father, five years earlier, shouting at me as I sobbed and begged to get out of the shallow end of a recreational center pool he'd tossed me in stark naked to learn how to swim: "Shut up, shut up, I'm ashamed of you! Ballard men don't cry!" In that split second I decided I'd drown before I'd yell for help.

Another wave struck me. It turned me over on my back—I was lost. I squeezed my eyes shut . . .

A strong hand grabbed me by the wrist, an arm grasped me around the chest, and I found myself being pulled to shore. It was a white man, lots of hair on his chest, wearing a black bathing suit. At the shore I was met by the unobservant lifeguard, my weeping mother, and a terrified little brother. My mom thanked my rescuer profusely, then wrapped her arms tightly around me, rocking back and forth.

"Thank the Lord, thank the Lord! Praise His Holy Name!"

Swimming was a sport, and I was an African American male in Philadelphia. While all its inhabitants loved sports—Jews, Italians, Poles, Irish, and blacks—being black meant athletics was the core of your life. Nothing was more important, not even academic achievement. After all, sports were pretty much the only area in which blacks seemed to have a halfway decent chance of achieving parity with other Americans.

My escape from a watery death came within a few years of Jesse Owens's 1936 Olympic victories and Joe Louis's first-round knockout of Max Schmeling, which sent thousands of cheering blacks, including myself, into the streets to celebrate. Sports were like a photograph—they didn't lie. If you won or lost, that was it, black or white.

On the surface, my family made some attempt to balance sports and academics. Come into my grandfather Ballard's house with a poor report card, and the barber strap would soon be falling with a heavy hand on some poor soul's bottom.

My dad, A.B., or Abe as he was sometimes called, was a real scholar. South Carolina born and a graduate of Philadelphia's Germantown High School, where he'd been among the few black stu-

dents, he finished Virginia Union University in Richmond and was admitted to the University of Pennsylvania Medical School way back in the 1920s.

He finished one year there, by his own account with the best grades in the class, but family circumstances—he was the oldest of eight—forced him to go to work to help provide for the others. And so he took his considerable talents into the field of recreational work, something for which he was amply equipped, having been the captain of Union’s football and basketball teams and an All-American football player—all-CIAA (Colored Intercollegiate Athletic Association), the highest status to which most black athletes in this country could aspire at the time. Sports were in my genes, and as if my father’s prowess wasn’t enough, I had a whole family’s heritage to bear.

There’s a picture taken in 1944 of the entire clan that I keep in my living room. My dad, holding my half-brother, sits at the center beside his own father, a blacksmith born in Greenwood, South Carolina. My grandmother Elizabeth, a former schoolteacher in the South who became a laundress in the North, sits beside her husband.

All seven of my father’s siblings are there, among them a former captain of basketball and baseball teams at Lincoln University—all-CIAA in both sports—and an aunt who was a national black tennis champion. Beside her, in his second lieutenant’s uniform—at the time he was the physical training officer for the Tuskegee Airmen—stands another uncle, an all-CIAA football, basketball, and baseball player from Virginia State. All but two of my grandfather’s children in the picture finished college, and several went on to receive a master’s degree.

My mother, Olive, isn’t in the picture. My dad divorced her when I was four, and my little brother Jerry and I lived with her in the home of my maternal grand-uncle and grand-aunt, Forrest “Jerry” Marshall and Alice Dorsey. Now, Uncle Jerry had been one of the very first black second lieutenants in the United States Army, where he’d been trained at a special medical officers’ school for African Americans in Des Moines, Iowa, in 1917. He served in Europe during World War I, then earned a PhD in pharmacology from Temple University.

Like the Ballards, Uncle Jerry's consuming passion was sports. If they were playing, he could always be found listening to the Eagles, Athletics, or Phillies. The living room radio was a big brown Philco that had to be tuned just right to avoid static, and Uncle Jerry was always fiddling with it or—more likely—asking one of us to get off the couch and fix it for him.

My dad would come to visit, and after my uncle had brought him a cold glass of Coke with chipped ice from his drugstore, they'd sit down.

"Abe," Uncle Jerry might say, "tell me something about that kid Campanella; I hear he's really coming along well." And my father, whose younger brothers were playing ball on a semipro team with the future Brooklyn Dodgers great, might tell him exactly how quick "Campy" was and compare him to the stellar Simon Gratz athlete Joe Hall—who, along with an uncle of mine, would go on to star on Virginia State's CIAA championship undefeated football team in 1937.

While my dad and Uncle Jerry were talking, I'd be sitting in the dining room with my little brother, books on the table, studying. At least, I was trying to study—it was hard getting Jerry to sit down and read, and when he wasn't distracting me he was messing with Sidat Singh. Sidat was a pure black Persian cat who—like my uncle—loved my brother and merely tolerated me.

In the mid-1930s, Wilmeth Sidat-Singh, a star athlete at Syracuse, was a major sports hero of the black community. He played left half-back on the football team, a position that entailed both running and passing—the equivalent of today's quarterback. In 1938, when Cornell was the reigning East Coast football power, Sidat-Singh led Syracuse to a 19–17 upset victory. So my uncle honored the cat by naming him Sidat Singh. I had but to look at him to know what I had to do with my life.

Uncle Jerry was a lot like my father in one respect—they were both popular and charismatic, radiating warmth to the outside world yet cold, dictatorial, and at times almost hateful to their children and wives. I've never figured out how they shifted so easily from one mode to the other. I can see Uncle Jerry now, hunched over the counter of his drugstore, talking with a couple of fellows in his store. They'd clap their hands and laugh like they were sitting around a campfire. I loved to hear the laughter and banter but was

never able to become part of it, act like them, be anywhere near as comfortable as they were.

Aunt Alice and my mother were old Philadelphians, from a line that began with a Revolutionary War veteran who'd been at Valley Forge with George Washington and Aaron Burr, the third vice president of the United States. "You are a Burr and a Dorsey, Junior, and don't you ever forget it." That old Philadelphia line was replete with writers, barbers, caterers—and Underground Railroad leaders, the elite of African American society.

Aunt Alice entertained like a woman proud of her lineage. Oh, you should have seen the punch bowls with gold trim and the delicately painted chinaware we dined on for holidays when I was a child! Aunt Alice would bustle around the kitchen and dining room. "Junior, just stay out of this room until everything is ready, it has to be just right!" And so it would be: candles, highly polished silverware, sparkling stemware. The next day it was back to normal, with Uncle Jerry slouched in his breakfast chair, reading his paper and calling out, "Alice, my coffee isn't hot enough, make another pot!" or "Alice, this egg is too hard, boil me another one!" Aunt Alice, gentle soul that she was, hovered around him: "Jerry, are the mashed potatoes okay?" or "Are the lamb chops tender enough for you?" She never sat down to eat until he finished his meal.

Then he'd go into the living room and sit down in his easy chair—only he could occupy it—from which he could overlook the drugstore, perhaps read *The Evening Ledger*, and listen to the radio. And what did he listen to? The Philadelphia Athletics, who had not a single black player on their team. He would never say a word to me except as an order, but he lavished affection on my baby brother, who was named after him and who had a more carefree attitude toward life than I did.

"Doc Marshall," which is what everybody called my Uncle Jerry, was a big deal in my neighborhood in the Philadelphia suburb of Germantown, at the corner of Rittenhouse and Baynton streets. I spent ten years of my life there, from age four to fourteen. Home was a red brick building with a drugstore in the front and a three-bedroom house in the back.

There were two small tables in the center of the store and a marble soda fountain with low-backed walnut stools to one side. Behind

that counter were high-arching stainless steel spigots out of which cascaded foamy torrents of Coca-Cola, vanilla soda, or root beer. The floors were octagonal squares of linoleum, scrubbed morning and night by my aunt until my brother and I were old enough to do it. That was the social part of the drugstore, where black and white folks came in to chat, drink sodas, eat ice cream, or read their morning papers.

The pharmacy portion of the store, a long wooden counter with a big brass cash register, faced customers as they came in the door. The register made a loud *ping* and the cash drawer leapt out of its slot—not the silent, stealthy way things are rung up now. It was real cash being spent, the fruit of someone’s labor—credit cards hadn’t been invented.

Medical help for the poor and working poor was hard to come by, and Uncle Jerry, an accomplished pharmacist, became by default the neighborhood doctor. He’d sit you down on a chair in the drugstore, diagnose your problem, then give you the right bandage or prescription with no medical authorization whatsoever. And the neighborhood people loved him for it. It didn’t matter who you were, Doc Marshall would take care of you.

Sometimes his grateful patients would pay cash, but more often than not they’d pay nothing. I remember many a time he’d send folks on their way after telling them, “Don’t worry about the money, glad to help you.”

Sometimes they’d repay him with food—in the case of the Famularo family, which owned the grocery store across the street, steaming hot pots of pasta fagioli, with big chunks of ham floating in a sauce made from home-grown tomatoes and onions. The soup was always accompanied by freshly baked loaves of Italian bread.

Uncle Jerry was easily the most popular person in the neighborhood, but that didn’t save his business when a new drugstore with a larger inventory opened up a block away from us. It was owned by a white man, Mr. Peppers, who must have had more capital at his disposal than my uncle. Even the soda fountain customers deserted him, though the new competitor didn’t have one.

Blacks had been particularly hard hit by the Depression—by the mid-thirties, over fifty percent of black men were unemployed. Uncle Jerry’s solution was to turn to crime, specifically, the num-

bers racket. I've never been able to figure out what drove him to this—smart as he was, there had to be other options. But numbers banker he was, and around three o'clock or so every day his two "captains," the men who walked the streets and did any of the dirty work associated with the business, would report in.

Their names were Plink and Wardy. Plink, a World War I veteran, was tall, dark-skinned, and heavily muscled. He was missing one eye and wore a marble in the empty socket. Sometimes when he was disturbed about something, he'd take the marble out and roll it around in his hands, just like the pirates we saw in the movies.

Wardy, the other numbers captain, was short and wiry, with a gruff voice like a growl. But he had a warm smile and he was gracious—as was Plink—to my Aunt Alice.

"Good morning, Mrs. Marshall," he'd say as he came into the store. "Any errands I can do for you today while I'm making my rounds?"

Uncle Jerry eventually ran the largest numbers bank in Germantown, partly thanks to his friendship with Captain Hill of the fourteenth precinct. Hill came by every day, and Uncle Jerry handed him a large muslin sack full of dollar bills and coins right in front of me.

One day Hill came into the living room so upset he was actually crying.

"Doc, you gotta help me—Chiz has my damn pistol!"

Chiz, a rough, jet-black bald man about to be arrested by Captain Hill, had suddenly turned on him, grabbed his thirty-eight Colt revolver, knocked him down, and torn off. That caused quite a commotion around the corner of Rittenhouse and Baynton—the most embarrassing thing that can happen to a police officer is to lose his pistol. And if you're a precinct captain . . .

Uncle Jerry and Aunt Alice shooed us kids out of the house into the backyard. When we came in for dinner, Uncle Jerry was gone—he was out looking for Chiz. By eight that evening, he was back and so was the pistol. It was agreed that Chiz wouldn't be arrested and the whole day's events would be forgotten by all concerned. I heard all this from the landing at the top of the stairs, where my brother and I were eavesdropping.

That particular event sealed my uncle's relation with Hilly and the precinct cops. Every weekday, a marked police car would pull up

in front of the store. Cops would come in, go behind the pharmacy counter, maybe have a Coke or two, then go back out on patrol.

Uncle Jerry's relationship with Hilly was responsible for my dad's appointment to the Philadelphia Police Academy. At the time, my dad, dismissed from his position as an assistant recreational director because of an extramarital affair, was selling cemetery plots. Back then there were practically no jobs on the police force, and if there was one it went to a white man. But Hilly, after a talk with my father and some prodding from Uncle Jerry, became Dad's advocate. It was not without cost—my dad had to pay the going rate for appointment to the academy, eight hundred dollars or so. The fee came out of weekly wages once a policeman went on duty.

Uncle Jerry was also the Republican committeeman for the district. He ran the elections just like he ran the numbers racket, and he was so trusted that the nuns around the corner would actually let him forge their names and vote for them in the elections—a service he provided so they wouldn't get wet on rainy days.

He did the same for dozens of other voters in the district—the election was over as soon as the polls opened in the morning. No force, no thuggery, just a convenient assumption on the part of all concerned that Doc Marshall would take care of everything.

As for my dad, he was a hero or saint to the black Philadelphia population, for whom he eventually became a much-loved and admired chief police inspector. Even into my sixties, folks in Philadelphia still knew me as the inspector's son. And I loved my dad a lot—to me, at least at times, he was a superman. It was my love for my father, of course, that made me so vulnerable to being hurt by him.

When I was eight years old, Dad sprang a great surprise on my brother and me.

"Junie, I'm going to take you and Jerry to a real boxing match on Saturday." Boy, was I happy—we were going to the fights! All the other kids were envious.

Late Saturday afternoon my brother sat next to me on the couch, both of us all bundled up in winter clothes, from our rubber galoshes to our leather caps with ear flaps.

Aunt Alice said, "Daddy will be here at six to take you to have something to eat before the fight." My mom wasn't home.

Six o'clock came and went. We sat there on the couch listening to the news as Uncle Jerry went back into the kitchen, where Aunt Alice served him.

"Your dad should be here soon," she said.

At six-thirty she came into the living room with a plate of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches.

"Better eat this, your dad won't have time to get you anything before the fight." It was scheduled to start downtown at eight.

Seven o'clock. Aunt Alice came back into the living room.

"Take off your hats and jackets, you'll catch a cold if you keep them on."

"Can't, Aunt Alice," I said. "Daddy'll be here in a minute and we'll be late for the fight if we have to put everything on again."

"Have it your way, but if he's not here in ten minutes, you're taking everything off."

The big brown clock that sat on the living room table sounded once, the half-hour mark.

Jerry got up from the couch and ran upstairs, yelling over his shoulder, "I'm not taking off my stuff!"

Five minutes later, Aunt Alice came into the room with two mugs of steaming Ovaltine.

"Here, take off your things, Junie. I don't think your dad is coming." She went upstairs to fetch Jerry and two minutes later brought him down, saying between sobs that his daddy would be there any minute to take him to the fight.

My father never showed up, nor did he call. I don't remember whether I cried that night or not, but I never forgave him for that disappointment. I vowed then to never break a promise to a child, and I never have.

Uncle Jerry's best friend was his brother, Bud, a pharmacist up in Harrisburg. When the flood of March 1936 hit, Uncle Jerry braved the rising Susquehanna River to carry food and water up to him. I remember now the preparation for the journey, how Plink and Wardy helped load the car with huge bottles of water, loaves of Italian bread, cold cuts, cans of spaghetti and Campbell's baked beans. Aunt Alice, who'd been listening to the flood reports all day, was frantic.

"Jerry, you can't go up there, you'll get yourself killed."

“Don’t care, Alice, I’m not leaving Bud and his family up there without food.”

He put on an old army poncho, got into the car with Wardy, and drove away. He came home three or four days later, and I remember being shocked at the way he looked—drawn and haggard. Uncle Bud was safe, but Uncle Jerry said something I thought at the time was really unlike him.

“The water was everywhere. It was awful, Alice, just awful.”

That childhood memory came back to me very clearly one day in the late seventies when I was in Harrisburg doing research at the state archives. Just before dawn I left my motel room and headed down to the Susquehanna River for a run along the quays. Steps led down to the quays, where the swollen river, blocks of melting ice floating in it, coursed southward. I descended to the quay and began to run. About a quarter-mile along, I started to notice that the cobblestones I was running on were damp. It wasn’t raining, so I figured water was splashing up from the river.

And I was right. I looked ahead in the dim morning light and saw that the river was just barely overflowing the banks of the quay. I looked behind me, calculated the distance to the steps I’d descended, and saw that it was not only too far to run back but water now lay between me and those steps. I was just about trapped by the flooding waters of the Susquehanna River, and no amount of swimming prowess could possibly save me from their reach.

I looked ahead. The next steps were at least a hundred yards off, and it was wet all the way. I put on speed, ran as hard as I could, with the water inching its way up over my jogging shoes. If I slipped, I’d be swept away into the river. But I ran on, and God was on my side, for I was able to reach the steps and mount them through the water lapping over the quay. When I reached safety, I remembered Uncle Jerry’s words. “It was awful, Alice, just awful.”