Chapter 8

After our move to 929 Center Way, my parents set about building a solid and enjoyable life for our family. Each day my father would drop me off at my grandparents' and Mother and Daddy would come together after school to pick me up. Granddaddy still worked a pretty full day, and my grandmother was a full-time homemaker. I’d “help” her around the house and watch soap operas with her. She loved *As The World Turns*, and I loved the commercials, especially for Tide and Mr. Clean, which made stains disappear right before your very eyes.

Sometimes Daddy would pick me up early to go to a high school football game at Rickwood Field, the somewhat dilapidated
stadium at which black high school teams played their games. According to Grandmother, I would become so excited at the prospect of going to a game that I would pester her all day about the time. “When is it going to be two o’clock?” I would ask over and over. My exasperated grandmother finally showed me a clock and the position of the hands at two o’clock so that I could track the time myself. I guess I can thank football for helping me to learn how to tell time.

But the activity that I enjoyed most was watching my grandmother teach piano. Grandmother Ray had about twenty students, ranging from beginners to quite advanced pianists. Her lessons started at about three o’clock every day and she taught for a couple of hours, charging twenty-five cents a session. When the students would leave I’d go to the piano and pretend to play, banging at the keys and “reading” the music. Then I’d ask to take some sheet music home so I could “practice.” Each day I’d leave with music, usually forgetting to bring it back the next day. To preserve her music collection, Grandmother finally gave me a regular book to take home. “Grandmother, this isn’t music!” I told her.
Grandmother Ray decided that it was unusual for a kid to know the difference and asked my mother if she could start giving me piano lessons. I was three years old, and they wondered if it might be too early but decided to give it a try. Unlike the early experiment with first grade, this worked. I loved the piano.

Grandmother started every student with books of exercises that trained young fingers to do progressively more difficult things. Each student also learned a prescribed series of increasingly more difficult hymns, starting with “What a Friend We Have in Jesus.” My parents had bought a little electronic organ for our new house, and I’d play for hours when we got home. They claimed that it was hard to get me to do anything else, including read books or watch television. But a problem emerged as I began to play hymns: the little organ did not have enough keys. Each time I wanted to play low notes, I was out of luck.

“I need a piano,” I told my parents several months into my lessons.

Daddy made me a deal. “When you can play ‘What a Friend We Have in Jesus’ perfectly, we will buy you a piano,” he said.
The next day I went to my grandmother’s and sat at the piano for eight hours, not even wanting to break for lunch. I practiced and practiced, and when my parents came to pick me up I played “What a Friend” perfectly!

As they’d do many times in my life, John and Angelena found a way not to disappoint. They didn’t have the money to buy a piano but they rented one the next day from Forbes Piano Company. By the end of the week I had a brand-new Wurlitzer spinet piano.

I became good at the piano very quickly and started to play publicly. Mother found opportunities for me to play at various church functions as well as citywide events. I played several pieces at the gathering of new teachers in 1959, where I was decked out in a gray polished cotton dress with pink flowers, black patent shoes with rhinestones, and a white fur hat. I don’t remember being nervous and have always thought that these early experiences helped me to overcome any sense of stage fright.

My mother reinforced my inclination toward music in multiple ways. She’d buy books written for children about the great composers. I imagined what it would have been like to meet Beethoven, who scribbled musical notations on tablecloths, or Bach, who fathered twenty children. My favorite story was about

EXCERPT: CONDOLEEZZA RICE: A MEMOIR OF MY EXTRAORDINARY, ORDINARY FAMILY AND ME
Mozart’s life. I was totally enchanted by this man who had written so much and died so young, at the age of thirty-five. I even developed a little crush on him, imagining myself as his wife, Constanze. Admittedly, this was a strange infatuation for a little black girl in Birmingham. Most of my friends were in love with Elvis Presley.

Mother also brought home records, which we would listen to together. One day, when I was about five years old, she brought home *Aïda*, the Giuseppe Verdi opera. My little eyes were as big as saucers as I listened to the “Triumphal March” for the first time, and I played the record over and over. And on Saturdays we listened to radio broadcasts of the New York Metropolitan Opera, “brought to you by Texaco.” Opera and classical music were totally and completely my mother’s domain. My father loved jazz but had no interest in or taste for classical music. Even so, he displayed admirable patience when my mother and I took charge of what was playing on the car radio as we ran errands on Saturday afternoon.

Daddy did teach me to dance. He’d put on a record by jazz singer Dinah Washington or play the big-band music of performers such as Duke Ellington.
Then I would stand on his feet as he walked me through the box step or the fox-trot.

But Daddy’s real territory was sports, and I took to it with great fervor. We watched the National Football League on television every Sunday after church. In those days, there was one game and no halftime studio show. Daddy wanted me to really understand football and would analyze the plays, explaining what the defense was doing to counter the offense and vice versa.

Our team was the Cleveland Browns, and to this day I am a fan. This may seem puzzling given that I didn’t visit Cleveland until the mid-1990s. The reason is simple: Birmingham had no NFL team when I was a child. It was one of only two cities in the South, the other being Memphis, that prohibited blacks and whites from playing together professionally. But even in other southern cities, black players had trouble finding hotels to stay in and restaurants to eat in. By the late 1950s, the NFL was refusing to play in the South at all because of segregation.

The last team to integrate was the Washington Redskins, which had no black players until 1962. Though Washington, D.C., was geographically the closest to us, my father hated the Redskins for their racist policies. They
couldn’t be our team. So we rooted for the Cleveland Browns, who had the great black running back Jim Brown. And each Thanksgiving, Daddy and I would watch the Detroit Lions, who by tradition played on that holiday every year. The next day, we would play the “Rice Bowl,” a touch football game held at “Rice Stadium,” known the rest of the year as the front yard.

Excerpt from Chapter 15

It’s true that Americans of a certain age remember where they were when they heard that President Kennedy had been shot. That night’s evening news and the constant replaying of the motorcade, the moment of impact, and the slumping President are images so vivid as to seem like yesterday. So too are the dignity of Jacqueline Kennedy, the swearing in of Lyndon Johnson, and the funeral cortege making its way mournfully through Washington, D.C. But for black citizens of Birmingham, John Kennedy’s
assassination was personally threatening. I doubt if many children outside the South would have described their reaction to his death as fear.

Fortunately, though Lyndon Johnson was a southerner, he carried through on Kennedy’s promise to end segregation. As a political scientist, I have read scores of academic papers on Johnson’s legislative approach. Some believe that Johnson was able to do what Kennedy could not have: assemble a coalition of northern Democrats and liberal Republicans to ram through landmark legislation. Donald Rumsfeld, then a young congressman from Chicago, was one of the Republicans who supported the President. I can dispassionately analyze Johnson’s strategy and the shameful reaction of the Republican Party that resulted in the “southern strategy,” a conscious attempt to court white voters disgruntled by desegregation. But I have to step out of my own experience to do so because this was not just any legislation—it produced fundamental changes in my family’s lives. And it did so almost immediately.

On a hot July day in 1964, we watched Huntley and Brinkley deliver the news that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 had passed the U.S. Congress and had been sent to the President for his signature. Johnson would sign the legislation on July 2. The local news anchor repeated the story after the national news.
“The so-called Civil Rights Act passed today,” he intoned, adding a rather
telling qualifier to his description of the legislation.

But it didn’t matter. A couple of days later, my father said, “Let’s go out
to dinner.” We got dressed up and went to a relatively new hotel about ten
minutes from our house. We walked in, and people literally looked up and
stopped eating. But in a few minutes, perhaps recognizing that the law had
changed, they went back to eating and we were served without incident. A few
days after that, however, we went to a drive-through hamburger stand called
Jack’s. It was nighttime, and as I bit into my hamburger, I told my parents that
something tasted funny. Daddy turned on the car light. The bun was filled with
onions: nothing else, just onions.

Nonetheless, de jure segregation was over. Decent people—not
extremists, but ordinary people—would start to adapt to that fact. Much is
rightly made of the historic significance of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. But in
terms of daily life, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was at least as important,
striking down legal segregation.

Many years later when I was national security advisor I was shocked to
learn that this wasn’t universally understood. One day in a meeting to plan the
President’s calendar, we reviewed a request to commemorate the fortieth anniversary of the Civil Rights Act. The consensus was that the President could issue a paper statement without much fanfare because the fortieth anniversary of the 1965 Voting Rights Act was to be celebrated the next year, and that legislation was considered to be the real breakthrough. I hit the roof and, more pointedly than perhaps I should have, told my colleagues that they’d better understand that the 1964 act was the one that had made it possible for me to eat in a restaurant in my hometown. Taken aback, they relented, and we had a very nice celebration in the East Room. We invited Lynda Bird Johnson Robb, whom I had the chance to thank personally for the courage and commitment her father had shown in bringing about dramatic changes in my life.