

# Introduction



I was born in Ft. Lauderdale on October 16, 1945, in the city's all-Negro hospital. Negro babies could not be delivered in the white hospitals. My parents were farmworkers who labored long and hard but could not regularly make ends meet. When I was 18 months old, Broward County's pole bean crop was devastated by heavy rains, and my parents had to "go up the road" to find work. En route to Exmore, Virginia, where they would work in potatoes, they left me in Crescent City with my father's mother and stepfather, Lillie Mae and Robert Albert Bentley; there I lived much of my childhood until I went away to college in 1963.

Crescent City, between Palatka and DeLand on U.S. Highway 17, is on the eastern rim of the Ocala National Forest, less than 40 miles inland from the Atlantic Ocean. It is next to Lake Stella, tiny Lake Argenta, and Crescent Lake.

Crescent City was not a utopia. It seemed, however—and I am speaking only of the Negro communities because I rarely had close contact with local

whites—a black version of paradise in my early years, where black children, mostly boys, roamed the woodlands and fields barefoot without a care, where black girls in gingham dresses skipped rope under live oak, magnolia, and camphor trees. And back then, citrus, fern, and pulpwood provided jobs for most Negroes who wanted to work, at least seasonally. The eccentric could eke out a living pulling deer tongue and Spanish moss, pulling and selling gopher tortoises.

My grandparents' house was a green-shingled, three-bedroom, shotgun-style structure with a matching two-hole outhouse across the dirt road. On three acres of sandy soil near Lake Argenta, we grew all of our vegetables and fruits. We had no cows or hogs, but our chickens laid enough eggs for five families.

Religion—the real fear of a living God who, at will, intervenes in earthly matters—anchored the lives of the adults. My grandfather was a presiding elder in the House of God, Church of the Living God, the Pillar Ground of Truth Without Controversy—a black Pentecostal, or Holiness, denomination. He was also the pastor of three congregations: one in St. Augustine, one in Palatka, and one in Crescent City. He routinely conducted or participated in tent revivals throughout north central Florida and the Panhandle. I accompanied him on these trips when my grandmother had to work or was “too plumb tired” to travel, as she would say.

Things were different beyond the boundaries of our communities, however. One of the most violent events of my early childhood involving white people occurred when I was 10 years old and went with my grandfather to a three-day tent revival in Lake City. Pilgrims came from several nearby counties. On the second afternoon of the gathering, a group of boys and I walked to a store in a black neighborhood. I bought my usual: a frosty bottle of Nehi grape soda, a bag of salted peanuts, and a giant dill pickle. Returning to the tent, we roughhoused, played the dozens, and fantasized about pretty girls as we approached the railroad tracks.

Out of nowhere, a Ford pickup roared toward us. We could hear the horn blasting and the rebel yells. Three white teenage boys sat in the cab, and five or six others rode in the bed. We knew what was coming because, although we came from different regions of the state, we had seen this potentially deadly game before.

We were about to be “nigger-knocked.”

As the adults in our lives had taught us, we ran in different directions to confuse our attackers. I had been nigger-knocked a year earlier on my newspaper route in Crescent City. I was pedaling my bicycle along Union

Avenue and was preparing to toss a copy of the *Palatka Daily News* into a yard when a woody carrying three white boys approached. The passenger in the backseat hit me in the face with a balloon full of urine.

On that day in Lake City, I knew immediately that I had doomed myself by looking back. A boy in the truck bed held a leather belt in the air, the silver buckle twirling above his head. Suddenly, I saw the buckle descend, and, just as suddenly, everything went black. Pain ripped through my face. Cupping my nose, I smelled my own blood and felt it pouring into my palms, then between my fingers. I thought that I would pass out and that I had lost both eyes. After several of my companions returned to help, I was surprised that I could see.

My nose had been broken, and the gash was deep enough to reveal bone. My friends helped me back to the tent, where the standing-room-only crowd was “shouting” (a spiritual dance) to the syncopated sounds of drums, a piano, and dozens of tambourines.

My grandfather, who was in the makeshift pulpit with several other preachers, saw me and ran toward me. The eyes of the crowd followed. I stood in the aisle holding the bridge of my nose.

The front of my starched white shirt was covered with my blood. The wife of the local minister, with whom we were staying, took me to her house, flushed my wound with antiseptic, bandaged it, and gave me one of her husband’s shirts. That night, my grandfather drove me to the black doctor in Gainesville.

That incident made me fully aware of our estrangement. In fact, white people were a mystery to us in Crescent City. They were strangers. We would see them downtown or catch a glimpse of them driving their cars and trucks. Some of us took orders from them at work. But we rarely saw their faces up close.

The early morning sun was blazing hot as my grandfather and I drove to the Putnam County Courthouse in Palatka. I was excited because I was about to start the paperwork for getting a restricted driver’s license. I had stayed up all night, dreaming of driving my grandparents’ 1949 Chevrolet, of showing off in front of the girls at Middleton High School in Crescent City, of wearing exotic cologne and holding my wrist dangerously loose over the steering wheel as I had seen my father and other men do around women. And, of course, I dreamed of owning a fast, sporty coupe.

The year was 1959, and I was a few months away from being old enough to drive legally.

My grandfather and I climbed the courthouse stairs, moving aside at the

door to let three white women pass. At the counter, a clerk, an older white woman with eyes that instinctively looked through black people without seeing their humanity, gave me a form to fill out. My grandfather sat in the chair beneath the ceiling fan, his hat resting awkwardly on his lap. An armed sheriff's deputy, a tall white man with a ruddy face and hairy arms, stood beside me. Leaning on the counter, he chatted with the woman, studied me from head to toe, and glanced over at my grandfather. The room was hot, and I was nervous.

When the woman asked if I had a pen, I said, "No, I don't." I had no idea that those three simple words had violated two centuries of strict tradition and had exposed me to the oath that required a white man to protect the honor of a white woman—especially if he imagined that her honor had been trampled on by a Negro.

As I reached for the pen that she was handing me, the deputy grabbed my left shoulder, spun me around to face him, shoved my back against the wall, and pressed his forearm against my chest.

"You say, 'Yes, ma'am,' and 'No, ma'am' to a white lady, you little nigger," he said in a low, deliberate tone, his breath smelling of tobacco.

Never will I forget the way he said "nigger" and the rage in his eyes. Over the years, I have relived this incident, assessing my reaction to it at the time and measuring its long-term effect on who I have become. Doubtless, it was a watershed in the life of a proud 14-year-old black kid, a happy teenager who saw himself quickly growing into manhood. Now, I look back and marvel that—given the racial customs of that time, when white men believed that they had a God-given right to do anything they pleased to Negroes—I was lucky to have escaped physically unharmed.

Weighing about 190 pounds and standing nearly six feet, I stiff-armed the deputy in the face. I caught him off balance, and he went back, stumbling to hold himself up.

"Keep your hands off me!" I shouted.

Unaccountably, I was unafraid, only insulted and angry. He grabbed the edge of the counter and balanced himself. I looked into his eyes, knowing that he wanted to shoot me. Perhaps I imagined the hesitant downward movement of his hand for his pistol. But I did not imagine the heat of bigotry in his eyes, the heavy burden of his being of the "superior race."

As I stared at him, he looked away, turned to my grandfather, and said, "Git this little trouble-making nigger out of here. He thinks he's Martin Luther King or somebody."

"Don't call me a nigger!" I shouted, moving toward him.

By now, my grandfather, a gentle man infused with the serenity of the deeply devout, was trembling. Jumping to his feet, he pulled me down the hallway and out of the building. Terror was in his eyes as we passed the Confederate Heroes monument on the front lawn. In the car, he did not look at me, nor did he speak to me. We drove the 26 miles back to Crescent City in silence.

When he died four years ago, we still had not discussed that day. I can only guess at his reason for never talking about it. But I know what it did to me. It introduced into my young consciousness a sense of personal vulnerability and mortality. Until then, I had been like other children: I believed that I was invincible and would live forever. But on that day, there I stood, in that muggy courthouse, facing a man who wanted to annihilate me, who could have annihilated me with the squeeze of a finger.

Why would he have done so?

Because my skin was black. Because I forgot the lay of the land and stepped out of my “place” when I did not say “ma’am” to a white woman. Even at that young age, I understood that my fate was in the hands of a total stranger, a white man—an adult—who despised me—a young boy—for no logical reason. I clearly understood that life in the South was unfair, that being a Negro in northeast Florida was a high-risk game of minimizing physical assaults.

Even more, though, I walked away from that courthouse with an altered psyche and a diminished sense of self—conditions that I would spend subsequent years trying to repair. Indeed, the courthouse encounter was a turning point for me, but it was also the fulcrum in my growth, the point of support from which I now can appreciate the wholeness of my life. In other words, all events that occurred before that day in Palatka prepared me for surviving it.

Crescent City was not an openly brutal place. In many ways, beyond what I have said already, it was a good place, better than most other towns I later visited as a farmworker on the nation’s East Coast and throughout the Southeast. In Crescent City, the separation of the races was taken for granted on both sides. Black people bowed and scraped. Whites felt superior and benevolently endured our presence. Their neglect of us was a benign one. Many stores, such as Hilda’s Style Shop, Sackett’s Grocery, and the hardware store, extended credit to blacks, and the People’s Bank of Crescent City never turned down qualified borrowers because of their race as far as any of us ever knew.