CHAPTER 1:

GROWTH

HTRA115_VV297_H: A portrait of my father in 1963.

When my father, Sammy Davis Jr., "The Entertainer," a black, Puerto Rican, one-eyed Jew, got throat cancer and died, well, I just fought with God. After everything he'd been through, was this some kind of a sick prank? He was suffering from a cancer that made its presence known every day by a tumor that protruded on his neck from the source of his illness—his throat, once the source, to my mind, of the most outstanding voice in show business.

The irony of it all was an epic tragedy to me. He was so frail he took on the semblance of an absurd caricature of his former self—one of the greatest entertainers of all time, who also happens to be my beloved father. I stood by helplessly, pregnant with my first son, overwhelmed by the reality that my father was going to suffer and die without ever meeting his grandchild. Pop stayed strong, but it often seemed more than I could bear. The struggle between God and me raged on for months, but I still prayed and prayed that Pop would hang on long enough.

I remember vividly one night waking up from my sleep, in utter panic, having an out-of-body experience. Things and places, past and present circled around me in the dark. As I tried to climb out of this terrifying abyss of uncertainty, it was right there before me: the future. In a flash, I was with my husband, putting my newborn baby into my father's arms. Was this a premonition? Was God working up some kind of miracle? I didn't know, but I decided to give God a break. From that night on maturity set in. It was God who gave Pop all his talent. Perhaps the true test of faith is how you face death. In light of the gifts God gave my father, I had no right to regret his impending death.

Dad sure got a lot into sixty-five years as a performer. He was on the vaudeville stage by the age of three, packed in over forty albums, seven Broadway shows, twenty-three movies, television-show-host spots, and zillions of nightclub and concert appearances. He was a five-foot-six-inch, one-hundred-twenty-pound legend. As my father would say, "God gave me the talent, all I had to do was not screw it up."

What a journey it was of pure talent and sheer determination to triumph as the world's greatest entertainer amidst all the racial adversity of his day. My father was a bona fide star, used his talent as a weapon to fight racial indignities, created his own rules, and planned to leave the world just as he wanted—to quote him, "while I'm still interesting." Pop was dying and I didn't want to miss a minute of it, no matter how bittersweet. If my father was going to do the death march, I was going to march right by his side.

When Pop got sick, I was pregnant with his grandchild. A mere few months from delivery of my child, on April 20, 1990, cancer ravaging my father's throat, we spoke more than we had in my entire life. Conversations took on new meaning. We were laser-focused on Pop's life, knowing each time I saw him could be the last time we talked. Later, he would hold his trachea tube just to speak. But we talked and talked, treasuring each word with impending

In 1961 the world was curious as to what the daughter of Sammy Davis Jr. and his "Swedish goddess" wife would look like. I'm about TK years old here, just coming into my own "look." As my father neared the end of his life I was soon to give birth to my own interracial child—one I hoped my father would live long enough to meet.

urgency, in a manner infinitely more rapid and spontaneous than ever before.

We were together all day, every day—a far cry from the days when Pop didn't even know my phone number. Typically, an assistant would call and send for me. It was liberating just to saunter through the front door of his Beverly Hills home without being sent for. From death would grow life, so I started my journey back in time with my father.

"Hey, Trace Face, you get uglier every time I see you," his eyes sparkled with joy as I entered.

Pop's 1151 Summit Drive Estate held fond memories of years of Hollywood entertaining, his most proud moment being my interracial wedding to Guy Garner inside his 12,000-square-foot home. Pop's most sacred sanctuary was his 2.5 acres of lavish emerald gardens with pungent eucalyptus trees and a sparkling pool. It was a tranquil oasis where he could drink in the air and reflect. It is where my father would spend the last days of his life.

His gourmet kitchen in the guest house was his pride and joy, back in the day. Pop loved to cook. Lessie Lee Jackson, who started as our nanny but ended up a family member, was Dad's prep cook. Lessie Lee was the estate matriarch. Her most infamous line to my father's third wife was, "I was here before you, and I'll be here when you leave." Lessie Lee in her slippers and old Southern house coat, would often saunter across the lawn to the guest house kitchen to deliver the ingredients for my father's favorite chicken cacciatore.

Today, Pop held court behind the brownish downstairs bar off the living room, pulling the sides of his V-neck cashmere sweater down over his designer jeans. From time to time, his nurse, doctor, or private armed guard would pass by, but we never paid them much mind. I sat on a bar stool, praying my pregnancy weight wouldn't topple me over. I was confident we would have some privacy that morning, no celebrity visits from Uncle Frank (Sinatra), Liza (Minnelli), or Bill (Cosby).

Pop caught me staring at his raw pink blasted neck where the second round of chemotherapy radiated his dark skin pigment right off. The cruel odor from the malignant tumor sticking out of his nape assaulted me through the air. Even his Aramis cologne couldn't diffuse that stench of death. But to mask my sorrow, I allowed the cologne to assume its olfactory guise. I surrendered all my sensibilities to its soothing artificial semblance of reality.

"I'm doing all right, Trace, just tired." Dad winked. "Want a Strawberry Crush?"

"Coke, please, and maybe something to eat," I replied. Pop hollered into the kitchen, "Lessie Lee, whip up some smothered pork chops with rice, I think we got a craving here!"

"So, Trace Face, I'm thinking about pulling out the pool table in the bar upstairs and making a proper nursery for when you and the baby come over," my father announced.

"Are you going to pull out the bar, too?"

"Let's not get ridiculous!" Pop smiled.

"How about the racks of guns on the wall from Clint Eastwood, Elvis, and all of them?" I asked.

Dad poses with his Rolls Royce outside Piccadilly Station in Manchester, 1961.

"Never mind. We'll put the nursery in the guest house!" Dad smirked.

I could tell an ominous shadow followed a deep reflection that enveloped my father's eyes today. "Bet you wish you could turn back the clock, huh, Popsicle?" I often called my father, Popsicle.

"Perhaps, but childhood, I don't know. I never was a kid," my father said.

"You made damn sure we got the best childhood, Pop. But I guess you missed out, huh?"

"I never realized there was a childhood to miss!" Pop said. "Show business was a particular world unto itself. When I was three years old, doing two or three vaudeville shows a day, I couldn't just go out back and play with the kids. I didn't know how. I didn't even learn to read or write until I was seventeen and in the army. I never had any formal education like you, Trace Face, never spent a day in school. So guess what?"

"What, Pop?"

"Baby, I'm going back to school!" Dad howled.

"You mean for your GED?" I knew Pop had no idea what a GED was.

"Nope, I'm going back to the first grade!" he said. "Dip into that well! Learn my lines! Sing some ABC's to that kid bursting out of your belly!" Pop knew his ABC's, but I wondered if he could sing the song that accompanied it. My father spent the first ten years of his life like a mimic when it came to anything outside of entertainment.

I love this picture of Pop, smiling and happy.

"Just teach your grandchild how to play 'Fool the School.' You mastered that role." He gave me one of his warm, twinkling, father-daughter smiles.

"'Fool the School' was a game Pop played back in the early 1930s in his Harlem home on 140th Street and Eighth Avenue with his grandma, who raised him. He called her Mama. She was a heavy-set woman with joy in her heart, a happy face, and the "black-attude" of "You come around here again, I'll beat your butt with this broom!"

From about the age of six, my father would rehearse his rat-tat tap dancing in the living room for that evening's vaudeville show. Mama would guard the window, watching for truant officers who could potentially mess up Pop's rise to fame by throwing him into school. When Mama spotted one of the truant officers, they would both freeze in place. "Don't move. Don't breathe," Mama would whisper, as she listened to the slow steady pace of heavy boots entering the building, each footfall climbing creaking the wooden stairs.

Dad never went to school a day in his life, never knew the first thing about literature, but the way Pop told the story, it felt like Edgar Allan Poe's black raven flew smack into the middle of Harlem! Suddenly there came a tapping, a white man gently rapping, rapping at their rickety ghetto door. Deep into that darkness, peering long, Pop stood there at six years old—wondering, fearing, doubting, and dreaming dreams of stardom no "colored" mortal ever dared to dream before.

LEFT: My dad and his own father, the man who started him in show business.

ABOVE: A congratulatory kiss from his mother, Elvera, after the opening of *Golden Boy* on Broadway, 1964. Although raised by his grandmother, my father's own mother remained on the outskirts of his life.

Dad learned quickly that a white man in uniform rat-tat-tapping on their ghetto door, somewhat louder than before, only meant trouble. Startled at the stillness broken by reply so aptly spoken, his soulful, willful, don't-mess-with-me Mama would whisper her own words of wisdom to Pop, "We can wait long as he can knock, child!"

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My father, Sammy Davis Jr., was born on December 8, 1925, in Harlem, as an only child to vaudevillians, Sammy Davis Sr., an African American and Elvera Sanchez, a Puerto Rican. My father always joked that Elvera's father was so prejudiced he didn't even like black shoes. The two separated in 1928. Elvera continued her career as a chorus girl. My grandfather raised Pop with his own mother, my great-grandmother, "Mama." Pop always felt abandoned by his mother, never cared for her much, but he fronted in public and paid her rent for life. As the story goes, Elvera visited Pop on the vaudeville circuit once when he was just a kid. His father introduced them, "This here is your mother, Elvera." My father's response was, "What? I have a new mother every night."

Dad's father promptly took his son on the road as part of the Mastin Troupe lead by Will Mastin. Will was not a blood uncle, but Pop always called him affectionately, "Uncle Will." My father began his rise to stardom playing vaudeville at the ripe age of three years old. In 1928, he was already a little firecracker, sitting on a singer's lap onstage, imitating her facial movements with hearty laughs from the audience.

The Will Mastin Troupe had become the Will Mastin Trio: "Uncle Will" Mastin, Sammy Davis Sr., and a rising spark plug, Sammy Davis Jr. Pop adored his father, the limelight, and wanted to be onstage more than anything in the world. My father saw a world where people would applaud you, give you credence, plausibility, a safe haven. The stage was a place where if you had talent, you could grab on to it and earn instant respect. In the early years Dad told me he often said, "What have I got? No looks, no money, no education, just talent."

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I motioned Pop to sit down on his Gucci half-moon couch with me. Lessie Lee had placed our smothered pork chops and some beverages on the coffee table. Our soul food feast sat on the glass coffee table in the good company of Judy Garland's ruby slippers from *The Wizard of Oz*, sealed in a special case from Liza Minnelli. Liza was a longtime close friend of my father's, and they entertained together for many years. On the table was also my father's Kennedy Center Honor, letters from Jack Benny, and a bunch of belt buckles from old western films.

"Silent Sam the Dancing Midget is how they billed me, Trace Face," said Pop, "I was the freak of the show back in the day!"

The Geary Society in the 1930s had a law that

no child under sixteen could sing or dance onstage. Pop explained, "I would sit in the wings and watch the stage. I wanted to be in that gang but I was only four or five years old. I was in my element because I knew no other element. They had to bill me as a forty-four-year-old midget to work because I wanted to work. My father put me in black face, a little redundant, but they thought that was enough of a disguise."

Pop's eyes lit up, "Oh Lord, then it all came to a screeching halt at the Liberty Theatre down on Forty-Second Street! Here we are doing our act, making an impression, audience is loving it, then *boom!* Two beastly women and three white cops climb onstage. Guess they figured out I wasn't a midget! I hear my father yell, 'Run boy!' as the cops throw your grandfather to the ground and handcuff him. So I slipped through the officers, the midget

Black performers often appeared in blackface in the early twentieth century. This is one of dad's very first professional photos.

My father on stage in the early 1930s.

that I was, and man, did I run!"

"Where did you run to, Pop?" I asked.

"Home to Mama! Where else? Hey, that was the way it was in show biz at the time. If you had to run, you had to run. Heck, there were adult performers running. Colored folk running was nothing to be embarrassed about. Just had to run sometimes, sign of the times." Dad smirked.

"What happened to Grandpa?"

"He was thrown in jail. Released with a date for a court appearance. Uncle Will got away somehow. Funny, even thirty years later, when I bought your grandpa that fine house in Beverly Hills next to his doctor's house, he still slept with a shotgun under his bed!" Pop laughed.

"I used to say to my father: 'Dad, who's coming over here to getcha? Your doctor? You gonna shoot him?'"

"And what did Grandpa say?" I asked.

"He would say: 'Son, you know nothin' about no safety, no how. You? You're gonna talk smack to me! You? Who sits with his back to the door *still*! Who's coming to get *you*, son?'" Pop laughed as he reminisced.

"What happened after Grandpa was thrown in jail over the dancing midget fiasco?" I asked.

"My father was to appear in court. Mama said: 'Ain't no one walking into that courtroom but me!' Mama stormed into that Harlem court on fire. Told the judge that my own mother, Elvera Sanchez, was chorus girlin' somewhere, no tellin' where she was. Mama said the only person fit to take care of little ole Sammy was Mama herself! The judge had work documents from the house Mama cleaned with little white kids she raised, so he gave Mama full custody of me." Dad smiled.

"Mama must have loved having that power . . . ," I said.

"Oh, Trace Face, that day Mama came marching through our Harlem door on 140th Street and Eighth Ave like she was queen of the castle. Mama boasted to everybody, 'The judge said his own mother and father ain't capable of raising him, so he gave Sammy to me. Legal!'" Pop roared, slapping his knee.

"Bet Grandpa and Uncle Will respected Mama after all that!" I said.

"Utmost respect and a few little white lies to get us back into show business. Uncle Will made up some story about a big gig he lined up in Boston for us, paying money. Mama believed him and so did I," my father explained.

"Mama started asking me questions like, 'While you on the road, you ever been hungry, Sammy?' I told her the truth, 'No, Mama—Daddy and Massey been hungry, but never me,'" Pop said. He often called Uncle Will "Massey" back in the day.

"My father started packing bags and grabbed me to go. I said, 'Where we goin', Daddy?' He said, 'We're going back into show business, son!' And off we went."

My father's oeuvre of work as an entertainer was vast. But back in the 1930s and early '40s, Boston was no show business treat for Pop. The Will Mastin

The Mastin Trio in the late '40s: Sammy Davis Sr., my father, and Will Mastin.

LEFT: Uncle Dean, Pop, and Uncle Frank at their best. **ABOVE:** My father in the “ring-a-ding” ’60s.

Trio was homeless, sleeping on benches in train stations. Uncle Will would go up to the ticket counter every couple of hours to ask a bogus question, so they wouldn't be thrown in jail for loitering.

When the train station closed, the Trio moved to a nearby open bus station to catch some shut-eye on their benches. When it came time to eat, there was only enough money at the restaurants to order Pop a meal, so his dad and Uncle Will would leave with empty stomachs. On a lucky night, his father might put together enough money for a beer, anything to help ease the hunger pains.

"Ah, Trace Face, in those days, we were on the road, homeless and hungry, sleeping in terminals, hopping trains without no tickets. We paid our dues. Nothing like the scrumptious, delectable Sands Hotel '60s days in Vegas," Dad explained.

Six years after my father died, in 1996, the Sands Hotel was imploded to make way for the Venetian Resort Hotel Casino in Las Vegas. In an off-camera conversation, the Emmy-winning filmmakers of *Biography: The Rat Pack*, Luke Sacher and Carole Langer spoke with Vegas singer and dancer Claude Trenier, who said, "It's not like it used to be. I liked the old Vegas. I'm sorry they tore down the Rat Pack room, and the Sands, and the Dunes. . . . These were landmarks! And what kills me, it seemed like the new breed wanted to tear out anything that reminded them of the old Vegas. They wouldn't have the new Vegas if it wasn't for the old Vegas."

Back in its prime, Pop says, "The Sands was our 'Rat Pack' oasis, our home away from home. I hung out with Uncle Frank, Uncle Dean, Peter Lawford, Joey Bishop, and celebrities galore in a 3,000-square-foot plush suite. We ordered everything on the room service menu—spread out buffet style. Huge bowls of cigarettes with every brand in it—my Pall Malls or Camels unfiltered—whatever I needed, wanted, at my fingertips. When I was drinking, always had a Coke with bourbon on fresh ice handed to me by hotel staff standing by—or Strawberry Crush when I was on the straight and narrow. Rat Pack lifestyle. We owned Vegas, baby. We even had a private celebrity pool, not on the ground floor, mind you."

"Pop, you always liked everything first class. Even now, I wonder, why you pay for all this stuff?"

"Because I can, Trace Face, because I can."

In the 1930s and early 1940s the rise of motion pictures began stealing the light from vaudeville stars. My father, who claims he was just turning five years old at the time of filming (the press mistake him to have been seven), made his big screen debut in "Rufus Jones for President," a musical short with Ethel Waters. Pop performed a little tap number, singing around a stand-up microphone, dressed in his Sunday best with a top hat and all. A bona fide five-year-old professional, never missed a beat or a step. Pop always joked, "The film stunted my growth. I could fit in the same darn suit today!"

But Pop continued to travel throughout the country as his father and Uncle Will trained Pop on tap dancing, singing, and how to engage the audience with a confident patter and a wide smile. My father told me the same story he told talk-show host Richard Bey, "In those days in show business, speaking medically, the job was not to be a specialist, but a general practitioner—you had to do a little bit of everything, know how to say a line, sing a song, tap a dance, do a joke. It was part and parcel to our business."

Gradually my father became the trio's star, leading the act to larger and larger clubs. Uncle Will decided their pay would be split three ways. Years later, after Pop became a solo artist, he still split his pay three ways, paying Uncle Will and his father until the day they died. Pop was kindhearted, lavish, and generous to a fault. When my father was invited to private dinner parties he wouldn't just show up with three dozen roses, he would arrive with a gift from Tiffany's—that was Sammy Davis Jr. style.

"I created my own rules, Trace Face. I danced, sung, joked, or impersonated my way through the color barrier. Like the time my father and Uncle Will told me I couldn't do an impression of James Cagney or any white artists. I couldn't see any sense to it and did it anyway. I did a Cagney walk to center stage, spread my legs apart in a classic Cagney stance and said, 'All right . . . you dirty rats!' There was a startled pause and then a roaring applause. Backstage, my own father apologized for being wrong, laughed, and hugged me. See, Trace, in those days we had TOBA—that was an abbreviation for 'Tough On Black Artists,' and the 'A' . . . didn't always stand for 'Artist.'"

"I get it," I said.

"I don't know who made up the rules for 'colored' performers. But if you were colored you would never address the audience when you walked onstage. There was this invisible wall colored entertainers were not allowed to cross. When we worked downtown at the Paramount, the Roxy, Loew's State, the Capitol Theatre, the Strand, the 'colored acts' would come on the stage talking to each other like, 'Why ya yesterday say ta me . . .' This really got on my nerves. So, I went to the opposite extreme. I would walk onstage sounding like Laurence Olivier—'Good evening, ladies and gentlemen . . .' It was a personal challenge, too. I wanted to see how well I could speak with no formal education."

"But Grandpa and Uncle Will taught you everything else about the stage, how to tap, sing, capture an audience?" I asked.

"Pretty much, Trace Face—until the night I got to watch the best in the business. It was in the early 1940s at the Plymouth Theatre in Boston. We did our opening act, stood in the wings. The great Bill 'Bojangles' Robinson took the stage. His dancing was different than I had ever seen. He didn't do the routine flat-footed buck and wing. He skated on the balls of his feet. He had this shuffle-tap style that flew him backward faster than most could tap forward. My jaw just dropped open," he explained.

"Is that why singing 'Mr. Bojangles' was always the signature segment of your shows, Pop?"

"Oh, it was deeper than that, Trace! After the

Dad preformed “Mr. Bojangles” with more feeling than he did any of his other songs.

show, we went back to Bill Robinson’s dressing room. He had a valet helping him put on this silky monogrammed robe. Beautiful! I counted twenty-five pairs of the finest shoes laid out on the floor. Right then and there, I knew when I became a star, I would not just have one pair of Sunday best shoes. I would have a collection of designer shoes. Jerry Lewis and I used to talk about how when we became stars we would buy not one, but five pairs of shoes at the same time. We would do the same with suits, hats, bow ties. Tailors were sweet candy to us.”

“You do have quite the wardrobe, Dad.”

“Anyway, after I counted twenty-five pairs of Mr. Bojangles’s finest shoes, he says to me: ‘Lemme see you dance, kid.’ My knees buckled, but I gained my

composure and did a little tap number. That was the beginning of my tutorials with the best in the business, I was a young star in training." Pop smiled.

"Inspired by the best," I added.

"Bill Robinson was the cream of the crop—old school. Do you remember my sixtieth anniversary tribute, the one you couldn't attend a couple of months ago because you got in that horrible car crash?"

"Yeah, almost lost the baby, Pop," I said.

"If you had lost my grandchild, you would have lost me."

"I know, Pop . . . we're okay. The crash was my first childbirth lesson: I learned to breathe, count, and swear all at the same time! So tell me about the tribute."

"Well, at the sixtieth anniversary they did a montage footage with voice-overs of me talking about 'Mr. Bojangles.'"

Pop continued, "Fact was, I could not do a show without including 'Mr. Bojangles.' Every finale, I performed that number. It was very special to me, hit close to home. I almost feel like it was written for me, but it was not. Nor was it written about Bill 'Bojangles' Robinson, as some people say."

"Who wrote it?" I asked.

"Jerry Jeff Walker of the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band for his 1968 album," Pop explained. "Jerry composed it about a white homeless vagrant he met in jail who called himself Mr. Bojangles. This white guy was down and out, drunk, talking about how his dog up and died after fifteen years traveling around together, making a buck off the remains of his talents wherever he could. So the inmates tried to cheer him up, asked him to dance across the jail cell. So I did my own heartfelt version of it. You remember my version, Trace Face?"

"Of course, Pop! I only watched you perform it a zillion times! You always whistled the melody opening that number." I remembered.

"Start out soft, make the audience strain to hear you, that's how you captivate them." Dad said.

"That song always makes me want to cry."

"Cry?"

"After your finale, fans would swarm me, 'Oh, you're Sammy Davis Jr.'s daughter, you're so beautiful, blah, blah, blah . . .' it was just overwhelming."

"You're too sensitive, Trace Face!

I'll never forget how Dad got me to sing that song with him on the spot that day—impromptu duet. Our indelible performance was a precious rhapsody that I would tell my children about in years to come.

Pop went on to explain, "I did 'Bojangles' the first time live with Tom Jones, in 1970, on his television show. In that skit, Tom sang the song by himself, while I silently played the part of Mr. Bojangles, dancing and doing routines in sync with the lyrics."

Pop started to relate the song to himself—a speech I had heard him announce in public before. "'Bojangles' was special because I hated the song. Well, I should say, I had a love-hate relationship with the song. I was afraid to do it because that was always my fear—that I'd end up like Mr. Bojangles . . drunk, alone, dancing in a jail cell."

"Surprise, surprise! You didn't end up drunk dancing in a jail cell!" I tell Pop.

"But I still had the fear. I told the press, my fans, when I would do that number some nights, I would get so hung up on it. One night in Vegas, I said, Oh my God! That's me! I'm projecting! That's how I'll be when I'm seventy years old. I'll be working little joints, talking about what I used to be—and that'll be the end of it. That man, that culmination of different black performers, minstrels that I'd known—performers who got hooked on junk, who got wiped out by alcohol, got wiped out by the changing of times—I'd seen them disappear, great dancers. But, Trace Face, I wouldn't end a show without 'Mr. Bojangles.' It was deep in my heart and soul, a spiritual journey through life."

"No one performed it better than you, Pop," I said.

"Damn straight." He cajoled and howled, hoping that his own laughter would distract us from the onslaught of his medical condition. I saw the exhaustion in my father's eyes, fatigue was setting in. It was time to rest and refresh.

"Hey, Pop, let me grab you a Strawberry Crush to perk you up," I said.

I headed over to the downstairs bar. I grabbed my father a Strawberry Crush and myself another Coke. I couldn't have been gone more than five minutes. By the time I returned to sit on the couch, Pop had nodded off. The radiation was taking its toll. It hit me yet again: my father was ill, he was dying, and our tête-à-têtes that I cherished so, would one day cease to be.

Tears welled up in my eyes, as I placed a throw blanket over him, tucked a soft pillow under his head, kissed him on the forehead, and whispered, "I love you, Popsicle." I proceeded to the kitchen to tell Lessie Lee and the nurse to watch over him, that I would return in the morning.

Every time I walked out his front door it felt like an apocalyptic warning. I would take a moment to glance at the moon pasted in the evening sky, praying that throat cancer would not desecrate my father into a coma by morning. As I climbed my pregnant body into my car, I wondered if that would be the last time I would ever see Pop. But I did not want to invite that notion in. I trusted my father would stick it out long enough to see the birth of his grandchild. Nothing would keep him from that sacred moment, not even the grim reaper himself.

When I returned to my father's home the following day, I came with my husband, Guy Garner. Guy was six foot three inches, handsome and half Italian. Guy loved Dad as much as I did, and they were very close. They had often had "movie nights" together. Lessie Lee marched upstairs to the master bedroom to announce our arrival. She came out and motioned us up the stairs.

"What's up, Guy, getting taller?" My father joked, sitting up in bed. Guy smiled.

"Pop, Guy and I have something to tell you . . . ," I said, choking up. Guy had to finish for me.

"Mr. D," he said, "we found out we are having a

boy. We decided to name our baby, Sam, after you."

There was a moment of silence. Pop and I locked eyes. Then my father trembled, broke down, and burst into tears. "Thanks for my gift," he said in a soft whisper.

Guy and I went back downstairs so as not to cry convulsively in front of my father. By the time we got downstairs, my father's doctors had arrived. He asked to have a word with me outside.

Three doctors and Pop's assistant, Murphy, explained that my father would not be alive when our baby was born. I should not have any false hope. I knew they were trying to prepare me, but I didn't believe one word. I trusted God now. I trusted in the revelation that I would one day place Dad's newborn grandson in his lap.

One more thing, they added, your father wants you to be responsible for his wishes. *What wishes?* I thought. He is in so much pain, the doctors announced, we will have to up his morphine level, but it will ease out with the overloading—the morphine will eventually stop his heart.

I went back up to my father's bedroom, only to find his window wide open. Pop had overheard the doctor. He looked me straight in the eye and said, "I'm not going anywhere until I see my grandson. I'm staying around to see Sam. After that, I have nothing left to live for."

I kissed Dad on the forehead, and went back downstairs in tears. I trusted my father's determination and his will—more than the stinging words out of medical mouths.

I made the decision that today would not be good day to reminisce with my father, given the emotional roller coaster we were all riding. I planned to revisit in the morning, open the four French doors off the living room to his emerald garden sanctuary, and take Pop out to drink the air, sit, and talk.

Frank Sinatra was playing on the stereo in the living room when I returned in the morning. My father was on his Gucci half-moon couch resting. I opened the French doors out to the garden oasis. The nurse assisted my father outside. We sat on a couple of chaise lounges to take in the beauty of the outdoors. We listened faintly to Uncle Frank's music sent forth from the living room. Pop was happy I was there to tell his tales to, and I was delighted to hear him in good spirits, sharing monologues from his lips to my ears.

"The first time I met Frank Sinatra it was in1941 at the Michigan Theatre in Detroit," Pop said without skipping a beat.

"The Will Mastin Trio was replacing an act for three days and we opened for the Tommy Dorsey Orchestra and Frank. It was the swing era, Trace Face—the Stone Age to you. Frank and I shared a sandwich before showtime. I was the entertainer; Frank was the voice."

I added, "Uncle Frank may have been the voice, Pop, but he was also the agitator! You were the go-to-hell guy! Uncle Dean was the make-it-work gentle kind of soul. He seemed to soften everybody up like a Downy sheet in a dryer."

Pop could often be found with a camera in hand. Here he is during rehearsals of a Mastin Trio performance.

"True, Trace, but that was later, in the Rat Pack Vegas days. Back in 1941, it was just me and Frank, the entertainer and the voice. We bonded that day at the Michigan Theatre, talking shop."

"Soul brothers for life," I said. Comedian and actor Pat Cooper told Sacher and Langer that, "Nobody but Frank Sinatra could have put Sammy Davis where he was. Sinatra, first of all, was never a racist kind of a guy. He cared about everybody being equal. . . . When Frank said, 'This guy's great'—they all paid attention."

Pop told his story about Uncle Frank: "I remember how Frank used to study Dorsey—examine him like some specimen," Pop said. "Frank noticed how Dorsey snuck in breaths through an air hole in the side of his mouth while playing the trombone.

Frank said he wanted to use that technique to hold his notes longer, keep a stanza going without having to stop for air. Frank's vocal range was outstanding, smooth, romantic, and rich with nuance. Never occurred to us back in the day that moons later we would be living in the limelight as the Rat Pack in Vegas," Pop explained.

"In 1947, we worked the Capitol Theatre in New York. We both had a three-week engagement. We were inseparable. Oh how Uncle Frank would woo those girls with his sultry love songs. Trace Face, girls were screaming from that electric aura that was Sinatra, swooning in lines for autographs."

"What was your role in the Tommy Dorsey show, Pop?"

"I featured impressions of celebrity singers in the opening act. Uncle Frank always encouraged me to sing in my own voice. He was right, in the long run. After the Michigan Theatre, Uncle Frank became a lifelong soul mate and best man at my wedding to your mother," Pop said.

"Mom must have taken your breath away in that beautiful wedding dress!" I said.

"My heart jumped out of its rib cage every time I cast my eyes on your mom. Everyone said, 'May Britt had a face chiseled like a Swedish goddess.' Her beauty, her grace, that 'interracial' wedding, now that's a story for another day! But as for Uncle Frank, he did stand up as my best man, was and always will be the best friend I ever had, truly."

I could tell all the reminiscing had sucked the wind out of Pop. His eyes were starting to droop. I handed him a throw blanket and said, "Here, Pop, why don't you catch yourself a little nap."

"You'll be here when I wake, Trace Face?"

"Perhaps in the powder room, baby is sitting on my bladder."

Pop smiled, closed his eyes, and nodded off in his sacred outdoor sanctuary. I made my pregnancy stop to the powder room, returned to sit by Pop, and watch him sleep, so at peace.

As I gazed out at his lavish Beverly Hills estate, I was beaming with pride at all my father had accomplished in life. I wondered if I would ever be that successful. Flashes of stories my father had shared when he first started making money consumed my mind.

One story that always made me smile was at the Roadhouse in Waterford, Connecticut, in the early 1940s. Pop and Burt and Jane Boyar wrote about it in his autobiography, *Yes I Can*. A half-dollar flew toward Pop, a teenager, onstage. He danced to it, picked it up, flipped it in the air, caught it, and put it in his pocket without losing a beat. The audience cheered, and suddenly it started to rain money. Dad was so weighted down by coins in his pocket he could barely dance through the closing act. He was living his dream.

But money didn't always buy happiness. Pop

My mom had a glamorous career in movies before she met my dad. She was touted as a "new" Swedish goddess in the style of Greta Garbo.

was a fish out of water with kids his own age. He was the oddball, the misfit, didn't know the first thing about real life.

One time he was in a candy store in Harlem in the 1940s. Some of his peers were trading baseball cards. Pop didn't have a clue what a baseball card was since he was on the stage since the age of three, performing vaudeville instead of going to school. The kids started taunting Pop, humiliating him. My father tried to impress his peers by buying ten packs of baseball cards, a hundred in all. But the kids continued to laugh at him when he traded away his top players. That day, Pop ran home to Mama, and cried himself to sleep.

Years later, after all of Harlem knew he was a rising star, my father bumped into those same peers at the same candy shop. This time they all wanted his autograph. Just like Pop, he never held a grudge. He smiled, signed their autographs, and killed 'em with kindness. Pop had style and class. He also had the attitude of "You think I can't do this? Done. And watch out, folks, because one day I will buy and sell your sorry butts."

My grandfather and Uncle Will always tried to shield Pop, at least in his early years, from any form of hatred from his peers or the public. His father would explain away slights and snubs as sheer jealousy. They were determined to free Pop from the limitations of prejudice, particularly the racial ignorance heavily prevalent back in the day.

Pop's first real taste of racial injustice was at El Rancho Hotel in Las Vegas in the 1940s. It's torn down now but it opened big on April 3, 1941, on the southwest corner of Las Vegas Boulevard and Sahara. For a time it was the largest hotel in Las Vegas, with 110 rooms.

The Will Mastin Trio was pulling in $500 a week for their act, but the hotel would not allow "colored" entertainers to book a room, or even use the dressing rooms. The Mastin Trio had to wait out by the swimming pool between acts. Colored people could not gamble in the casinos, dine, or drink in the hotel restaurants and bars. House rules always sent the trio to the west side of Vegas to a colored boarding house.

The "colored" boarding house was a shack made of wooden crates run by a landlady named Ms. Cartwright. Ms. Cartwright capitalized on the fact that her boarding house was the only place in town colored entertainers could stay in Vegas. She charged a fortune for a room, twice as much as a room at El Rancho Hotel, with one perk—she would press your clothes.

Pop would ask his father, "Why are we staying here?" His father, relentlessly shielding young Sammy from racial adversity, would simply tell Pop the same ole line, "Oh hell, son, they're just jealous of our act."

Pop would later recount in a 1989 interview on Terry Wogan's BBC show that "in the '50s, every black star that worked Vegas, that helped build it up, who would pack a joint—I'm talking Lena Horne, Nat King Cole, Billy Eckstine, the Mills Brothers—were not allowed to eat there, could not

walk through the front door of the casino, gamble, nothing. You would perform, get out of the casino by the side door, and head to the ghetto."

Claude Trenier said, "I remember an incident at the Riviera. Billy Eckstine went in there—he and his manager—at the craps table, and the guy says, 'You can't play. We don't serve niggers here.' Billy Eckstine socked him right in his jaw. Oh, we ran into that quite a bit . . . we had to go out and sit out by the swimming pool until our next appearance. They didn't have dressing rooms or nothing for us. When we lived here, we had to go on the west side—to the colored boarding house."

Many years later, once Pop's eyes were opened to the real sign of the times, he refused to entertain at places that practiced racial discrimination. He made certain it was in his contract that the trio would be allowed room, board, full use of the facilities, and would permit colored people in his audience. But he always had mixed emotions about that.

"By integration we lost a great deal and we gained a great deal," Pop told Wogan. "When everything started to integrate, in terms of acceptance . . . we lost the ghetto, which was all our culture. There was the colored barbershop, and I say 'colored' because that was the terminology used in those days. The 'colored' rooming house where we all stayed, there was community. We all suffered the same indignities; it brought us, as black performers, closer together. We shared experiences and we hung out. As soon as it started to open up, and everyone could stay at the hotel they were working in, we very rarely saw each other anymore. And it's a shame we lost that; it's too bad we couldn't have maintained a little balance."

Unfortunately, during World War II, my father no longer had my grandfather and Uncle Will to protect and shelter him from the racial injustice in the army. In 1943, my father joined the Infantry Basic Training Center at Fort Francis E. Warren in Cheyenne, Wyoming.

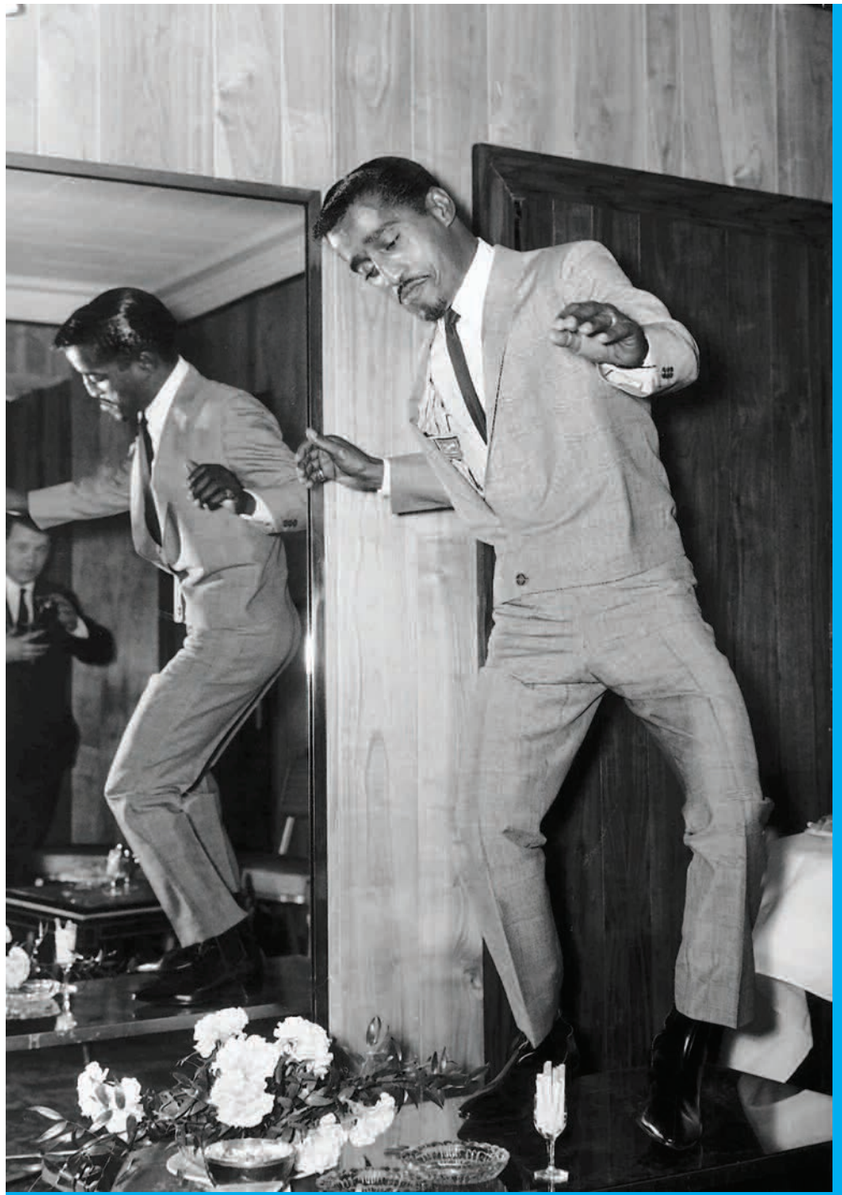
My father was a gun enthusiast and an avid movie nut. He pictured himself as an aerial gunner in the Air Corps, a little guy in a cockpit with his scarf blowing in the wind, shooting at the enemy like in some old Hollywood movie. But Pop never had any schooling, so when he took his exams for the Air Corps, it was clear that he couldn't write and could barely read. He could not join the only black unit, the Tuskegee Airmen, as they had graduated with the highest honors.

Dad was sent to the Infantry Basic Training Center. The infantry of his dreams it was not. But at least he didn't have to read and write. My father was a patriot and agreed to defend his country. What he did not expect was to defend himself against enemies within his own military unit—bigots in his own barracks. It turned out to be an awakening he would never forget.

"What are you up to, Pregasaurus?" Pop woke from his power nap.

"Just watching you nap, Pop. Brain cells churning . . . ," I said.

"What's on your mind, Trace Face?"



In the army Dad learned to use his talent as a weapon against racial prejudice.

Frank Sinatra may have been King of the Bobbysoxers in the 1940s, but Dad made some young female fans of his own.

"I was thinking about the time you were in the army," I explained.

"Been there, done that!" Pop said.

"Stories, Pop, I want to hear the stories . . . again!" I begged. I wanted to hear it from the horse's mouth, not just read about it in his interviews and books.

"Awwww, grab me another Strawberry Crush and maybe I'll indulge you but keep in mind, viewer discretion is advised!"

I smiled and went inside to the bar. The nurse handed me pills for my father to take with his Strawberry Crush. I placed his drink and pills next

to his chaise lounge out by his sacred garden and pool. He swallowed the pills as I sat next to him.

"Your turn," I said to my father.

"Well, Trace Face, I was seventeen when I joined the army, all of five foot six inches and one hundred twenty pounds. All the soldiers were twice my size. A little lost, I politely ask a white PFC sitting on the barracks' steps where Building Two Hundred Two was located. He sized me up and down, reluctantly told me it is two buildings down followed by 'And I'm not your buddy, you black bastard!'"

"What an entrance you made, Pop. Dignity down the drain."

"Overnight the world was different. It wasn't one color anymore. The protection I'd gotten from my father and Uncle Will was a farce. I appreciated their loving hope to shield me from prejudice, hate, bigotry—but they were wrong. It was as if I'd walked through a swinging door for seventeen years, a door which they had always secretly held open," Pop explained.

"I realized then that you can pass legislation for desegregation, but you can't legislate people's minds. It's like hacking off the top of a weed: After we do it, we've got to get down and pull out the roots, get to the heart of the ignorance and intolerance, so it won't keep growing," Pop said.

"When I arrived at Unit Barracks Two Hundred Two, a corporal checked my name off his clipboard and told me to wait on the sidelines until they 'figure out what to do with me.' White kids showed up, simply walked inside and took the first bunk they saw. Another colored kid, tall, with his gear, was sent to sit on the side by me. We shook hands. His name was Edward. We both knew trouble was stirring."

"So what happened, Pop?" I asked.

"Felt like a lifetime that me and this colored kid waited outside the barracks watching the last white kid march in. We sat outside a screen door, as we were ordered."

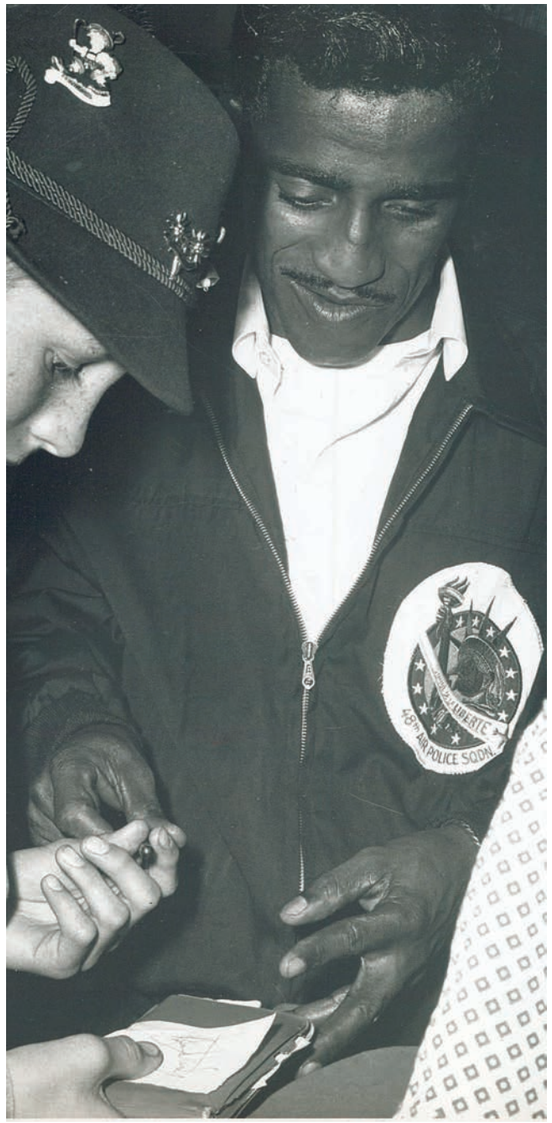
"We could hear the corporal address the unit. He said, 'Folks, we got a problem, we got niggers outside assigned to this company. I'll stick 'em down there, but move your gear so I can give 'em the last two bunks.'"

"Then one of the guys piped up, 'Hey, that's right next to me! I ain't sleepin' next to no dinge!' The corporal made it clear who was in charge of the unit, but the same guy kept mouthing off, 'I'm only sayin' I didn't join no nigger army,'" Pop recalled.

"All the guys started shouting about how they ain't sharing no toilet can with no nigger, and what the hell's the army need 'em niggers for, just to steal us blind while we sleep? The corporal quieted them down with a simple, 'Knock it off. I don't want 'em anymore than you do, but we're stuck with 'em. That's orders,'" Pop said.

"The corporal motioned us in with our gear 'on

To the delight of thousands, Dad performed at Lankenheath Air Base in 1960. This was a far cry from the performances he did while in the Army himself during World War II.



Years after the humiliation and discrimination of his experiences at Fort Francis, my father was warmly received on military bases as a superstar.

the double.' My legs were shaking, trembling. As he marched us down the aisle—eyes glaring on either side of us—soldiers guarded their cots spaced about three feet apart. The corporal pointed to the last two beds on one side, separated from the rest by about six feet with one empty cot between us and the white soldiers. It was as if we had the plague and were being quarantined."

"A sergeant marched in. He announced his name, Sergeant Williams. He glanced at the space between the beds. He gave a cold stare to the corporal and said, 'What the hell is that?' The corporal whispered quietly to the sergeant about how he was trying to deal with the nigger problem."

"Sergeant Williams was fuming, 'There is only one way we do things here and that is the army way! You have sixty seconds to replace the beds with exactly three feet of space, to the inch, between every cot in this barracks. Move!' For a brief moment, I felt safe."

"Sergeant Williams asked us questions: When did we arrive? How long did it take for us to get our bunks? Did you choose your bunks? Then the sergeant told us to move our gear one bunk closer to the white soldiers. He addressed the whole unit, 'No man here is better than the next man unless he's got the rank to prove it!'"

"I remember years later, George Rhodes, my conductor and arranger, told me he was surprised that with all the racial tension I endured, I never turned around and hated right back. I think that was because when I reached out for help, there was

always some white guy like Sergeant Williams or Frank Sinatra, who helped me back up. The black press would scrutinize me for it, but believe me, those cats saved the day for me."

"Sergeant Williams sounds like a good man, Dad," I said.

"From then on, I knew as long as Sergeant Williams was around we 'colored' folks would be safe," Pop added.

"But the minute the sergeant left, the soldiers tried to turn us into their slaves—making us polish their boots and such. I refused to do it and was teased as the 'uppity nigger boy.' Edward on the other hand, was not going to put up a fight for his own dignity, and I had no right to judge his desire to hide his humility and pain. 'Yes, suh!' said Edward, 'Glad t'do 'em, suh.' I felt like I was on an island all alone," explained my father.

"Pop, I can't even imagine the horror of it all. How you lifted yourself up out of that muck and survived it is unfathomable!" I said.

"That's only the prelude to the circus act. Your grandfather had given me an expensive one hundred twenty–buck gold watch to take with me to the army. I treasured it. The white soldiers got a hold of my watch on the first day in the barracks. They tossed it back and forth to each other, over my head, laughing as I chased after it. You know how little I was—still am! These white cats were huge."

"Eventually, Jennings, the biggest bigot of them all, ground my watch into the floor with the heel of his boot. He crushed the glass, twisted the gold, and broke the hands off. It was mangled in pieces. I picked up the remains, went to my bed, and wrapped it in paper. Jennings shouted behind me, 'You can always steal another, nigger boy!' The whole incident crushed me, deeply," Pop said solemnly.

"How does somebody do that to someone?" I was disgusted.

"Because they can, because they *could*, back in the day. Every night I would lay in bed, wondering what is it about skin that made people hate so much. But it was far deeper than skin; to these white cats, I was a different breed," my father explained.

"I had to face the fact that the army vultures were going to prey on me daily. Try to eat me alive. I thought of my father, Uncle Will, the agents, the managers, the acts we worked with—nobody treated us this way. Or had my father just shielded me from it all? I knew we stayed in colored boarding houses made of wooden crates, but I didn't realize we *had* to stay there. My father said we stayed there because people were . . ."

". . . jealous of our act?" I replied.

"That's right. And somehow, in my naïve, sheltered world, I believed it. All I knew was that when the Will Mastin trio got onstage, people laughed, clapped, were entertained. Talent earned us respect . . . ," my father said.

"Talent shielded you," I told Dad.

"Talent was my only weapon. Eventually in the army, I was transferred to an entertainment regiment

in an 'experimental' integrated Special Services unit. But until that transfer, Sergeant Williams got me a few gigs at the service club, thinking it might help," said Pop.

"After one show, Jennings appeared to be offering me his friendship. He handed me a beer. 'C'mon over here, Davis, let's get acquainted.' He pulled out a chair for me. 'You notice I ain't calling you 'boy.' I thought my talent finally broke the ice. But sure enough as I picked up the bottle of beer, I realized it was warm, not cold. I smelled it. Jennings had replaced my bottle of beer with urine."

Tears welled up in my eyes, then rolled down my cheek. It was just too overwhelming to hear. My father grabbed my hand. "Don't cry, Trace Face. I only tell you these stories, so you will understand firsthand the adversity our race endured. It only made me stronger."

"Did Jennings and his guys ever let up, Pop?" I said choked up.

One hundred and twenty pounds was Dad's "fighting weight."

"Nah. I had a knock-down, drag out fight every two days. I can't even count how many times I was in the infirmary for a broken nose. When we finished basic training, my physical turned me down, and I was put through basic again. I didn't qualify for any of the army's specialist schools because I had no education at all," my father said.

"Sergeant Williams was my savior. He would call me into his office to offer his advice. 'You've got to fight with your brains, Sammy, not your fists.' Sergeant Williams told me I had to stop looking at comic books and learn to read. He taught me to read and write. God bless that man."

"The first book I ever read was *The Three Musketeers*. Long, thick, and let me tell you, I am never going to read it again. But Sergeant Williams had me read all the classics. He would select books from Dickens to Twain to Abraham Lincoln, even *The Complete Works of Shakespeare.* I would circle the words I didn't know. He would sit in the squad room at the end of the barracks and explain it to me. Sergeant Williams gave me hope that I could overcome this battle, Trace."

"What you put in your mind, no one can take away from you, right, Pop?" I said.

"Listen to you, the philosopher! The latrine became my temple. I would read religiously after taps in that dimly lit latrine, and report back to Sergeant Williams. We would have our own civilized discourse on each book. I hungered for that time with him. He made me feel like a human being again. His office became my own sacred refuge, a retreat from the racism, hate, ignorance, and intolerance of my unit."

"What became of Sergeant Williams, Pop?"

"I don't know. But I owe him my life. He tempered all the humiliation I felt from my unit. He distracted me from all my rage, all my anger. I wouldn't have survived the army without him," my father replied.

"The last straw with Jennings was the worst of all. After I did a little Frank Sinatra number at the Officers' Club, impressing a general, word was out that I might be able to transfer into the integrated Special Services unit. There I could perform on a professional level for the entertainment regiment. Jennings wasn't pleased. He thought I was kissing butt to escape his abuse. I had to work out a budget for scenery, props, and costumes for a white female captain. This didn't sit well with Jennings. The captain had all the power to give me something to offer the army: my talent," Dad said.

"I can't imagine what Jennings did next," I replied.

"It was unimaginable, Trace," my father said with disgust. "Jennings and his gang jumped me on the way to a meeting with the captain. They cornered me, dragged me into a latrine, and beat the crap out of me."

"Oh, Pop," I said, holding back the tears.

"But that wasn't the worst of it. They took a can of white paint and wrote the word 'NIGGER' on my chest. They beat me until I was bleeding from every part of my body. I thought my life was done—I was

going to be beaten to death. Just to add some icing on the cake, Jennings ended his circus act with, 'Now be a good little coon and give us a dance.'"

"Dear Lord, did you dance for him?" I asked.

"I danced for my life, Trace. After Jennings finished his finale, I wanted to crawl into the walls of the latrine and die. I thought to myself, I joined the Unites States Army to fight the enemy in whatever country at whatever time, but I never thought I would be sleeping with the enemy in my own unit, my own barracks."

"Did they transfer you after that nightmare, Pop?"

"Luckily, yes—into the entertainment regiment. I was able to perform to larger crowds, even got cheers from those who previously mistreated me. Prejudiced white men admired and respected my performances. I saw Jennings in the audience once. He didn't crack a smile, but I could tell from his expression I had won the battle, maybe not the war, but that battle. The spotlight lessened the prejudice. For me, it was a revelation. My talent was the weapon, the power, the way for me to fight. It was the one way I might hope to affect a man's thinking. From then on, deep in my heart, soul, and spirit, I knew I had to be a star."

"What about Grandpa and Uncle Will, did you tell them about the beatings in the army?" I asked my father.

"Not a word. My father and Uncle Will met me at the station in Los Angeles after I was discharged. After hugs and all that good stuff, my father noticed my treasured gold watch he had gifted me was not on my wrist. I just couldn't bear to tell him the truth. Why would I put my father and Uncle Will through the pain and suffering of hearing stories about prejudice, beatings, and white paint smearing the word 'NIGGER' across my chest? I told my father 'the watch got smashed on maneuvers.' Luckily, he believed me."

"That's so sad, Pop," I said.

"Heck. The army was in the past—history—and it was time to move into the future. I wanted to become a star, a shining star, a shooting star, a megastar, a legendary star—any kind of star would do. I needed to perform, entertain, sing, and dance. I was filled with sheer strength and determination to succeed, triumph, win the day."

"So there we are standing in the Los Angeles station. I am discharged from the army, free at last. I ask my father the same question I always asked him as a kid: 'Where we goin', Dad?' The melody of his refrain was music to my ears when I heard him exclaim, 'We're going back into show business, son!' And off we went, full speed ahead."

Once Dad's star was on the ascent, nothing could stop him.

CHAPTER 2

BREAKTHROUGH

After the car accident in which he lost an eye, Dad often posed with more of the right side of his face showing. This is him in 1958.

It was an early spring afternoon when I got a call from Shirley Rhodes, my father's assistant/manager since before I was born. Shirley was the wife of George Rhodes, my father's beloved musical director for thirty years. "Your father's in the hospital, you better come now," Shirley announced. My heart jumped out of my rib cage.

I waddled down the hall, my pregnant belly bursting into the celebrity suites at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles. I entered the outer chamber to the Sammy Davis Jr. suite.

"How's Dad?" I asked Shirley. "Is he getting better?"

"Not exactly, sweetie." Shirley prepped me: It turned out Pop's second radiation treatment did not work. He was not in remission at all. The doctors were starting him on chemotherapy through an IV and fighting some other infection that was ravaging his body. "And don't be alarmed, they have a trachea tube down his throat. He can't speak unless he holds his hand over the trach hole," said Shirley.

How could this be? I thought to myself. What kind of quagmire was this? I remembered the fights I had with my father when he was first diagnosed with throat cancer. I wanted him to have surgery, cut out the tumor. The doctors said if they cut out the tumor he would lose his voice box. Pop refused to have the surgery. We had two options: surgery with a seven in ten chance to live, or radiation that gave him a three in ten chance to live. He would never, under any circumstance, have surgery and risk losing his singing voice. "It's my decision," he kept telling me. Now here we are, two radiations and chemo later, and Pop has a trachea tube down his throat—his voice snatched from him.

My father quite simply and honestly was scared when he was first diagnosed with cancer. He was scared to die, of course, but more scared to lose his gift: the Sammy Davis Jr. voice, his God-given talent. That would bare him naked in a way. His talent, his voice, had gotten him where he was: 12,600 square feet smack in the middle of Beverly Hills, a lifetime of performing, dedication to charities, and still performing to packed houses. Without his voice, what would he have? He would be a superhero without a cape.

All I thought about was making certain that he would not die. Pop had us, his family, his friends, his fans, we all loved him and refused to live without him. Sam was going to be born, and Pop was determined to be the best grandfather ever. He was going to make up for lost time. He was going to learn to change diapers. All of the "regular" stuff parents and grandparents do every day. In short, my father was going to be "normal." Ha! What the heck was I thinking? Pop normal? Pop was anything but.

I truly believed the radiation would work. The doctor said he was getting better. Now he was worse. It was a race to the finish line—would Dad die first or would I have the baby first? Everyone thought giving birth to Sam was going to be the

My "Pop," 1962.

My father's identity was so completely tied up with his ability to perform. As I watched him grow more and more ill at the end of his life, my mind often drifted to scenes like this of him solo in the spotlight, 1961.

miracle cure. The pressure was incalculable. Sam was safe and sound in my tummy, blissfully unaware of the tragedy that was unfolding each and every day. Thank God for that.

As for me, I had no idea if Sam would be the miracle cure. I vacillated back and forth, swinging like a pendulum. On the one hand, I was begging my obstetrician, Dr. Karalla, to take Sam out early, so Dad would get that chance to hold his grandson. On the other hand, I was afraid for my baby to be born, for fear that Pop would die shortly thereafter. It was the best of times and the worst of times.

Shirley snapped me out of my hole of despair with a big bear hug. She tried to cheer me up by showing me the myriad flowers and cards from fans, family, and friends that encompassed the outer room of Pop's private hospital suite.

Evidently, Denzel Washington had just left, having given my father a copy of his film, *Glory*. She mentioned that Bill Cosby, Eddie Murphy, Arsenio Hall, and a few other celebrities were planning to stop by to visit Pop in the next few days.

All I could think of was how much my father would hate having all those visitors. He liked to be seen in his glory, certainly the way he was at the hospital.

A nurse came out of Pop's inner room, announced that he was sleeping, but I could go sit by him if I cared to. I was terrified to go in, panic-stricken that this could be the beginning of the end for Pop. But I took a deep breath, hoping it would send a message to my brain to calm down, stood valiantly tall, and walked in.

I was greeted by an ominous collection of tubes that were attached to my father like living, breathing parasites. He had a trachea tube protruding from his throat, an IV in his arm, and machines everywhere. As I pulled up a chair next to my father's bed, I noticed his face as he slept. It was hauntingly skeletal, but not quite as bad as I had expected. Unfortunately, the menacing odor from that tumor on his neck threatened to attack. During my pregnancy I was extremely sensitive to smell, and his tumor seemed to have a sinister odor all its own.

I picked up an old record a visitor had placed as a gift on a bed table next to him. It was one of the first singles Pop ever released, "The Way You Look Tonight."

✦✧✦

After my father was released from the army, he rejoined the family dance act, playing around the country, being singled out and praised by critics. Late in 1948, Dad was on a radio broadcast from Los Angeles and was overheard by Capitol Records executive Dave Dexter Jr. Dad signed a twenty-record deal at fifty bucks a side. The most successful single released was "The Way You Look Tonight." *Metronome* magazine chose it as the 1949 "Record of the Year" and named Dad the year's "Most Outstanding New Personality."

Even though he'd had his first hit, my dad was hoping for greater success with his first record label.

He began working with David Cavanaugh—"Big Dave"—at Capitol Records. Cavanaugh was known for composing, arranging, and producing records for my dad and others, including Frank Sinatra and Nat King Cole. At the age of twenty-three, on January 13, 1949, Pop undertook his first recording session for Capitol Records, starting with the songs "I Don't Care Who Knows," "The Way You Look Tonight," and "Please Don't Talk About Me When I'm Gone." Dad eventually recorded twenty sides for Capitol in 1949. It was the successful turn he hoped for. Dad blamed his lack of success with Capitol on the poor arrangements of Cavanaugh, rather than the fact that he was just getting his foot in the door. According to music review journalist William Ruhlmann, "Sammy's Capitol material was more of the work of a young artist trying to find his voice and doing so by trying out various different approaches. Sometimes he sounds like other singers of the day, perhaps unintentionally; other times, he is deliberately doing impressions with comic intent." My father was clearly still finding his own voice—the one that would make him stand out from the crowd of stars.

In March 1951, my father got the praise he was seeking. It happened at Ciro's nightclub on the Sunset Strip in Los Angeles. Ciro's was packed with celebrities who had gathered after the Academy Awards. His much heralded performance at Ciro's that night lead the family act to the hottest clubs Eacross the country, including the Fairmont Hotel in San Francisco, the Beachcomber in Miami Beach, the Flamingo in Las Vegas, and the Riviera in New Jersey.

The Riviera is where Dad first met Morty Stevens, a clarinetist in the Riviera house band. Pop had been begging his father for his own arranger and conductor for years. Morty took the job and hit the road with my father. Morty later broke out on his own, winning two Emmys for composing the theme tune for *Hawaii Five-O*. Shirley's husband, George Rhodes, took over the job as Pop's musical arranger for thirty years. After George passed away, it devastated my father, and Morty came back again to arrange and conduct for Dad.

My father had an entourage of loyal, faithful staff—all turned into family members for life: Lessie Lee, Shirley and George Rhodes, Morty Stevens, Arthur Silber (his advisor and business partner for over twenty-five years), Charley, his driver, Murphy Bennett, his assistant, and others.

Frank Sinatra was his closest lifelong friend. He was a mentor when Pop was a teenager and his best friend until the day he died. Dad was "the Kid" to Frank; and later he affectionately called him "Smokey." Their relationship was a rare precious gem only they could touch. Pop had a heart of gold and was truly beloved by those that got close to him.

✦✧✦

Pop started to stir in his bed. I heard a faint raspy whisper. I leaned my ear in toward his lips. He covered his hand over a hole in the trachea tube

Dad and the man he called his best friend, Frank Sinatra, in 1967. Their friendship lasted more than forty years.

and spoke again, "Hey Trace Face you get uglier every time I see you."

"Hi, Pop," I said, holding back the tears.

"I got this new gadget to play with, baby!" Pop tapped on his trachea tube.

"I see," I said, choking up.

"Where's that fine nurse?" Pop said, holding the trachea hole. I rang the buzzer for the nurse.

"Can I help you, Mr. Davis?" the nurse entered.

"I need to use the restroom," Pop said. The

nurse proceeded to pull out a bedpan, politely motioning me to leave the room.

"Darling, I'm a superstar, get me up, I'm not going in a bedpan!" Dad exclaimed.

No, Pop was not going in a bedpan. My father created his own rules his whole life. He was a pioneer, consistently breaking the color barrier as an African American entertainer.

In 1953, ABC Television commissioned a $200,000-sitcom pilot starring "the Trio," as the Mastin Trio was commonly called. This was an unheard of achievement for a group of African Americans. The pilot was not picked up, but that did not stop Pop from flourishing in the world of television.

He was a guest on Eddie Cantor's *The Colgate Comedy Hour* and Ed Sullivan's *Toast of the Town*. Eddie Cantor and Pop were old friends and on the air Cantor had no qualms about showing off their friendship by hugging him and wiping my father's brow with his own handkerchief. NBC protested the broadcast and threatened to pull their backing from the show. Cantor reacted by booking Pop for the rest of the season. God bless him.

By September 1954, Pop had found his singing voice thanks to a new recording contract with Decca

TOP: The Mastin Trio, led by my father.

BOTTOM: The Mastin Trio together in *Mr. Wonderful* on Broadway in 1956.

The Mastin Trio marquee at the Apollo in New York in 1954.

Records, and his first single, "Hey There" climbed to #1 on the *Cashbox* record charts. The Trio headlined to rave reviews at the Copacabana in New York City the same year. Table by table at the Copa, the audience stood, clapped, roared, and demanded encores. It brought my grandpa, Uncle Will, and my father to tears right on the stage. On closing night, Pop gave the staff at the Copa gold watches engraved: THANKS, SAMMY DAVIS JR. Pop was a bona fide class act.

The following day, the Trio, Mama, Morty, and Pop's entourage all headed to Hollywood to rent a house—no easy task given the racial tension of the day. No one wanted "niggers" as neighbors, even if they were superstars.

When the crew arrived in Los Angeles after their success at the Copa, my grandfather and Uncle Will bought my father a brand new Cadillac convertible to cruise around the Hollywood Strip in.

As tacky as it sounds, yes, the car had "SD Jr." painted on the door. My father told me and recounted in his autobiography, *Yes I Can*, that he would never forget the first time they all rode in that new Cadillac.

Pop was smoking like a chimney, filling up the ashtray, and said to his father and Uncle Will, "Hey, guys, what do we do when this thing gets filled up?" His father smiled and said, "Son, we throws this car away and gets us a new one!" Uncle Will laughed and roared, "You boys keep up those old jokes and we'll be back riding in the back of the bus!"

After more than twenty years of performing, Pop was becoming a superstar.

Twenty-five or so years later, he was a superstar who was not going in a bedpan.

"God, I hate it here . . . ," Dad muttered as the nurse assisted him back into his hospital bed.

Pop always detested hospitals. It started from his 1954 nearly fatal car accident that took his left eye. During the mid-1970s, Pop's addictive lifestyle gave him liver and kidney trouble that sent him to the hospital for several months. Uncle Frank cut off his friendship with Dad for a short period to force him to clean up his act. Dad turned to cooking to fight his own addictions, and it worked. My father became a gourmet cook.

In 1974, Pop suffered a heart attack, but recovered and continued his relentless work pace. From 1975 to 1977, Pop hosted the television variety show *Sammy and Company*, performed in the Broadway musical *Stop the World—I Want to Get Off*, cut more singles, and continued to perform in casinos and nightclubs across the nation. Pop was back in the hospital in 1985, when he had reconstructive hip surgery (so he could dance again).

The hip recovery coincided with his birthday in December 1985, and the only thing that cheered Pop up was a letter from the President of the United States himself, Ronald Reagan. It read:

Dear Sammy,

Nancy and I understand that Altovise has planned a wonderful surprise birthday party for you. We send our warmest congratulations and our special hope that you are well along the road to recovery from your recent surgery.

If this occasion brings some reflection on your part you should have a fine time musing over the fullness of your life. From childhood on you have been a dynamic force in the entertainment industry. Whether it be singing, dancing or acting, you have done it with rare talent and dazzling energy. You have given audiences some of the finest performances they have ever seen. So, when you think about your accomplishments, don't forget all those fans—including Nancy and me—who are captivated and delighted by "Mr. Entertainment."

Happy birthday, Sammy, and may God bless and keep you.

Sincerely,
Ronald Reagan

Eventually the Will Mastin Trio became the Will Mastin Trio—"Starring Sammy Davis Jr."

Now here he was back at Cedars-Sinai, in the hospital—with carcinoma growing behind his vocal cords. Pop was beyond ready to go home.

"Just think of it this way, Pop. Hospitals are one place where laziness is rewarded," I said.

"I was always lousy at being lazy . . . ," Pop replied.

"So your ex-wives claim." I chuckled.

"Heck, I've only had two so far! Loray [White, from 1958 to1959, a "proper" marriage to a black woman after Dad's scandalous relationship with blonde superstar Kim Novak]—my dancer chic mistake, and [from 1960 to 1968] your blessed mother, May [Britt]." Dad grinned.

"And Altovise Gore. Oh, I'm sorry, Altovise *Davis* . . . when are you going to divorce that alcoholic drug addict?" I said.

"You are fierce, Trace Face. Divorce? And let her take half? Hell no. It's easier just to lock her out of the master wing of the house. Forget cancer, I'm more afraid of Altovise. If she got high enough, she could fall on me and kill me!" Pop laughed.

"I can see the headlines: Sammy Davis Jr., crushed to death by drunken wife!" I said.

"That's the *New York Times* version. The *New York Post* would say, Entertainment's only black, Puerto Rican, one-eyed Jew crushed to death by drunken wife."

"Pop, Altovise only wants you because you made it," I told him.

"Made it? Me? I made it?" Dad chuckled.

"Seriously, Pop," I said.

"I did make it, didn't I? I'll never forget that time—the time I really knew in my heart that I had made it. It was November 1954. We headlined at the Frontier Casino in Las Vegas. What made it taste so sweet was the contract. The Trio pulled in $7,500 a week, but more importantly, our contract allowed us 'colored folks' to stay in the Frontier's best suites and have free run of the facilities—the casino, the restaurant, even the pool! All lodging, food, and drinks were free of charge. Beautiful!" Pop explained, hand over his trachea tube.

"Done with Ms. Cartwright and her colored boarding house across town, huh, Pop?" I asked.

"Done. Still mountains to climb, but we were making quantum leaps on both sides of the color spectrum. We were not a colored act or a white act, we were just an act. Huge crowds opened up for us as we walked through the front door, not the back door, mind you, of the Frontier. The sweet taste of freedom felt like stardom to us." Dad smiled with nostalgia in his eyes.

"It was a landmark achievement, Pop," I replied.

"Yes, it was. Doors were swinging open for us. Until I made that late night trip to Los Angeles . . ." Pop's smile turned on me.

"The car crash. Your eye . . . ," I said softly.

"You know the story, Tracey, and I am in no mood to repeat it!" When Pop said "Tracey" as opposed to Trace Face or Trace, I knew it was firm and serious.

"Where's that *Glory* film Denzel gave you?" I said, trying to move on.

"Ask Shirley," Pop said.

I went out to the outer chamber to retrieve *Glory* from Shirley. I brought it back and slipped it into the DVD player. It was about time my dad rested his strained voice, anyway. I propped the pillow behind Pop's back and sat down on the bedside next to him. He grabbed my hand as the film started to roll.

I could not focus on *Glory*. My mind was on the car crash that took my father's eye the moment he got to revel in the adulation he strove so hard to win.

The car accident happened on November 19, 1954. Fans roared as my father exited the Frontier stage. "Make room for Sammy," "Swinging show, Sammy"—voices echoed in the halls as he headed up to his suite to pack a few items for Los Angeles. He called his driver, Charley, and told him, "No party tonight, we have to drive to Los Angeles." After showering, he put on a pair of Levi's and a sweater, packed casual items for his trip, and called room service for a burger.

What knocked on his door a short while later was not room service at all, but a chorus girl who motioned him straight into the bedroom. He went with the flow, but would have preferred the burger, he later said.

Charley was waiting in the car as my father climbed in the backseat. It was late. Pop watched the neon lights flash his name on the Frontier marquee as they drove off. The taste was sweet. Looking back at the marquee he knew a new era had opened up for him: success.

PURPLE: Dad's pictured here wearing the mezuzah given to him by Eddie Cantor—Pop's "good luck charm."

Dad on his TV show in 1966, embodying his nickname—"Mr. Entertainment."

Dad once told me when we were sitting out on his patio that "Hey There" was playing on the radio the night of the car accident. Dad said he was listening to himself on the radio thinking it can't get better than this. There he was, headlining at the Frontier, listening to his own #1 single on the radio. Dare he dream for more?

He told his driver, "Keep it under fifty, Charley. Let's break this car in so smooth that she'll sing ballads," Pop said, unaware that a star was born and would nearly die the same night.

Not yet a Jew, Pop had received a gift of a mezuzah from Eddie Cantor. Pop used it not as a traditional blessing over a door, but wore it around his neck like a good luck charm. The only time Pop did not wear it out, was that night of the car crash.

Dad reached around his neck for the mezuzah, but it wasn't there. He couldn't recall taking it off at the Frontier, but with the frenzy of packing and the chorus chic frolicking about, it must have slipped off his neck. He thought about returning to retrieve it, but Charley was already twenty minutes away. It was late and they had a long drive ahead of them to Los Angeles. Dad opened his backseat window, and let the stars and clear desert breeze lull him to sleep.

The car crashed in San Bernardino, California, at a fork in US Highway 66 at Cajon Boulevard and Kendall Drive. A woman driving ahead on the highway got off at an exit, only to realize that it was the wrong exit. Dad had taken over in the driver's seat by this time. The lady backed up from the exit ramp onto the highway, and that's when the collision happened. Dad slammed his eye on the pointed cone in the middle of his steering wheel. The last thing he remembered was reaching for his left eye that was dangling out of its socket.

Dad woke up in the Community Hospital of San Bernardino, in total darkness, bandaged up like an Egyptian mummy. The impact fractured the bones of his face. His mind raced. He heard the random cacophony of hospital staff rushing in and out of his room. He felt the warm breeze of an open window; it felt like day, but it was pitch black. What time was it? He felt iron bars under his hands and realized he was strapped like a prisoner to the hospital bed. Was he paralyzed? His heart beat violently, throbbing with terror and fear. He moved his legs under the bed sheets, relieved to find he had working legs and feet.

But why was it so dark? Where was the sunlight? Was he blind? Would he live like a madman in the dark for the rest of his life? More terrible still was his imagination that plunged him into a deeper abyss of uncertainty: Would he ever perform again? Was God punishing him for becoming a star? Had he lost his way along the path to stardom, forsaken some moral, some principle, some holy commandment that forced God to take his sight from him? What was happening here? He yelled out, "Help me!"

A nurse rushed into the room and removed his hand restraints, telling Pop not to touch the bandages over his eyes. She told him that he was in a nearly fatal car accident, but he was going to be fine.

Fine? Dad felt his head. He felt no skin, just

January 1955: In rehearsals for his return to performing at Ciro's in Hollywood after losing an eye in a car accident. Will Mastin is behind him.

Dad's first public performance, at Ciro's, after losing an eye in a car accident. You can see Dick Powell and June Allyson at a front table in this photo.

ominous bandages. His head hurt as he lay in the dark. He was not fine. My father pleaded with the nurse to tell him if he was going to be blind. He would rather die at that very moment than live blind. The nurse simply replied that he was not going to be blind, and that he needed to rest. Pop knew the nurse would not be the one to break it to him; he would have to wait for the doctor, so he demanded the nurse page the doctor.

Within minutes, my father heard the heavy footsteps of a man entering his room. He introduced himself as Dr. Hull. In a solemn and gentle tone, the surgeon announced that he operated on my father the night before and was forced to remove his left eye.

What? Just like that, so matter of fact, he removed his left eye? My father touched his bandages, thinking perhaps he hadn't heard the doctor

TOP: Dad had many supporters in Hollywood after his comeback. Here he is with James Cagney.

BOTTOM: With Milton Berle.

correctly. Pop grabbed for the bars on his hospital bed, steadying himself from the nausea of what he just heard. The horror of it all scared him beyond comprehension—it was an insidious and brutal entrapment.

Dad shot a myriad of questions at the surgeon. Dr. Hull explained that he was a vision specialist called in to advise the doctors on duty struggling to save his eye after the crash. There was, at best, 10 percent vision possible for the left eye. However, as an expert in his field, he felt the strain on the healthy right eye would weaken both and result in "sympathetic blindness," that over a few years would result in total blindness. There was no choice but to remove his left eye, and once healed, replace it with an artificial eye that he would have to wear for life.

Questions flooded my father's mind: Was this man serious? An artificial eye? Jeopardize his new stardom? Would he dance again? What about his balance on the stage? Who would do the show at the Frontier while he was recovering in the hospital? All his dreams came to a halt as he scrambled to make sense of it all in the dark. His cry for answers was primal. He demanded the right to dignity, to

Pop joining the party after a performance with the Will Mastin Trio.

work—nothing else, nothing more—just to work.

As my father convalesced, Frank Sinatra and others came by to console him. Flowers and cards from fans poured in. Dad's friend, actor Jeff Chandler, offered one of his own eyes if it would keep Pop able to perform. But medically, there was nothing to be done. Pop would have to wear an eye patch for at least six months and later be fit with an artificial eye that he would wear for the rest of his life. As an entertainer, my father would have to master a balancing act with one eye, so as not to dance off the stage.

As my father recovered from the removal of his left eye at the Community Hospital of San

ABOVE: With Jack Carter in *Mr. Wonderful*, Dad's first Broadway show.

RIGHT: My father and Eartha Kitt in *Anna Lucasta*, 1958.

Bernardino back in 1954, he did a lot of deep and painful self-analysis about his rise to stardom. He examined his belief systems, his needs, desires, and the undercurrent of his own human spirit.

He dwelled on the fact that the only time he did not wear his mezuzah from Eddie Cantor was the night of the car accident. It turns out it had fallen behind the hotel bed before he left for the drive to Los Angeles. He didn't even realize at the time that a mezuzah was not traditionally worn around the neck, but the self-scrutiny of not wearing his "good luck charm" was enough to trigger my father to meet with a rabbi in the hospital.

My father's family was Baptist and until the accident he had not paid religion much thought. As my father spoke with the rabbi, he was enlightened by the myriad spiritual and historical parallels between his own embattled identity as an African American and the oppression of the Jews. He learned that Judaism taught justice for everyone, particularly those who had been oppressed for centuries. It gave Pop an exhale of "I get this, I am a part of this."

A year later, in one of the first satellite interviews on the *Edward R. Murrow Show*, Pop said that the accident made him a better person. It was the best thing that ever happened to him. May be an odd thing to say, but as a rising entertainer, doors opened up for him, and he got wrapped up in himself. He came to the realization that there were more important things than stardom—essential fellow goodness, generosity, kindness. His friends rallied around him and supported him through his recovery.

In the hospital, from his conversations and readings with the rabbi, Dad discovered more similarities that Jewish and black cultures both faced. Dad learned that in the early twentieth century, Jewish publications spoke of violence against blacks, and often compared the black racism in the South to *pogroms*, the violent mob attacks against Jews.

Dad also discovered that Jews played a major role in the founding of the NAACP in1909. Dad learned that leaders in the American Jewish community used their economic resources, time, and energy to fight

for black civil rights. The more he read, the deeper his conviction was to become Jewish.

Dad made his final decision to convert to Judaism after the hospital rabbi gave him Paul Johnson's *A History of the Jews* to read. One passage hit home with Pop: *"The Jews would not die. Three centuries of prophetic teaching had given them an unwavering spirit of resignation and had created in them a will to live which no disaster could crush."*

My father never allowed himself to stay in a gloomy reality for long, no dark clouds over his head. Pop recovered from the 1954 car crash in Frank's place in Palm Springs. Frank drove seventy miles to bring my father to his home to recuperate and get his stride back. Frank was determined not to let his handicap stop him from being a star. Pop's talent was once again his weapon, the only way out of this madness. He wore his eye patch for at least six months and almost fell off the stage a few times, but eventually learned to keep his balance again as he danced. He even appeared on *What's My Line?* wearing the patch.

He was fitted with an artificial eye and rolled on to become a bona fide star. Pop always combatted horror with humor, and continued to joke onstage about being the only "black, Puerto Rican, one-eyed Jewish Entertainer" in the world.

In 1954, the same year as the accident, Pop sung the title track for the Universal Pictures film *Six Bridges to Cross*. In April 1955, my father's first LP, *Starring Sammy Davis Jr.* rose to #1 on the charts.

Mr. Wonderful was a musical comedy written specifically to showcase my father's talents as a Las Vegas nightclub entertainer. The story focused on the entertainer Charlie Welch's struggles in the industry. The cast brought together the Will Mastin Trio, and Sammy recorded a sixteen-track vocal jazz album highlighting the staged play.

Mr. Wonderful opened on March 22, 1956 at the Broadway Theater, closing on February 23, 1957 after 383 grueling performances. Joseph Stein and Will Glickman were the authors of the original book upon which the musical was based. The music and lyrics were composed by George David Weiss, Jerry Bock and Larry Holofcener.

Pop was back with a vengeance. He even hit the big screen in movies like *Anna Lucasta* and *Porgy and Bess*. By 1959, he was about to take over Las Vegas with the baddest and coolest cats in entertainment history, better known as the Rat Pack: Frank Sinatra, Sammy Davis Jr., Dean Martin, Joey Bishop, and Peter Lawford. But that is a story for another visit with Dad.

After Pop's accident and his conversion to Judaism, there were fans who supported his decision to become a Jew, and some members of the Jewish and African American communities that would not embrace him. But it made no difference to my father; he had fought bigger battles in his life.

Pop always took the road less traveled, the road that takes you to the heart of human understand-

Dad singing his heart out in *Porgy and Bess.*

My father told me that my mother was the love of his life. She was a calm and loving presence in his life. They were married in 1960, amid a storm of controversy. Their marriage was actually illegal in thirty one states.

ing, generosity, and fellowship. In Pop's view, Jews and blacks not only shared a history of oppression, but were all related as seen by their dark skin and curly hair from Northern Africa, Egypt, Israel, and neighboring countries. Why not embrace his own race as well as Judaism. In the Davis family, that is what we did.

My mother, Swedish actress May Britt, converted to Judaism before she even married my dad. The Davis family would be raised Jewish. Every Friday night we would celebrate the Sabbath at sundown with my mother. We had a nonsecular Christmas tree, simply because my mom liked to decorate it.

Our summer vacations were spent in Lake Tahoe, where Dad would perform at Harrah's or in Reno. After the divorce, my mother moved us to Lake Tahoe permanently, and she continued to raise us Jewish. There was no Jewish community or even temple at the time in Lake Tahoe. We would travel over an hour away, to Reno, just to attend temple, go to Hebrew school—or see Pop's show. My brother, Mark, had a bar mitzvah, and we would celebrate the traditional Jewish holidays like Hanukkah and Passover with friends. We built our own little Jewish community in Lake Tahoe lead by Dr. Phillip Charney, a Jewish dermatologist turned rabbi who graciously opened his home to us.

The Davis family were Jews, period. Well, except for Mom's soul food cooking! Not exactly kosher. Despite Pop's best efforts—my Swedish mom had no rhythm, wasn't very musical, and was always off-beat. Mom remembered being at Pop's show at the Sands, the whole audience was clapping in rhythm, then came one off-beat single clap. Pop stopped the orchestra and said, "That must be my wife!" He got a big roar of laughter that night. Now as for her soul food attempt:

Mom said they we are in Lake Tahoe—for the family it was a summer getaway, although Pop, of course, was working. He was performing at Harrah's, for his lifelong friend Bill Harrah. At the time, early '60s or so, Harrah's Hotel area was pretty barren, so they built a little place just for entertainers. It had a small kitchenette, with three burners, no oven. Mom got this idea that she would make soul food. Loving to cook and born in Harlem, Pop gave her some simple soul food tips—*simple* being the key word. Mother decided she was going to master this. Good Lord!

Mother called the local Tahoe town market, "This is Mrs. Sammy Davis Jr. I need pig tails." Dead silence on the other end. Then she hears, "One moment, please." Someone else picks up the phone. "I would like to order some pig tails," she says again. Dead silence. "I want for six people," my mother said in her Swedish accent. The six people included Dad's musicians and some key staff. She tells the guy on the phone, "And also some neck bones please."

Finally, they tell her they don't have any, but can get what she needs delivered in three days. She also gets some black-eyed peas, collard greens, and rice. She waits three days.

When the pig tails arrive, they don't look so

good, but the neck bones looked okay. There was my mother in this little kitchenette with six pots, three burners. After cooking for four hours, alas, she had created her first soul food dishes.

When it came time for the dinner party she'd arranged, everybody sat down. Pop sat at the head of the table. Being a Harlem boy, he was thinking this is going to be sheer humiliation. So immediately my father announced to his guests—who were all on his payroll—"If you don't eat it, you're fired!"

The crew ate every last drop! But to my mother's credit, her soul food creation was not half bad, so I was told, considering it was Lake Tahoe and made by my Swedish mom.

✦✧✦

I smiled at my father—thrilled that Pop was able to enjoy *Glory* from his Cedars-Sinai hospital bed—while my mind continued to wander.

He was fitted with an artificial eye and rolled on to become a bona fide star. Pop always combatted horror with humor, and continued to joke onstage about being the only "black, Puerto Rican, one-eyed Jewish Entertainer" in the world.

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Rat Pack
1950s
Shown: Dean Martin, Frank Sinatra, Sammy Davis Jr.
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Dean Martin and Pop visit Frank Sinatra on the set of Sinatra's film *Some Came Running*. The chemistry between these three men both on and off stage was one in a million.

go to Hebrew school—or see Pop's show. My brother, Mark, had a bar mitzvah, and we would celebrate the traditional Jewish holidays like Hanukkah and Passover with friends. We built our own little Jewish community in Lake Tahoe lead by Dr. Phillip Charney, a Jewish dermatologist turned rabbi who graciously opened his home to us.

Pop,

I just walked out of Cedars and I am so scared. I had a wonderful visit, talking with you, reflecting about your heroic past as you watched Glory, thinking about your strength, your faith, your courage. I loved walking through the hospital hall with you.

But no matter how hard I try to forget it, today, pregnant with your grandchild, I realized that there is a good chance you will not recover. I fell getting into my car. I was so scared. I got down to the bottom of the parking structure and wiped the tears from my eyes. I got in my car and pulled away. I tried to stay calm, wiping my tears with my shirt sleeve. But we can do it. WE will be okay; we have to be. We have to be. Sammy Davis Jr. is not dying on my watch.

—Trace Face

✦✧✦

It was an early March morning and Pop was back resting back at his home in a hospital bed upstairs in his master suite. Shirley, Lessie Lee, and I had become skilled bedside nurses. Today we were being given instructions from a home nurse as to how to clean Pop's trachea tube. In case of emergency, the nurse wanted to be sure we knew how to prevent airway obstruction, impaired ventilation, and infection as well as other lethal complications.

I was a germaphobe. I was pregnant. I was due in a month. It wasn't just the sickness of it all, it was reality setting in. Dad's hope of recovery was slim to none. But under no circumstance was my father going to let the fear of death stop us from spending time together. We sat in silence for hours, sometimes just holding hands, sometimes laughing our heads off, sometimes chatting about his nostalgic and heroic past, sometimes just smelling the sweet scent from the eucalyptus trees in his garden oasis. Whatever it was, we cherished every moment.

Lessie Lee announced that Uncle Frank was here. Frank Sinatra, oh my! I knew Pop would be hesitant about his friends visiting him in the state he was. But a select few, like Frank Sinatra, he would welcome.

Uncle Frank entered and had a few comforting words with my father. You could tell he was destroyed by the impending death of his friend. He climbed down the stairs. I followed him down. Uncle Frank was crying like a little kid. I gave him a big bear hug. "How could my best friend be dying?" he said. I took Uncle Frank outside so Pop couldn't hear. We paced around the circular driveway talking. Satellite press trucks and reporters

swarmed outside the guard gate.

I found myself comforting a legend, this tough guy. Uncle Frank saw the tears well up in my face and tried to change the subject. He kept repeating my bachelorette night and how much fun it was. Then he would break down again and say: "Trace Face, oh my God. Smokey's dying. . . ." As Uncle Frank departed, choked up and in tears—the paparazzi shooting at him through his car—we made a pact to think of Pop as he always was throughout our lives, not as he was now.

I assisted my father downstairs and out to the brick patio surrounded by his favorite lush emerald garden. We walked out together hearing the little wheels of his IV grind against the brick. He was wearing his hospital gown.

"Grab the robe!" my father said. Lord really, Pop—like I would forget the hospital gown was open!

Our talks outside became a daily ritual with Popsicle leading the way. Do we talk today or have silence? It was always his choice. My father was determined to foster strong emotional bonds between us now, to show me how much he loved me, share his most intimate life stories with me, and laugh and share a smile or two. I hovered and perched over his words like a hummingbird ready to lap up sweet nectar.

Today we just laughed. They say laughter is the best medicine and laugh we did. We were cracking jokes, bantering back and forth, good belly laughs, clutching our sides till it hurt. I always hit Pop's funny bone in just the right way, making him snort and cackle until he had to beg me to stop.

"Pop, remember when you colored your hair with Kiwi shoe polish! It was running down the sides of your face! I laughed my ass off!"

"I had ten minutes till showtime!" Pop was cracking up.

"But Kiwi shoe polish? Really, Pop!"

"Oh, and you never did anything foolish? Every kid wants a dog, right? I buy you a poodle and what do you do? You give it back to me! Now I got this poodle messing up *my* house!"

"Our gift to you, Pop!" I laughed.

"Charming!" He smiled.

"Listen, Pop, I hate to put a damper on our party, but I got a baby checkup. I'll be back in the morning. Let me get Lessie Lee or the nurse out here," I said.

"Okay, Trace Face, but don't forget I'm ready. I'm gonna learn to change diapers, do bottles, I might even babysit!" Dad cackled happily.

"Oh God," I said.

"And, Trace, plan to spend the whole day visiting tomorrow, okay?" Pop said, holding his trach hole.

"Sure. Why, Pop, what's up?" I said.

"Gasser, chickie baby, we're going to relive the glory days of the Rat Pack! In honor of Frank. You with me?"

"I'm already packed," I replied with a big grin on my face.

CHAPTER 3

STAR

My father in his prime, one of the biggest stars of the day.

When I arrived the next morning, Pop was in his chaise lounge out in his emerald garden landscape, enjoying the simple pleasures of watching the butterflies flutter from flower to flower. He felt the new spring breeze wash over his face. He cherished the serenity of silence.

I quietly sat down next to him, so as not to disturb his Zen-like state of spiritual healing. But I could feel the pain of the cancer weighing heavily on the life he was no longer living. I wanted to ask him how he felt, but I knew it would hurt him, so I kept my mouth shut and let it hurt me instead. He could feel my angst. He took my hand in his.

"I earned my stripes with those cats. . . ."

"What cats?"

"The Rat Pack . . ."

The ensemble of Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Peter Lawford, Joey Bishop, and their closest friends in the late 1950s and '60s was christened the Rat Pack, as a successor of sorts to Humphrey Bogart's 1950s Holmby Hills Rat Pack. Mom said she never liked that name. Actor Tony Curtis told filmmakers Sacher and Langer: "We didn't like the term Rat Pack. I hated it, so did Frank, so did Sammy, all of us hated it. Our group of friends was named that by the intelligencia of New York City—the Aryan population of the far right. Here we were all children of immigrants—Hungarian immigrants, Italian immigrants, Russian immigrants, and Sammy being black."

"The price of admission was talent, and most of all love and respect. I loved them like brothers. Before I was widely accepted by the world, I was accepted and loved by them. Off the stage, inside our circle, there were no color boundaries. Back in the day, when Frank was singing at the Copa, I was turned away at the door because I was colored. By 1954, the Copacabana ushered me through the door like a big star because I was with Frank Sinatra. He was not just 'the Voice'; to me, he was the voice against racism," Pop said.

"He respected your talent," I uttered.

"We respected each other's talent. I first met Frank back in1947 over a sandwich, when I was just 'the Kid.'"

"I remember him studying Tommy Dorsey's breathing, just to perfect his own voice." Pop was starting to repeat himself, slip a bit, repeat stories he had long since told me, something I noticed, but wouldn't let get in our way.

"A class act," I replied.

"I remember telling Terry Wogan on his BBC show, about how Frank and I reunited. I called it the second beginning of our relationship," Dad said.

"What happened, Pop?"

"I was just out of the army, still wearing my army suit with the gold bird on it. In those days, if you were a discharged soldier, you could get free tickets to shows at NBC, CBS, wherever. So I got tickets to the *Old Gold Show* with Frank Sinatra. I had been in the audience three weeks in a row, and Frank kept looking out at me—the black cat in the audience. Back then, not too many black folks were going to see Frank Sinatra."

Dad sure made a lot of close friends over the years of his career. Among them in these photos are Richard Burton, Jerry Lewis, James Dean, Frank Sinatra, and Nat King Cole.

CAPTION: TK

"One day, Frank comes out of the stage door and says, 'Didn't we work together?' I told him 'Yes, it was only three days, we replaced an act when you were with Tommy Dorsey.' He remembered! I couldn't believe it!" Pop explained.

"Then Frank said, 'You were with your family?' I nodded. Frank said, 'Hey, you're out of the army, want to come next week?' I said, 'Oh, could I?' I was so excited. 'Yeah, come and watch rehearsal.'"

"Frank turned to his manager, who was Hank Sanicola at the time, 'See Charley over here,' so I broke in and said, 'My name is Sammy.' Frank replied, 'It's Charley. See Charley over here? When he comes here make sure he gets in for the rehearsal.' He turned to me and said, 'See you next week, kid,' got in his car, and drove off," Pop explained.

"That's a great story, Pop." I smiled.

"I was in heaven. After, I walked to the hotel we were living in, from Hollywood down to Fifth Street in Los Angeles. Man, it must have been twenty miles. I just walked like I was in heaven, floating lightly through the streets. I had met Frank Sinatra and he remembered me! It was the second beginning of our relationship," my father said proudly.

"You idolized him." I laughed.

"Heck, I wanted to be like him, I wanted to dress like him, I wanted to look like him, I took my hair and had it all done up, Sinatra style, with the little curl here and all." Dad pointed to his hair.

"That's sweet, Pop." I said.

"I watched Frank's climb to fame, his fall, his comeback, his obsession with JFK, and through it all he was always the voice. I can see him now, onstage, perched on the bar stool with his brim hat tilted back, jacket languidly tossed over one shoulder, with that smooth sultry voice that made girls scream."

"Frank was the best, even stood up as best man at your wedding to Mom," I said.

"During the Rat Pack days, Frank and I had a close camaraderie of musicians and entertainers, stage hands—colors and ranks would fade away. We owned Vegas. It was our home. Never a regret. That's why I called one of my autobiographies, *Why Me?* I always looked to God, during the good times and the bad, and would say, 'Why Me?' Frank was a blessing from God. We got so in sync onstage, all I had to do was raise my eyebrow a certain way and he knew what I was saying. We honed our craft."

The great comedian Milton Berle later said, "Every one of them that were in the Rat Pack was dedicated to their art. I wasn't part of the Rat Pack but I was friends with them all. They were so relaxed. Everything was ad lib. Everything was impromptu. I think that the success of the Rat Pack—besides loving what they did, making people laugh, and truly liking each other—was fun."

My father continued his stories about the Rat Pack. "After the shows at the Sands, baby, we were wild. Innocent compared to today maybe, but we were wild. Hey, we were the headliners, the ladies were the most attractive, the cats the coolest, the booze the best, the celebrities the highest profilers,

the ragtag misfits the freakiest. But you learn. Now that I am older, wiser, it's payback time, boy, on my body—for all those good times from the '60s. Years later, every once in a while when I tried to get out of one of those low sports cars, my body said to me, 'I told you to take it easy.' I'd be like ew, ah, ow . . . well, I think I'll just sit here for a while then!" Pop chuckled.

All five core members of the Rat Pack teamed up to star in the movie *Ocean's 11*, which went into production in Las Vegas in January 1960. The original writer of the story, Jack Golden Russell, was a gas-station attendant in Vegas, and handed Sinatra the script while he was filling up. Just like Frank to accept it. There was, of course, a famous remake of *Ocean's 11*, made in 2001 starring George Clooney, Matt Damon, and other hot stars of the day. In the 1960 edition, Danny Ocean (Frank Sinatra) gathers a gang of World War II 82nd Airborne compatriots to pull off the ultimate Las Vegas casinos heist. The plan is to rob five casinos on New Year's Eve (Sahara, Riviera, Desert Inn, Sands, and The Flamingo).

Pop always said, a huge portion of *Ocean's 11* was improvised, ad-libbed. The Rat Pack knew each other and the Vegas casinos better than any screenwriter could ever attempt to write. Much of the Rat Pack ad-libbed dialogue turned out to be far better footage than what they would have shot from the written script, so the producer's went with it. Even Shirley MacLaine ad-libbed a tipsy uncredited cameo with a classic Dean Martin line, "I'm so drunk I don't think I could lie down without holding on." I've read that MacLaine received a brand new car from Warner Bros. as compensation for her memorable contribution.

Angie Dickinson was the female lead in the movie. She later said, "Sammy is the one who recommended me for the movie . . . so Sammy told me. And I believe him!. I was under contract to Warner Bros. and he said to Frank, 'You know who'd be a gas as your wife? Angie!' I got the part." Frank had a lot of pull in the industry. Angie Dickinson continued to say that "Frank was a very kind man. We think he was all gruff . . . he could throw you out the window and over the balcony if you did something to deserve that, but he was a very tender guy—very!"

Pop played a garbage collector, Josh Howard, in the movie. He said he needed wooden blocks attached to the pedals on the garbage truck he drove in the film so he could reach them. He also said the production team's most challenging task was trying to get Nevada's Clark County officials to lend them a garbage truck for the movie. Needless to say, they finally got the truck. Peter, Dean, and Frank have a scene near the end of the film where they attempt to disguise themselves by blackening their faces in the garbage truck. Pop says, "I knew this color would come in handy someday." Forever more, Uncle Frank and Uncle Dean joked with Pop about that line, all in good Rat Pack fun.

During the filming of *Ocean's 11*, Pop's schedule was insane. The ensemble continued to perform

A movie poster for *Ocean's 11*. Illustrated from left are Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Pop, Peter Lawford, and Angie Dickinson.

TOP: "The Summit": Peter Lawford, Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Dad, and Joey Bishop during the time they were making *Ocean's 11*.

BOTTOM: The stars of *Ocean's 11*.

RIGHT: The Rat Pack in all their glory.

concurrently at the Sands Hotel each night, in an extravaganza they referred to as "the Summit." I heard it was a reference to the East-West Paris summit in that took place that year between the United States, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, United Kingdom, and France.

"The way we did our shows, we made it look like all fun and games. But we worked hard. Like I said, we were wild, but how hard can you really party when you perform one to two shows a night and are due in for call-time and makeup on a major feature film the next morning, sometimes before sunrise? The only time we got any decent sleep was in the afternoons, after the shoot before a show," Pop explained.

I always loved the final shot of *Ocean's 11*, when the eleven compatriots referred to in the title walk past the Rat Pack's own infamous marquee in front of the Sands hotel—Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Sammy Davis Jr, Peter Lawford, and Joey Bishop. The last billed, Joey Bishop, was also the last of the Rat Pack to pass away, on October 17, 2007.

✦✧✦

Dad as Jonah Williams in *Sergeants 3*, 1962.

ABOVE: Producer Budd Schulberg visits Dad on the set of a television special, "Memory in White," in 1961.

Pop approached his rigid schedule like clockwork, never missing a beat. 1961 began a period of Rat Pack activities for Dad that included a whirlwing of making movies, among them *Sergeants 3*, *Robin and the 7 Hoods*, and *Johnny Cool*.

There were "Summit" performances with Uncle Frank and Uncle Dean in Atlantic City in August 1962. There were shows at the Villa Venice in Chicago in November 1962, and back at the Sands Hotel in both January and September of 1963.

RIGHT: Dad made an appearance in the 1962 movie *Three Penny Opera*.

"Frank asked me to work John F. Kennedy's campaign show. He was obsessed with getting JFK elected—pushed favors with the mob to turn West Virginia and Chicago voters in favor of JFK. But really that was none of my business, though, there are rumors to the contrary. I can tell you after working the JFK campaign show, I was delighted that JFK received the Democratic party's presidential ballot in 1960. I wasn't thrilled about Mississippi booing me when I sung the national anthem, though. But no racial slurs surprised me by that point. Brush it off and move on was my motto!" Pop explained.

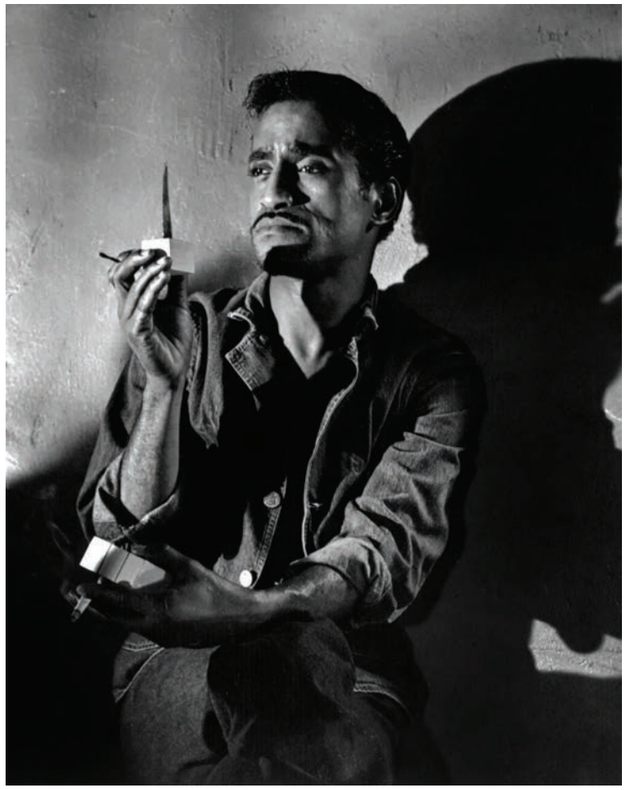
"What about Joe Kennedy? I heard some stories about him!" I said.

"I got one story about Ambassador Kennedy I bet you have never heard."

"What happened?" I asked.

"Awww, well, poor Peter Lawford was just a kid, sixteen years old, parking cars on the wrong side of town in West Palm Beach, Florida, for twenty-five bucks a week. Peter became buddies with two black valet cats he worked with. One day, a rich client saw Peter on break, eating lunch and playing cards with his colored buddies. The rich client was outraged and complained to the parking lot owner that it was a disgrace to see such a good-looking white boy fraternizing with colored kids. Poor Peter almost lost his job. Turns out the client was Joe Kennedy. How Peter survived being Joe Kennedy's son-in-law fifteen years later is beyond me!" Pop said.

"How did you survive being the son-in-law to mom's father? I mean he was Swedish, she was



Dad in the 1962 film *Convicts 4*.

Swedish, interracial marriages were forbidden by law in thirty-one states when you got married." I asked.

"I adored my father-in-law, and your mother said he loved me, too. Your grandparents didn't have an ounce of racism in them. They were kind, loving, and supportive. Incredible folks." Pop smiled.

"I remember my first appearance as an entertainer in London. I was booked for a $12,000-a-week nightclub act at the Pigalle in London. Your mom was already telling friends she'd probably become Mrs. D, but she was finalizing her divorce from [Edwin] Eddie Gregson, son of a distinguished widower and Southern California real estate millionaire. Your mom flew to London to see my show, and flew her father in from Sweden. She was determined to introduce her own father to her 'soon-to-be groom,'" Pop said.

"That's so sweet. . . ."

"Luckily, her father had already gone back to our London hotel and didn't have to see the hate banners and all the public booing outside the Pigalle. It was June 2, 1960. Your mom and I had to face horrible insults from British fascists. About thirty followers of Sir Oswald Mosley waved banners saying, 'Go home, Nigger' and 'Get divorced first, Slag' in reference to my plans to marry your mom after her divorce was final," Pop explained.

"As I always say, being a star made it possible for me to get insulted in places where the average Negro could never hope to get insulted!" Pop smirked.

"Gosh, and you two were only just dating," I replied.

"Your Mom was like Grace Kelly with all the elegance, beauty, class, and charm, but fierce as a tiger. She told the London press that her love for me could not be destroyed by fascist hate attacks," Pop explained.

"A kind British journalist for the *Daily Mirror*, by the name of Sir William Neil Connor came to our defense, pleading for people to stop the slander, get off our backs, enough was enough. The guy wrote under the pen name of 'Cassandra' taken from Greek mythology, in reference to a tragic character given the gift of prophecy by Apollo but is ultimately cursed so that no one will believe her," Pop said.

"Your mom continued to pay the price for the London racial slurs, though. Back in Hollywood, eighteen days after the racial slurs by Sir Oswald Mosley's followers in London, a Twentieth Century-Fox spokesman released a statement that May Britt's contract would not be renewed," Pop explained. "This was June 1960. The studio refused to say if the action was a result of her plans to marry me or the London racial slurs, but the timing was more than a coincidence."

I could see my father's eyelids grow heavier. Mentally, our talks were therapeutic for both of us, but physically draining for him. I put a throw blanket over him and let him nod off for a spell. As I watched him sleep, I thought of my mom, always so

With Henry Silva in *Johnny Cool*, 1963.

Uncle Frank, Dad, and Uncle Dean in *Robin and the 7 Hoods*, 1964.

proper on the outside, dressed to perfection, bag hanging on her forearm, never leaving the house without her eyeliner—she was so put together, so beautiful. On the inside, she had enormous courage, strength, and resilience. She would not only marry a black man at a time when interracial marriages were shunned, but do it at all costs.

My mom, Swedish actress May Britt Wilkens was born on March 22, 1934, in Lidingö, Sweden. Her birth name was MajBritt Wilkens, but she later changed it to May Britt. Her father, Hugo Brigg-Wilkens, was a postal clerk; her mother, a housewife. Mom had a younger sister named Margot. Mom always said there was very little racism in Sweden, at least in the town where she grew up.

Mom and Dad had a deep, undying love for each other, while courting, through marriage, and divorce—even after my father's death.

Mom always said, "It was your father's kind, thoughtfulness that interested me the most. He was very intelligent. He studied people, he understood people—he could always spot someone across the room and tell if they were a phony or not."

Mom still says, "He was a good father, Trace, even if his schedule kept him from being around all the time. As an entertainer, when you are hot you are hot, you have to work. Can't stay home and hold your wife's hand all the time. Your father had to work his butt off. And it was also his life blood, his passion. He thrived on it. He loved entertaining."

The day my parents announced their engagement to the world, 1960.

Mom had a great career before she met my father. Her first job was as a photographer's laboratory assistant in the Stockholm suburb where she was born. At eighteen years old, she left for Italy. In 1952, she was discovered by producer Carlo Ponti at a retouching studio. My mother became one of fifty actresses who Ponti auditioned for the film, *Yolanda, Daughter of the Black Pirate*. Mom landed the role and off to Rome she went, chaperoned by her own mother, for the filming of *Yolanda*. In 1957, my mother moved to the United States after five years under contract to Carlo Ponti in Italy.

In 1957, Mom escorted her good friend, Montgomery Clift, to the Hollywood premiere of the American Civil War drama *Raintree Country*, a film in which he starred with Elizabeth Taylor. Clift had a nearly fatal car accident during the filming, which is evident in scenes where the left side of his face was partially paralyzed. The director of *Raintree Country*, Edward Dmytryk, would later direct my mom in the 1959 film *The Blue Angel*. Mom fit in well in Hollywood. She and fellow Swedish starlet Ingrid Goude were invited to the filming of television's *Panorama Pacific*. Mom was also cast in the role of Kristina "Kris" Abbott in *The Hunters*—a Twentieth Century-Fox feature film adapted from a novel by James Salter.

In 1958, Mom attended a dinner party given by Southern California real-estate mogul Edwin Gregson Sr. My mother met his son, Eddie Gregson. Eddie

BELOW: My mother and grandmother, Elvera Sanchez.

RIGHT: Mom and Marilyn Monroe, as houseguests of Frank Sinatra.

left Stanford University in 1957 to follow an acting career, getting a small part in *The Naked and the Dead*. My mother spent a lot of time with young Gregson on the Strip and in Malibu, and on February 22, 1958, Mom and Eddie Gregson married in Tijuana, Mexico. He was nineteen; she was twenty-three.

Although Mom and Eddie found a nice house to live way up in the Canyon, Mom's relationship with the young Gregson was not destined to rise much higher. The two parted for the first time when she returned to Sweden alone and he was off on a movie assignment. In June 1958, Mom returned to the States, followed by my aunt Margot. Mom and Eddie reunited in a new house in Palo Alto. Gregson left the film business, with dreams of returning to Stanford to study law in Palo Alto. By late October, Mom was sent to New York City to do publicity for *The Hunters*. There she resumed photography courses, while Eddie went to San Antonio, Texas, to serve with the Air National Guard for two months.

Mom became an overnight sensation on film posters and magazine covers galore after she won the part in *The Blue Angel*. Directed by Edward Dmytryk, *The Blue Angel* was a remake of the 1930

My mom all in white, Dad all in black. Pop courted controversy while courting my mother, but they didn't care—they were in love!

film of the same name that had made Marlene Dietrich a star. The part had previously been slated for no less a star than Marilyn Monroe. Mom said there was never any tension between her and Marilyn. She said, "Years later we were houseguests at Sinatra's place. Marilyn, like me, was shy. Neither of us were the life of the party. I was pregnant with you at the time, and Marilyn and I had our picture taken together. Later it became quite a famous shot."

In the summer of 1959, Mom planned a trip to Sweden to visit her parents with her husband. Eddie announced his plans to take summer classes at Stanford. Tension mounted. Mom asked her husband not to visit the set when she was singing for *The Blue Angel*. Mom and Eddie soon announced their separation. With her marriage unraveling, Mom turned down a role in the film *The Seven Thieves*, a part that went to Joan Collins instead.

Mom had become quite well-known. Her marriage was on the rocks and the press was on it. Mom was feisty when it came to the press. In March 1960, she told columnist Earl Carroll at the Sherry-Netherland Hotel in New York City: "My name is My! I hate to be called May!" Columnist Dorothy Kilgallen reported in August 1959: "May Britt's split with her husband, Ed Gregson, wasn't much of a surprise to local cafe-goers, who observed her cocktailing and handholding with a famed flicker actor. . . ." By September 8, 1959, Mom and Eddie separated for good. Mom filed for divorce two days later in Santa Monica, ending her nineteen-month marriage. By the end of September, Mom had an interlocutory divorce decree from Gregson. But the divorce was yet to be finalized.

Mom next filmed *Murder, Inc.* at Filmways Studio in New York City. She was expected to return to Hollywood and then on to Hawaii to board and surf at Waikiki. But my dad entered the picture and changed her life forever.

My mother attended one of Pop's shows at the Mocambo nightclub, which opened in 1941 at the site of the old Club Versailles on the Sunset Strip in Los Angeles. "Your father was in a car with a female friend. He saw me walk across the street, and told his friend he wanted to meet me," Mom recalled. "He called me, told me after the show a group of people would be going up to his house on Evanview Drive above the Sunset Plaza to watch a movie, would I care to join?"

"I did join, but what I thought was so endearing, so kind, was that your father drove me all the way home to Malibu after the party. He invited me *and* my mom in town from Sweden to his show at the Sands. I thought that was so nice and thoughtful," Mom explained, smitten.

"I always adored Frank, too," Mom would say. "I remember one time when I was planning on heading to Vegas for one of your father's shows. I had a horrible cold, and told your father I didn't want to come up and get the whole Rat Pack sick. Your father told Frank, 'May's not coming up. She has a cold, doesn't want to make us sick,' and Frank said, 'What a classy broad.'"

Pop had been involved with a twenty-one-year-old Canadian singer named Joan Stewart. He quickly broke things off and began his pursuit of my mom. He even asked his mama (his grandmother) what she thought about him marrying my mom. Dad had a talk with Mama. "I'm going to marry May, Mama." Mama liked my mother, but looked at him with the concerned eyes of a wise old woman from Harlem, "I won't say, do you know what's ahead of you, Sammy?"

In April 1960 in New York City, Mom declined to confirm or deny reports to the press that she and Sammy Davis Jr. were planning to get married—since she was still not officially divorced from Eddie Gregson. Eddie had already moved on and was being seen around town with actress Cara Williams. The Hollywood wedding was scheduled for October 16, 1960, but had to be postponed until November 13 due to technicalities involving my mom's divorce. Finally, on September 28, 1960, Mom's divorce from Gregson became final.

Mom decided to convert to Judaism before her wedding to my father and on October 17, 1960, a spokesman for Hollywood's Temple Israel announced that she was accepted into the faith of Judaism. My father always joked with me about her conversion. He even talked about it in his autobiography. As the story goes, he was driving with my mother and she blurted out:

"Sammy, how come you never asked me to convert? To become Yewish?"

My father laughed and said, "Well, for openers, if you keep giving it that Swedish *J*—I don't think they'd even take you."

My mother smiled, and whipped out her certificate of conversion from Temple Israel. She explained how she was satisfied as a Lutheran, but thought it would add unity and support to the family, once they married and had children, if both parents were of the same religion. Now they could be married by a rabbi.

"Darling, there's no nicer present you could have ever given me," my father said.

Mom replied, "Then you wanted me to convert? Why didn't you say so?"

"I didn't feel I had the right to. I wanted you to do it, only if it was your own desire. I'm the last person in the world to say, 'Do it my way because my way is better,'" Dad said. My father took her hand and kissed it. "Thank you."

Only eight days later, three youths wearing swastika arm bands paraded outside the Huntington Hartford Theater where my father was headlining. Officers had to take my parents into protective custody. But that did not stop them. On November 9, 1960, Mom and Pop took out their marriage license in Los Angeles.

My father postponed the wedding yet again due to the racial tension in the air, the press, and Sinatra's allegiance to JFK. Frank was planning to be his best man, and Dad didn't want him to suffer in the press for it. He just couldn't believe his friendship with Frank could affect a national election, but for JFK, every vote counted from the liberals to the bigots. Pop had told me that he received a letter one

day that read: "Dear Nigger Bastard, I see Frank Sinatra is going to be the best man at your abortion. Well, it's good to know the kind of people supporting Kennedy before it's too late."—An ex-Kennedy Vote

Mom said, "We got death threat letters all the time, but we didn't save them. We just hired a bodyguard. It just became a way of life. We heard it so often, we shrugged it off; otherwise we would go crazy. Your father had met JFK several times, was fond of him. He asked me if I would mind putting off the wedding until after the election. It was disappointing, but I was prepared for anything. I knew what I was getting into."

Ostensibly trivial incidents would escalate into major threats and even hate group demonstrations outside places where my father was entertaining. Outside the Lotus Club in Washington, D.C., white picketers carried signs: MARRIAGE TO MAY BRITT WILL BE AN INJUSTICE TO THE NEGRO RACE! and GO BACK TO THE CONGO, YOU KOSHER COON! To my father's credit, when he walked onstage that night, the audience rose to their feet, applauded his courage, and exclaimed, "To hell with 'em, Sammy. We're with you!"

Despite the support from my father's fans, family, and close friends, my father felt forced to send a telegram to all the guests invited to the wedding:

The wedding of Miss May Britt Wilkens and Mr. Sammy Davis Jr. will be postponed until Sunday, November 13. We sincerely hope your attendance will be possible for the wedding reception at the Beverly Hilton Hotel on this day at 4:00 p.m. RSVP 9057 Dicks Street, Los Angeles 46, California.

—Mr. and Mrs. Ernst Hugo Wilkens

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My parents on their wedding day, 1960.

The thoughts of my parents' unyielding love was disrupted by a nurse who came outside to check on my father. He woke up as she tried to quietly adjust his IV and trachea tube. Lessie Lee had already placed some beverages and snacks on the table by his chaise lounge.

"Hey, Trace Face, you get uglier every time I see you." His eyes sparkled with joy as if I had just entered.

"How are feeling, Pop?" I asked.

"How are you feeling is the question, Ms. Pregasaurus?" Pop said.

"I'm fine. Sam's kicking a bit."

"Learning how to kick butt early, that's my grandson!" Pop replied, holding his trach hole to speak.

I thought about how exciting it was that here I am, married and having my first child. I recalled a story my father had told me about his wedding to my mother.

First of all, since my father had to postpone the wedding for almost a month, thanks to death threats, demonstrations, and JFK's election, by the time they got married, my mother was already pregnant with me.

It was November 13, 1960. My parents wanted a dignified wedding, not a publicity circus about this taboo interracial marriage. So they had a small, private ceremony at their Hollywood home on Evanview Drive off the Sunset Strip. The reception was at the Beverly Hilton Hotel with around two hundred guests. Some of the press claimed my mother was twenty-four but she was really twenty-six. My father was thirty-four. My mother had already converted to Judaism, so the Jewish rites were performed by Rabbi William Kramer of Hollywood's Temple Israel. It was beautiful, so I heard.

Frank stood up with my father. Mama, my Grandfather, Uncle Will, my Grandparents from Sweden, were there, among others. The guests watched on in the living room with a canopy of flowers by the windows—under which stood my parents as bride and groom. Shirley was the maid of honor.

Pop was so deeply in love with my mother. His whole life, he said he felt alone, in the army and all. Once I he met my mother, he didn't feel alone anymore. She was the love of his life—his joy, his better half. When Mom appeared from the next room with her father, looking like a Swedish goddess in her dress, tears welled up in my father's eyes. He was a superstar, but she was an icon, at least to him.

The words of Rabbi William Kramer are words that should never be forgotten—ever. They should live on forever.

"Pop, want me to read aloud to you?" I asked Pop.

"Read what, Trace Face?"

"The words from your wedding by Rabbi Kramer."

"Sure. Always makes me smile. Grab the paper out of the top left drawer over there."

From everything I'd heard and having read his words to the couple before, it really seemed like Rabbi Kramer made it the most beautiful service I can imagine. I got out the papers. I started to read:

"Almighty God, supremely blessed, supreme in might and glory, guide and bless this groom and his bride. Sammy and May, you are standing in front of me to join your lives even as your hands are joined together, and custom dictates that I, as your rabbi, give you some advice.

"Your marriage is something more than just the marriage of two people in love, and it is most certainly that or I have never seen two people in love in twenty years of the ministry. But as you come together as man and wife something more is involved. You are people without prejudice. You represent the value of the society that many of us dream about but, I suspect, hesitate to enter. As such, because you are normal in an abnormal society—society will treat you as sick. To be healthy among the sick is to be treated as sick as if the others were healthy.

"Through no fault of your own except your love, because both of you are greater than the pettiness that divide men, you become not simply a symbol of marriage, but because you both have accepted Judaism equally as your own you become representatives of Judaism because you are in the public eye; you are part of that from which the public gets its response and its value systems—either by acting along with or reacting to.

"Also, because of the circumstances of your love, there is a symbolic representation to the fact that you are of different racial stocks originally and that now you merge your love as in a sense all mankind is merging its genes and chromosomes to the oneness which is inevitable. It's not really fair that your love should have so much imposed upon it, but it must be a mark of greatness of your love to know that you must not only continue to love each other, but because circumstances beyond control—and all circumstances involved in real love are beyond control—make you representatives of Judaism and marriage to a world that watches with curiosity, with eagerness, almost with a will to see failure rather than success.

"An additional pressure is on you in knowing that because of the different racial backgrounds you are a symbol, too, of the success that must come from such unions. If you are true to the story of your love, then your social role in our times will be an important one. Important for the future of the amity of races.

"What I pray for you, May, and for you, Sammy, is the strength that you may fulfill either the public role or private role, because if you can do either, you will be doing both. If you are true to that which you have called upon yourselves or which has been thrust upon you by society, then your love will be a love story to join immortal love stories of the ages.

"May the blessings of the patriarchs and the prophets, may the blessings of God Almighty be upon you and may you be worthy, my dear friends, of a historic trust and a great love."

Mom and Dad's marriage was so controversial they required bodyguards for a time.

After that Rabbi Kramer led them into their "I do's." I turned to my father, who was smiling.

"Thank you Trace Face. That lifted my spirits. It energizes me to think of the good ole days. Your mom was glowing in every wedding photo."

"She was glowing all right! Glowing with a one hundred three degree fever," I said.

"It's true. Your mother was so sick. She was in bed before the ceremony and after!" Pop exclaimed.

"Mom said the doctor told her she had an intestinal flu and had to stay in bed."

"And your mother told the doctor: 'You're crazy! It's my wedding!'"

"Mom always told me, 'your poor father had to go to the reception by himself, without his bride!'"

"What she said to me after the reception, in her Swedish decoding process was, 'Poor Sharlie Brown had to go alone to his own wedding party!'"

"Sharlie Brown, that's funny. You were Charlie Brown, too. A solo groom at the Beverly Hilton Hotel with no bride and swarms of guests to entertain!" Among the guests were Peter Lawford and his wife, Diana Dors, Tony Curtis, Barbara Rush, Jack Kelly, Mr. and Mrs. Dean Martin, Peter Brown, Janet Leigh, Shirley MacLaine, Edward Robinson, Jr, Milton Berle, the list goes on and on.

The public outrage after the wedding was so vitriolic, my parents were forced to hire bodyguards—again! More frenzied hate letters, more death

threats. Uncle Frank was hosting Kennedy's inaugural party. Pop even got removed from the list of entertainers. He was deeply hurt by that. In her column, journalist Dorothy Kilgallen wrote at the time, "Scuttlebutt from the Clan indicates Frank Sinatra and chums will take over a whole floor of Washington's best hotels for the inauguration ceremonies in January. Big question: Since the nation's capital isn't very integrated will Sammy Davis Jr., be allowed to share a suite with his bride, May Britt?"

I started to think about my own interracial wedding decades later. My husband, Guy Garner, was Italian; I am mixed, so the potential for future hardship ran through my father's mind. Dad used to talk about his love for Guy, gave us his wisdom about interracial marriage: "Just remember, it's their problem, not yours."

When I got married, Pop and I had just overcome obstacles in our father-daughter relationship—my father had been too busy to attend childhood birthday parties, my college graduation, and such. To make up for the past, my father was determined to do everything right at my wedding. He watched *Father of the Bride* like he was studying for a role, to prepare for my wedding. It was sweet, and he nailed it.

I remember when my husband and I were at Pop's private pool at the Desert Inn one time in Vegas. We decide to head to the main pool to swim. Dad stopped us and screamed, "No!!!!!" Then he caught himself and said, "Sorry, kids, I forgot we're not in the '60s anymore . . . go on, have fun!"

✦✧✦

I glanced over at Pop in his chaise lounge. His head was down. I could see he was still thinking about not being invited to the JFK inaugural party. I tried to cheer him up, "So not long after your wedding to Mom, I was born! Tee hee!"

"July 5, 1961. Best day of my life after marrying your mom!" Pop perked up.

"Mom said she went to the bathroom and realized her water broke," I said.

"A couple of weeks early at that! We jumped in the car along with our close friends—and my book co-authors—the Boyars. Anyway, I drove to the hospital, your Mom sat next to me in the passenger seat—moaning."

"Mom said in the car on the way to the hospital, you heard on the radio that you were on the way to the hospital!" I said.

"Yeah, isn't that a kick? We all got a good laugh out of that one!" Pop chuckled. "Once we got to Cedars, your mom was given a spinal. In those days the fathers had to wait in the waiting room, so that's what I did."

"Mom says if you had been in the operating room, you would have fainted!" I said.

"Your mom couldn't be more correct!" Pop smiled.

"But when I first laid eyes on you in the private room, I got so teary eyed, I just couldn't believe how beautiful you were," Pop said.

"Mom said, all you kept saying was, 'she's so

LEFT: My parents had to wait so long to get married, my mother was already pregnant when they were wed. I was born in July 5, 1961, eight months after their marriage.

ABOVE AND RIGHT: Family photos with Mom, Dad, and my brother Mark, 1962.

beautiful, she's so beautiful . . .'" I replied.

"Correct again! But your beauty faded quick when you were a toddler, Trace Face," Pop joked. "You liked to pee on me when you were pissed!"

"But . . . for three days in that hospital, your mother and I were so touched, so moved by you, our first child, our only daughter, Tracey Hillivi Davis." [Hillivi was my Swedish grandmother's first name.]

"When we left the hospital, press was swarming everywhere. They kept asking 'What color is the baby?'" Pop said.

"I heard they asked, 'What color is IT?'" I chimed in.

"Even worse!" Pop exclaimed. "We climbed into our Rolls Royce and took off, thrilled to leave the press behind. You know, Trace, I never used to let those type of comments get to me. Even when my own people would complain to me about racism, I would always say, 'You got it easy. I'm a short, ugly, one-eyed, black Jew. What do you think it's like for me?'"

The nurse came out to give my dad some medication and check on him. Pop motioned her away, so we could continue our talk. He was enjoying our moment. He was having a good day, feeling better.

"Your mother and I spoke about adopting kids way back when we were dating. We both believed

My parents on the steps of the courthouse after adopting my brother Jeff, 1965.

in providing a good home for children in need. In November 1962, we adopted your brother, two-and-a-half-year-old Mark. A couple of years later, we adopted your brother Jeff. He was four months old. What joy they brought to our lives. What a kick to watch your white Swedish mom carting around three black children!" Pop said.

"The rainbow tribe," I replied.

"As I recall, only you got to meet your grandparents in Sweden before they passed away. Your mother took Jeff to Sweden but only to visit her sister. Her parents were already gone."

"Did you go on the Sweden trips, too?" I asked.

"Trace Face, I was working; my schedule was crazy hectic. First of all, even before you were born, I was juggling films in Hollywood, shows in Vegas, the Rat Pack gigs, *and* making albums! 1957 to 1960 was probably my busiest time with Decca Records, *ever*. I made a swinging album with the Count Bassie Band, two duet albums with Carmen McRae, worked with Mundell Lowe, had arrangements by Buddy Bregman. Rigid schedule."

"Sounds like a good gig with Decca Records, though. Why did you leave?" I asked.

"Uncle Frank. He created his own record label, Reprise Records. I left Decca; he left Capitol. Uncle Frank even got Count Bassie, Duke Ellington, Bing Crosby, and Dean Martin to sign on his label. Uncle Frank looked out for artists' rights, so we all felt safe. In our contracts, if you chose, recorded masters would become the property of the artist after a period of time, or you could cash out. Either way, Frank looked after us, took care of us. There was trust," Pop said.

"Trust is everything in the biz," I replied.

"Trust is everything in life. That's why I chose Marty Paich. I trusted his work with my buddy Mel Tormé on Bethlehem and Verve. Paich had this West Coast jazz–style approach to music. Together we made some of the best recordings of my career: *The Wham of Sam* and my hit single 'What Kind of Fool Am I?,' which was on the 1962 *Billboard* charts for fifteen weeks . . ."

"And won the Grammy for Record of the Year!" I added.

My father's musical recording career from 1961 to 1964 was at its height. He had Broadway show-stopper albums, a collaboration with Sam Butera and the Witnesses, a live album recorded at the Cocoanut Grove, an album of songs composed by Mel Tormé, one with Count Basie, and even the cast recording from his second Broadway musical, *Golden Boy*. In 1965, Pop became a Tony Award nominee for Best Actor in a Musical for *Golden Boy*.

"My schedule was tight, but I did my best to make time for your mom, too," Pop said. "We went to the rainy Hollywood premiere of *West Side Story* in December 1961. Not long after, at a New York nightclub, your mom impressed the crowds by dancing the Twist. She impressed me, too, since your mom had no rhythm at all."

"You go, Mom!"

"Never forget that April, columnist Hedda Hopper came up to me at the Sands and asked if me and

your mom were separating. Can you imagine? She heard a rumor, she said. I told her, 'Nothing could be further from the truth. I'm closing here and the next day we leave for Seattle for our first honeymoon,'" Pop said.

"In May, we even took a week off for a vacation in Rome where I was working. Your Swedish mother mispronounced almost everything in English. But I found it endearing. I called it the decoding process—one of the reasons I loved her so."

"But oddly enough, when it came to other foreign languages, she could translate anything. In Rome, she translated the Italian so well. I could never have gotten by without her. I remember joking with your mother, 'You're too powerful over here!'" Pop smiled.

"I really didn't like to travel without her to foreign countries, but when I did, I would always bring her back fabulous gifts. One time I was in Paris, I spent a fortune on some French couture Balmain dresses, coats—everything hand-sewn. Beautiful! When your mom found out how much it cost just to get the stuff out of Customs she almost cried!" Pop laughed.

"Don't' make me laugh!" I was chuckling.

"When you mother could join me in my travels, Lessie Lee took care of you kids like you were her own. She raised you children like my Mama raised me, over-protective!"

"My mama loved to tell this story: When I was

an infant she would stroll me down the streets of Harlem. When the other mothers would see her coming, they would exclaim, 'Here comes Rosa B with her Jesus!'"

"At least Mama didn't smother you in vats of Vaseline like Lessie Lee did to us!" I told Pop.

"Where's the vat!" My father shouted toward the kitchen, "Lessie Lee! Get the vat out, my daughter's got ashy black feet!" Pop said. In an instant, Lessie Lee marched outside with her vat of Vaseline. We all laughed.

"Lessie Lee, do you remember smothering so much Vaseline on my face, I could barely see?" I ask.

"Uh-huh." Lessie Lee's standard response.

"My vision was so blurred, I couldn't see my way back to the bed for ten minutes! No amount of blinking would get rid of that, it was like a coat on my eyeballs!"

"Uh-huh." Lessie Lee said again, and took the vat back into the house.

"I love Lessie Lee's strong-soulful-black-woman 'Uh-huh'—letting you know she's been around the block a few times. No explanation needed!" I said.

"I got that 'Uh-huh' from Lessie Lee when I told her that your mother and I were going to meet Martin Luther King for the first time. We attended a mass civil rights rally at Wrigley Field in Los Angeles. Lessie Lee's 'Uh-huh' translated to: it's about time you and Dr. King meet, no explanation needed!" Pop said.

In 1963 my father marched with Dr. King at the March on Washington. He campaigned relentlessly

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