

BETTYE COLEMAN

I'll try to be all very honest with you about it. There are certain passages (I think you'll find this to be true with most of the kids down at Synanon) that are just periods that are completely blocked out, you know. I have trouble on the recall of incidents and places or even feelings at the time. Whether they were painful, too painful to remember, I don't know. This has been a possible explanation.

I'm thirty-nine years old, and I was born in Kansas City, Missouri. I don't remember anything about Kansas City. I have a brother who's fourteen months younger than myself, and after his birth, my mother took us to our grandparents, who lived in Coffeyville, Kansas, a little town. My first memories are mostly of Coffeyville. I don't know anything about Kansas City.

I don't have any cousins or anything like that. To my knowledge, it was a family of seven aunts and uncles and my mother, who was the only one that had children. She had two. So we were kind of pets of the grandparents and these aunts and uncles.

Coffeyville, to my recollection, was a small little dusty town. Kansas was very hot. I can

remember hot summer days. My grandfather was a school teacher. In those days they had circuit school teachers, you know. They would get their horse and buggy and go out and teach. My grandmother was a seamstress, and she sewed for some of the better families in town and everything.

It was a mixed marriage. In those days, even, it was quite something. My grandfather kind of located us. Well, he went and bought the house and then he moved his family in, and it was quite controversial. This is information that I've learned later. I didn't know anything about this, then. But, seemingly, he was very well respected and this woman conducted herself very well, being very talented with a needle. In those days, women had seamstresses more than buying clothing out of stores and things, you know. The children were well-behaved and educated and they gradually got the respect of the community where they were living, especially the neighborhood where they were living. I don't know if it completely abated or whether there were feelings; but anyway, I grew up in this atmosphere of feeling very loved and wanted, spoiled.

I can remember a fenced-in yard. There was grass and pine trees and everything was brought in to us. We weren't encouraged too much to go out and

play with the other children. We had our own goat for a pet and a couple of dogs and a couple of cats, and at Easter time, they would think of little things. For instance, I remember this bunny, because my grandfather was telling us a story about the bunny rabbit. And Easter morning there was a knock on the door and they had this hare hooked to a little cart filled with eggs, and he bumped into the room, you know, and made life so real for me.

Looking back on it, I can remember remarks that would be made when I would go out. I can remember people pawing over me, because they dressed me like a little doll from the bottom out. I can't recall anything bad, but I can just recall that these certain little incidents, I'd say up from whatever time I start remembering to the age of about five or six, just about school age, were all good. I can't ever remember being hungry or spanked or anything like that.

When I was five years old, about five and a half, I ran into my first racial issue. I didn't quite understand it, but I knew something. . .I had a feeling about it. My grandfather had taken me uptown and apparently ran into a friend of his. And as usual, this man picked me up and he said, "Oh my God! What a cute little pickaninny," and my grandfather snatched me.

It was just the tone of the man. I had no idea of what the word meant. It was the protective way my grandfather sort of snatched me and said, "Well, this is my grandbaby."

I just had a feeling, you know. I had the feeling my grandfather was mad at this man about something. I tried to ask him what was pickaninny, because everyone has always said, "Bettye," or "Baby" or something up to this time, and it was a different name.

I don't know if it started before then, or if he had these plans, or if it started at that moment. It seemed that my training period began. I can remember then, of things kind of changing, of being taught to read, for instance. I had to get my books and my grandfather would study with me; and the old-fashioned stroking of the pull of the pen, so that I could learn to write legibly.

Then I remember starting in school, and, I don't know, things kind of changed. I have a feeling . . . Later, it was said to me that they were pushing me in a direction so that I could, somehow, rise above this fact. If I was well-educated, or if I was taught to be a lady, or something of this kind, it was going to help me through all these rough times ahead. It was very concentrated, this period of training. I



was given piano lessons. And on my seventh birthday I got a little gold wrist watch, which was almost unheard of for kids in those days. All of the material things and a heavy concentration of mental attitudes and feelings was crammed right in. If I wanted anything, from that time on, it had to be with a question, "May I?" or "Thank you."

I was very quick when I was a child, and I learned very easily. I can remember being called out in front of company to recite something I had learned, or play my little piece on the piano, or whatever it might be; and I rather liked this. There was a little part of me that kind of liked to show off.

Then it kind of gets vague up until my grandmother, when I was about eight, had a stroke. My mother would periodically appear, and, during summer vacation interval, through all of this, the different aunts and uncles who were established around Oklahoma and Kansas would ask for us and it would be a different environment, but the same thing. They didn't have any children and we would come home with more clothing than we took away. One was a farm life, where I learned to milk cows and feed the chickens, not because of necessity, but because it was fun to do these things.

Grandmother then began teaching me how to can fruits. I had a little stool, and I would get up on

this stool and she'd teach me old-fashioned recipes. She was kind of the central figure in the neighborhood, the kind that always had a pot of soup to take the neighbor and I was always along. So I began a training of learning how to be a woman--cleaning house, taking care of my own clothing, and cooking--even at a very early age, they were preparing me for womanhood and this was one of the qualifications. This was all in Coffeyville, Kansas.

Now the picture changes at around eight--after my grandmother took sick. My mother had made her way to Omaha, Nebraska about this time, and it was decided that she should take the children back. She wanted us or something, but anyway, there was going to be a transition and we were to join her.

I remember there was something else we'd always talk about. It's interesting, now that I look back on my childhood, that they never took us any place. For instance, from Coffeyville back to Oklahoma. If we wanted to go and visit a relative of some kind, they thought we were grown up enough to do it, you know. They would take us to the bus or train or however we were going, and I remember they'd put this little tag around my neck. I'd have my purse and my gloves and my little brother by the hand, and someone would be at the end of the line to meet us when we got

there. We travelled. I guess I've always been a woman. I had the responsibility. I can remember this because we were going all the way to Nebraska, wherever that was, and, of course, my mother was going to meet us at the other end of the line.

Went to Omaha. We arrived, and my mother had set up a little cafe or eating house of some kind and she was working there. She had never really had the whole, the full, responsibility of her children, twenty-four hours a day, every day and every day, and every day, and as a result there'd be conflict. There was a conflict with her work, and I can remember her discussing schools to put us in. As a result, I was put in a Catholic school, Saint Benedict's, in Omaha. And I can remember my mother coming to see me and taking me out on trips around town, shopping, and things like that. But she's still rather vague. She doesn't really come into the picture. In fact, I never called her "Mother." I used her first name. She was like an older sister or someone. A pretty little thing that always showed up periodically, and I knew it was my mother, but I had closer feelings for my grandparents.

Those years from around eight to ten were filled with, I believe, the beginnings of a lot of conflicts with me. My brother and I were separated. By the

way, he's at Synanon, now, and we've been talking. They're kind of vague. He has different recollections of Omaha than I do. We were discussing this. He can remember things I absolutely cannot remember, and I have told him things that he says he has no memory of. So, apparently there must have been some kind of. . .I didn't like the school, or I was in unfamiliar territory. Something, it was just. . .I can remember the Catholic School. That's about the only thing that sticks out in my mind, and my mother. She had remarried, and the stepfather, was running on the road. He was a cook or something, and he would kind of appear every once in a while or something.

And yet, I can remember boxes still arriving from home, clothing. My grandmother had switched trades. I refer to my grandmother's as "home." I had an aunt that had made her way to California by that time, and lived in Long Beach. She had become a domestic and was working for some people, a private family, who had decided to come to California. She'd been working for them ever since she was sixteen and they brought her out with them. So she was living in Long Beach at the time. Another aunt (they had begun to spread out) had gone to New York, and, I don't know, I guess I must have felt uneasy about this, somehow. Things were not familiar any more.

All through this, I still continued my schooling. I studied, and at that age, I wanted to be a school teacher like my grandfather. I was reaching toward this and I studied through school. I can't ever remember roller skating, or riding a bicycle, or going swimming. I can't do these things today, and yet it seems that I can remember getting skates for Christmas. Seems like there was a bicycle there. I don't know if I had hurt myself or if I had fallen. I don't know. I can't bring up any memories of picnics or fishing trips or something during these few years in Omaha. I'm aware of them, and yet they're not too clear to me, so I won't keep dwelling on them.

It's interesting, when I get to talking about it, sometimes I'm thinking, "Well, maybe I'll remember a little more this time," or something like that.

When I was about eleven, ten and a half or eleven, I entered into womanhood. I started having my monthly periods, and I can remember having severe cramps, which used to bother me all the time. It was explained to me that they would get better. But I'd be in a lot of pain, and I remember I didn't want to grow up if that's the way it was going to be.

My mother started having headaches. Seems that she had separated again from this husband, this second

marriage she's made, and there was trouble. There was just always some kind of trouble going on. She started having these terrific headaches and business was bad. It was kind of during the depression and pennies began to count. Every penny. I remember she went to work in a mattress factory one time, and it was very hard work for her. I can remember the cold winters of going to school, and fixing breakfast for my brother and myself, because my mother had to go to work. It would be cold and I remember dreading to get out in the weather and this kind of thing. And yet, I can remember warm clothes to wear and everything. It was a kind of a lonely period.

Anyway, my mother wrote to her sister (the one that I just told you about that was here in Long Beach) and I guess she threw up her hands and said, "You know, I'm in trouble. I have two kids. I'm not doing so well and I have these terrific headaches. I don't know what to do."

Her sister said, "Well, come to California. We have very good doctors here, and I'll be closer to you and I can give you a hand."

We came; packed up again and moved to California. It was a good trip, but I can remember my mother having these terrific headaches, even on the train coming out. We moved over into Temple District in

Los Angeles and I can remember my aunt sort of hovering around for the first few days, getting us set up. We were in a completely strange part of the country. I really didn't know anyone, and my mother was getting sicker and sicker. She would cry and she'd hold her head. So my aunt took her to the General Hospital for an examination.

In the meantime, we got established in school. I went to Central Junior High and my brother started Roosevelt Grammar School. As I said, she took her to the hospital and they told her there, after several examinations, that she had a tumor on the brain. She'd have to be operated on immediately. That's what was causing the pressure.

So, there was a lot of conflict at this time. She hated to go into the hospital to have an operation. My aunt was in Long Beach. What was going to happen to the children? And I can remember huddles, talking, and my aunt saying, "Well, it's no good if you just lay here and die," and yak, yak, yak.

I'd lay in bed and I became so frightened. I started thinking, "Suppose my mother would die at. . ."

You know, I'm just here. Well, she did have the operation and, of course, I don't know whether she took in a lot of her fears or whether there was a slip of the knife. My mother still has a question

mark behind the loss of her eye-sight. It was over two years before they would even give her an official release from the hospital. She came out from under the anesthesia in a sort of a grey fog. From that time on until this day, the nerves just slowly died in the eye. When they opened the head, there was no tumor, and that was the beginning of her long seizure of illness, to a certain extent, and blindness.

So that was quite a turning point in my life. My mother was very upset. She just didn't know what to do. She was rather sick and she stayed in the hospital almost a couple of months before she was released. In the meantime, this neighbor woman. . . We lived in a kind of duplex. She was upstairs and we lived down stairs, and she consented to keep an eye on us. My aunt had to keep her job. As I said, it was during those years where pennies counted. She sent out an SOS to the other sisters and brothers and they retaliated by sending small donations of money and clothing and things to help out, but no one came. She would, in turn, give it to this woman for the weekly food and she would try to come up. She would try to come up at least twice a week, plus go see her sister at the hospital and keep her job. I can remember the day that my mother came home. I can remember at this time consciously crying. I



would go to bed and cry at night and being so grown-up about it, this one thing.

"You kids come up and sleep with me," and I would say, "No. I can take care of the house until my mother comes back. I'm a big girl," and washing and ironing and actually cleaning, going through the motions.

Sort of a defense barrier went up. I was determined that I was going to make it, regardless. Of course, I just wasn't aware of the responsibility I was taking on. I had this feeling, and she would keep a check on us and at night; she would see that we were locked in and everything; but I refused to go upstairs and sleep in her room. I couldn't do it.

They brought my mother home after a couple of months. Her head was still bandaged--this raw, gaping wound in her head. Then it became a series of going to school, taking my mother back to the clinic on the days that my aunt couldn't take her, preparing food for her, really cleaning the house, management of money, trying to talk to her about it.

When my mother came back home, I ended up calling this woman my aunt. She wasn't my aunt, but she was really a friend in need. Still, she was working at the time, also, and had a husband who was ill. It was quite a family flat there: her husband

was upstairs sick; my mother was downstairs sick; and there were two children. I think it may have been the beginning of my aunt's illness. She was really. . .I can remember her being very harried and always on the run. Getting the streetcar, either coming or going from Long Beach (she didn't drive), and a long series of doctors. All the way to Pasadena for shock treatment, ending up going to San Francisco to the Green Brothers, specialists for eyes. It was a kind of horrible whirlwind there.

And the school authorities finding about this because of some absences that I had from school: that this woman was ill and losing her eyesight with two teen-age children. Then the problem came up, should they place us in foster homes and put her in a home. This was my first initiation in California bureaucracy and politics, social service agencies.

During this time, I kind of lost track of my brother, somehow. He went to school. He was selling papers, but he started associating outside with another factor of kids. During all of these little troublous times up to this point, at about twelve, my associations with other children had always been kind of hand-picked by the family. I don't know. For some reason, they were trying to push me, as I say, in a certain direction.

I can't ever remember living in a complete "black" neighborhood. Somehow, we always found the beginning and the ending of it, the small interracial neighborhood. There's one everywhere. And always being told, you know, that you should be somebody; you're going to be somebody. Yet, my mother is rather liberal. She can admit anyone into her immediate circle, or she would allow us to. It wasn't the rich and poor situation. It was more-or-less where you were going. If the kid was very ragged, but was scrubbing floors and working hard to finish his education, he was the welcome guy. If he was rich and was a slob, she didn't want him. We're kind of getting off on a tangent.

Anyway, life seemed to kind of settle into a groove, after about that first year. My mother was very depressed, of course. Finally working it out with the school authorities to extend my lunch hour for fifteen minutes, and taking gym right after lunch to allow that fifteen minute period. In the meantime, I'd graduated [from Junior High School]. I had already started high school in Omaha, but they don't have high here, so I had to go back to the ninth grade. After all, I was only eleven years old, and they thought that was a little young for high school. So I graduated and I started into Belmont. I was

about twelve, in the tenth grade.

After about a year of these doctors and things, and late nights and trying to study my lessons and everything, the position of my mother and myself somehow became reversed. She kind of became the child and I became the mother and took over the reins. My aunt would have conferences with me. Something inside of me took over. I can remember then, I was beginning not to have such a great need to help my mother, but just to do the things quickly to get her out of the way, so that I could do what I had to do. It's only lately that I've been aware of this, how I really just took over. I shopped and cleaned and washed and I found myself telling her things to do when I started off from school in the evening.

"Would you make the bed," or "Be sure and sit in the yard and," or, "Get your sun." "Be sure and take your medicine. I'll put it right by the bed," and I'd go off to school, and run back home during the lunch hour. Belmont was only about a fifteen-minute walk if you walked fast enough, and I'd check on her for lunch, rush back to school, finish the day, come home, start the cycle over again.

During this time, I really had no childhood-- I was much too busy. And my brother had taken another direction, somehow, and had gotten into trouble,

broken into an ice-cream truck or something, and so something else emerged. We had to go through the whole juvenile bit. I think he was only thirteen, fourteen, something like that, and they sent him to a boys' camp. Something else was added: visiting him up in Calabasas, California; trying to go see him at least once a month and taking my mother. There are so many odd tangents. I can't quite remember all of them. I can only remember being very, very busy, and suddenly being awfully, awfully tired of it and not knowing quite what to do about it.

My aunt then started thinking in terms of buying a home, since my mother was going to be an invalid and the children were kind of harried and tarried. She thought that if she would buy a piece of property and get us all under one roof and somehow get us set up, things would be better than this running situation. Money was being wasted.

Somehow, during all this period, I can remember a violin emerged. I bought a violin for my brother and he had music lessons. A piano appeared and I had piano lessons again, which I hated at this time; and dancing lessons--I went to dance school. I look back on it, and I really don't know how I had the time to do it. I can't even tell you. All I know is, I had a certain urgency. The things that had been

pounded into me as a child--I was in a terrible hurry, all of a sudden, to do it. I wanted to speak well, dress well, become talented, highly educated. Somehow I guess I had the feeling this would take me away from it all, you know. And, again, slowly threaded through this, I can remember Easter and Christmas time. These aunts and uncles never forgot, but they never came. Just packages, and Special Delivery envelopes with money in them or something. Not quite being able to cash the checks and having to take my mother because I was a minor.

Anyway, my brother went to this boys' camp, and then a new element came into the neighborhood. I was really alone for the first time since the Nebraska episode when we'd been separated. In fact, when we were smaller, we used to dress alike and everything. People would think we were twins, and we had a very close relationship going on, even a neurotic thing. We'd learned to depend on each other so much. It was a sort of a three-ring-circus, really, a dependency that went one, one to one.

And a new element entered the neighborhood. A colored man moved in just before I was ready to graduate from high school. His name was Ben Carter and he had a lot of ideas. It was the beginning, I guess, of a new era in motion pictures, of wanting

better parts for Negroes. He was very talented. He had three scholarships in music, was from the east, a little town in Illinois--Aurora, Illinois, or something. I can't quite remember his moving in the neighborhood or anything. All I know is, one day there was a rumor floating around the neighborhood that there's a movie agent that has moved in and they're going to make a picture called Green Pastures, and they have a lot of, what they call atmospheric work--you know, fill-in parts. You go down and sign up, you can make. . . I think they were paying twelve dollars a day then or something. And I thought, "How exciting, twelve whole dollars a day!"

I remember timidly going in this little office and asking, "Is this the place where you can sign up and make the money?" and his asking me how old I was and I lied. I think you had to be sixteen. I'm not quite sure. I know there's a minor law for kids working in movies. Anyway, I told him, of course, I was. This was how I met this man.

I can remember I did go to work in this picture and I made this money. It was only three or four days or something like that, but I got this check and it was fifty or sixty dollars or seventy-five or something, which was my first big earning, you know.

It was very impressive to me and I said, "Jesus.

I'm on the wrong track! School teachers! I'm going to be a movie star," and I got involved in it.

I always have liked to read and scribble around writing. I don't consider myself a writer, but being very lonely I think that might have had something to do with it. I have a habit of doodling now. I could write the things I would feel about my mother and other situations without having to say them out, because it wasn't polite, you see. So it was a little habit and I keep scraps of paper all the time.

I got so I haunted this poor man's office. Was there any parts? Anything happening? Right from school, I'd make a detour by and see what was going on. I started meeting some people in the field of entertainment and I became better acquainted with this man. For some reason, I could talk to him. I guess he was really kind of bored with a little kid always yakking because he had his eyes sort of set on another goal.

I remember I asked him for a job and I told him, "I think this is very fascinating. I'd like to come down, answer your phone, and go to the movie studios with you," and so forth and so on.

In the meantime, my mother had heard these rumors and she was quite concerned because this man was a homosexual. The reputation, you know, and he



smoked.

"I don't want you hanging around that place," and of course she couldn't know. I can remember consciously lying to her, inventing little trips, places I had to go, just to go down to this office.

And, finally, he said, "All right."

I have no idea how I interested this man. Maybe it was a "younger sister" thing. He was thirty-three years old. Maybe it was my constant struggle or the things that I verbalized to him, of some of my longings and dreams and plans and I would always say to him, "You know, I'm only going to marry a rich man, so that I can buy my mother a house and get somebody to take care of her." This is the way my dream would go.

"I'm going to travel. I'm going to go to Europe." Even then, I was wanting to get away from it. I didn't know how, but that was it. I was going to put my mother somewhere. The guilt was so much, I couldn't just walk off. I had to fantasize riches enough to set her up properly and then get away from it.

And he kind of became interested. He'd look over my lessons, and this is how I found out that he had graduated from college himself and had several degrees. So he would study with me and we would

cut it up. He had an automobile, and I finally told him about my brother, and he said, "Well, I'll be glad to drive you up, or I'll get someone to drive you. Can you drive?"

"No, I can't."

He said, "Well, once you get your mother's permission for a driver's license, if I know that you can really drive, I'll let you use the car; but in the meantime, I'll take you."

So he took us up several times, my mother and myself, and we went to Calabasas to see my brother.

It's not my story, but it involves me. It was true that he did have the homosexual tendencies, and as a result he got involved with some parents and a couple of young boys in the neighborhood.

He had laughingly said to me two or three times, "You know, if you could accept me as I am, and I could accept you. Frankly, I'm afraid of you, although you're just a baby. I've never had any kind of a relationship with a woman in my life, and I'm thirty-three years old. But I'm going to be rich and famous some day. How would you like to marry me?"

And I'd say, "Fine."

I went to school one day, and I looked up and there were two large police officers and a police matron. I was frightened to death. I couldn't

imagine what in the world had happened. They took me from school, back home to my mother's house, and wanted to know if I knew this man. How well did I know him? Had he ever been intimate with me? Yak, yak, yak. I had no idea what was happening. I had a feeling, though. I wasn't an idiot. As I say, I was pretty smart when I was a kid, observing things. "Old Ben's got himself into some trouble," and I consciously lied for him. In fact, I said that I had been intimate with him, hoping that it would counterbalance this thing he had going with the boys. As a result, all I did was hang him more because I was underage, but I didn't know this at the time. The truth of the matter was, he'd never touched me. They told me they'd come back the next morning and take me downtown and I was to sign a complaint; go to the District Attorney's office or something. They didn't take me then, because my mother would be left alone in the house. So they said that they would come back and take me the next day, or to be there.

In the meantime, Ben got out on bail that night. He had a hurried conference with his lawyer and yak, yak, yak. And I told them what I had told the police officers. Anyway, that very same night, it ended up with my mother, Ben Carter, the attorney, and myself rushing off in the middle of the night to Yuma, Arizona, to get married. It was very abrupt. I can

remember I didn't feel married, because when we got back to Los Angeles, we were so tired. He took my mother and I into the place where we were living, and he said, "I'll see you later on tonight."

You know, he was very casual. I said, "Yes. I'll see you tonight."

My only thought was that I had missed school and they were going to be after me again. So that's how exciting my first marriage was.

Within a week or so after the marriage, my brother came home. We had a family unit again. My husband bought a home. I moved in with him. He insisted that I finish high school. I got married in April, finished high school in June, which was a couple of months later, and my birthday was in August, which was a few months later, and I was eighteen. I was married at seventeen, finished school.

My life has always been just boom, boom, boom; you know, one transition to another. I entered into a completely new phase of living. He began to get a few breaks and make money. He began to sign up different talent around the country on a ten per cent basis. You know how agents are. He was the meteor that streaked across the sky, because for a period of about a year, everything he touched turned to money. He began the Hall Johnson Choir and these

are various things within the Negro element. Bought a lovely big home over on Washington Boulevard, right off Washington and Harvard, a white neighborhood. It was around 1939. It was still predominantly white. I had a sixteen-room house, a car, three servants, the whole facade. A show place. Maybe it was the artistic personality that he was. He was rather flamboyant, liked all this attention and the show and everything.

Of course, it was like a fairyland to me. A very abrupt transition of being able to walk into the May Company or Bullocks or wherever, with a charge account, and get the things I wanted. He gave me a car on my eighteenth birthday, and a fur scarf. You know, the material things, and I was just eighteen. In the Negro society, we were invited places and entertained. I found my training came in very well; so were the social graces, and being able to cook, although I had a housekeeper. It flattered my ego tremendously. It compensated for the fact that they were constantly whispering behind my back as his reputation spread. So in one direction, if it did, also in another. There was even a lot of talk that I might have a sexual problem, myself, as there would be no other way I'd be interested in this particular kind of man.

This went on for about two years, two very good years of going around places, seeing a lot of people, as I said, living in pure fairyland world, with no responsibilities for a change. I would then drop over and see my mother, "Lady Bountiful Bettie," pick her up in my automobile, take her, or have her over with my brother to see me.

And then the twenties. I can remember, I guess I was twenty years old before I consciously began to want somebody to love me. I'd been doing things and been so busy, but I began to feel like a woman, I guess. I had a husband; I wanted him to love me. And a mother. You know, I felt she loved me, but I wanted something else. I guess maybe it was a sexual gratification with one man, because interwoven through this I had had sexual experiences. I wasn't a virgin by any means. But it wasn't right. I think that was the beginning, about twenty, the first time in my life of consciously wanting something of my own. I don't know what I wanted, but I was dissatisfied.

As a result, it brought about a separation, because I tried desperately to make my husband fall in love with me erotically and he wasn't capable. It caused a lot of friction. We separated. He died shortly after. After the estate and everything was

settled, I had a small amount of money that I got out of it. As I said, most of it was show, you know. We were mortgaged to the hilt, but there was some cash after it was settled, and this dream finally came true.

My aunt had made a small down payment on a house and I was able to throw a few bucks in the pot and we got this house set up for my mother and brother and myself. I kind of went on a rampage then. I decided to take a vacation and go back and see an uncle that I hadn't seen for a long time, but I'd been in close contact with all these years, back in Oklahoma. My brother was growing up. He was about ready to go through high school. He was a track star. He kind of settled down a little bit and was sticking pretty close to home. I kind of dumped my mother on him and gave him the responsibility for a change, of doing things for her.

And I took off, went on vacation. Went into a wild period then, of, well, a kind of breakthrough. I went back to Oklahoma and I learned how to make home brew. I learned how to gamble. I played cards. Life was exciting. I just went blooey, dancing, drinking, the whole works. Bored with a kind of a detached thing, you know, live it up!

I continued this cycle, came back to Los Angeles,

and I can remember I decided I was going to become a madame. I was going to work in a whorehouse. At this time, threaded through all this conflict and misery, I can't ever consciously remember being hungry or having a need of a piece of clothing or something. We weren't wealthy. We weren't well fixed. Just somehow, it was always there, from one source or another, so there was really no economic pressure to make me have to go out and become a prostitute and I had no introduction. Drugs hadn't even come up in the scene yet. It was like I was released into a complete psychopathic behavior that I would admit, and wanted, just consciously wanted to have no feelings, no responsibilities, to do what I wanted to do .

In Laurel Canyon, the Communist parties were just beginning to start, and it was very smart to take a Negro along in the group, you know, to prove how broad-minded you were. They were slightly tinged with red in those days, and I was a willing participant in these brawls that we'd have, and posing in the nude for artists.

I don't know. I went to work in this whorehouse. I was the only colored there; made very good money; had no need for it; gave it away; spent it foolishly; went to race tracks. I can't quite remember. I know



it was a kind of a liberated period, where everything and anything went, regardless of the mores or morals or anything.

This went on for about three years, four years. I smoked a little marijuana during these years, but I don't even think it's worth mentioning. It was just an introduction to these parties or something. You sit around; you puff on a marijuana cigarette, and it was forgotten. Nothing took effect in those years. Drinking. . .I didn't become an alcoholic. I still don't like alcoholic beverages to this day; but it was just being there, doing like in Rome, whatever the Romans were doing, and it had no effect. I soon became bored and I tried to find another phase to go into.

My mother called me and had a good talk with me and said, "Well, you know. What are you going to do? Why don't you go back and get into college? Why don't you go to college? Why don't you go get a trade? Why don't you do something? You're headed for trouble. I can see it. What are you looking for in life? What do you want?"

Then she became a big counselor and advisor. I kind of remember me saying that I don't anybody to tell me what to do any more. I didn't want any more responsibility, but she convinced me. As a result,

I went to beauty school. I spent a year there getting my license. I've been a licensed beautician ever since. I didn't do too much with it.

Got married again, about this time. The war was on. It was very glamorous. This uncle that I had previously visited in Oklahoma had moved to San Francisco, so he was a little closer. My aunt was still in Long Beach. In fact, she worked for these people all her life. She ended up working for them thirty-eight years when she died.

My uncle, who was always the kind of black sheep in the family, was my favorite. I talk about him often because he is my favorite. He would get drunk and raise hell, but he would always work. He was a working man. He wasn't a criminal or anything. He was an alcoholic, and his life was always so exciting. He was always in hot water, you know. They were always talking about Joe. Joe was always into something, and as a result, he had a lot of glamor for me.

During the war, my brother enlisted in the Navy. He enlisted in the Navy and he was gone again. I was kind of free floating. My mother had found herself a companion then, during these years, and remarried when I was about twenty. The same husband that she has now, and she was still rather fortunate. She was losing her sight in one sense, but this man

had property in Los Angeles. A hard-working, kind of timid little fellow, who couldn't quite believe that a woman really loved him for himself. They hit it off very well and she moved and set up a kind of a second life for herself.

I was still free-lancing. I got married, for no particular reason, just to get married. I can remember thinking at twenty-six, "Jesus, I've done everything. I've been everything, I've done everything. It's all over. What's the use?"

Feeling very depressed. I didn't get along very good with my second husband. He was very stormy. I had marital troubles, he was chasing around. We were only married about a year and a half, something like that, when he was killed on the Hollywood Freeway. So I was widowed again by death, and I remember thinking to myself, "Well, this is it. You're looking at thirty."

You know, I felt this. "Better settle down and do something for yourself." I'd been working in beauty shops, more-or-less at my own discretion. I'd work; I'd save a little money; I'd blow it. There were no pressures. In the meantime, this house that my mother had moved from, which is kind of a family thing--my aunt's investment and the few dollars I had--was kind of the home station for my brother

and myself. My mother gave us the house completely furnished and everything when she married and moved away.

So again, there was no real pressure of having to think. I can remember kind of listening to some of the girls talk about kicks that they would have and I was still looking for something, kind of an escape. They talked about pills and pot, and there was a new kick on the scene. I guess it had been around all the time. It was just my time to hear it, and my introduction into drugs, finally.

Well, I can't quite remember when and how. All I know is, after the death of my second husband, within six months, I somehow found myself going through a ritual of getting up and fixing every morning before I went to work. I've always been withdrawn. I had to associate with a gang for a contact, but I learned to fix myself very quickly in the game, so that I could purchase my drug, go home, do it behind a closed door and put on my uniform, go to work at the shop. I didn't want the association bit, you know. It's like the alcoholic that drinks in secret at home rather than sit in bars.

There was a five-thousand-dollar settlement after my husband died, that I got from the city, because he was killed on the freeway. This took

several months, but eventually there was a five-thousand-dollar settlement dumped in my lap. This was some more money to be used at my discretion. It went down the drainpipe the wrong way.

In the meantime, my brother had come back from the Navy. He had had a very bad marriage which only lasted a few months. I don't know when he took his first fix, but I can remember, somehow, in this addiction period, we ended up kind of like at the same place for the same thing. He's been introduced to drugs, and I thought I had hidden mine so well from him, somehow. Then we combined forces again. It was kind of estrangement of about four years. We were there and we weren't there. I was doing things and he was getting acquainted with another type of person than I was. And yet, I can see they were both detrimental to us, you see. When we found we had a common bond, again, which was the addiction, we became closer than ever--two heads are better than one, you know, that kind of thing.

I was about twenty-eight when I entered into this drug addiction. The next nine years, ten years, you can say, it's the old story over again: slowly deteriorating from the work habits in the shop, to going out for other means of money, and not being able to keep the habit up. More tension, more guilt,

all piling, pushing, a lonely feeling.

I think I was about thirty-one the first time I ever went to jail, and there were a few marks on my arm. I began meeting a completely new element in jail. The girls that really had to grub for it the hard way, being one of their kind, and yet, not one of their kind. I had this feeling all my life, from an early child, of always wanting me to be, and my wanting to be, and yet having one big identification, which is a black skin. And yet never feeling quite black and never able to be white. A lot of tension and conflict that I tried to completely forget, thinking, "Maybe this is the end point. Just stay loaded."

You know, that's a thing you aren't to do; but it led me through the County Jail. I haven't done too much time. Out of ten years of addiction I was actually sentenced to maybe a hundred and twenty days, all told. I spent a voluntary eight months in Lexington, Kentucky, trying to beat a case. I had a possession case, and I did probation.

Those nine years, I think, you could say are pretty much the same story that you'll get in Synanon, of slowly more and more drawing into a capsule, shame and guilt. I even walked with my head down. It became impossible for me to talk to anyone. I was

afraid. I couldn't look at myself. And yet, I couldn't help myself. I was physically addicted and I must have my medicine, somehow.

I learned how to steal, but I'm a lousy thief. I got fifteen days in the City Jail for stealing a ham or something. I decided then, "This is not for me. I'm a lousy thief." So I became a peddler.

Most addicts who use, sell drugs on the side, but the money element entered into it for me. I thought, "Well, gee! Here's another phase. I can have my kicks and I can make some money. I don't have to go stand on my feet all day."

Through a jailhouse connection I was able to meet a pretty big pusher. He was a white man, a very young, handsome man and, ironically enough, another homosexual. I was attracted to him and for a few months there was a little distrust. Then we had a very odd relationship for about four years of being sweethearts and yet not sweethearts, business partners but yet not quite business partners. Sometimes he'd get his money from me. Sometimes he wouldn't. I think I destroyed more drugs for him than I made money, and yet he would take money out of his own pocket. Curiously enough, he tried to encourage me to quit. It was a paradox. Stop using the drugs, but he'd make them available to me.

Dixon: Was he a user?

Coleman: No. Just a pusher. In fact, he had a front going. He had a decorator business type of thing, nice car, worked. I introduced him to a lot of my friends. I set up my own little change. I talked him into a business venture and I went out and he got some pusher. He had about seven or eight on the line that I would be the intermediary of supplying and making collections to him. A kind of a foolish thing to do.

He was kind of comfortable. I couldn't even see the reality that, of course, this won't last. It was kind of a comfortable thing. That's where I got my possession. It was handling drugs, although I was only busted with the five capsules, which was nothing. It was just my fix for the next morning. I pleaded. They had the right drawings. If they had only waited a little longer, they would have caught me with quite a load of drugs.

Then, of course, my reputation began to swell, because there's a part of me that's always been rather fair in dealings with other people. I like to rationalize that it was this childhood training. You treat people like you want them to treat you, and even through addiction and everything, to me it was strictly business. I would rather fix someone than to trust him for a buck.



I even got my brother involved in it. He was selling drugs and had these hassles and everything. I had my status all of a sudden. I was somebody. Several of the kids in the club now, used to purchase drugs from me. I was kind of an oddball; didn't quite trust men; wasn't quite man or woman; never had any children; had this terrible neurotic relationship my own brother. He was my lover, boy friend, father, everything in the male figure.

My mother was still hovering around the background. I would let her live vicariously through me. I certainly informed her of all the things that I was doing, as a kind of punishment. I took her right down with me, you know, having her bumbling up to the jails to visit me, holding money for me that I made selling drugs and so on.

That took me through about ten horrible years; good years, you know, and bad years. I came back from Lexington winding it up. I'd been to a psychiatrist. They'd had family councils. What are we going to do? What happened? Where did we fail? Both of these kids were always in trouble. They're using drugs. What happened?

I'd feel guilty after sessions of this kind and I'd say, "Well, send me to a doctor."

I even committed myself to Camarillo Hospital.

I mean, "I'll go take the cure." All addicts promise this, you know. "If you just help me this time, I'll do the rest."

I pretty well made the rounds, and yet, I think I'm very lucky. I wasn't too badly hurt in reality. I like to blow it up, but it was "bad" and it was "good." I know other people who had really been bounced around, physical violence, the whole bit. I've never been hit or anything, you know. I was scarred, but it was the damage that I did to myself-- the interior damage.

My brother, for instance, wasn't quite so fortunate as myself. He had committed robbery, and had been travelling in a "rougher society" than I had. As a result, he had been sentenced to the penitentiary and had been released. I got up to visit him a couple of times. Of course, after coming back from serving his time, he got involved with drugs again. His parole officer had an inkling that he might be using drugs again and told him of a little place down on the beach called Synanon. Addicts were trying to help themselves. This was down in Ocean Park. I remember being loaded and talking about it. My brother thought it was rather amusing, you know; thinking maybe he should come because his parole officer was getting hip to him.

But I said, "Now, I think I'll go down there."

In the meantime, I had had another marriage. This one was completely ridiculous. I didn't even try to make a success of it; lived with him about six weeks. I knew nothing about him. We didn't even try to make a marriage. I had married him loaded, dashed across the desert back to Arizona, married, and came back. It was such a complete fiasco that, even in my addiction, I knew it was nothing. It was just this search that I was continuing since I was twenty, of trying to establish some kind of personal relationship for myself. I never used his name, as a matter of fact. Anyway, I remember I had another boy friend at this time and I had went off on one more little tangent before reaching Synanon. I'll be to Synanon in just a minute.

There was a movement slowly filtering through Los Angeles, the Muslims, and I started attending the meetings. There was something that struck a chord in me. It hit me where I lived, particularly because I never had too much of an association with Negroes, it's the feeling I mean. They would preach love of brother. I couldn't go along completely with a lot of the facets of the program but this one hit me where I lived. I thought maybe if I could really establish an identity, being a Negro with other

Negroes, accepting them, loving them, going through these motions, somehow I might solve some of this conflict I had in myself. I had always had feelings along this line, feelings of prejudice and resentment toward whites, having a tendency, especially during the addiction period, to reach out for anything outside of myself to hang all my "misfortunes" on. This was just as good as any. So I became interested and I started attending, and for a short period there, very short, but for a short period, I was able to abstain from drugs. I got a sort of push in the right direction. I think I started to, then, really accept myself for what I was, whatever that was. It was like a little oil on the troubled waters for the time being; but then it became turbulent again.

Getting back to Synanon, and my first introduction. This young man that I was involved with at the time was a very active leader in the Temple and we used to attend meetings together and so forth.

I remember getting loaded this night, and saying, "Well, I need help. If I can get clean, then I could really participate in this movement and find a life's work for myself."

I came to Synanon. For the first time in my life, I thought I was pregnant and I came down to kick for many reasons. I didn't come down really to

get well, I came down to kick a habit so that I could join my Brothers and go to Nigeria, or someplace, and do missionary work. I was going to love all black mankind and help raise them above the mass of man.

So I came to Synanon, down at the old club. I was awfully sick. Having drugs at my disposal, I was still selling drugs when I came here. Had a pretty bad habit, and I had had a doctor tell me that I was pregnant. I didn't quite believe him, but I had the appearances. Whether this was a psychological thing or not, there was a slight swelling and the whole bit. I got sick and asked Chuck if this man could pick me up. They didn't have any hospitals or anything then, like they have doctors who have come to aid Synanon, the Sponsors' group. This was still the little beat-up store-front day.

I remember my first impressions, all those ragged couches and strange looking people walking around quoting concepts and books and things. It was rather frightening, but it was fascinating. This was another element that entered my life, a new phase. I'd never been around addicts before where it wasn't something going on. I think a few of them were goofing. I use the term goofing, slicking around, using drugs, but you had an over-all picture that everybody, you know, had found God. They weren't

using drugs, and yet they would sit around and compare these long experiences they had and expensive habits and all of the things that went along with it. So I said to myself, "You know, they must be hypes."

Anyway, I left for ten days and I came back again right in the midst of another transition. I was only back about a week or so when Chuck had gotten a place up here on the beach and it was a big pack-up, a big move. I came to the club in July and, of course, we moved down here in August. So I came back just in time to pack up my bags again and move. I've always been kind of aware of my environment in a way. I always wanted to be the best, wherever I was. If I was sleeping in the gutter, I wanted to be maybe up on the sidewalk, just above the gutter, you know. I cooked the first meal down there. Everyone was busy moving and a little frightened, and I thought to myself, "Golly, I better do something."

I was terribly frightened of myself, really, so I set up the coffee pot, and while they were moving furniture in and out, I served them coffee. Later on that night, I fixed some sandwiches. The kitchen was filthy. You couldn't cook in there or anything like that. A big old ragged building. Oh, it was filthy! You have no idea!

The next morning, I kind of went in the kitchen. Nobody told me or anything, but I thought, "We have to eat and I have to get this kitchen in shape."

I just kind of took an interest, and by my taking the initiative like that, people kind of started saying, "When are we going to eat?" and I'd say, "Well, in a little while."

I got soap and water and rags and wiped down the tables and just started doing things. It was a good escape, too. I didn't have to think too much about what I was doing. Charles Hamer was in charge of the kitchen and our food in those days. We didn't have a kitchen, but in charge of our food--in charge of everything really. He became the purchaser. I remember they called and asked me if I would like to help Charlie run the kitchen, and I said, "Fine."

So I became kind of the first straw-boss under Charles in the kitchen. I stayed at Synanon about four and a half months, getting along fine in my work habits. I was just beginning to realize a few things. Some of the therapy was just beginning to seep through. I had a calloused shell like everyone else. A lot of things I didn't even want to give even the barest possibility at looking at myself, or admitting or anything. But slowly it was beginning to make a little sense to me.

I feel that I was really getting along fine when along came the probation man, who found out I was at Synanon. He said, "Of course, you can't stay here. It's not an approved agency for addicts--the 'non-association' clause."

There were three of us, I think, at the time: Wally Bunson, Morris Hodges, and myself. There had been probationers before. I think about eight, who had gone to Santa Monica, before Judge Lynch, and had been allowed to return to Synanon. Chuck thought, "Well, well, this is fine. We'll get together." He was playing his own attorney at the time, and he and Dr. Cassleman wrote up some briefs. It was my first meeting with him. He had just associated himself with the club, and he also went down to testify for me, so it was quite a group. We went down. It was interesting. We made several trips.

Wally was sent back to the penitentiary for not leaving Synanon. I think there was another case involved, somehow; but, anyway, by his refusal to leave Synanon, this is how they roped him in. He was sent back to the penitentiary on the same day in two different courts by two different judges.

Morris and I were ordered to leave Synanon within twenty-four hours, or we'd have to go to jail. So it was quite a conflict. I didn't feel that going to



jail would prove anything, and yet a part of me wanted to stay. Chuck left the decision to us. He kind of wanted us to stay because he wanted to fight the injustice of this thing. So I stayed around, I think, a couple of weeks longer, but eventually, I did leave, and the whole picture was spoiled for me, but I didn't realize it for a while.

I went out and got a job. My probation officer really tightened up on me to be sure that I was not returning to Synanon. For instance, I had to get a job. Also, it was part of my probation to have therapy of sorts, and they had a list of doctors there whom they approved of. So I registered with this doctor for my therapy and went back to work--my license came in handy. I always had to be available and I would have to show her my pay stubs. I'd have to show her the receipts from the doctor. She tightened up on me, dropped by occasionally, early in the morning, that kind of thing, and, of course, I felt the pressure.

Now I can realize that something had happened to me at Synanon, whether I was aware of it or not; because for the first time, I guess on a gut level, I knew that if I wanted to, there was something that I could do about this problem. I never had this feeling before, except lightly once in Lexington with

a doctor, Dr. Osnoss, who really spent a lot of time, oh just many, many hours of his time, with conversations and reading materials and everything. I had a faint glimmer, but I was locked up, five thousand miles from home (wherever Kentucky is), and behind, big red brick walls. But this was a free thing. The door was opened.

I really had a lot of conflict now, and I had an object to place this hostility on--the Probation Department, my job, and everything. Of course, I ended up using drugs again, but uncomfortable with it this time. Somehow the morality came up. It was wrong, "wrong" because I could do better, and I think a part of me knew this. Anyway, I wound myself up to such a point, after about seven months, that I made a decision, for the first time, to act on some of these feelings.

I called Chuck and said, "I'd like to come back to Synanon. I can't make it out here. If I don't come back, I'll die."

I had really reached a suicidal decision. I wasn't going to use any more drugs. I would rather die. I was going to kill myself. "I'm thirty-eight now," I think, "and really, looking back over it, it's really all been very useless."

He said, "Come down and talk to me."

I came down and talked to him. I told him I was working and still had about six weeks to go on my probation, but I would do whatever he said, if he wanted me to inform the Probation Department. I was willing to do whatever he said to do, if he thought that I could stay there until it was over.

Anyway, I just gave up and put it in his hands and said, "Tell me what to do."

He said, "Go back and get your things, and come back. When will you be back?"

I said, "I'll be back tomorrow."

Well, we hear this many times, you know. Kids say they'll be back tomorrow. But I was back the next day with everything, my bedding, my clothing. That was it. I came back to Synanon and finished my probation there, and I've been there ever since.

Dixon: Your probation officer didn't know?

Coleman: I informed her. Somehow we had gotten a closer communication going. I tried to verbalize. I was using, you see, as I said (I was even unaware of it) some of the Synanon techniques of trying to communicate to people. I had a sincere desire to do something about myself, and I tried to tell her. Of course, I knew my hands were tied. Yet, somehow, I just wanted her to know this, and she gave me some slips. Whether

she was conscious of it, or it was her way, I didn't question. She said, "Mail them in," and I mailed them in and no more was said about it.

I stayed at Synanon. I came back and, of course, the original core was here. Seven months is a long time in Synanon, and yet it's a short period of time; but the place had changed face. There were offices now, telephones, and a system. The kitchen was really functioning in a way. I felt, again, rather lonely, a need to catch up, to get with the original group. I didn't feel like an old-timer. I hadn't had the time in, yet I didn't feel like the newcomer, because I was going again through things I had gone through previously.

It didn't take long, with, the first time in my life, a kind of feeling of freedom, and pointing in the right direction. I rolled up my sleeves and I went to work. I started back again in the kitchen. It wasn't long, of course, before I was running it. I was shopping and I was keeping books, and the next thing I know, I was on the Board of Directors.

That's very short, but in between, of course, there were the things that had happened to Synanon life: our fight with legislative measures, speaking engagements, the whole rounding out of the life, not only within the structure, but the outside environment

that Synanon encompasses; of being in on the initial group of the Presbyterian Synanon, the so-called "Square Synanons." I can't verbalize every particular thing that happens at Synanon. The days are just full and you find yourself being busy.

For the first time in my life, I feel that I really found my niche. I don't feel lonely any more. And yet I find there are some periods in my life when I have small depressions, of a kind of regretting, a kind of nostalgia that so many years were wasted. But then they go away very quickly, and I think, "Well, golly! What's it for?"

It's kind of a challenge and I wake up with a kind of wonderment. After forty years, I've kind of made a cycle of heading in a direction of having all the things that I've wanted all my life, of recognition, of status and identity, not only with the black race, but being able to communicate with people, period. My needs, or desires, or hostility, or whatever--being able to make these feelings heard by other people. I don't know. It has been a new way of life for me.

I say very casually all the time, "I'll spend the rest of my life helping those who have helped me." And the children--the barren years are not quite as painful. We have a lot of kids around Synanon. The

lonely years are not quite as painful. I have many, many friends, in and outside of Synanon. The love that I've always wanted, I found by loving other people. The pain of it has become lessened. I can actually feel the warmth that people have for me, and I guess it's because I have a warmth for them. It's still an individual thing. I haven't found God and I don't love all of humanity, but I am capable of giving my time and affection, physically and even mentally . I can give empathy and sympathy to individuals. I think I never allowed myself before, in my whole life, to do this, not even with my family. I was afraid, because nothing was ever there very long.

It's all here. I sit today. I wish I could tell you what's going to happen tomorrow. I don't know. Today I'm pretty comfortable and pretty happy, well-adjusted. In a few months I'll be forty years old, and I feel young.