

Chapter 1

“A Traveling Girl”

My friends and I used to regard school as just a good place to meet and make our plans for what we would do all day.

THIS TIME, Althea had really worked his last, good nerve. Daniel Gibson came at his eldest daughter as if she were the Brown Bomber—with every ounce of his 190 pounds behind his fists. He punched Althea so hard that he sent her tall, skinny behind sprawling down the hall outside the family’s five-room walk-up in the heart of Harlem. She hadn’t just skipped school or stayed out all night; she had been gone for a few days. So Gibson didn’t even bother looking for a strap or snatching off his belt. What was the use? No matter how hard he whipped Althea, she always refused to cry. Even when he punched her that time, she pulled herself off the floor, socked him in the jaw, and made use of all the boxing lessons he had given her by fighting him as if she really were the son he had wanted as his firstborn.

Whenever he whipped her, Althea merely gave her father the silent treatment and continued to do *what* she felt like doing *when* she felt like doing it. But she wasn’t feeling junior high school and it had been the same in elementary school at

P.S. 136, both of which often lost out to softball games in Central Park and other diversions. Althea couldn't sit still. She was in her own words "a traveling girl." School was too confining and boring to be worthy of more than cameo appearances. She paid a high price for playing hooky—paddlings in the classroom, whippings from her father so severe that she'd bypass home for the police precinct, and that punch in the face. But it was a price she was willing to pay to see all that Depression-era New York had to offer. "We'd climb over the fence to a playground, and we'd swing way up, two on a swing," Althea reminisced many years later. "And we'd sneak in the movies." She would also travel the subways night and day; catch a show at the Apollo; shoot some hoops; or lift some ice cream, fruit, or sweet potatoes for roasting.

"My parents were doing their best to raise me, but I wouldn't let them," Althea recalled. "I just wanted to play, play, play. My mother would send me out with money for bread, and I'd be out from morning to dark—and not bring home the bread. I had fun, fun, fun!"

All of this wandering around caught the attention of child welfare officials, who placed her in a home for wayward girls as a ward of the state in lieu of sending her to a reformatory. But it also prepared her for a life on the move as an athlete, playing tennis and golf in far-flung corners of the earth that were quite different from her Harlem neighborhood and especially her birthplace on a cotton farm in Silver, South Carolina. These early days shaped her restless personality, competitive spirit, and zest for life.

It all started on August 25, 1927, when Althea came screaming into the practiced hands of her great-aunt Mattie Davis, a "middoctor" who had delivered many babies throughout Clarendon County. She was born to Annie Bell and Daniel Gibson in a four-room cabin, where they lived with her paternal grandparents, Junius and Lou Gibson, and at least six

of their children from current and previous marriages. "Us children knew better than to go near the door," which was off limits, Mary "Minnie" McFadden recalls of her niece's birth.

Word spread all over Silver about "Dush" and Annie Bell's firstborn—"a big, fat one" at eight pounds and long, too. Since Silver wasn't but that big, word didn't have too far to go. Both Annie Bell and Dush had grown up in Silver, which folks have always described as less of a town and more of a community. Silver, named for John S. Silver, cofounder of the Charleston, Sumter & Northern Railroad, stretched maybe three miles in any direction. Everybody knew everybody and everything, since most of them could say they were cousin so-and-so's daddy's sister's people whether they were Gibsons or Tindals or Stukes or Durants or Bethunes or Washingtons. Annie Bell was a Washington.

"While we were courting, I used to walk a mile over the bridge to see her once a week; every Sunday night I went," Dush once told Althea. "That's all her people would allow." Once a week wasn't enough for the young sweethearts. They would sneak around behind their parents' backs to see each other. "Mama used to talk about how they used to pick cotton, and I guess Daddy, he was making corn liquor in the woods somewhere, and they would always run across each other some sort of way," remembered Daniel Jr., better known as Bubba. "It must have been romantic, because something developed out of it." By the time they jumped the broom, Dush was nineteen and Annie Bell was eighteen. She kept house, while he farmed cotton and corn on the land passed down to his father, Junius, from his grandfather, January.

January Gibson is the oldest known member on the paternal side of Althea's family. "His mother came over here on the ship," according to his grandson, Thelmer Bethune, the sole surviving child of Mary Gibson Bethune, the fifth of January's eleven children. The story told to Bethune, Dush's



Althea's parents, Annie Bell and Daniel "Dush" Gibson, celebrating her 1957 Wimbledon victories at Gracie Mansion in New York City, after Althea had gained international prominence.

first cousin, and other Gibsons was that January was born to a sixteen-year-old girl and a slave owner who had purchased her on an auction block down on the coast in Charleston. The slave owner told his wife that he had deprived the girl of breakfast and supper for disrespecting him but that he was ready to feed her in exchange for an apology. He gave her not only a meal but also his seed, fathering January and eventually a daughter. The slave and her two children were later sold to another slave owner, Thelmer says. "And then that slave owner, he had two children by her."

Under the chattel for W. J. Gibson, Clarendon County's 1860 slave schedule lists an eight-year-old mulatto boy and a twenty-four-year-old black woman who fit the age span that Thelmer described. A five-year-old girl is also recorded among Gibson's eight slaves. Two decades later and seventeen years after the ink dried on the Emancipation Proclamation that

Abraham Lincoln signed to free slaves like January, his name shows up on the 1880 census as the head of his own household. January is listed as a twenty-nine-year-old farmer with a wife, Adrianna, twenty-seven, and four children, including two-year-old Junius, Althea's grandfather. The 1880 census also lists a forty-five-year-old single black woman named Rachel, living with five children ranging in age from one to fifteen. January's and Rachel's names turn up again on the tax rolls of 1898. These and later public records consistently show that January was probably born around 1852 and most likely in the month that bears his name, a common practice at the time. The last reference for Rachel, who may or may not have been January's mother, indicates that she was probably born in 1835 and lived at least until the age of sixty-three.

It is known, however, that January died on January 12, 1928, four and a half months after the birth of his great-granddaughter Althea, according to the inscription on his tombstone at Mount Zero Missionary Baptist Church in Paxville, just north of Silver. Over his grave, a limestone obelisk, dark and mottled along the edges by decay, lists his birth as occurring in 1842—ten years earlier than decades of census records show. Historians note that people often "aged" more than once a year because of the reverence bestowed upon elders. Exact ages are also iffy due to faulty memories or, more typically, nonexistent birth and death records. Whether January was seventy-six or eighty-six, he lived a long and fruitful life, boasted descendants who took to heart the inscription on his tombstone: "Gone but not forgotten."

January was a farmer, a Freemason, and a deacon who served forty-six years at Mount Zero, which was founded on the land owned by James E. Tindal, for whom his first wife, Adrianna Tindal, was named. Shortly after the Civil War, newly freed slaves had taken to the woods to hold worship services for what became Mount Zero. They gathered at

Bush Arbor near Tindal Mill Pond, where many Gibsons were baptized well into the 1970s, Minnie McFadden remembers. Like January, some of his descendants became leaders in local churches, including the Reverend Purdy Gibson, a grandson who was pastor of Friendship AME Church, founded on the Ridgill plantation in 1901. January also established a legacy of land ownership that survives today and grew acres upon acres of corn, cotton, and tobacco. “He couldn’t read or write, but during his time he bought and paid for four hundred and sixty-eight acres of land,” Thelmer pointed out with pride. “I tend some of it now.” According to county tax records in 1898—thirty years before January’s death—he owned 193 acres and four buildings worth \$650 plus \$200 in other possessions. That November, he paid \$13.11 in taxes on his \$850 property. Historians say his holdings were significant for a Negro man of that era.

Through the land, January provided sustenance, homesteads, and a way for his heirs to put in an honest day’s work. Althea would eventually develop a work ethic as strong as her great-grandfather’s and a desire for self-sufficiency that some came to view as an obsession with making money. January’s holdings also created a buffer against Jim Crow for some of his descendants, but unfortunately not for Althea, who had to withstand the racism in the sports world alone. All over Clarendon County, for instance, Negroes lost jobs, banking privileges, access to farming equipment, and customers in the 1940s and 1950s for supporting school equality and integration resulting from *Briggs v. Elliott*, the first of five lawsuits that made up the 1954 landmark Supreme Court case *Brown v. the Board of Education*.

But Thelmer says that he was able to withstand the pressure to simply go along to get along. Thanks to January’s holdings, he was his own man with his own land—even if he

sometimes had little to show financially after meeting his expenses. "I'm the first man that sign the petition to have the schools," noted Thelmer, now in his nineties and one of Althea's oldest living relatives. "They couldn't hurt me because I was on my own place." January also provided land for Oak Grove School, which Thelmer and the other Gibson children attended when they weren't farming. "Sometimes I'd get two lessons in a week," Thelmer recalled wistfully. "I made up my mind that if I ever growed up and get to be a man, I'm going to see to it that my children got a better education."

Dush, Minnie, and Junius's other children learned to read and write. Minnie described attending a school for Negro children called Ram Bay until the fourth grade and then the two-room Hamilton-Brailsford Road School at the old Gum Springs Baptist Church. "School lasted three months," she said. The rest of the time she joined Dush on the farm, helping their father, Junius, milk their two cows, plant wheat for flour, chop cotton, and pick corn, tobacco, and soybeans—some of which they sold. Their older sisters would transform the fruits of their labor into hearty meals, keeping the woodstove burning to cook peas, corn bread, collard greens, and especially sweet potatoes, a family favorite. "You don't have that; you don't have nothing," said Minnie, who was also partial to bread with milk and syrup. "We used to raise our own chickens," she added. "The goats would walk up the steps and come right in the house. They would get in the bed, too!"

Junius stretched the meals by hunting. A prankster with a "devilish" streak that made its way down to his granddaughter Althea and her siblings, nieces, and nephews, Junius once passed off a fox to his wife as a sand hill coon. "Mama had it cooked up real good with black pepper and onions and stuff," Minnie chuckled, her eyes watering from laughter as she retold the story. "Then Papa told her, 'Lou, that ain't been

no coon; that was a fox.' Boy, did Mama get mad and get on Papa! I don't think I ever seen her mad."

Since Junius wasn't particularly fond of farming, a good deal of it fell to Dush and the rest of his offspring. Sometimes Junius found other ways to occupy his time and bring in extra money. "He used to go into the woods and saw blocks and logs and take them to Sumter to sell them," Minnie remembered. Silver was smack dab in the middle of logging and lumber operations stretching from Sumter to the north and the Santee River farther south. Some of the railroads that serviced them paid local farmers and woodsmen roughly 12 cents for each pine or cypress crosstie.

When Junius wasn't chopping wood or hunting, he made beer and moonshine. "He used to make some nice moonshine liquor," Minnie said. "People would rather buy that than buy label liquor." Mattie Bryant, Althea's cousin and childhood running buddy, was even more emphatic. "He made the *best* corn whiskey in the world," she said of their grandfather. "Everybody came to him." Thelmer pointed out that Junius wasn't alone. "Plenty of people were making whiskey," he said. "All they do is have to duck the law; that's all." At one point, as many as forty thousand people made a living as "bootleggers, moonshiners, and rumrunners" in South Carolina, according to the historian Walter Edgar.

Althea's other grandfather, Charles Canty Washington, also made moonshine on the side. But Charlie, a loud-talking man, was mostly a father, a farmer, and a preacher. "He was a good grandfather and provider," recalled Althea's first cousin Agnes "Aggie" Green, who was raised by Charlie and his second wife, Miss Josephine, after her mother died when she was a baby. "My grandfather ran a big farm," said Aggie, the daughter of Willie Washington, one of Annie Bell's older brothers. Aggie described Charlie as a tenant farmer, working the land owned by Levy Tindall with help at one point

from Althea's father, Dush. "We worked so hard until I couldn't think straight," Aggie reflected on her days in the field, picking everything from string beans to watermelon. Charlie didn't have his own church, but he was a popular preacher who stirred souls with his powerful delivery of the Word. He tended to preach close to home at Friendship AME, which was only a mile from his house. Aggie still worships there along with other relatives, traveling seventy-five miles east from Columbia, South Carolina.

Charlie Washington also ran one of Silver's three stores. "He was the first man opened up a store in Silver," Thelmer said. A master butcher, he sold everything from dresses and shoes to beef and fish that arrived each Friday by train from Charleston. As a girl, Aggie cooked fish and sold clothing at her granddaddy's store, which was located in the center of whatever hustle and bustle the small town could muster up. At its peak, Silver had the trio of stores, a sawmill, a corn mill, a cotton gin, a post office, and a train depot with an agent. The town rode along with the fortunes of the railroad and the crops it carried. By the forties, the only thing moving along Silver's railroad tracks were local folks walking north to Paxville and Sumter or south toward Summerton and Manning. Overgrowth and dusty farm roads conceal those tracks today, and Silver's businesses center on a small nightclub, a nursing home, and one store—Sunny's—owned by Harold "Sunny" Billie, another of Althea's cousins.

No one remembers exactly when Charlie's store went bust; his third wife, Rosa, tried to keep it going after he died. Lots of businesses in South Carolina went under in the early years of the twentieth century, from stores and banks to lumber mills and farms, including those owned or managed by relatives on both sides of Althea's family—especially those who grew cotton. For a time, cotton was truly king in the state and spread its riches throughout the local economy,

accounting for two-thirds of the cash value of South Carolina's crops. Better seeds and fertilizer spawned record harvests that grew from 747,000 bales in 1890 to 1,280,000 bales in 1910. Although South Carolina was the smallest of the cotton-growing states, its farmers picked enough for it to rank third behind Georgia and Texas.

But no matter how promising things looked time and time again, any hopes that the Gibsons and Washingtons had of getting ahead were repeatedly dashed. The war in Europe was a boon for the cotton market and gave everyone hope, but in the long run it proved to be a mixed blessing. South Carolinians found themselves with too much cotton and not enough places to sell it or even store it. With overproduction, a tight export market, and cotton exchanges shuttered for at least three months, prices plunged as low as 6½ cents a pound in mid-1914. After the United States entered World War I in 1917, prices for both cotton and tobacco rose to roughly 40 cents a pound. By Christmas of 1921, however, cotton prices fell again, this time by two-thirds to 13½ cents a pound, thanks in part to the one-two punch of a drought and a boll weevil plague that had worked its way up from Mexico. Long before Black Tuesday—when the historic stock market crash of October 29, 1929, signaled the official start of the Great Depression—South Carolina was already suffering from a rural depression that was just as great and devastating.

It is against this backdrop that Althea Gibson was born in August 1927. With a new wife and new baby, Daniel Gibson was having a hard time making unruly ends meet, especially with three years in a row of bad weather. "The depression hit Silver, South Carolina, quicker than it did most back around 1929, and things were tough all over, even if I was working my father-in-law's farm then," Dush recalled. With the drought and the boll weevil, many farmers harvested less than 10 per-

cent of their typical yields. Overall, average cotton production in the state dropped from about 1,365,000 bales a year to 801,000 bales. The common refrain, Edgar said, was, "Ten-cent cotton and 40-cent meat; how in the hell can a poor man eat?"

Dush could certainly relate.

"I worked three years for nothin'," he remembered. "That third year, all I got out of it was a bale and a half of cotton. Cotton was sellin' for fifty dollars a bale then, so I made seventy-five dollars for the year's work. I had to get out of there." So when Annie Bell's sister, Sally Washington, came home for their sister Blanche's funeral, Dush decided that they would follow her back to New York City. His plan was to send Althea first with Aunt Sally, and he'd take the train up to do some job hunting as soon as his cotton money came in. Once he got on his feet in New York, he would send for his wife. The Gibsons and Washingtons became part of a mass exodus in which half of South Carolina's forty-six counties lost as much as 15 percent of their population. More than fifty thousand black farmers left early on. "Back then, everybody was catching the devil," Thelmer said. "How I came through that, sometimes I don't believe it." Black farmers made even less for their crops than white farmers did, Thelmer recalled, shaking his head. "You could pick a hundred pounds, but you wouldn't make no money. The big man, he buy the cotton. He gave you the lowest he could give you for it. And one time I know it ain't been but five cent a pound for a bale of cotton. It take fifteen hundred pounds of seed cotton to make you a bale."

"Those were the draining years on the cotton farms," wrote Ben Robertson, the author of *Red Hills and Cotton*. "Nearly all of the strongest tenant families left the cotton fields. Only the old and the young and the determined stayed on." Although Dush was certainly young and determined, when his money

came through, he was out of there, joining the nearly thirty-four thousand others who left South Carolina for Harlem in 1930. "I bought me a cheap blue suit for seven-fifty," he said. "I paid twenty-five dollars for the fare, I left some money with the wife, and I took off for New York City."

Charlie's daughter, Daisy Kelly, is believed to have been the first of Althea's kin to head north, according to Mattie. Many relatives and neighbors tested out life in New York by taking on short-term jobs that they'd hear about through the grapevine. Daisy, whose husband held a coveted job as a Pullman porter on the railroad, lived in Philadelphia for a time, before relocating to Bronx, New York. Even Althea's grandfather Junius migrated north when he got up in years, living down in the Bowery in lower Manhattan, where he was the superintendent of an apartment building on Irvington Street. Although Junius spent most of his life in a warm climate, he walked around New York in the winter wearing only rubbers on his feet. Sometimes he wore nothing on his full head of hair that he usually kept parted down the middle in two lengthy braids of a glistening silver that Althea longed for in her later years, but that only blessed Bubba's crown.

"He'd run his hand through his hair and say 'if a fly come on my head and slip up, he'll slip and break his darn ass,'" Minnie recounted. His skin was so light, she added, that he had gotten away with sitting in the front of South Carolina's buses with the white passengers rather than in the back with the other black riders. Junius would come to Harlem to visit Althea and Bubba's family and then moved there permanently with his daughter, Sweetie, when he became ill. Sweetie and her husband were the parents of Claude Brown, who chronicled his family's adjustment from country life in Silver to their hard-knock life in Harlem in his critically acclaimed memoir, *Manchild in the Promised Land*.

Dush, indeed, saw New York as the promised land—even though his introduction to the big city entailed being hustled out of five dollars by a train porter who offered to spare an hour to accompany him on the allegedly tricky trip to Harlem. The porter kept his word, so to speak. But Dush paid a huge markup for the nickel subway ride, which had a fairly direct route north from Pennsylvania Station at West 34th Street in midtown Manhattan to West 125th Street in Harlem. Roughly twenty minutes after they entered the subway car, the porter walked Dush up a few flights of stairs to the sidewalk and said: "Here you are, Mr. Gibson. This is Harlem." Dush was so happy to be in New York that he shrugged off the con job and joined three-year-old Althea at the apartment his sister-in-law Sally shared with a boarder on West 145th Street, while Annie Bell waited in Silver with their new baby, Mildred. "I got me a job right away," Dush said. "Handyman in a garage for big money. Ten dollars a week. I didn't have nothin' to worry about no more. I sent for my wife, and we were in business."

Despite its fledgling "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" campaign, the Harlem that the Gibsons and other transplants encountered lived up to its reputation for good times and what they considered to be good jobs. It was a Harlem that buzzed with blackness, borne of a "Negro invasion" that fleeing white residents despised and tried unsuccessfully to block with restrictive real-estate covenants and fear tactics. Blacks migrated not only from the Deep South, like the Gibsons and Washingtons had done, but also from the near South, leaving chocolate clusters in Greenwich Village, the Tenderloin and San Juan Hill on the west side of Manhattan, and Five Points, now City Hall, in the lower part of the island. Add to this the immigrants who had sailed into Ellis Island from the Caribbean after boarding boats of their own volition

unlike the grandparents of their new American neighbors who had been forced onto slave ships.

It was a Harlem reveling in a renaissance that calls to mind the poet Langston Hughes, the author Dorothy West, and the sculptor Augusta Savage. It was a Harlem swinging to the sound of Duke Ellington and singing the blues of Bessie Smith. It was a Harlem that had witnessed the business acumen and philanthropy of a Madame C. J. Walker. It was a Harlem inundated with “leaders” of every stripe, including W. E. B. Du Bois of the NAACP; the Reverend Adam Clayton Powell Sr. and his son at Abyssinian Baptist Church; A. Philip Randolph, the founder of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters; as well as more controversial figures such as Bishop Charles Emanuel Grace, better known as Sweet Daddy Grace, at the United House of Prayer; George Baker, dubbed Father Divine for his reputed mystical powers; and Marcus Mozhiah Garvey, who had spent much of the twenties trying to move the masses back to Africa. Before his deportation to Jamaica, Garvey had captivated many in Harlem with the power of his message, “Up you mighty race! You can accomplish what you will”; the pageantry of his parades; and the sheer size of his empire, for which he used its millions to amass hotels, factories, restaurants, stores, and the Black Star Line intended to transport the masses to the Motherland.

It was a Harlem that captivated the Gibsons, who got off to a comfortable start at Sally’s place with Annie Bell and Millie settling in just months after Dush’s arrival. “There was always lots of food to eat in her house, the rent was always paid on time, and Aunt Sally wore nice clothes every day in the week,” Althea recalled. “She did all right for herself.” Sally, who worked as a domestic, also sold bootleg whiskey on the side, just as her father, Charlie, had back home. Once, Althea inadvertently had a taste when she woke up thirsty for water and turned up a jug on the kitchen table, while Sally

entertained company in the parlor. "The next thing I can remember is Aunt Sally holding me down in the bed while the doctor pumped my stomach out," Althea said. It wouldn't be her last drink, for her father would have to purge her periodically of the whiskey that her uncles and Sally's visitors would share. But these early experiences convinced Althea that she'd never "disgrace" herself by getting drunk in public.

From Aunt Sally's place, Althea moved to Philadelphia, where she lived on and off with Aunt Daisy. In Philly, Althea began to show the spunk that would mark her childhood. Never one to sit still—even in her Sunday best—Althea once jumped back and forth over a bucket of automotive grease while a friend of Aunt Daisy's worked on his secondhand car. Since Althea was so drawn to Aunt Daisy's friend and to his car, she didn't pay enough attention to her footwork while jumping the bucket. After one false move, she wound up with grease all over her skin and the immaculate white dress that matched her stockings and the silk bow in her hair. It took Aunt Daisy a while to degrease her niece, whom she said was transformed from a picture of beauty to an *Amos 'n' Andy* character. And the outfit—it was ruined. Another time, Althea had a fit when she couldn't go somewhere with Aunt Daisy and her cousin Pearl. Little did they know that she accompanied them the entire trip by ducking below the car window on the running board and holding onto the door handle for dear life. "When the car pulled up at the house they were going to and Aunt Daisy and Pearl got out, I was standing on the sidewalk."

And then there were the fights, where Althea was swinging either fists or branches at boys chasing her around the neighborhood. But all of this was nothing, she admitted, compared to the ruckus her wandering ways caused in Harlem at her family's railroad flat on 143rd Street, between Lenox and Seventh Avenues. "I was a traveling girl, and I hated to go to

school,” Althea explained. “I played hooky from school all the time. It was a habit I never lost. Later on, when I was older, my friends and I used to regard school as just a good place to meet and make our plans for what we would do all day. What’s more,” she added, “I didn’t like people telling me what to do.”

So she did what she wanted.

“I guess about the worst thing we did was snitch little packages of ice cream while we were walking through the big stores like the five-and-ten or pieces of fruit while we were walking past a stand on the street.” A cop once caught her with a sweet potato in hand but released her after lots of pleading and begging. But as soon as she was free, she reclaimed it on a dare from her girls, and they roasted the “mickey” on burning milk crates at a nearby empty lot. “Snitcher’s heaven,” Althea said, was over the 145th Street Bridge at the Bronx Terminal Market. There, they’d fill empty baskets with rejected peaches, bananas, tomatoes, and lettuce. “Once, I carried a whole watermelon in my hands over that bridge.”

While she was determined to be in the thick of things, all that was new and exciting and hot, Althea was oblivious to what the times truly represented. It wasn’t until adulthood that she realized the true depths of the Depression and how it had affected her family. “I remember you could get fish-and-chips for fifteen cents and soda at five cents a quart,” she recalled. “If there was any poverty, I wasn’t aware of it. How could you think that when you could get soda for five cents?” She lived a carefree existence—“a very happy child’s life,” her cousin Mattie said. “She was very playful. She was pleasant, very active. Nobody would bother us. We’d take up for one another.” Life wasn’t so easy for their parents, however. “It was just hard times,” Mattie said. “People were on WPA;

they call it welfare today." Mattie's mother used help from the Works Progress Administration to supplement her income as a hospital laundry worker, while Althea's father worked nights as a mechanic. The median family income in Harlem fell 43.6 percent in the first three years of the Depression, from \$1,808 in 1929 to \$1,109 in 1932, while the national median was \$2,335. And, even as incomes continued to fall, rents rose above 125th Street in Harlem and were up to \$30 a month higher than the rest of Manhattan.

The Gibsons made sure that Althea and Bubba and their sisters, Millie, Lillian, and Annie, lived richly even if they weren't. They kept them fed and clothed, making their daughters' wardrobes a priority over their son's. "I said, 'Mama, you know what? You don't have to buy me any more clothes. You don't have to buy me anything.' I said, 'I'm going to get my own,'" Bubba claims he promised as a nine-year-old. "Whatever I was doing," he added, chuckling with raised eyebrows, "I never got caught."

Annie Bell could burn in the kitchen—always cooking two meats on Sundays—and knew how to stretch a meal. She had to, since there were always extra mouths to feed. The Gibson home was the place to be. It was full of life, making outsiders long to be on the inside where they thought all the laughin' and fussin' meant a party was going on. But it was usually just family. Lots of 'em. Dozens for Thanksgiving and other holidays. And nearly a dozen just because. Just because it was the weekend. Just because they were in the neighborhood. Just because they up and decided to leave the South and needed a place to rest their heads until they got on their feet. Some stayed, like Annie Bell's baby sister, Hallie, and her dog, Ruth. Millie also stayed along with her girls, Mary Ann and Sandra, after she got married. Annie Bell wouldn't have it any other way—even when Hallie would argue with

Dush over any little thing, drink, curse, or show her behind—literally pulling down her pants and telling her brother-in-law to “kiss my ass!”

“Mama was a sweet lady,” Bubba said. “She was a softy.” Many a niece and nephew claim to this day that Annie Bell was their favorite aunt. To a person, they use the words *sweet* or *nice* or *quiet* when describing her. One of her favorite pastimes, Bubba recalled, was playing popular ragtime tunes on the piano.

Dush, on the other hand, was characterized as an easygoing family man but not the “huggy-kissy” type. After working long hours at various garages around town, he’d return home, wash up and brush his teeth with Octagon soap, and fix one of his favorite meals: grits and eggs with fish, sardines, or bacon—polished off with a nip of Four Roses whiskey. He also liked Brown Mule chewing tobacco, the one thing that the Gibson and Washington children wished that their elders would have left down South. They found it embarrassing and disgusting, but they were in good company. With so many transplants in Harlem, nearly everyone had someone in his family who chewed tobacco, like it or not.

Although Althea was fond of her father, she kept him riled up. “He was the quietest man I’ve ever seen,” Mary Ann said. “But when he got mad,” Bubba added, “get out of his way! When he talked, you listened—and he didn’t repeat himself.” Annie Bell would try to smooth things over when Althea, Bubba, or another child stirred up her husband’s wrath. She’d stand between Dush and the offending child—sometimes catching errant swings—or she’d “administer” the discipline herself. Typically, her children and grandchildren said, she’d make much ado about nothing—fussing and whipping the bed more than the child so that Dush would hear the commotion through the walls and be satisfied that the rod had not been spared. Now Dush’s punishments were the stuff

of legends, often coming at full force from an ironing cord or an open hand. "He would slap the hell out of you," Bubba recalls, wincing. As severe as they might have been, his whippings were no different than those delivered in many households. Dush considered himself a good father who wanted what other parents wanted: to keep his offspring in line and out of harm's way. "I feel a lot of those whippings helped," Althea admitted. "Somebody had to knock a little sense into me." And the whippings were avoidable, Bubba said. "You could be around that man for a whole week or a month; as long as you are doing the right thing, he wouldn't bother you." Bubba chuckled at the memory. "Sometimes he wouldn't even say anything to you. He'd look at you."

As long as Althea and the rest could steer clear of drugs, alcohol, fights, and Daddy's quiet fire, they were fine. Thanks to Dush, Althea could hold her own on the streets and was among the few trained boxers in her neighborhood. "Daddy used to take Althea and I on the roof," Bubba said. "He told Althea: 'I'm going to teach you how to fight.' He would hit her like he would hit a man. He would teach her, but he would knock the hell out of her until she couldn't take no more. Althea turned around and beat Daddy's butt. After all that, he said, 'Lesson's over.'"

Dush was pleased with Althea's progress. "The minute I saw this natural left hook that Al had, I started teaching her how to mix it up with a right cross," he said. "It was a beautiful combination from the beginning."

"She could beat the hell out of anybody in the block, including all of us," Bubba acknowledged. "So we never had to worry about anything." That protection extended from children to adults, he added. "There was a guy named Ellis. He was over six feet tall, and he was a little husky, too. One day we were out in the street arguing, and he called Mama a name. I ran to get Althea. I said, 'Althea! He's talking about

our mother!’” Althea was about fourteen, and Ellis was about eighteen, but the age difference didn’t matter. “She hauled off and hit him and knocked him down,” Bubba said, beaming. With a black eye from a younger teenager—a girl at that—Ellis left the Gibsons alone.

Althea also came to their inebriated Uncle Junie’s defense when the leader of the Sabres gang on 144th Street tried to jump him in a stairwell leading to their Aunt Sally’s apartment. “That’s my uncle,” Althea yelled at the gang leader. “Go bother somebody else if you got to steal!” As she helped Uncle Junie to his feet, the gang leader threw a sharpened screwdriver at her. “I stuck my hand out to protect myself and got a gash just above my thumb,” she said. After escorting Uncle Junie to Aunt Sally’s place, Althea ran downstairs to beat up the boy in a bloody fight that became the talk of the neighborhood. “She was going blow for blow with this guy,” Bubba remembered. “They were battling!”

“You didn’t mess with the Gibson family in those days,” Bubba boasted. “Althea had a reputation. I got a kick out of it!” Besides her fighting ability, Althea hung with a tough crowd. Some of her friends lived behind them on 144th Street, and they would go to the back windows to talk across the alley. “They were some rough girls,” Bubba explained. “When you saw them coming, you got on the other side of the street.”

“If Daddy hadn’t shown me how to look out for myself,” Althea pointed out, “I would have got into a lot of fights that I would have lost, and I would have been pretty badly beaten up a lot of times.

“Sometimes, in a tough neighborhood, where there is no way for a kid to prove himself except by playing games and fighting, you’ve got to let them know you can look out for yourself before they will leave you alone. If they think you’re helpless, they will all look to build up their own reputations

by beating up on you. I learned always to get in the first punch."

"Althea carried herself very well," Bubba said. "She would never back down. She'd say, 'Kiss my ass!' I heard her say that many times."

Besides building street savvy, Dush was also motivated by the possibility of boxing stardom. "You see, back in those days, you could read in the papers about the big money that lady boxers were making," he explained. "And I knew right away that Al would make a world's champion." Women boxed at the Moulin Rouge in Paris and in boxing booths that traveled to fairgrounds in some parts of Europe. In 1904 women's boxing was showcased in an exhibition at the Olympics in St. Louis and began spreading across the United States. One of the popular boxers of the 1930s was Ruby Allen, who made as much as \$1,000 fighting other women. Allen boxed each Thursday at the Liberty Theater in St. Louis and wrestled on Mondays. But it remained a controversial pastime, because it wasn't considered ladylike and could lead to severe injury or death.

But things didn't work out quite as Dush had planned. "There was no way for me to know then that the fad for lady boxers was going to run out. But it did," he said. Still, he was right about his eldest daughter one day becoming a world's champion. The signs might have been there all along when she was hitting a ball with a stick as a toddler back in Silver. As she grew older, she played sports with her brother or stickball and basketball with her cousin Mattie. "I mean that girl would play ball in the street," Mattie said. "We loved to play ball. It was basketball all the time." Althea would also shoot hoops for Cokes and hot dogs with her best friend, Alma Irving.

"At night, we used to go to the school gymnasium and challenge anybody, boy or girl, man or woman, to play us in

what we used to call ‘two-on-two,’” Althea recalled. “We’d use just one basket and see which team could score the most baskets on the other. We played hard, and when we got finished, we’d go to a cheap restaurant and get a plate of turnip greens and rice, or maybe, if we had a little extra money, a hamburger, steak, or fried chicken and french fried potatoes. In those days, of course, you could get a big plate of food like that for only thirty-five cents. Fish-and-chips were only fifteen cents, and soda was a nickel a quart if you brought your own can.”

Althea filled her time with games and postgame celebrations, which left little time for school or home. “I played it all—basketball, shuffleboard, badminton, volleyball,” Althea said. “Mama could never get me up from the street. I was down there from morning to night.”

The teenager became even less interested in school after graduating from junior high in 1941. Being assigned to Yorkville Trade School didn’t help matters. She tried to obtain a transfer to the high school downtown where her friends were enrolled, but it didn’t work. Althea was pissed. She initially tried to make the best of it, but the novelty of sewing and fixing sewing machines soon wore off. “From then on, school and I had nothing in common at all. I began to stay out for weeks at a time.” Her “vacations” from school spilled over into her home life, and soon she was dodging not only the truant officer but also her father.

“I would go to the police station on 135th Street and tell them that I was afraid to go home because my father was going to beat me up,” Althea explained. “Once a girlfriend told me there was a place on Fifth Avenue at 105th Street, called the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, that would take in kids who were in trouble and had no place to go. The next time I stayed out so late that I didn’t dare go home, I asked them to take me in. . . . The trouble was, they notified

my mother and father, and Daddy came for me in the morning. I promised him I wasn't ever going to run away again, but he licked me anyway, and a week later, I took off again.

"I went straight to the SPCC," Althea continued. "I skinned off my shirt and showed them the welts on my back. They took me in again. When Daddy came after me, they asked me if I wanted to go back with him. When I said no, that I was afraid to, they said I could stay. That place was a regular country club. I had to do a little work, like making my bed and helping clean up the dormitory and taking my turn scrubbing the toilets, but mostly it was a snap."

However, the novelty soon wore off, and Althea asked to return home, promising to stay out of trouble. Before allowing her to leave with Dush, the woman in charge warned Althea that if she reneged on her promise, the next stop could be a reformatory. Althea kept her word—for a little while—but it wasn't long before she was back out in the streets. When Althea seemed to forget where she lived, Millie had to lead the search parties. "We used to have to drag her back in the house," she told *Time* in an interview. "When the other girls were putting on lipstick, she was out playing stickball." Sometimes Annie Bell went out herself to find Althea. "Mom says she used to walk the streets of Harlem until two or three o'clock in the morning looking for me," Althea said. "But she never had much chance of finding me. When I was *really* trying to hide out, I never went near any of the playgrounds or gymnasiums or restaurants that I usually hung out at.

"I sneaked around to different friends' houses in the daytime or sat all by myself in the movies, and then, if I didn't have anyplace lined up to sleep, I would just ride the subway all night. I would ride from one end of the line to the other, from Van Cortlandt Park to New Lots Avenue, back and forth like a zombie. At least it was a place to sit down."