

A close-up portrait of Whoopi Goldberg. She has her signature dark dreadlocks and is wearing glasses and a white button-down shirt. Her right hand is raised to her forehead, and she is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. A silver bracelet is visible on her right wrist.

Whoopi Goldberg

Bits and Pieces

MY MOTHER, MY BROTHER, AND ME

“Anyone reading Whoopi’s book *Bits and Pieces* will come away, as Whoopi puts it, ‘knowing how to share the earth with other people’ better than they had before. Thanks, Whoopi.”

BARRY JOSEPHSON, PRODUCER

“*Bits and Pieces* shows the rise of a beloved performer, and is a tribute to the loved ones who supported her along the way.”

PEOPLE MAGAZINE

“A rare gem among many ho-hum celebrity memoirs.”

NEW YORK JOURNAL OF BOOKS

“This is no dishy Hollywood tell-all—it’s a salve for wounded souls.”

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“A poignant, enjoyable, and moving read . . . Readers will want to call their parents after finishing this behind-the-scenes look at the life of a major entertainer.”

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“[Whoopi’s] new memoir is an emotional and uplifting exploration as, with her unique voice and trademark wit, she reflects on the people, places, and experiences that have made her the multi-award-winning icon she is today.”

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# BITS AND PIECES

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MY MOTHER, MY BROTHER, AND ME

WHOOPI GOLDBERG



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This book is a memoir. The events and people are portrayed to the best of Whoopi Goldberg's memory. It reflects the author's present recollections of experiences over time.

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*This book is for everyone who knew my mother and brother.*



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## INTRODUCTION

Probably none of us had the childhoods we think we had. We only have our individual memories of what we believe happened. You can talk to siblings born two years apart, and they will give you different perspectives on the same event or experience in their childhoods.

So, what's that supposed to mean? We can't trust our memories? You know, yeah. That's exactly what it means.

When my mother died unexpectedly in August 2010, it took me a while to feel the full effect of her being gone. I still had my older brother, Clyde. As long as he was with me, I had my home base. There were only the three of us in my family: Mother, Brother, and me. I knew Clyde and I would be okay. We were both in our fifties, so I thought I'd have my brother in my life for at least another twenty-five years.

Then, five years after my mom passed, Clyde suddenly died of an aneurysm. I was stunned by it, but not really surprised in a way. He was different after our mom died. Losing her was devastating beyond words for Clyde, more than he could share with me. When she died, a large part of my brother disappeared with her. Most people couldn't see it, but I did.

After Clyde died, I didn't know what to do with myself. I wasn't ready to feel so alone. Being an orphan hit me much harder. I wanted to crawl into a cave and hole up. But my work schedule wouldn't allow for it. I carried on . . . feeling flat. That's all I could do. I couldn't kick and scream or stomp my feet. That would change nothing.

Suddenly I felt there might be many loose ends and unanswered questions. But, at the same time, I had no proof that there were loose ends to resolve. I began to doubt if any of my memories were real, or if they were something I saw or read a long time ago.

Clyde was the only brain I had on my memories, the only witness to my growing-up years.

I used to ask him, “Am I crazy? Did this really happen?”

And he’d say something like, “It happened, Sis, but it was during this time or that time.” Or, “We did go there during that time, and here’s why . . .”

Now, I no longer have Clyde to set me straight. I have no one left to ask.

It’s this thing we all have to face, the death of those who knew you the best, the people in your life story. I am very lonely for my family. I get lonely for the two of them.

I really should start this book by saying it’s possible that nothing in this book happened, or it’s possible that nothing I have written in this book happened the way I say it did. I never kept journals or datebooks. I don’t know the calendar year for many of my memories or even my age at the time.

You might be asking, “Why are you writing a memoir, then?”

Because the two most magnificent people I’ve ever known were my mother, Emma, and my brother, Clyde, and they had almost everything to do with how I became the person I am.

Also, I can sense that my memories of my mom, which used to fire strong like a torch, have now become more of a flicker in the thirteen years since she passed away. I know the same will happen with Clyde, so I want to put them down in words before they fade further.

In addition to all the great roles I’ve played in movies, TV, and on stage, in character or as myself over the years, I’ve also done a lot of writing. I’ve written solo shows, comedy sketches, songs, host monologues for the Oscars, storybooks for kids, a black girl’s *Alice in Wonderland*, and published books about relationships, aging, political and social issues, and even manners.

Now it's time for a book about my nucleus family: my brother, Clyde, and especially about my mother, because none of the other stuff would have happened for me without her. I never doubted that she loved me for exactly who I was. My mom made me believe I could do anything I wanted. When I told her that I thought that would be acting, she listened, had conversations with me about it, and backed me up. Because of my mom, I was able to go from being Caryn Johnson, the "little weird kid" from the projects who no one ever expected to achieve all that much, to being me, Whoopi Goldberg.

I know how lucky I was and am. Not everybody gets to walk this earth with folks who let you be exactly who you are and who give you the confidence to become exactly who you want to be. So, I thought I'd share mine with you.

## CHAPTER ONE

---

My mother, Emma Johnson, and my brother, Clyde, were already a lockstep duo by the time I showed up on the scene. Clyde was six, and nobody knew how old my mother was. She refused to tell her age to me or anybody. Still, I tried to get it out of her once in a while. I'm not sure why. She was notorious for answering my questions with a question.

"Why do you want to know?" she would say.

"Because it's your birthday," I'd answer. "So, how old are you?"

"Why does it matter?"

"I'd just like to know."

She would light a Kool cigarette and give me a look.

"I'm old enough to be your mother."

That's as far as I'd get.

As a kid, I tried not to annoy my mom by asking too many questions. In the 1960s, adults didn't think kids should know their business, at least not in my neighborhood.

It wasn't until I was in my fifties that she told me a secret she had kept for forty years, and it gave me a lot more insight into why she was the way she was and how I got to be the way I am.

I thought my mother was the most interesting, beautiful, funny, and wise person in the world. And Clyde was the coolest sibling anybody could possibly have. I felt

that way as a kid, and it never changed. I knew I was lucky that my mom and Clyde allowed me to hang with them. It's not like they didn't want me to be around. They had bonded in this magical nucleus of two, which they expanded to include me.

The three of us lived in the Chelsea projects at Twenty-Sixth Street and Tenth Avenue in Manhattan, in a five-room apartment on the sixth floor of a twelve-story brick building. There were nine other buildings that matched ours. We had about 2,400 close neighbors. Lots of folks of every color, religion, language, and culture, all packed into a couple of city blocks.

Apparently, we lived in the projects because we were poor, but I didn't know it. When you're a little kid, you accept the way things are. Nobody told me what "poor" meant because everyone around me was in the same situation. I lived among a whole lot of people barely getting by. Somehow, my mom made my brother and me feel like we lived at the entrance gate of a big, interesting world in which we could do anything we wanted to do.

From as early on as I remember, my mother would say to me, "Listen. The confines of this neighborhood do not represent the confines of your life. You can go and do and be whatever you want. But, whatever you choose, be yourself."

I believed her. That's what made the real difference in my future.

In reality, there was no extra cash, no rainy-day fund, no spare-change jar on top of the fridge. No child support checks came in the mail. No inheritance would be forthcoming. My mother's mom had died at age fifty, and her father had remarried. Nothing was expected in a will. Emma was on her own, except she wasn't. She had Clyde and me.

Even when I asked her, well into my adult years, "Ma, how did you take us to see the Ice Capades and the Christmas Spectacular at Radio City Music Hall and all the other experiences we had?"

She'd answer, "Why are you asking me that?"

I'd say, "Because we always went everywhere and saw everything. How did you do that? How did you make that happen?"

"I have no idea why you're asking me that," she'd say.

I'd end up feeling kind of foolish, like I wasn't asking in the right way. So I'd drop it. It was a mystery to me then, and now that she's gone, it always will be.

New York City in the 1960s and '70s was the hub of it all. Everything was going on: pop art, timeless art, classical ballet, the symphony, protest music, Alvin Ailey dancers, beatnik poets, street theater, hippies, civil rights, women's lib, gay rights, Lincoln Center Theater, film, Miles Davis, Birdland, Joe Papp and Shakespeare in the Park, and a long line of high-kick dancing women at Radio City Music Hall. Everything was a fifteen-cent bus or subway ride away, ten cents for kids.

My mother would figure out which days were free at the galleries and museums and make sure that Clyde and I were out the door to go see the newest exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art or the American Museum of Natural History, even though she could rarely go with us because of her job.

At home, our tabletop record player played all types of music: Lady Day; Bing Crosby; Ella Fitzgerald; Peter, Paul and Mary; Pavarotti; the Supremes; Sinatra; and the Beatles. My mother had an eye and ear for what she liked, and she liked the Beatles.

The Beatles played Shea Stadium in 1965. My mother had somehow scored tickets. Our seats were way up high, along the top rim of the stadium. Huge floodlights buzzed right over our heads, but it didn't matter. We were in the stadium with fifty-six thousand other fans. Not many other nine-year-old kids were in that crowd, watching four guys from England in matching jackets and black pants sing "Can't Buy Me Love," but my mom made it happen for me.

For some reason, she wasn't a fan of the Rolling Stones' music and didn't want it played in the house. I think I remember her saying something about them "being dirty." I thought she meant unbathed, but it was probably about the lyrics. My mother rarely said anything negative about anybody. She thought "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction" and "Get Off of My Cloud" were not as sweet as "I Want to Hold Your Hand."

There wasn't much room for complaining when I was growing up. My mother would say, "If you're going to feel bad today, then make it big. Lie on the couch and

throw your wrist across your forehead and sigh loudly, so we all know what's going on for you. That way we can step back and say, 'Okay. That's what she's doing now. Go ahead. Get it over with. I'll wait.'"

She did not believe in self-pity. Her attitude was simple, and one of the big things she put in my head was this: "You've got two choices. You can waste a lot of time complaining, or you can get up and figure out how to fix it."

My mother was clear: "I have to be practical. I have two kids. I can't spend a lot of time crying about what I don't have. I have to figure out what I do have and go from there." That was her approach. She didn't complain or explain. However, my mother laughed. A lot. She loved a good reason to laugh. Clyde and I got the same gene. The three of us knew how to have a good time together.

When I was about eight, my mother, brother, and I took a subway and maybe a bus to Rockaways' Playland amusement park. That kind of adventure was always a treat day. The park had a fun house entrance, a giant barrel that rotated slowly on its side, and you had to walk through as it spun to the side under your feet.

Clyde made it through, no problem. I crossed through next. Then, we heard my mother's laugh. We looked back into the barrel and saw her on her hands and knees, trying to keep from tipping over as the barrel turned. Whenever she tried to stand up again, she would laugh harder and fall back to the floor.

Clyde inched back in to give her a hand up and ended up on his ass, too. So, you know, I thought I'd better get back in there and join them. The three of us tumbled from side to side, Clyde and me screaming with laughter and my mother's light musical laugh bouncing around in the barrel.

Eventually, a carnival worker turned the whole thing off, hoping to get this crazy family out of there.

As a little kid, I always felt secure and loved. I thought everything would come out okay because my mom was in charge. Between her and Clyde and me, I thought we could do anything.

It wasn't until I was older that I really understood what my mother had to go through to keep a roof over our heads. My father and mother had separated, so I



didn't grow up with him. She tried to get him to pay some support through the courts, but helping black women living in the projects wasn't high on the state court's priority list, and she couldn't afford a lawyer who might have gotten something done.

Still, she refused to apply for welfare, saying, "If I am able to work and take care of my own, then I should do that." She didn't like the stigma of being on welfare. I saw her cry once or twice about being unable to pay her taxes. But as a kid, I never grasped that we were always one paycheck away from the worst-case scenario.

Kind of like the fun house barrel, my mother never got to stand still for a minute and let someone else handle it all for a while. No one was going to show up and rescue her, and she knew it. There was no alternative plan to fall back on. Whatever challenges she had to face, she somehow managed. And she did it alone.

Clyde and I never thought she needed rescuing. She had an air of authority. We didn't question it. But in reality, she had to endure a whole lot of stuff that would've beaten down somebody with less backbone.

In 1994, eight years after I starred in the movie *Jumpin' Jack Flash*, I called my mom up to ask her a question.

"Ma, the Rolling Stones want me to come to Miami for the filming of their Voodoo Lounge Tour, introduce them to the crowd, and then join them onstage when they perform 'Jumpin' Jack Flash.' Do you want to go with me?"

I wasn't sure how she'd answer, considering how she'd felt about them during my childhood, but she told me she'd like to attend.

When I joined Mick Jagger on stage for "Jumpin' Jack Flash," I looked down from the stage to see my mother up and dancing in the front row, holding her cigarette lighter high above her head. (Back then, we didn't have cell phones to wave around, so lighters held by thousands of fans had to do.) I couldn't take my eyes off her—my mother having a great time rockin' to the Stones.

I looked at her and started laughing. She looked back at me and laughed. That's how we did life, right up to the day she died.

## CHAPTER TWO

---

I was still wearing a head-to-toe nun's habit when I got a call from my brother, Clyde. He was at my house in Berkeley, California. I was in London, performing in the stage version of *Sister Act* at the Palladium in August 2010.

My regular gig, hosting *The View*, was on a monthlong hiatus, so off I went to the West End to do a limited run of twenty shows. This time, I was playing Mother Superior instead of the role I originated in the 1992 movie, cabaret star Deloris Van Cartier. I was fifty-four now, so I figured the chief nun was a better fit.

I had two shows left before heading home.

Actress Maggie Smith and some of her friends were at the show that night to see me. She had come backstage to my dressing room to say hello and talk, which I loved. When my phone rang and I saw it was Clyde, I thought I'd be telling him I'd call him back.

"It's Ma," Clyde said.

"What d'ya mean? What's goin' on?" I asked.

"Caryn, Ma died. A couple hours ago."

"How? Where?"

Clyde told me that she had asked him to go to the store for a newspaper and some More cigarettes. She loved smoking More cigarettes and never wanted to run out of them. When he got back, he found her sideways on the couch with an unlit cigarette in her hand, smiling, but she wasn't breathing.

“She’s at the hospital,” Clyde told me. “But listen, she’s gone.”

I could hear in Clyde’s voice that he was pretty shook up. Neither one of us expected anything like this. The doctor told Clyde that it was an aneurysm.

He was feeling awful, like he could have saved her. But that didn’t seem to be the case, according to the doctor. A blood vessel had exploded in her brain. She went quickly. Here one minute, gone the next.

I’ve got to say, if there’s one family trait that we all shared, it’s efficiency. We get down to business.

I had been on a FaceTime call with my mom the day before. We had talked about the grandkids, rose bushes, cats, dogs, and Clyde. We had laughed for an hour. She’d seemed fine.

FaceTime had just come out. At first, my mother thought she didn’t want to bother with it. She was fine with regular talking on the phone. But once I showed her how easy it was, she got into it. Even though I was five thousand miles away, we could still have eyes on each other every day.

I talked to my mom on the phone almost every day of my adult life when I wasn’t with her in person. Every conversation always ended the same way. My mother, brother, and I always told each other everything we thought the other person should know before we hung up. If we had any problems with the others, we’d get it out and be done with it. One of us would say, “Is there anything else you think I should know? Anything else going on?” And we’d end every call with “I love you.” We always did that, I guess, as a “just-in-case.”

I couldn’t wrap my head around the fact that the “just-in-case” was for real this time.

“What will the hospital do now?” I asked my brother. I wanted to see her.

“I asked them to leave her on support until you can get home,” Clyde told me.

He wanted to make sure I had a chance to say my farewells and kiss her goodbye.

“I’ll get on the first plane I can find,” I told him.

“Don’t rush. She’s not here anymore. It’s okay, Sis.”

I explained to Maggie Smith what was going on and apologized for having to fly home as soon as I could. I'm sure I was walking around in a dazed circle.

That's when this magnificent woman, Dame Maggie Smith, went from being my backstage company to being my friend through the rest of the night. She decided she would stay with me until I was on my way to the airport. A flight was arranged for me to leave early the next morning. For the next five hours, Maggie sat with me and let me talk her ear off, telling stories about my mom, my growing-up years, and my brother. We laughed a lot.

I don't know if I was in shock. I had never been in shock before. I don't think I cried. I didn't feel anything except a big wave of kindness from Maggie. I've got to say, she is one of those people for whom I would do anything. Anything Maggie Smith needs, I got her covered.

I went straight from the airport in San Francisco to the hospital, knowing that my post-Mom life was now starting. She had prepared me for this day, but I would never be ready. I wasn't ready to not be her kid.

My mom was in a hospital gown, lying in the bed, with the ventilator running. She looked peaceful, not in any pain.

Clyde and I agreed to pull the plug together, turning off life support. The room went silent. And then this nucleus that had been the three of us became the two of us. When I looked at Clyde's face, his eyes looked empty, like he was gone, too.

We stood by her bed, silent for some time.

I asked Clyde if he knew what was supposed to happen next. We were told that a mortuary should be called to pick up her body. There was important stuff to discuss.

"Do you know what Ma wanted?" Clyde asked.

I said, "I might know. Remember when the three of us were talking about someone who passed recently? Ma had said, 'I don't want to be put in the ground and take up space. I don't want people to feel they have to come visit. Just put me in the microwave.'"

Like I said: efficient.