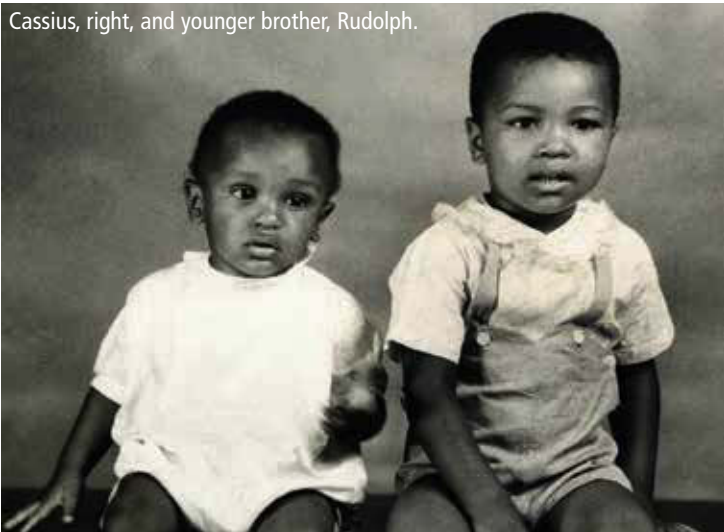


# CHAPTER 1

## Tomorrow's champion

Muhammad Ali was born on 17th January, 1942, and his parents named him Cassius Clay Jr. He had one younger brother, named Rudolph. Their mother, Odessa Clay, worked hard to send her two boys to school and buy clothes for them. Cassius Clay Sr\*, their father, worked hard too. He also liked to drink and was often in trouble, but it was a happy home. Cassius Sr played music and wrote songs, and Cassius Jr was always laughing and playing tricks on everyone. The Clays were a Christian family, and Odessa took her two boys to church every Sunday. The Clay house in Louisville was in a part of town where only black people lived. Louisville, Kentucky was a safe town for Cassius and his brother if they stayed in the black areas.

Cassius, right, and younger brother, Rudolph.



\* Sr = Senior; in America, parents often give their first son the same name as the father. They call the father Sr (Senior) and the son Jr (Junior).

The family name of Clay was a slave name. Slaves in the 1800s took the name of their owner, and many kept these names after they became free. Odessa Clay also came from a slave family. Her great grandmother\* was a slave called Dinah and her great grandfather was a white man.

Kentucky is a state in the south-east of the USA. When black slavery ended in 1865 in the United States, ideas in the South did not change. Most southern white people did not want to live with black people. So the South made new laws. Blacks and whites had different buses, schools, shops, churches and workplaces. This was 'segregation', and the laws were the 'Jim Crow laws'. One hot day when he was a child, Cassius went into a shop for white people. He wanted a drink of water, but they wouldn't give him one because he was black. He was too young to understand, but he knew it was wrong.

In 1955, just a year after Cassius started learning to box with Joe Martin, a fourteen-year-old black boy was in the news. His name was Emmet Till, and he was from Chicago in the North, where there was no segregation. Emmet was staying with his cousin's family in Mississippi in the South. He and his cousin were in town one day, and Emmet was joking around. He called out to a pretty white woman. A black boy could not speak to a white woman like this, but Emmet didn't know that. When Emmet saw his cousin's face, he knew he was in trouble. That night, the woman's husband and brother pulled Emmet from his bed in his uncle's home. They hurt him very badly and then they killed him. When Emmet's mother came to collect her son's body, he didn't look like her son anymore. The white men did not go to prison.

\* great grandmother = your grandmother's mother

Photographs of Emmet appeared in *Jet*, a magazine for African-Americans. Cassius Sr showed the pictures to his sons and told them the story. Cassius was upset and scared. Until then, he felt safe as a black boy in a black part of town. But he was nearly fourteen, like Emmet. He loved joking around, like Emmet. He saw that the law was on the side of white people and against black people.



Boys from Joe Martin's boxing club travelled all over the South for fights at the weekends. Joe Martin's wife drove them. When they stopped to eat along the way, the restaurants often had 'Whites Only' signs on the door. Mrs Martin would buy hamburgers for all the boys, and they would eat them in the car. The boys had to use 'Coloreds\*' toilets, and could not go in the 'Whites' toilets.

Working harder than the other boys, Cassius learned quickly with Joe. He was soon winning boxing titles and he started to have his own fighting style. He danced around the ring, he was very quick with his hands and he could punch hard. Because he grew very tall and had long arms, other boxers couldn't reach him. He felt at home in the boxing ring, and he wanted to be great. His day often started at four o'clock in the morning, with a run through the streets of Louisville. At first, the local police would stop him. Soon they weren't surprised to see him, and they left him alone.

Joe Martin also ran a local TV show called *Tomorrow's Champions*. His young boxers appeared on the show on Friday nights. Just six weeks after he joined the club, Cassius had his first fight in the ring. He won his fight and he was on the show. 'Did you see me on TV?' he asked

\* 'Coloreds' described non-white people in the segregation areas, especially African-Americans.

everyone at school on Monday. 'One day, I'm going to be Heavyweight Champion of the World.'

Cassius and Joe worked together for six years until Cassius was eighteen. In that time, Cassius won 100 fights and lost only one.

Boxing was Cassius's life in his teenage years. When he left Central High School in 1960 aged eighteen, he could only just read and write. He didn't do well in his last exams, and he came 376th out of the 391 students who left school that year. But he wasn't interested in results. He had a very different goal. 'I'm going to be an Olympic champion this summer,' he told everyone at Central High.

Cassius had a place on the U.S. Olympic team. The 1960 Olympics were in Rome, and he nearly didn't go because he was frightened of flying.

'I'm not going,' he said to Joe.

'If you want to be a great fighter,' Joe said, 'you have to win the Olympic title.'

Finally, Cassius agreed to go.

The Olympic team went first to New York, where the young boxers visited Harlem, New York's black area. It was not like sleepy Louisville. The city streets were busy and full of people in fashionable clothes. On many of the street corners, there were men standing on boxes. They were shouting their ideas to people as they walked by. Cassius stopped to listen to one man.

'Buy black,' the man shouted. 'Buy from black businesses and shops. Don't get your food from white folks\*.'

His message wasn't dangerous, but nobody talked like that in Louisville.

'Can he say that in the street?' Cassius asked a sports

\* folks = 'people' in U.S. informal English

writer who was with them.

‘Yeah,’ said the writer. ‘This is the North.’

Cassius walked around this new world, looking at everything with wide open eyes. They stopped outside Sugar Ray’s, a famous Harlem restaurant and bar. Boxing champion Sugar Ray Robinson owned it. At that time, many sports writers believed Sugar Ray was the world’s greatest boxer. He was good-looking too, and for Cassius, a hero. Sugar Ray drove up to his club in a pink Cadillac and said hi to the young boxers.

‘Some day I’m gonna have two Cadillacs,’ said Cassius that evening, ‘one to ride around in and one to look at.’

The boxing team moved on from the world of black Harlem to the Olympic village in Rome. Here was the whole world in one place. Cassius talked to everyone, even when they didn’t speak the same language. He learned everyone’s name and he was very popular in the village. The crowds at his fights loved him too, with his new and exciting style. Cassius defeated the European champion, Ziggy Pietrzykowski from Poland, to win the Olympic title.

‘I’m young. I’m good-looking. I’m fast. I’m pretty. And I always win!’ he said. He wore his Olympic medal for days after the fight, even in bed. He was happy to be an American.

‘The United States is the best country in the world, including yours,’ he said to a Soviet\* sports writer.

‘What about the way blacks have to live in the South?’ asked the writer.

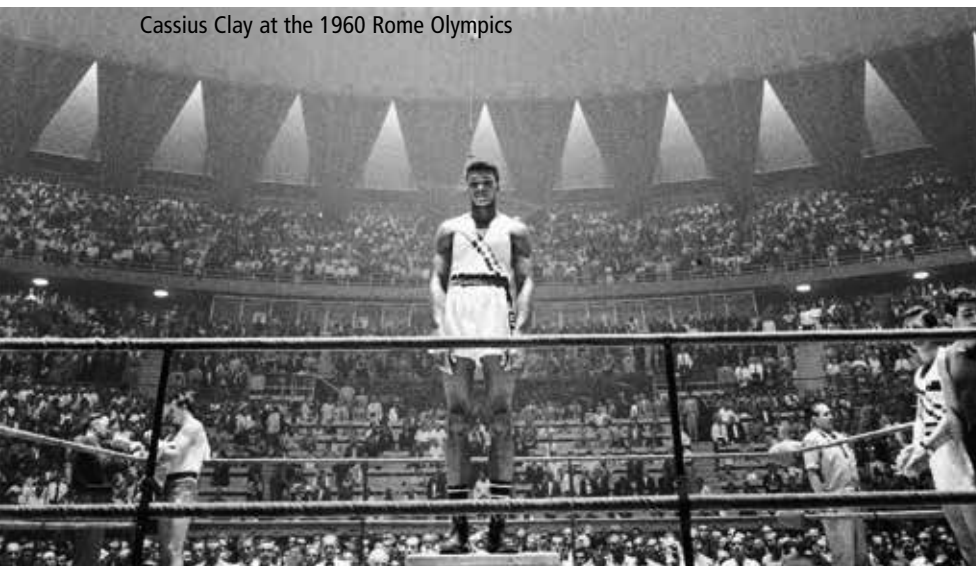
‘We’ve got good people working on that,’ Cassius answered.

\* The modern country of Russia was called the Soviet Union (USSR) at this time.

Back home in America, Cassius was becoming famous, and he loved it. He wanted everyone to know him and talk about him. He wanted to be right at the centre of everything.

There was a hero's welcome for the Olympic champion back in his hometown of Louisville. All the important men of the city met Cassius, and he rode around town in an open-top car. For a short time, nobody saw his colour. He went back to Central High School and showed the school his beautiful, shiny medal. Nobody remembered his exam results now.

Cassius Clay at the 1960 Rome Olympics



Kentucky still had the Jim Crow laws, and segregated life went on. Even with his Olympic medal, Cassius couldn't use the seats on a Louisville bus. Cassius was always smiling and joking. But some big questions were going around in his head. He was starting to look for answers.