

THE WAY THEY WERE

Before introducing you to Mama and Daddy as they are now, my siblings and I would like to tell you about the way they were.

PRECIOUS MEMORIES

By Durwin, Gail, Eric, Yolanda and Victor Wright

DURWIN:

Mama used to get up around 5:00 a.m. when Daddy got up. This was before their three back-to-back babies arrived. She would fix his coffee, and I would want some too. She would add lots of cream and sugar. I would sip my coffee with Daddy before he went off to work. It would still be dark outside when he left.

I really enjoyed the times that Daddy took me to work with him. When he was working in the foundry, it was like watching an artist at work. To this day, Victor, Eric and I talk about how amazed we were at his skills. I have never seen anybody in my life who is such a perfectionist! A large part of who I am today was inspired by him.

I never thought of myself as the man of the house during Daddy's absence. I just did what I had to do. I would cut lawns or water grass to earn money. Sometimes Mama would come help me. I would use the money to get whatever was needed for the family. I never thought of our family as poor or at-risk. We just didn't have a lot of stuff. And we didn't know other people who had a lot of stuff. I realized just how poor our family was when I was about 21 while listening to people at college speak of how they grew up - the cars they drove, the jobs their parents held.

I attended Gompers Junior High School in Los Angeles. Every day the school showed movies at the noon lunch break. It cost .25 to get in. Coming up with .25 was hard for me. One day the school announced that it would be having a competition and the prize was a week's pass to the movies. All I wanted was to get the free pass to the movies. The competition was a math test, and six passes would be awarded - two passes per grade. I took the test, hoping to win the grade B7 pass. The scores were announced over the P.A. system. I had won the B7 pass! In fact, I had the highest score in the school - 200 points higher than the next score. I was so naïve, concerned only about my free pass to the movies.

My teachers began to take notice that I excelled in math. Around this time Mama was going to Compton College working on her AA degree. One of the classes she took was chemistry. I got my hands on her chemistry textbook and began working the problems and comparing my answers to those in the back of the book. I became confused when I got a different answer on one problem from what the book showed. I took the chemistry book to my teacher and showed her what I was trying to work out with the problem. I showed her my answer, and showed her it was different from the answer in the back of the book. So she took the book and went to talk to some of her colleagues. My teacher called Mama, and told Mama she had her chemistry book. A few days passed and the teacher came back and asked me some questions about the stuff in the book, to see if I truly understood what I was doing or just mimicking. I answered the questions, not really

thinking that much of it. Mama told me later that they were doing that because there were some skeptics who didn't believe I really understood chemistry.

The school counselors scheduled a conference with Mama and told her I really should be in another school. Henry Clay Junior High in Gardena was starting a gifted program, but there were only 24 slots. Even though Mama and Daddy were separated and we didn't have a car, she arranged for him to get her to the school at 5:00 a.m. and they waited for the office to open. I was accepted into the program. I think I was number 11 or 12. Mama and I took the bus back to the school, and I got registered. It was a real culture shock for me. There were only about three black students in the entire school. It was the first time I had been around so many white people in my life. But that is where I got my foundation to do well in school. Even though I later went to Centennial High School in Compton, which didn't have a gifted program, I was able to do well enough there. All because Mama went the extra step to do what was best for me.

At Centennial High School, the highest SAT score recorded was 932 from the year before. I had attended elementary school with the record holder, Vivian. She had taken the test twice. My counselor informed me that she wanted me to take the test twice, because I would score 100 points higher the second time around. This presented a problem, because \$12 was a great deal of money for Mama to come up with. I took the test the first time. I got my score - 1471. I showed my counselor the score and she never mentioned taking the test the second time.

Our mailbox began to be flooded with letters from various colleges - over 150 letters, including the Air Force Academy. Mama always wanted me to go to West Point, and we were constantly battling over it. I had no intention of going to West Point, and if I had, I don't know how Mama planned to come up with the money for it. Then we got this letter saying I had been selected as a Presidential Scholar. I thought it was yet another letter, and I dumped it in with the other letters. I did show it to Mama. Neither one of us had any idea what a Presidential Scholar was but Mama thought it was significant so I took it to my counselor. As it turned out, I was one of 110 students selected nationwide to go to the White House and receive a Presidential medal. The government paid for my airfare and hotel. Our church, Greater Circle Mission, raised the money to send Mama to the White House with me. We went to Los Angeles Airport, and it was the first time Mama and I flew on a plane. At the time security was not tight, and Daddy was able to walk us onto the plane. This was 1970. We got to Washington, D.C., landed at Dulles International, took a bus, Mama went to her hotel and I stayed in a dorm at a local university. There were many activities planned. I met people from all over the country. There were about five or six black students. There was a banquet which Mama got to attend. The next day was the ceremony. Mama got to go to the White House. The ceremony was in the East Room at the White House. I was able to sit with Mama. President Nixon gave a speech, and we received the award from one of his aides. Mama was so happy.

After I decided which college I wanted to attend, Daddy took me to work with him when he announced to his boss [a MIT graduate] that I was going to Caltech. The look on his boss' face was one of surprise. The look on Daddy's face was one of pride.

GAIL:

I am by destiny and design a "Daddy's Girl". Daddy and I bonded immediately after my birth due to the late night and sometimes all night vigils as he nursed me through my infant asthma attacks. His precious baby girl was nurtured gently and lovingly while fighting to intake each breath during these nightly struggles. Now as the story goes as told by Mama, she had made a pact with God that if she conceived after trying diligently for over four years AND if she got a baby girl, Mama would dedicate both herself and the baby girl to God. Well, shortly after my birth, Mama soon stopped drinking, smoking, dancing and partying, and began attending church on a regular basis. Daddy had made no such pact and therefore continued his chosen lifestyle. I recall at times knowing that Mama must have gone way overboard with this church thing since we were always in church. We were not allowed to participate in any kind of activity on Sundays because we had to attend Sunday school (9:00 a.m.), Sunday morning service (11:00 a.m. until forever), frequent Sunday afternoon services (scheduled to start at 3:00 p.m. but generally starting when the shouting from the 11:00 a.m. service stopped) and Sunday night service (7:00 p.m. until usually sometime past midnight). Of course, there was also Wednesday night service and Friday night service. AND we attended all these and Mama never drove us.

Ideally for me I would have preferred hanging out with Daddy, wherever it was he was hanging. I always found Daddy's choices for recreation a lot more enticing than what Mama was forcing me to do with all this church stuff. Daddy usually had a liquor bottle or two stashed somewhere in the house. Eventually Mama or Yolanda would find them and dump the contents down the sink. I would always make note of where the bottle was located so I could 'share' it with Daddy. It seems no wonder that Mama and Daddy eventually grew apart and decided to live separate lives. Just like the Jim Crow laws, Separate but Equal is how they chose to raise their children.

I am awestruck at their success as parents. Mama did not have a mother and Daddy did not have a father. The positive role models which society insists must be present for healthy childhood development did not exist for them. But nonetheless, Draton and Jewel overcame those barriers and the proof of their achievement is in their five exceptional children.

ERIC:

When I think of the debilitating changes wrought on my parents by the onset of old age, none are more striking to me than the diminishment that has accompanied their decline in the past ten years. I was always somewhat shocked to notice how small Mama and Daddy look in comparison to my memories of them in my younger age. It is almost as if I have become some sort of Goliath in their lives where I was once merely a David. It is not that I have grown so much in recent years (although I have put on a few pounds), it is that they have become more enfeebled and hunched over with time. The physical, emotional, and intellectual presence that always seemed to characterize them has been

diminished. The largesse that they once embodied and made them appear to be larger than life in my eyes is no longer there.

My earliest public memories of my parents stem from holiday gatherings at my aunts' and uncles' homes at which Mama and Daddy always appeared to be the life of the party. Daddy's gregarious sense of humor and Mama's overwhelming grace always placed them at the center of the gathering. Daddy always announced our arrival at Unc'a Mo's big white gate with a rousing shout of "Hey, Red! Whadd'ya say!?" And Unc'a Mo's equally gregarious reply was always the same, "Whoa, Youngblood! Hey, Jew-girl!" Daddy would saunter over to his cousins and friends gathered in the backyard while shouting his greeting up to Aunt Helen in the kitchen window, "Hiya, Sis!" and Mama would shout out "Hi, Unc'a Mo!" while simultaneously greeting her sister at the kitchen door.

To say that Jewel and Draton in their prime were larger than life is no mere exaggeration. They each possessed unique qualities that belied their physical stature. Mama was the embodiment of an immense spiritual presence and power that went beyond pure, blind faith. To her, prayer was 'motivating intent.' It was faith as "the grain of mustard seed" that was able to move mountains—the essence of the power represented in the equation, $E=mc^2$. She would always sing and pray with passion and vigor so that the whole world could hear, calling on Jesus not just as her personal savior, but as her avenging warrior. And in a voice so strong that He could hear her at any distance. Her prayers seemed to imbue her physical strength and mental fortitude to overcome any obstacle in her path. Her motto, "God will make a way out of no way," was not just a matter of faith but a matter of fact. Her personal anthem and *raison d'être* was, "If I hold my peace and let the Lord fight my battles, victory, victory shall be mine!" I fondly recall the times when she wanted to rearrange the living room furniture and there was no one around but me and her. I must have weighed all of 95 pounds at the time. But she would call on the strength of all those James' in the Bible, her spiritual ancestors, and muster enough strength for the two of us to complete the task. I once noted that my own faith paled in comparison to hers. And what little faith I did possess was simply an extension of her abundance. The sad irony of her last years was the quietness that accompanied her steadfast faith until her final days.

Daddy lived a life of quiet exaggeration. He drank and gambled hard and often. He celebrated life to the sounds of the blues. He danced to his own rhythms. He elevated his profane curses to a poetic, vulgar art form. He told tall tales and bawdy jokes to the delight of friends and family. He was slow to anger but a terror when provoked. And he worked as hard as he played. His arms were knots of muscle as big and strong as the chains that bound the anchors of steamships. His legs were like gnarled tree trunks, his hands huge calloused mitts that shoveled sand all day long and bent steel bolts as if they were made of tin foil. Victor and I would joke that Daddy didn't know his own strength and the worst thing that you ever wanted to hear when Daddy was working on your car was the loud crack of a bolt breaking followed by Daddy's exclamation of "Aww, s***!" It usually meant that the minor repair had now doubled in time and money. And Daddy would come to us very humbly to announce what we already knew, "Son, I broke dat bolt. Dat's alright, I'll

fix it. I just gotta go to da parts store to git anotha one and tap it out.” Of course, once he left he would get sidetracked by his own ‘*joie d’vive*’ and detour over to the bookie joint or the home one of his friends for a drink and a few stories. I mentioned to him a while back how noticeably weaker he had become compared to his former self. He replied solemnly, “Elmo always used to say that I was real strong for a little man.” I turned my head away from the melancholy in his voice and wiped a tear from my eye in recognition of his decline.

In my memories I always see Mama and Daddy as heroes of mythic proportion endowed with immense strengths that belied their own small physical stature. Fully human and more so—laughing, crying, singing, praying, celebrating life to its fullest physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual potential. When our ancestors look across time, and our children recognize their heritage, they can all be proud. *Aché!*

YOLANDA:

In case you are wondering how Mama and Daddy got back together, I’ll share that part. Durwin’s college graduation was approaching, and Mama asked him what he wanted for his graduation present. Still a single parent of five children and on a very tight budget, Mama was always the type to think ahead. More than likely, her plan was to start saving money to get the gift of his choice – perhaps an overcoat, maybe a suit for his new job at IBM, or she might be able to help with a down payment on a car. To Mama’s surprise, Durwin told her he wanted his Daddy back home! Durwin got what he asked for, and from June 1974 until the present Daddy and Mama have remained together.

VICTOR:

Being the youngest of five children, I have known Mama and Pops the least amount of time. However, because I was the last to leave the nest, I got a chance to spend lots of time with them. Pops would always drive me to football practice, and pick me up from school. But there were other countless errands when he acted as a taxicab for an eager young boy. And even when he could not be an escort he encouraged my independence and innovation in reaching for my goals. In the end, he provided me with selfless love through hours of watching over me and being my friend. He encouraged my love of sports, love of cooking and my ambition to achieve something greater than what the world expected.

We will never be able to tell everything that Mama and Pops both have given us, so I will start with what has been the most important gift that they have given to me. It is difficult to describe but I think the best word for it is confidence. Well, that’s not quite what I mean. Maybe it is best described as a sense of destiny. We were taught that God had something special for each of us. Mama called it a gift from God. When we failed to acknowledge our blessings, Mama and Pops were always there to give us a kind word and a bit of encouragement, or a kick in the rear when we might have considered abandoning the quest to develop that gift.

They impressed upon us long ago that it did not matter where we were raised, how

much money we had, or the pigmentation of our skin. The whole wide world was out there for us to conquer. Not only were we encouraged to do this but we knew that we could do it. If a teacher disliked us, it made no difference. If we did not have enough money to go to a certain school, it made no difference. If our test scores were the lowest in the class, it did not matter. We could still do any job asked of us and do it better than anyone else.

So when people ask, "How did *you* get here - from *Compton*?" My response is, "I did not know that I was not supposed to be here. Whatever it is that you have, I too am entitled to my share. My mother and father made no excuses for a failure to achieve." I guess that I will always have to live with what some might refer to as the "burden" of knowing that I can do anything. Some consider this a burden because any gift from God comes with an obligation to develop the gift to its greatest potential.

Our parents gave us a gift that we can share with everyone, on every day. They impressed upon us that we each were someone special. They showed us that through God, all things are possible if we have patience, continue to work hard, survive the rough times, benefit from others' wisdom, and maintain a passion for knowledge.

Today I am here, before God, to testify that Mama and Pops have done their job. They have developed their gifts from God - their children - to the best of their potential.

Our gift to them is the assurance that we give to our children the same sense of destiny that they have provided and nurtured in each of us.

~*~ ~*~ ~*~ ~*~

