

A special memory for Black History Month

By HERMAN M. GAY

Whenever I read "Mother to Son" by Langston Hughes, I think about my grandmother. She's been dead for several years now, but her vision of life, love and devotion will always remain a living force in me. Her name was Lillie Parker Gay.

Ma, that's what all of us called her, had that something that rises above the beauty that even the most eloquent poets and soulful singers suggest to us in their artistry. Words like charm, charisma, grace or style fail to describe what Ma had. Instead of describing her, these words seem only phony murmuring by somebody with a false heart. How, I often wonder, did a woman so short stand so tall. How, I often puzzle, did a woman slightly stooped by a battle with milk leg when she gave birth to her last child (her tenth child) possess the power to stand so statuesque? How, I seek to learn, did a woman almost unschooled by today's standards (she told me once that she finished the second or third grade) acquire the insight of a Ph.D. and nearly a savant's recollection for the Old Testament? I don't know how but she had those powers and they gave her a radiance that can only be described as beauty by miracle.

Ma never read Langston Hughes' poetry, but Hughes had read her life from the lives of so many of the old black women that he knew. These are the black women that sup-

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plied their children with the will and optimism to endure, to keep up the fight for survival and for success.

The mother in the poem tells her son, "Life for me ain't been no crystal stair." Ma told me the same thing. She had two children who died before they reached 18, and her mother died before Ma had reached 20. Ma had seen Pa suffer when his brother killed himself, and she had known the years and their loneliness when Pa served in World War I. She knew about eating collards and cornbread with a piece of fatback. Sleeping on pallets in houses that were closer to living in the weather than simply camping in a tent was no strange experience for her. She'd killed more than her share of rats, roaches, bedbugs and mosquitoes; she'd sloshed out hog intestines, skinned rabbits (not for quaint variety, but for sustenance) and had smelled stump hole whiskey and seen its harsh, cruel marks in the faces and in the

suffering of her husband, her cousins, children and neighbors. In fact, she had lived over 30 years in a two-story house that had running water only when she poured it. Amid all that, though, Ma managed to keep hope alive, for herself, for all of us, for other members at her church, for anybody who seemed down and filled with despair. She was living exactly what that mother announced to her son when she said, "Don't you fall down now —/ for I'se still goin', honey/I'se still climbin'."

She taught me to keep hope and believe in myself. She wasn't always walking around lecturing me to get that message across. She busily lived, helping everybody and just watching her was lesson enough for me. I sometimes think about how I never thanked her for helping a black boy grow up in a world limited by the strongholds of segregation and draining forces of life on tenant farms that raised tobacco, cotton, and more tobacco.

No, my grandmother never read "Mother to Son." She only lived the story that the mother in the poem tells. My grandmother was just that way, and I feel blessed to have known her. I am a better person because she shared with me the same vision that the optimistic woman in "Mother to Son" shared with her son and the world.

(Herman Gay lives in Easton.)