ODE TO MY MAMA THE ORIGINAL WOMAN IN ME

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They say you only truly cross over when your name is spoken with love, and tonight, hearing my nomination called for The Soultown 52 has drawn me back through the veil. I am here, watching from the glow, stepping forward to accept this honor not as a memory, but as a living spirit.

If you want to know the exact hour the girl dissolved and the woman stood in her place, you have to take it back to an eight-year-old girl sitting at the kitchen table, watching her mother wrestle with the weight of bills that felt heavier than the house itself. I was a Mama's girl, through and through. When I saw her struggling, I didn't just watch—I stepped into the fire. I offered to help figure them out. And when the math worked out, when the numbers finally fell in our favor, that thrill became the first time I realized my mind was a weapon.

Mama was raised in the South. She didn't have the luxury of a formal education, and those bill collectors tried to capitalize on that, claiming she owed money that was nothing more than a fabrication. But Mama and I combed through the papers together, line by line, until we found their mistakes. We caught them. And when the dust settled, she got plenty of money back. That victory meant new clothes for all of us, and for me? It bought my very first pair of skates. On eight-year-old wheels, I felt like I could roll right past the limits of our world.

After that win, the world outside our door tightened its grip—I wasn't allowed out much anymore. But when I did slip outside, I mastered jumping double Dutch, my feet keeping rhythm with a world that was trying to figure out its own beat. Inside, I devoured our encyclopedias to pass the time while my brother fell victim to the streets, listening to peer pressure and choosing the life of crime.

As a preteen in the turbulent 1960s, I couldn't fully comprehend the violence of the fighting between Whites and Blacks. Mama would shake her head and tell me people shouldn't act like that—that we are all the same underneath. Yet, watching Black people go through so much pain on the nightly news broke something open in my chest. Daddy and Mama wouldn't let me join the protests out on the streets, so I fought my own war inside my mind. I read books, I talked to Black scholars, searching for where I fit in during all that unrest, trying to forge the strong Black female I was destined to become. Even through all I had to face, I held onto Dr. King's wisdom: that regardless of the past, we are called to love the entire human race.

Western culture and society really did a job on us. I didn't need a history book to feel the exhaustion; I felt it in my bones. I totally understood how Rosa Parks felt the day she refused to move to the back of the bus. Even though the Jim Crow South was hundreds of miles away from our doorsteps, the dismay bled right through our television screens. My only escape was the ink on the pages of my books and the rhythm of the music playing in the background.

Then, one day, I read Shakespeare, and a line anchored itself in my soul: To thine own self be true. Gil Scott-Heron echoed it, telling us not to be phonies, to stay real to ourselves. I was searching desperately for a place where I truly belonged, and it was those positive, unyielding words that kept me strong.

I knew I had to get out of the slums to find a better way to fight. But the stakes were higher now—I had my own children to protect, and they needed to know the truth so they could teach their own children how to grow in the light.

The final catalyst came right before we packed our bags to leave the slums behind. A strange man approached me on the street and casually mentioned, "I see your children watching out for each other coming home from school."

A stranger—a grown man—watching my babies' every move? It scared the absolute life out of me. That was all I needed to hear. That single moment stripped away any remaining hesitation and gave me the fierce, protective velocity I needed to scoop up my babies and pull them far away from that kind of debris.

That was the night the little girl who helped her mama with the bills fully transformed into the matriarch who would protect her bloodline at any cost.

Thank you for remembering me, for keeping my story alive in the pages of The Soultown, and for welcoming me back into the circle. Keep turning the pages, keep telling the truth, and always remember... thank you for having SOUL!

I am Pauletta Nelson-Bridges. TS#52 of 52 of The Soultown Magazine. I want to thank you all for having SOUL!

The content of this story was taken from an ODE TO MY MAMA THE ORIGINAL WOMAN IN ME, an original poem sent to my siblings and me via email from my mother, the late Pauletta Nelson-Bridges on May 13, 2019.

Rest In the Heavens, mom and thank you for having SOUL!

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