

PERFORMANCE

Sunday morning at Resurrection Baptist Church and the monotone voice of Reverend Claudis Amaker echoed across old rickety wooden ceilings, raining down the infallible word of God upon us.

My grandmother Gigi (pronounced “Jee-Jee”) always dressed up for church. To her, the Sunday presentation of yourself was an intentional act of devotion to the Lord. She wore one of those pristine, floral, church-lady dresses, perfectly accessorized with the church pearls and the church hat with the giant satin flower pinned to it. During the sermons, she’d fan herself, eyes closed, shaking her head in agreement, chiming in, “Preach, Pastor, say it again!” or just a simple “Mmm-hmmm!” Every once in a while, she would glance down at me, checking to make sure I was paying attention.

But I was just nine years old. People clapped and swayed and cried and prayed, all the while my nine-year-old mind couldn’t help but wonder if this service was ever going to end.

Except every third Sunday when the visiting Reverend Ronald West would take the pulpit.

Reverend Amaker was our *home* pastor, and he would *talk* about the power of God, but all I could hear was the voice of the adults in *Charlie Brown*—“Wah, waaah, wah, wah.” Reverend West, though, would *show* you God’s power. He wore stylish red CAZAL glasses with a matching three-piece suit, punctuated with the standard bleached-

It's always been funny to me that the first prayer my grandmother taught me was actually a rap.

Gigi was **Jesus's** homegirl. I've met many people who say they are religious. But I've never met anyone who lived out Christ's gospel the way my grandmother did. She walked and talked and *embodied* the example of Christ. This was not a Sunday thing for her. It was a 24-7-365 thing. Everything she said, everything she did, everything she *thought*, it was to glorify God.

Gigi worked the graveyard shift at the hospital, which allowed both of my parents to maintain full-time jobs. She watched my siblings and me during the day and worked at night. At the young age of four or five, hearing the phrase "the graveyard shift" filled me with images of ghouls and demons and my superhero grandmother slaying vile creatures just so she could feed me—while I lay in bed, safe and sound, caressing the silken edges of my cream-colored puffed blankie.

I used to beg her, "Please don't go, Gigi! Please stay here with me!" I felt such guilt. My impressionable mind twisted the situation into a sense of personal failure and weakness. I thought, *What kind of kid stays in bed while his grandmother has to fight monsters in a graveyard at midnight?*

It felt as though she was risking her life to protect me. And in some sense, maybe she was—not her *life*, but she was certainly sacrificing a big part of herself for me, my siblings, and my parents.

"One day, I'm gonna take care of you, Gigi," I said.

"Aww, thank you, Lover Boy." That was her nickname for me.

One day we were sitting on Gigi's front porch. She was crocheting a sweater—which at some point I was going to be forced to wear—when a homeless woman walked by. Her clothes were filthy; her face was darkened and haggard, a mix of dirt and sunburn. Her front teeth were missing. And even though she was down on the street, I could smell the

pungent reek of urine. I'd never seen a homeless person before. She looked like a witch to me, and I prayed she'd just walk on by.

But Gigi stopped her.

"Excuse me, miss, what's your name?"

I was horrified—I thought, *Gigi, what are you doing? Just let her go!*

This woman was clearly not used to being asked her name, or at least not recently. She seemed to almost have to *remember* it.

After a long pause, as she sized up my grandmother, she said, "Clara."

"Will, this is Miss Clara," Gigi said, as though they were old friends.

With that, Gigi walked down off the porch and put her arm around Clara.

"I'm Helen," Gigi said, and *invited her into the house*.

My mind was furiously flip-flopping between disgust and terror. But it was about to get way worse.

First, they went to the kitchen. Gigi didn't give Miss Clara food that was already prepared in the refrigerator; she cooked her a fresh meal, from scratch. While Clara ate, Gigi handed her a robe, took all of her clothes, and washed and folded them.

"Will?" Gigi called out.

What could she possibly want with me? I thought.

"Yes, Gigi?"

"Go run Miss Clara a bath."

As I think back, this may be the moment where one of my most famous movie catchphrases was born: *OH HELL NAW!* I thought.

I ran the bath.

Gigi then took Miss Clara upstairs, bathed her with her bare hands, brushed her teeth, and washed her hair.

I wanted to scream, *Gigi! Stop touching that dirty lady! She's gonna stank up our bathtub!* But I knew better than to say that.

They were both about the same size, so Gigi took Clara to her closet and began holding up clothes in front of her in the mirror to see which ones would fit.

Miss Clara was gasping with gratitude. Through tears, she kept

saying, “This is too much, Helen, way too much. Please stop. I don’t deserve this.”

But Gigi wasn’t having it. She held both of Clara’s hands, gently shaking them to get Clara to look into her eyes.

“Jesus loves you, and so do I,” Gigi said. That was the end of the discussion.

Gigi didn’t make a distinction between your burdens and her own. She truly believed the message of the Gospel. She saw loving and serving others not as a responsibility but as an honor. I never heard her gripe about working the graveyard shift. Never heard her say a negative word about my father, even though he had beaten her daughter. With her Bible in hand, her arms were open not only for us but for everyone. She was joyfully her brothers’ and sisters’ keeper.

Gigi was the moral compass that has guided my entire life. She was my conduit to God. If *Gigi* was happy with me, that meant that *God* was happy with me; but if she was unhappy, that meant that the universe was displeased. Gigi’s approval of me meant that the universe approved of whatever I was doing. In my mind, she had a direct line to God. When she was talking, I felt like I was getting explicit instructions *from God*. So her approval wasn’t simply the adoration of a loving, gentle grandmother—her approval was how I would access and harness the power and favor of the Lord.

Gigi personified my understanding of holiness and divinity. To this day, when I ask myself, *What makes a person good?*, my mind immediately pictures my grandmother. When I sat in those hard wooden pews at Resurrection Baptist as a kid, I didn’t understand the meaning of the sermons or the intricacies of scripture. But I got Gigi. She lived as Christ taught her to live. She walked the walk. And through her, I saw God’s love. I *felt* God’s love. And that love gave me a sense of hope. Gigi was light. She illuminated the possibility that life could be beautiful.

When I think back to my childhood, I visualize my father, my mother, and Gigi arranged as a philosophical triangle.

My father was one side of the triangle: discipline. He taught me how to work, how to be relentless. He instilled in me an ethic that “It’s better to die than to quit.”

My mother: education. She believed that knowledge was the irrevocable key to a successful life. She wanted me to study, to learn, to grow, to cultivate a deep and broad understanding, to either “know what you’re talking about or be quiet.”

Gigi: love (God). Whereas I tried to please my mother and father so I wouldn’t get into trouble, I wanted to please Gigi so that I could bathe in that transcendent ecstasy of divine love.

These three ideas—discipline, education, and love—would fight for my attention throughout the rest of my life.

Gigi was obsessed with this one Broadway play from the 1960s called *Purlie Victorious* that was turned into the musical *Purlie* in 1970. Written by Ossie Davis, it was the story of a Black preacher named Purlie who went down to Georgia, opened a church, and began saving enslaved people from an evil plantation owner. One year, Gigi decided all the kids at church had to perform *Purlie*. We had to learn every word, and every song, front to back. She would have my siblings and me practice in the living room, record player blaring, as we sang and danced along.

Forty years later, I can still sing you every song from *Purlie*.

Gigi was always encouraging me to perform. She was the self-appointed head of special events at Resurrection Baptist Church and organized all of the Easter recitations, nativity reenactments, the Thanksgiving feeding of the poor, holiday talent shows, post-baptism potluck dinners, and on and on—you name it, she planned it. As soon as my brother and sisters and I could talk, Gigi had us up in front of the