

Journal and diary entries, letters and handwritten notes from "Toots," the author's mother, paint a portrait of the affluent Caribbean community of New York and Jamaica from the 1920s forward. Memories and commentary from the author complete the picture. Includes photos.

Affectionately, Toots - My Mother's Journal

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Affectionately, Toots
My Mother's Journal

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On Mothers and Daughters

Much has been written on the special relationship between daughters and their mothers. Somehow, the umbilical cord between the two is never really severed. Despite circumstances, despite distance and the passage of time, the bond still holds, no matter how tenuous. We may get along, we may argue, we may vow never to speak to each other again, but the cord is still there. We may love each other, we may take each other for granted, we may resent each other, but we're still connected. We may frustrate each other, we may not appreciate each other, we may not understand each other, but we are undeniably linked.

Even if we think we're complete opposites, there is an undercurrent of similarity running through our veins. It might be a look, a spoken word, an attitude, or an emotion—evidence of the cord that binds, despite the outward physical differences. We may have grown up in different eras, we may have worn different clothes, liked different types of men, had different careers or different friends, but we're tethered to each other, whether we like it or not. Spending nine months in her womb has connected us in a way much deeper than the physical. Every woman at some point in her life surely looks in the mirror and sees her mother staring back at her. The seed implanted at conception blossoms into the person we are, but never loses its reflection of the person who birthed it.

Affectionately, Toots

In the back of our minds, we just know our mothers will always be there. And when they leave us, whether separated in life or in death, we feel an immeasurable loss. The severing of the cord is painful, more so than we care to admit. For when they die, we feel like a small part of us has been lost as well. Whether our mothers were our heroes or our enemies, we cannot deny their impact on our lives. They helped shape our futures, our personalities, and our dreams.

My mother was an amazing woman. She was strong and courageous, ready to take on the world. At a time when women were just starting to assert themselves in the workplace and society, she galloped through life like a horse with blinders, oblivious to distractions or obstacles. Always conscious of her weak points, she exploited her strengths so that you almost never saw her shortcomings. Was it a façade? Was she really that strong underneath it all? She led a truly blessed life of privilege, growing up in relative wealth, never lacking for anything material. I thought she was invincible.



Mom and me at my aunt Pauline and uncle Locksley's home in Albuquerque, September 1984

Cheryl Elferis

It wasn't until she was in her eighties that I saw the enormous effort it took to maintain that aura of strength. And as her strength, physical and mental, slowly ebbed, I got a glimpse of the woman left behind. Although frustrated by emotional and physical pain, she kept her head up high until the end.

Her life summed up: "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith."

The Journal

January 1999

At the presentation of this journal, I quietly debated just how I would frame the following topics. As we age, the mind becomes a well-stocked filing cabinet. “Time” is a river that runs tirelessly into the sea—never backward to the spring.

Valentine’s Day 1999

I earnestly decided to attack [the journal] to review life and add interesting tidbits unblinkingly.

1920-1925

My mother, Ivy Maud DaCosta, married October 1919 and gave birth to me July 12, 1920 in Manhattan, New York. Both my parents were products of very respected families. My mother (1897-1987) was the daughter of Rachel Johnson and Dr. John DaCosta. My parents had migrated to New York from Jamaica, West Indies in 1918. I was a privileged daughter, idolized by my parents and two precious godmothers, Catherine Henderson and Hytena Dobie and godfather William Dobie. We were all residents of Harlem, which was fast becoming a mecca for Southerners and West Indian migrants—coming north for a better life.

Cheryl Elferis

Dad—Egbert C. Craig, proud dad—through all the years regarded me as a special gift and blessing. Mother—very ambitious after giving birth to three children: Edna Louise 1920, Gloria Merle 1923 and Egbert Junior 1926.



Edna Louise Craig, six months old, January 1921

Mom and I became close friends growing up. She took several courses at the Girls' High School—night courses for adults: millinery, English, flower making and dressmaking. Her only means of punishment was chasing Gloria or Junior with a broom—of course, she never caught them. I can never remember a harsh word from Mom.

Affectionately, Toots

The taskmaster and ruler of the clan was Dad. As the U.S. entered the Depression, Dad joined the NYC Board of Education as a custodian engineer. Dad—one of the first men of color to reach Board of Education status. We always had enough—a full, generous life. We saw people standing on [bread] lines and didn't know what they were waiting for. Although others suffered the repercussion of the financial setback, we continued life as usual: piano lessons, ballet lessons, private schools, shopping. There was always food on our table and clothes on our back—we lacked for nothing.

My earliest recollection of life in Harlem was that of enjoying afternoon walks during lovely spring and summer days. I can remember cobblestone streets; I became fearful of the uneven sidewalks not yet asphalted. Although trivial, it was a fear that followed me throughout my entire life.

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