

“O.M.L.”

by Pamela A. Lewis

Mom would have scoffed at the term, no doubt about it. “Role model? Me? Cha!,” and the “Cha” would have been preceded by a clicking “Tsk” of tongue against teeth, a distinctly Guyanese expression of mild ridicule.

But my rebuttal is contained in the sturdy light-blue train case my mother had carried with her in 1944 when she left what was still called British Guiana to come with her husband, my father, to settle in New York. The embossed initials “O.M.L.,” for Olga Millicent Lewis, once bright gilt, are now barely discernible. My mother’s documents, her “immigrant attributes,” as I call them - birth certificate, first passport, citizenship papers –each bearing her photo displaying the strong and noble face that meets the viewer’s gaze directly, all say “Yes, you were a role model and we are the proof of that.”

Nearly eight years have passed since my mother died, and close to seventy since she first stepped foot on American soil. Whenever I lift the lid of that train case and carefully touch those precious papers, I wonder if I could have done what she had done and with as much patience and grace.

Such as leaving home and loved ones to live with a husband she knew only through a brief courtship, as well as turning her back on her well-ordered colonial world for the boundless New York universe where everyone spoke, moved, and even ate fast;

where the seasons changed and she would have to make an acquaintance with winter and snow. Against dad's wishes, mom took work in the garment district, an immigrant among other immigrants, all struggling and striving to become more American with every dress or blouse they sewed. Not unlike a high-wire performer, mom held her balance between learning American lingo, customs, and cuisine while keeping a firm hold on her Old-World ways.

Could I, without benefit of instruction manual or even the omniscient Doctor Spock, have entered motherhood? Bereft only days old of her own mother and reared (with her two slightly older sisters) by a loving but strict father, she nonetheless figured out how to raise and guide me, her only child, drawing more from hunches than experience, buttressed by common sense and her unalloyed love.

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Without my beloved O.M.L. I could not have learned to be a person of faith, for it is she who taught me my first prayers and a knowledge of God. And implicit in her oft-repeated mantra, "A lady reveals neither her age, weight nor if she's had a past," was her conviction that being a woman and a lady is no contradiction.

Could I have witnessed the illness and eventual death of my husband and kept on moving to raise my still-young daughter alone? If mom ever doubted her ability to do so, I was unaware of it; she prevailed despite her grief and maintained a positive outlook.

Although she is gone, mom's example to me is deathless. But her life that was bound by faith, courage and pride is now a loving and inspiring guide to my own.

Pamela A. Lewis

Biography

Pamela A. Lewis was born in Jamaica, Queens, the only child of British Guyanese immigrants. She teaches French in a Manhattan high school and still lives in Queens.