

Taking No Prisoners

[Good Night, Kids: Good Night, Gill](#)

Posted: 09 Jun 2011 03:53 PM PDT



“Was there a touch of spring

in the air?

And did she have a pink dress on?

Wasn’t your first love

A very precious time?

It was predictable that the accolades to the late poet and singer, Gill Scott-Heron, focused on his political commentary and searing insight

to the tenor of America's transitional era of 1960-80. His "We Almost Lost Detroit," about the partial meltdown at the Fermi nuclear power plant was as valid then as it was prescient, 12 nuclear meltdowns later, in this year of Fukushima Daiichi.

But there were two Gill Scott-Herons: the social commentator, and the romantic poet.

And for a single father raising two young girls, the overlooked romantic was an integral part of their upbringing. One of the advantages of being a poet is that no one criticizes you for lacking a singing voice. And to two young girls, the raspy, earnest, off-key, note-breaking Scott-Heron was just another Dad, but one who had a backup band. Which meant he was the perfect musician for me to join in the nightly ritual of singing them to sleep.

His ballad, "A Precious Time," from his *Winter in America* album was all about the wonder of first love. But Brie, my youngest, and Kir, four years her senior, were too young to know that. But they did have pretty pink dresses they pulled out for Easter, in a spring ritual that accompanied the blossoming of the dogwood and cherry trees.

"And when she smiled

Her shy smile

Could you almost

Touch the warm?"

A closing line which would inevitably prompt a "you like our smiles

and dresses, don't you Daddy?"

"Yes Dear. You have pretty smiles. Now close your eyes."

Scott-Heron had a ballad for all occasions; something to fit the stories of Blacks in America as told by me or their elders. Their Great Grandfather, Walker Smith – or GG-Pop – gave them several books on Black Cowboys and regaled them with tales of how *his* grandfather, the first Walker Smith, wielded a rifle and sword, rode with the Pennsylvania Cavalry, and pretty much won the Battle of Gettysburg single handedly. So when Gill's gunpowder-rough voice intoned:

"Brother Man run to Nebraska

After the Civil War was through...

Rootin' tootin' Wild West shootin' up Brothers!

Though his-story don't teach us none..."

they would pipe up from the covers about GG-Pop's cowboy books and how much they liked riding horses. And if it was a scorcher in August, or the holiday season after Thanksgiving, they wanted to hear me and Gill in a duet on "Winter in America" which, to adults, dealt with the Republican push-back against civil rights but to the kids brought cheerful images of snowy days and family gatherings at Christmas.



And the concerts always ended the same way, with two melodies that signified all was well: “A Lovely Day,” and “Your Daddy Loves You.” The first one said look to the bright side for all would be well, regardless of what happened during the day:

“On a clear spring morning

There’s not a cloud in the sky

...when I see that old sun shining

Makes me think that I can make it through

Yes. And all I really want to say

Is that the problems come and go

But the sunshine seems to stay.

Just look around. I think we found

A lovely day.

And the latter, with its refrain: “Your Daddy loves you. Your Daddy loves his girls,” simply meant all was right in the world and Daddy would fix whatever was broken. For years, if they woke up in the middle of the night shaking from a terrible nightmare, a brief concert of just those two songs would chase the looming monsters away. “A Lovely Day” would erase the shakes, and they would be asleep by the end of “Your Daddy



Loves You.”

The nightly concerts faded away as they became “big girls.” But growing up does not eliminate nightmares – especially the real ones. At age 15 Brie needed cancer surgery – a prospect that would scare an adult and terrified a 10th grader. Kir, then a college freshman, missed coming home for the surgery because she was in intensive care in a California hospital, where doctors tried to reduce the swelling of her brain stem from meningitis. Brie cried that she wouldn’t live to graduate from New Jersey’s Teaneck High School. Kir cried over the phone that the pain was unbearable and she wouldn’t live to see tomorrow.



A day after the surgery, Brie was in bed and Kir came home on a medical flight. As I prepared to leave their room, Kir said softly:

“Daddy, would you sing to us?”

So I got out the records, and began the familiar duet of Gill and Me till they were resting comfortably and I could ease out the door.



A decade later, Kir is married and raising a family in Virginia while Brie is one of many civilian engineers working with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in Afghanistan. It's after 10 P.M. on a Friday night this past February, and my wife and I are at a reception for Jeff Johnson, a sculptor in Poughkeepsie, N.Y., whose latest show opened to critical acclaim. My cell phone rang. It was from Brie, and she did not sound good.

I found a quiet corner in Johnson's wood working studio and asked what the problem was.

"We're in Code Black," Brie said.

"What's that?"

"It's when we have to grab our Kevlar and run for the bunker and wait till the Marines say it's all clear."

"What happened?" I asked.

"A bomb went off under my window. They were shooting at us with AK-47s as we ran. The bullets were hitting the walls and ground around us. Do you have time to chat?"

She had gone to Afghanistan just before Christmas and this was an ongoing nightmare she had no control over. So I sat on the floor and we talked about stuff: Kir's pregnancy, my writing, the antics of her three cats now ensconced in my library till she returns. Then, from an underground

bunker a half a world away:

“Daddy, will you sing to me?”

So I sat on floor, amidst the sawdust, leaned against the sturdy legs of Johnson’s workbench and, going without the aid of Scott-Heron’s raspy voice and tight music to keep me somewhere near tune, sang “A Lovely Day” followed by “Your Daddy Loves You.”

Brie was silent for a moment.

Then: “Thank you Daddy. Enjoy the party.”

And with that, she was gone.

