**Between Bars, Season 1, Episode 4**

**“The Unconventional Hero”**

Hello. Welcome to Between Bars, a podcast not only featuring poetry, but also stories of the inspiration behind the bars. I’m Sheryl Leigh, your host.

I would also like to welcome you to the most wonderful time of the year – June has made its appearance. It’s my birthday month, the start of summer, black music month, all the good things, plus a few more that we’ll talk about in a minute.

But let me start with an apology. As you know – or may not have even noticed – I did not publish an episode last week. I know I originally said new episodes would drop every other Wednesday. However, this is still a work in progress and honestly, I’m figuring it out as I go. When I looked at the calendar and realized I would potentially have to record three episodes in the month of June, I knew it wasn’t happening. I think two episodes a month is sufficient, so I decided to skip a week. I think it’s more doable for me to just plan to release the second and fourth Wednesday of every month – if anyone’s keeping track.

So, here we are in June and I found myself wondering what in the world to share with you, and it really was a no-brainer. This podcast will drop on the anniversary of the day my grandfather passed away, which also happens to be the day before his birthday. And as we all know, this month we also celebrate Father’s Day.

In light of all those special moments, I wanted to share a piece from my book *black pearls*, entitled “The Unconventional Hero.” I wrote it after my grandfather passed, specifically for his funeral, and including it in the book was my way of ensuring he was a part of that special project. Because anyone who knows me, or knows my writing, knows my grandfather has a special place in my heart.

This is The Unconventional Hero, written in loving memory of Motley Younger.

**The Unconventional Hero**

*In loving memory of Motley Younger*

Not all heroes wear capes.

For 46 years,

my grandfather draped capes

across the shoulders of boys and girls from around the way,

and fastened them at the napes

of the necks of men who traded in the block for the burbs,

yet still returned

for a Saturday morning shape-up

and a fresh shave

with the precision of a straight blade.

They came to 10th Street and 12th Avenue

expecting community and conversation

stories and playful banter,

but mostly

they came for the transformation.

For when the clippers were laid down,

the chair spun around

and they peered at his handiwork,

they felt like a new woman or man.

And if they locked eyes with their own image

long enough, they noticed

that after taking weekly position

in my grandad’s chair, their reflection

was a little grayer, a little wider

than when they first became a regular.

And whether white- or blue-collar,

judge or pro baller,

their style was more polished,

dreams more ambitious,

hearts more generous,

and faith more persistent

because of a standing appointment

with his example and encouragement.

Though they could not articulate when or why,

at some point after his cape first draped their shoulders,

they believed they could fly.

Not all heroes have a standard uniform.

My grandfather liked to switch it up:

tailored suits on Sundays,

with fedora hat or newsboy cap,

scarf and wool coat to match—

perfect fit

for his Cadillac.

Work days

in casual slacks

with a sweater or shirt and tie,

key ring dangling at his side.

Except for vacations,

meant for leisure and sweat suits,

paired with a Giants or Yankees cap.

He was effortlessly fly in any style—

but never too cool

to flash that signature smile.

Not all heroes have theme songs,

fast and furious scores

with complex instrumentation

and lyrical illustrations

of leaping buildings in a single bound.

My grandad

sang of being lost and then found,

his strong tenor

confessing weakness,

boasting dependence

on the Master.

He was content to sing praises

accompanied by organ and drum

or simply to the rhythm

of hands clapping

and feet stomping.
Sometimes heroes

are just members of an old country quartet

whose hymns and prayers rock the soul to its rest.

Some heroes boast love

as their greatest super power.

My grandfather came to the rescue

in times of public crisis and moments of private disaster

armed with a generous heart,

warm hug, and a hand to hold,

understanding that granddaughters

are never too old

for a hero.

He gazed at me

Like the world was lit by my glow,

made sure *I* knew

my value

each time he said I looked like new money.

He smiled through the phone at the sound of my voice,

leaving me with no choice:

*I love you, and there’s nothing you can do about it.*

I recalled those words in his final hour,

knowing that just as my actions bore no weight,

not even death can separate

a girl from her hero’s love.

It lives on in my heart and memories,

a reminder that love

is a hero’s greatest legacy.

That was “The Unconventional Hero.”

As I said, it was about my grandfather, who was obviously a hero to me. But he really was that to so many people – and for so many reasons.

I started off talking about my grandfather’s profession because he was one of those people who really loved and took pride in his job. He owned a barber shop in Newark for almost 50 years. In the black community, we know that barber shops and beauty salons are an experience. We’re obviously serious about our hair, but the sense of community that we feel within those places is sacred. And we also don’t let just anyone do our hair, so when we find our person, we stick with them. My grandfather was so proud of the fact that so many of his male customers had literally been coming to him since they were children. He not only watched them grow up, but like I said, participated in their transformation – whether that was giving them a shape up every week or two, or giving them inspiration to pursue their dreams and succeed in life. He did the same for me. When I released my first book, he called me and told me to send him a box of books and a poster to hang in the shop so he could sell them.

Though I dipped in and out of the barber shop over the years during my visits, I truly saw the impact of my grandfather and of his shop when we threw a banquet celebrating either the 30th or 35th anniversary of the shop. Hearing the stories of people who had so much love for him, knowing that he was somehow respected and protected in one of Newark’s roughest neighborhoods, knowing that the shop had lived through the city’s riots decades ago and was there to witness some of the revitalization that came to Newark in more recent years…. If I hadn’t known it before, I realized then that it was definitely more than just haircuts.

There were a million memorable things about my grandfather. Of course I talked about his style in the piece – something I’d like to call fly but not flashy. Definitely old school in that certain times and occasions called for certain clothes and cars. Then there was his voice. He came from a singing family and even had a gospel group with his brothers when they were younger. But the one thing that I felt was most memorable about my granddad, and what I would consider his legacy, is his love. He was generous with his money, with his smile, with his stories, with his compliments. He had a way of making everyone feel special.

As I mentioned in the piece, when my grandfather saw us – we could be dressed up or just in jeans – but either way he loved to tell us that we looked like new money. We hardly ever have cash these days, so it may not sound like much. But when you stop and think about it, it’s quite the compliment? New money is fresh. If it’s a coin, it’s shining; if it’s paper, it’s crisp. In any form, it’s full of possibilities, and you feel like somebody when you have it with you. Anyone can call you pretty, but I appreciate that old school originality.

Today’s episode is in dedication to the unconventional heroes in our lives. The men who take care of us day in and day out, in ways big and small. The providers and protectors. The men who inspire us to be better and remind us just how special we already are. The men who consider it not only their duty but their pleasure to love us unconditionally. Men like my grandfather, men like my dad. Men who don’t get all the attention and accolades – but whose presence is affirming and comforting. We are conditioned to think that love is loud and showy; in reality, as unconventional heroes have demonstrated to me, love is quiet and consistent. Happy Father’s Day to all the dads out there. You are appreciated.

You have been listening to Between Bars with SheryLeigh. You can find me on Instagram and Facebook @sheryleighwrites, on Twitter at @sheryleigh, and on my website at sheryleigh.com. The poem you heard on this episode can be found in my book black pearls, which is available for purchase on Amazon or from my website. If you have thoughts or suggestions, feel free to email me at info@sheryleigh.com.

Thank you for listening. Help me celebrate unconventional heroes by sharing this episode with your friends and followers. Also, don’t forget to subscribe to Between Bars wherever you listen to podcasts, and to rate us on Apple Podcasts.

See you next time, between the bars.