Dear Mr. Cole,

My name is Ida Mae Branden Gladney. Your song smile has been my theme song through my struggles. I traveled to the North with my two children and my husband some time ago. I realize we have never met before, but when you sing “Smile” it fills my soul and I feel as if I were the only one ever able to fully appreciate it’s beauty. I am writing you because I want you to know why “Smile” is my personal anthem. In order for you to realize just how much it has touched me.

I was introduced to the idea of struggles as a young child. My brothers were always up to something. I would try to tag along and do all the boy things with them. In fact I acted like a boy so much that the other kids started calling me “Tom”. For the reason that I didn’t really act much like an Ida Mae. In the years when I was “Tom” I saw my fair share of struggle.

When my brothers got tired of their little sister on their tail they would give me a quarter, so I would go plow the field. I remember feeling as if that were the only job that ever mattered. I would cut the lines in the field the best any young girl ever did. I see now what my brothers were doing, but I am grateful because the time in the field meant more time with my father.

Where ever my father went, I went. When my father would go out and nurse the cotton I would pretend as if I knew exactly what to do and help him. I pretended so much that I actually learned a lot about the fields. When my father would go out and pick I would trail behind him with a flour sack and pick what I could.

I was my father’s shadow. That is until he died. I was young but I still remember not having any shoes to wear to the funeral. It was raining. I was scared of what would happen to me now. This is

where your song started to help me. The lyrics,

“Smile though your heart is aching

Smile even though it's breaking

When there are clouds in the sky, you'll get by

If you smile through your fear and sorrow

Smile and maybe tomorrow

You'll see the sun come shining through for you.”

If I had only known this song then. That day may have been just the smallest bit easier.

I realize that you Mr. Cole did not write these or the music to go with them. The original writers were writing to the listener to have them cheer up. They wanted to give people a brighter outlook on tomorrow. I believe they do a fine job with the song. However your voice reaches deep down and comforts the soul, Mr. Cole. I didn’t think the clouds would ever clear, but they did. The sun came out , and it was time to keep living.

Everything in life was just that much harder now. I learned to fight. I got in a lot of fights. I am not proud of my fighting, but back then that is just what you did. When I reached the age of fifteen the boys did not want to fight me any more. Instead they wanted to court me! One in particular caught my eye, George Gladney. I married George in the fall of 1929. Things seem like they were going to be good now. Your song comes in again here Mr. Cole. When you sing,

“Light up your face with gladness

Hide every trace of sadness

Although a tear may be ever so near

That's the time you must keep on trying

Smile, what's the use of crying?

You'll find that life is still worthwhile

If you just smile.”

The first line of this lyric makes me chuckle a bit because it says, “Light up your face with gladness.” Gladney was now my last name. The last lyric is what resonated with me the most though. I did find that life was still worthwhile. I just kept on smiling and my smile won me a husband. I realize though that this may not be the original way to look at the lyric. When Mr. Chaplin wrote the song he was writing for a movie character. Even though the character was fictional the message that was sent to me in this song through you, Mr. Cole, could not have been more real.

That is why I chose to write to you as opposed to the equally talented Mr. Chaplin. I mean no disrespect to him by this, but you Mr. Cole breathed life into this song. You sing it like you could be on the edge, but it is giving you the strength to keep holding on. When you sing, “Although a tear may be ever so near” it hits home in a big way with me. Through my struggles I had many nights where I would want to let the weight of a corrupt caste, a bad situation, and some bad luck crush my spirit. I could not do this though. In the next several lines you tell me,

“That's the time you must keep on trying

Smile, what's the use of crying?

You'll find that life is still worthwhile

If you just smile.”

I do not know if truer words were ever spoke. I could not give up or give out. I had a family to look out for. I was living in a place where white people would rather see dead than within ten feet of them. I knew still through everything that life was still worthwhile! I just would let God’s love shine through my smile. It has also been said that when I look at you I look deep with question as if I had never seen another human before. I am looking for the worthwhile part of people. Nobody thus far has ever disappointed me when I go searching. There is always a reason to live and light up my face with a smile.