

ONE DAY IT'LL ALL MAKE SENSE | **COMMON** with Adam Bradley

"A magnificent memoir."
—MAYA ANGELOU



Common has earned a reputation in the hip-hop world as a conscious artist by embracing themes of love and struggle in his songs. His journey toward understanding is rooted in his relationship with a remarkable woman, his mother, Mahalia Ann Hines.

In *One Day It'll All Make Sense*, Common holds nothing back. He tells what it was like for a boy with big dreams growing up on the South Side of Chicago. He reveals how he almost quit rapping after his first album, *Can I Borrow a Dollar?*, sold only two thousand copies. He recounts his rise to stardom, giving a behind-the-scenes look into the recording studios, concerts, movie sets, and after-parties of a hip-hop celebrity and movie star. He reflects on his controversial invitation to perform at the White House, a story that grabbed international headlines. And he talks about the challenges of balancing fame, love, and fatherhood.

One Day It'll All Make Sense is a gripping memoir, both provocative and funny. Common shares never-before-told stories about his encounters with everyone from Tupac to Biggie, Ice Cube to Lauryn Hill, Barack Obama to Nelson Mandela. Drawing upon his own lyrics for inspiration, he invites the reader to go behind the spotlight to see him as he really is—not just as Common but as Lonnie Rashid Lynn.

Each chapter begins with a letter from Common addressed to an important person in his life—from his daughter to his close friend and collaborator Kanye West, from his former love Erykah Badu to you, the reader. Through it all, Common emerges as a man in full. Rapper. Actor. Activist. But also

father, son, and friend. Common's story offers a living example of how, no matter what you've gone through, one day it'll all make sense.

COMMON is a film and television actor who has appeared in such films as *Smokin' Aces*, *American Gangster*, *Wanted*, *Date Night*, and *Just Wright*. He is also a Grammy-winning artist who has released numerous albums. He is the founder of the Common Ground Foundation, an organization dedicated to developing youth in underserved communities.

Adam Bradley is the author of *Book of Rhymes: The Poetics of Hip Hop* and the co-editor of *The Anthology of Rap*.

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ADVANCE PRAISE FOR *ONE DAY IT'LL ALL MAKE SENSE*

"[*One Day It'll All Make Sense*] is a book about [Common's] fascinating life. That is true. More important, his story is the story of all young people trying to grow up. His saga reminds the reader that love liberates and poverty cripples. Common writes beautifully, like the poet he is."

—**Maya Angelou**

"Common distinguishes himself here as a true artist and a writer of deep talent. This book is the story of an artist in constant evolution, one who embodies the strength of the brilliant woman that raised him, the love of the South Side Chicagoland that spawned him, and the raw spirit of the pro basketball player who fathered him."

—**James McBride, author of *The Color of Water***

"Common is a 360-degree human being, and I don't say that about many people. He never needed to 'pimp the hood' to achieve his deserved success."

—**Quincy Jones**

"Raw in its honesty, profound in its insights, *One Day It'll All Make Sense* establishes Common as a voice that is as compelling on the page as it is on a record. This is not simply the story of an individual artist but a crucial page in the history of hip-hop itself."

—**Jelani Cobb**

"A powerful memoir that speaks to all audiences."

—**Queen Latifah**

"A thoughtful and beautiful book that tells us much more about Common. His mother's perspective takes this to another level."

—**Touré, author of *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness?***

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ALSO BY COMMON

I Like You but I Love Me

The Mirror and Me

M.E. (Mixed Emotions)

ONE DAY IT'LL ALL
MAKE SENSE

A MEMOIR

COMMON

WITH ADAM BRADLEY

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I dedicate this to the Most High God
from whom all blessings flow.

I also dedicate this to my mother,
to Omoye, and to my grandmother.

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EPILOGUE

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

"You have a wonderful son." "He is such a good person." "His spirit is so great." These are comments I often hear from perfect strangers. Most of them know my son only as Common, not by his given name, Rashid. But each of them speaks as if they have a personal connection to him. My favorite comment of all, though, is "I want to be your daughter-in-law!"

Every time I hear comments like these, it makes me smile. It makes me very proud to be his mother. Friends and family say, "Rashid hasn't changed. He's still the same as he was before the fame." That makes me feel even more proud. I'm surprised they think he *would* change. I know he's an entertainer and some say he's a star, but in my mind those words only describe what he does, not who he is.

I'm often told that Rashid is who he is because of me. "You are such a strong mother. You've taught him so much." Sure, I would like to take all of the credit for who he has become, but I can't. He's always been his own person—even as a child—and he's certainly become his own man.

Sometimes I listen to him and I have to ask myself, "Who is this? Why is he so wise? Did he really come from me?" There's so much about him that's still a mystery, even to me. What I do know, though, is that I like him. I really like him. Of course, I love him, too. As mothers, we always love our children—but we may not always *like* them. I often tell him, "I would like you even if you weren't my son."

What do I like so much about him? I like praying with him, talking with him, and learning from him. He has a way of putting things into perspective for me when I'm stressed out or worried about something. I remember talking to him about my niece Bianca, who had come to live with me after my sister, Stella, had died. Bianca was only twelve and she was so angry at everyone, angry at the world. She was angry at her mother for leaving, angry at God for taking her away, and she was even mad at me for still being here. I did everything I knew to do for her, but nothing really helped. She barely graduated from high school and I helped her move on to college away from home. It wasn't long before she was running into problems there.

That's when I called Rashid. I was so worried. I even thought that if my sister were here, Bianca wouldn't be struggling quite so bad. I said to him that I thought if she came back to Chicago where her family was she might do better. He said "Mama, I know you want the best for Bianca. I love her, too. You have to do what you think will help her, but you need to understand that wherever Bianca goes she will take herself with her." It was simple wisdom, but it was a difficult truth. So I let Bianca tough it out away from home and before long, she found her own path with our love and support.

Have I always liked Rashid? Maybe not always. I really didn't like him when he decided to leave school to become a rapper. I didn't even know what rapping was nor did I think that one could have a career in it. I am embarrassed today when I say I didn't know he was even rapping as a teenager. Sure, I knew he could write. He always got As in English. I knew he used to spin on his head to music all the time, but I certainly didn't know

that spinning on your head could lead to a career.

~~Remember, I came up in the '60s where doors finally started opening for African Americans to get an education, which would lead to getting a good job. You'd have the job for life. So why didn't my son want to finish college and get a good job for *his* life? I didn't understand it and I didn't like it, but I loved him and I tried to be supportive as he struggled to follow his dream.~~

I even went to one of his first shows one night at the House of Blues. I have to admit I was excited. I was proud that my son was an entertainer. He was excited that I was going to be there, I think. But my excitement started waning early into the show. All I saw were people jumping around onstage and hollering—angry, loud, and more often than not cursing. I wasn't sure who should have been onstage and who shouldn't. I even saw audience members jumping onstage trying to take the mic.

At some point in the show, Rashid seemed to feel like he had to defend his own microphone. I think he even hit someone. My excitement quickly turned to fear. My pride turned to worry, but somehow the show went on. My best friend, Barbara, and I just sat there in amazement. I knew she didn't say what she really thought because she didn't want to hurt my feelings. We sat there in silence looking at one another. Actually, I think by now we were standing because everyone else was standing and throwing up the hands.

With all that chaos going on, I tried to listen closely to the words in Rashid's rhymes. He wasn't quite talking and wasn't quite singing, but something in between. It had rhythm and spirit and a little bit of soul, too. But it sounded to my ears like a foreign language. At one point in his performance, Rashid jumped off the stage and into the audience. Barbara and I looked at one another and we sat down. We had been there since 9:00 p.m. He was supposed to come on at 10:00, but he ended up coming on just after 1:00 in the morning. By 3:00, the show was over and Barbara and I were exhausted.

Well, I thought, at least I'll get to see his dressing room. We were escorted backstage—if you can even call it that. Rashid's dressing room was not as big as my bathroom. It was full of Rashid's loud, smelly, and I think drunk (or on the way to being drunk) homeboys. When Barbara and I entered the room, they tried to straighten up out of respect for us, but there was only so much they could do. I gave him a hug—all the while looking at who was in there—told him he did great, and left.

As I drove home I thought to myself, *how could I have not known he was into rapping?* His friend Derek's mother and father knew about it. They were even driving him around to gigs with Derek and giving them money for equipment. I wondered if some of my money had gone toward his early rapping career. I'm sure it did.

But on the way back from that first show, I knew exactly why Rashid hadn't told me about his rapping earlier. You see, he knew me and he knew that if I had known I would have tried to stop him. Knowing why he kept it a secret didn't help the hurt. I was disappointed in him for not confiding in me. I was angry with myself because as a mother I should have known. I had really missed the boat on that one. It had sailed, but I was determined it wouldn't dock. This was not what I wanted for my son, or for me. I was embarrassed to tell anyone my son was a rapper. But this was his life not mine, so I had to step back. I decided I would give him three years of emotional and financial support to establish his career. If he couldn't do it by then, he would have to go back to school. In m

mind, I knew he would be back in school in three years, maybe fewer. Little did I know. . .

~~Over time, rap changed and so did Rashid. He became a conscious rapper. His lyrics expanded to represent more of what he was about and not what others—be they friends or record labels—thought he should be about. He became his own artist and his own man.~~

Today I am proud to say my son is a rapper. My friends call me the “hip-hop grandma” because I not only talk about his songs, but about Nas’s, Tupac’s, Jay-Z’s, and Kanye’s, too. Even though I often find myself defending rap in front of people who don’t have a clue about my son or what he does, I’m happy to do it. I have been in social situations where someone will mention that my son is Common and that he’s a rapper/entertainer. They’ll ask me what he does. I’ll say he’s a rapper. I can see by their blank looks that they don’t know what to say and they don’t know what to make of him—or of me. So, I make it easy on them. I’ll ask, “Do you have children?” If they say yes, I’ll say, “As good as the ones that Common has.” Most of the time, their kids will say, “He’s one of the dopest rappers I’ve ever heard of with meaningful lyrics.” And, you know what? They’re right!

But Rashid is more than just a rapper. He’s an actor, an author, a speaker, and a father, according to no less an authority than Dr. Maya Angelou, a poet (smile). As wonderful as all of that is, those are only things he does, not who he is. When I’m asked to describe him, I’ll say he is the best son a mother could have, a good father, a great and loyal friend, a firm and loving husband-to-be, a spiritual believer, and a practicing Christian—not necessarily in that order. In this book, you too will have the opportunity to get to know not only Common, but also Rashid. You’ll get to know the artist and also the complex soul I’m proud to call my son.

Throughout this book, Rashid opens his heart. He tells his story. He shares very personal experiences that are sometimes too personal even for me. But, if his openness and honesty can touch hearts, change minds, and help others to reflect on their lives in a way that will allow them to see the God within them, then I’ll even forgive him for telling my personal business, too!

PROLOGUE

Dear Reader:

When I was eighteen months old, my mother and I were kidnapped at gunpoint. My father held the gun.

At least that's one side of the story. I first heard about it all from my aunt long after it happened, when I was already a grown man. I asked my mother, and she told it to me one way. I asked my father, and he told it to me another. The story I'll tell you begins where my mother's and my father's tales come together and continues past them into the separate corners of my parents' truths. Somehow in telling it, the story becomes my own. Somehow in telling it, it all starts to make sense.

My father, Lonnie Lynn, was a Chicago playground legend. They called him the Genie because he'd make the basketball disappear right before your eyes then make it reappear at the bottom of the net. At six foot eight, he had NBA size and the skills to match. He was nice around the rim and had a sweet stroke from inside eighteen feet. But he talked back to coaches. He missed practice. He developed a habit. He was out of the league before his career really began. For all his gifts, he played just one year of professional basketball, for the Denver Rockets and the Pittsburgh Pipers of the ABA.

Around the same time, his relationship with my mother was falling apart. He was getting high, keeping drugs right out in the open on the nightstand. He'd react to the slightest provocation. One time my mother locked him out of our apartment, and he shut out all the windows. When he was sober, he was a loving man, but when he was high, he was somebody else.

"I was out of basketball," my father later told me. "I was struggling. My lowest point came in December of 1972, when you were nine months old. I weighed one hundred ninety-five pounds, less than I had coming out of high school. That's what the drugs had done—or, rather, what I had done with the drugs. By the time I got back to Chicago, I was back near my playing weight at two hundred thirty-five pounds. I was ready for my last chance."

His last chance came with a tryout for the Seattle SuperSonics. They knew about my dad's past troubles, and they were concerned. They wanted to know he was a family man. Problem was, my folks were separated, heading toward divorce. So, early one morning my father packed everything he owned into the backseat of a rented Dodge Charger and drove to Eighty-eighth and Dorchester in Chicago's South Side, where my mother and I lived.

Here is where my parents' stories diverge. "He took us out of the house at gunpoint, handcuffed me to the front seat, put you in the back, and started driving across the country to Seattle," my mother says.

"You and your mother got in the front seat with me," my father recalls, "and we started out on Interstate 90 heading west."

I can imagine my mother seething inside—not panicked, not defeated—waiting for her moment. My father must have known this too. Part of him might even have feared he was a strange thing since he was the one at the wheel. She had this indomitable spirit; it only grew stronger when she felt her child was in danger.

What could she do? When we stopped for gas, she says he handcuffed her to the

steering wheel. When she needed to use the restroom, she says he stood outside the door. The situation must have looked hopeless to her.

My mother escaped with me early one Sunday morning. She recalls my father pulling off the highway to get gas; there were no plans to stop for food, no plans to sleep. She complained of a headache and asked my father to bring her something for the pain.

He came back to the car with a bottle of pills. My mother took two like the container directed then somehow managed to put the rest in his can of Coke as he gassed up the car. When he got back in, he took a big swig of soda then threw the can out the window. It wasn't long before he started feeling the effects.

"Did she drug me? I don't know," my father told me later. "All I know is that I made the decision that it was better to sleep during the day and drive at night while you were sleeping."

We stopped at a roadside motel on the outskirts of Madison, Wisconsin. I wonder what people saw when they looked at us. A beautiful family on a cross-country trip? A dotting mother holding her child? A loving husband clutching his wife close by his side? Did they see the family we were or the family we might have been?

My mother told me that my father had just enough time to handcuff her to the bed, sit me on the couch, strip off some of his clothes, and fall onto the mattress, his feet dangling off the edge. Soon he was snoring away. Once he was fast asleep, my mother says she started working her small hand against the cuff, folding her fingers in on themselves and pulling until metal scraped skin.

"Rashid," she said in a stage whisper. "Rashid, baby, go outside and play. Mommy will be there soon."

Something in her eyes must have told me, young as I was, that this was no time for games. I followed her instructions and slipped out the door. Her hand finally free, my mother followed after me. She made it to the lobby and told the man working there to call the police.

"Next thing I know," my father now says, "I wake up and there are two policemen standing over my bed. One of them's got a shotgun on me. The other's pointing a pistol. I raised my hands up above my head and turned my eyes to the sky. I can remember seeing a teardrop of water falling down from that low, low ceiling. That's when I cried out: 'Don't shoot! Don't shoot!'

"It was all over the radio, the television, the newspaper. 'Kidnapping,' in capital letters. But I was in jail only overnight. They released me the next morning without charges."

Madison, Wisconsin, is one hundred sixty-three miles from the South Side of Chicago and nearly two thousand miles from Seattle. The road trip, the kidnapping, my father's dream—whatever you call it—it was over almost as soon as it had started.

Can a story you've only overheard somehow still give shape to your life? Can other people's stories also be your own? Hearing this was like discovering a lost piece of my past, like having my life told as legend. Could it have really happened? Part of me figured that when I asked my parents about it, they'd deny it. But when I asked each of them, they confirmed it—even if they told their stories in a different key.

They say trauma always accompanies birth, the beginning of new life. When I think about my parents and me driving toward my father's dream, I think about what it means to bear the legacy of these two people who were estranged from each other before I was born but remain tied together because I was born. It speaks to me about connection, willing and not. It speaks to the fact that when you try to tell your own story, you can't help but tell someone else's along the way. This is my life, my story, but it's their story too.

I think of my mother, a young woman with a child at the time threatened by a man she still loves. Maybe that's why she's always loved me so hard, like she could lose me at any moment. Today she is a mother, a grandmother, my best friend.

I think about my father and how his inner pains and self-doubt sometimes expressed themselves in ways he couldn't control. What possesses a man to aim a gun at the woman he loves and the child he helped conceive? If not the gun, then what possesses him to pursue a dream past all consequence? Today he is a thinker, a dreamer, a complex soul.

Who knows the truth of the story? My truth is this: I inherited love and trouble, joy and fear. I experienced all of these things before I could even put them into words. The story I have to tell you is one of inheritance and identity, of the values my mother passed on to me that I hope to pass on to my daughter, Omoye. The story is of making myself into the man that I want to be: an artist, a father, a child of God.

When I was given the opportunity to write this book, I had some misgivings. Had I lived enough? Would anyone want to hear my story? When I think of memorable life stories, I think of great men and women looking back over the decades. I think of Malcolm X and Assata Shakur. I think of Maya Angelou and Nelson Mandela. What story does a kid from the South Side of Chicago have to tell?

So I talked with friends. I talked with my mother, my father, my grandmother, my daughter. We laughed, we reminisced, we even shed a few tears. At a certain moment, I took in a breath, I breathed it out, and I knew that I had lived a life I wished to share. I knew that if I dedicated myself to writing about my life, it might all start to make sense.

I've always loved to write. It must have started with my mother. She still has a note she wrote to her when I was six or seven years old about leaving the key so she could get into the house and how I didn't want to get a whippin'. She tells me that's my first letter.

In school, I'd write love letters to cute girls in class. When I first started rapping, I'd write my lyrics in a composition book. As I grew older, I'd write my hopes, fears, and dreams in a journal. I still write to this day, even to people who are part of my everyday life—my mother, my daughter, my friends. I may be a talker just like my dad, but I love to express myself through letters. Maybe I write because I've learned to show certain parts of my heart on the page that I still struggle to capture in speech.

That's why I've decided to begin each chapter of this book with a letter. In these pages, I've written to my mother and to my daughter and to many others—to you, to lost friends, to distant lovers, to future generations. Each letter offers a way into the stories of my life that follow. Together they tell a story of their own, of a life still very much in the making.

I have loved and lost and given and failed and fallen and prayed and believed and worked and sexed and proved and listened and traveled and healed and grown and watched and journeyed and loved again and grown some more. I've done all of these

things and all of these things have created the man that I am today.

~~I also realize that my life is an expression of all those I have known and all who have known me. They are people in and out of the public eye. They are friends and fans and lovers and mentors. They are people like my mother and my grandmother and the guy who only ever knew as Duck, who was on the street but used to say that one day I'd be a star. People like Yusef and Ajile and the bellman at the House of Blues Hotel in Chicago who always had a kind word when I arrived.~~

My life is people like Omoye, Murray, Kanye, Reverend Jeremiah Wright, Minister Louis Farrakhan, Maya Angelou, my father, Mike Jolicoeur, Dion, Dart, Ron, Rasaaan Monard, and the memory of another South Side son named Emmett Till. All of these people are a part of me as I am a part of them. Their souls have joined with mine. In fact, sometimes when I'm writing songs I find myself looking through their eyes, expressing what I believe they might see and feel.

You'll hear some of these other voices threading in and out of the pages that follow. Other than my own, the voice you'll most often hear is that of my mother. It's only right given that my mother has been—and remains—the most influential person in my life. Throughout the chapters, you'll find her speaking in her own words directly to you through italicized text offering perspectives on my past that complement and occasionally even contradict the view of my life as I see it.

I'm writing you now because I know I have something to say to you. I believe we can forge a connection that will help us to recognize the other in the self. I know I can enlighten. I know I can inspire. And I know that this journey is not just about what I think about myself. It's not about how many records I've made or how many films I've done. It's about what has happened in my life that can spark you to be better in yours. What have I said and done, what have I failed to say and failed to do, that will give you insight as you strive to reach your full potential and serve your purpose on this earth?

So I hope this letter finds you in the place where you are willing and ready to progress in your life. I hope this book not only entertains you but also helps you grow in a spirit of openness. I write to you wishing, praying, and sending the best love to you. This is my story, the story of an uncommon life.

Love,
Common

1 "LOVE IS ..."

Hey, Ma:

I woke up this morning thinking about you and how much you mean to my life. I thank God so much for you, Ma. I know I would not have been able to pursue my dreams—even see them—I would not have been able to love so freely and purely if you had not been there for me.

Ma, you showed me what true love is, what God-like love feels like, by loving me unconditionally and with such fierce strength. You have always been the most important love in my life. I don't know what I would be without your caring and your teaching and your listening and your nurturing—and your being bossy!

Growing up, I just knew that you would always be there for me. I would look at my friends and see that they didn't have that same support. I saw how hard it was for them not to have a mother who could care the way you did. I knew then it was you who gave me a chance. I love getting to pray with you, Ma. Thank you so much for making me go to church, even when I tried to get out of it. Thank you for being my mother before you became my best friend.

I have always felt loved, Ma, and if you know it or not, that has made me a better person and a better man, a man who can love. Because you loved me, I was able to love myself, and because I can love myself, I can love others. I know I wouldn't be doing the things I am doing if you hadn't given me that foundation. You showed me strength and sacrifice and caring and hard work. You showed me hustle.

I know you tried to get me to appreciate things earlier on that I didn't get until later—and I do wish you had taught me how to cook! But just learning from you to care for others has been the most important lesson in my life.

Lately I've been stepping out, saying I gotta make my own decisions. "Ma, stay out of this one!" I have to live my life with all its ups and downs. I know you want the best for me. I know you try to keep your hold on me because you love me so much and don't want to see me hurt. But, Ma, I have to experience life to become the child of God that He wants me to be, to become the man I want and need to be.

I will make more mistakes on my own than I would if I followed your every word, but I know that God has blessed me with a supreme mama. You have taught me to love wholeheartedly, to think beyond limits, to make others better, to up my father game, to handle my money, to give to others, to enjoy life, to seek God, to be still, to have faith, to be joyful even in the pain, and to let my leadership radiate.

Yeah, Ma, I know that sometimes you haven't agreed with me if I'm giving some money to one of my guys or splurging on my girl. But what's funny is that I learned the giving spirit from you. You know I'm not going to let anyone take advantage of me. I still remember that day you told me that God put us here to help others. "That's our purpose," you said. I needed to hear that because I can get so caught up in my work and in my goals.

Even when we don't agree, I know you want what's best for me. I'm growing up, Ma. I am a child of God, but I am a man, and I want you to know that if it's one gift I thank God for most, it is you. You have been the beginning to me sharing my gifts. And you have helped me develop into a gift giver who can love life and love myself and be in love with others.

I know you always tell me you want me to be with the right woman. When you're gone, you want to know that I will have someone to care for me, someone to be there share my life. Well, Ma, no one will replace my mama, but know I will choose wisely and the woman I marry will undoubtedly have some of the beautiful things I see in you.

Know this: I am a man, and I will be wonderful in a relationship, and I will be a great father, and I will fulfill my purpose on this earth doing what God wants me to do. I thank you for holding me up to take the first steps on my path and I know you will always be there watching, loving, and praying as I walk it.

I love you, Ma.

Rashid



THE FIRST EMOTION I EVER FELT WAS LOVE. THE SECOND WAS fear. The love I felt was for my mother and her love for me. This love draws you into open arms and holds you close. It's the love of certainty.

The fear I felt was the unshakable awareness that her love could be taken away from me. It's the fear of loss.

I've felt this same combination of love and fear whenever I've felt something so deep that I couldn't imagine living in its absence—the way I love God, the way I love my daughter.

My mother showed her love for me every day, not just in words but also in deed. Insisting that we go to church on Sunday, no matter what—that was love. Making sure that I had new clothes for school and new equipment for sports—that was love. Making me eat catfish and cornbread—that was love. Reading books to me and, later, having me read to her—that was love. All of these things, both great and small, combined to envelop me in a warm embrace that stayed with me throughout the day and throughout my life.

So I loved my mother and I knew she loved me, but I feared that somehow that love might leave. Those two emotions—love and fear—motivate me to this very day.

I often marvel at the strength of my mother's will. With all the responsibilities that she had to take on, where did she find the strength to love so hard? Where does a love like that come from? Part of it comes from growing up around poverty, loving the little you have with everything you've got. Part of it is just a testament to her character. She was afraid, too, intent on protecting her son from the dangers of the streets without sheltering him too much and making him even more vulnerable. How could she raise a young man who would be tough enough to take the weight and sensitive enough to love with his whole heart?

I raised Rashid in such a way that if anything ever happened to me, someone would say, "I'll take that child." I wanted him to be well behaved, well groomed, well nourished. I wanted him to be the kind of boy that would be a joy to raise, not just for me but for someone else if I was taken from him.

Why was I so concerned about him losing me? I don't know. I suppose there was the fear of his father that still gripped me from time to time like a spasm. But

~~it was more than that. It must have been the remnants of a feeling I had as a child. We all are a product of our histories. I know I'm a product of mine.~~

Growing up in Chicago, you learn how to survive—some people call it hustle. Rich or poor, educated or uneducated, black or white, you'll find hustlers of all kinds in Chicago. For me hustling meant that even as I grew older and got more education, I was still able to relate to people on the streets. It meant that I could make a way out of no way, even if it meant bending or even breaking the rules sometimes.

As a school principal, they said I was "creatively insubordinate," which is just a clever way of saying that I took care of my kids—and myself. I was successful because I always did what I thought was best for the students while at the same time doing what was best for me and my family. They'd say, "Aren't you scared of losing your job?" I'd say, "No, because I'm willing to wait tables, work at a checkout stand, whatever I need to do." I know how to get money, and I mean legally. I'll take another job before I'll work in a place where I have to do something I don't believe in.

As a child, I saw that my mother always had two or three jobs at a time. We lived in a working-class black neighborhood. Most people had nine-to-fives, but there were a lot of street hustlers too. You had those who made their money running numbers—our street version of the lottery. I saw men who might have made their money on the wrong side of the law save up that money and buy Laundromats and corner stores and apartment buildings. So even though my mother always stressed education and pushed me to succeed, I also received a separate education in how to survive. Now I can sit down with someone from the street or someone from a university or corporation and be able to gain respect either way.

Here's my definition of hustling: knowing how to survive in a world that's set up for you to fail. That's why, as black people, we've had to strive so hard to develop a hustler's instinct and pass it on to our children. You have a door closed in your face? You have to learn how pick the lock or maybe just knock it off the hinges.

THIS IS MY LIFE IN EIGHT BLOCKS—the people and the places I love. This is where I had my first kiss and felt my first heartbreak. This is where I took my first sip of beer and got into my first fistfight. This is where I learned to breakdance and where I drove my first car. I grew up on the South Side of Chicago: Eighty-eighth Street and Dorchester Avenue, Eighty-sixth and Blackstone, Eighty-ninth and Bennett, Eighty-seventh and Stony Isle in a black middle-class neighborhood rubbing up against poverty. You had hardworking families with plenty of kids, but then you had gangbangers, too. That's just the culture in Chicago, I guess. It's a city of hustlers, legal and illegal.

I was born on March 13, 1972, at Chicago Osteopathic Hospital. My mother said it snowed that day. My father said it rained. I guess we can agree that some meteorological disturbance announced my arrival here on earth.

My grandmother likes to tell the story of how she rushed to the hospital as soon as she heard her first grandchild was born. She arrived at the incubators and started searching

through the glass, looking for the beautiful little baby she knew she would find. When the nurse came up to her, my grandmother had already picked out a couple prime grandchild candidates.

"Which one is yours, Grandma?"

"Oh, I'm looking for the Lynn baby, ma'am."

The nurse scanned her chart, glanced through the glass, and pointed me out to her.

"Is that him?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, ma'am. Lonnie Rashid Lynn."

My grandmother rushed to the recovery room where my mother was resting.

"Did you see the baby?"

"Yes, Mama. Isn't he beautiful?"

"Beautiful? Have you seen him? That little old red, long, dry-looking baby. He's so . . . ugly!"

My mother just shook her head and smiled.

"I need some sleep, Mama."

A couple days later, after my mother had brought me home, she called up my grandmother.

"He is kinda ugly, isn't he?"

THEY STILL TEASE ME about it to this day.

"Boy," my grandmother says now, "you were the ugliest little baby, all red and scrawny with a patch of hair up at the front of your head. But you know what? You've just gotten better and better every day, praise God!"

I may have been scrawny in the beginning, but I already carried a heavy legacy. I took my father's name, Lonnie Lynn. He and my mother also gave me another name, Rashid, the name I now go by to my friends and family. Rashid means "guide to the right path" in Arabic. I've always believed that our names hold our fate. I've tried to live up to the higher purpose hidden in my name. Early on, my mother noticed I had a spiritual side to me. I guess they say that all children are close to God.

His first babysitter was the trees. When he was no more than six months old, I'd lay him down underneath the large picture window in the front room and let him watch the trees sway in the breeze. You should have seen his face! He'd grin from ear to ear and just giggle like it was the greatest of jokes. Whenever I needed some time to myself, some time to my thoughts, I'd just set him under the window near the trees, and he was content. An hour or more would pass, and he would never cry. What a child I had!

LOOKING BACK, I can't recall much about my first years of life. My earliest memory was of a birthday party, maybe my fourth. It was on a party bus and there were different things t

see and do. They had clowns. There was this little toy jail that you could get behind. That's ~~the first thing I remember in my life: people having a good time on that party bus.~~ I remember looking at the grownups, and they were having fun, too. It was my party and I was enjoying myself, but there was something missing. Even in my joy, I felt a certain sadness. I had on one of those little hats, the kind that looks like a cone on top of your head. I can still remember that jail, too. I had a picture of it at one point—little hands clutching the cardboard bars.

The next thing I remember from childhood is playing around at my babysitter's house. Her name was Sheree, and she babysat me from birth until I was eleven years old. I loved staying with her because she used to play music. We'd dance and sing. I didn't know their names at the time, of course, but she would play Donny Hathaway and Roberta Flack and Marvin Gaye and the Commodores.

One night there was a knock at the door, and she went to answer it. I followed closely behind. When she opened it up, there stood a man, impossibly tall, that I knew was my father but somehow not my father. He was wearing a mask. Was it Halloween? The next day, again, maybe he wasn't wearing a mask at all. All I know is that I felt the warmth of recognition followed by the chill of fear. I was scared, but I wanted to see my dad, to see him. That's all that I can remember of that night. It's only a little glimpse, like glancing through the crack of a door while running past.

These early memories come at you in pieces, scraps of sight and sound, color and light. But even if the pieces don't fit together just right, you feel the truth of them in the emotions.

One of the strongest early emotions I felt outside of my family was for a place, for Chicago. Chicago is in my blood. My family has lived there for several generations on my father's side and three generations on my mother's side. Grandma Elva, my mother's mother, was born in Yazoo City, Mississippi, in 1927, the year of the Great Mississippi Flood, the most devastating river flood in the history of the United States. That spring the Mississippi River broke through the levees, covering an area fifty miles wide and several hundred miles long. People were still cleaning up from the wreckage that fall when my grandmother was born in the home of her grandparents. The day after my Grandma Elva's birth, her mother, Emma Donelson, went back to work as the cook at a private high school for whites only.

Like so many black folks around that time, my family was drawn to the North by the promise of greater opportunity. Historians would later call this mass exodus of blacks from the rural south to the urban north the Great Migration, but for the people themselves it was something more specific: it was a chance at a better life. Grandma Elva, after all, was only two generations removed from slavery. She can still recall meeting her great-grandmother Melinda, or Linda, who was born a slave. "All I remember," she once told me, "is that when I sat on her lap, she would always pinch me, and I would holler!" My great-great-great-grandma Linda was 103 when she died.

My grandmother's grandparents, Mahalia and Simpson Stubblefield, owned a store and farmed a small plot of land down in Mississippi. They had carved out a life for themselves and their family, but they wanted something more. Not long after my grandmother's birth, the family decided to move to Chicago, including their daughter and their new grandchild. My grandmother's mother, Emma, however, wanted to stay down

south and continue working. She knew, though, that her daughter would have a better life in the north so she asked her parents to take her child with them. It was the hardest decision she ever made. It might have been the best one, too.

That's how my mother's family ended up in Chicago. My grandmother along with her grandparents took the train north from Mississippi bound for possibility, but prepared for uncertainty. The Chicago they found wasn't exactly to their liking. After arriving on the South Side, my great-great-grandparents found that the hustle and bustle was just too much for them to handle. So they packed up again and kept moving, this time farther north to South Haven, Michigan.

South Haven was a rural community, almost entirely white. For my grandmother and her grandparents, it was like moving to another planet; they were the first black family to live in the town. My grandmother enrolled in the all-white school. "They treated me like a paper doll," she said. "But I didn't feel prejudice. There was no color bearing that I can remember." My grandmother and her white classmates went to school together, they went to church together, they made a life. From time to time, her mother would visit from Mississippi, but she was raised almost entirely by her grandparents up north. "I love those old people," she told me once. "They taught me common sense. My grandfather always said that an educated fool is the biggest fool going. So I never wanted to do anything that would make them ashamed of me."

WHEN MY GRANDMOTHER finished school, she went to live with her sister in Washington, DC where she met her husband. When he went away to fight in World War II, he left her pregnant with my mother. My grandmother then went back to South Haven for her daughter to be born. My mother was the first black child ever delivered in South Haven hospital.

My grandmother ended up having three more children, getting divorced, and moving back to Chicago, becoming a single mother of four. She had little formal training but a great sense of hustle and ambition. She went to beauty school and worked on the South Side in a hair salon. Then one day she read an ad in the newspaper looking for a shampoo girl in a white salon on the North Side. She knew she could make more money there on tips alone than she could on the South Side, so she took the job. Her mother finally moved from Mississippi, motivated by her desire to help out, to take care of the four children during the day while my grandmother worked. All the while, my grandmother honed her skills. Before long, she had moved from shampoo girl to manicurist, then to owning her own shop. She started the first nail salon on the South Side, on Seventy-ninth and Champlain Avenue. She did nails for thirty-six years until her retirement, rarely missing a day of work.

Some of my earliest memories take place in my grandmother's salon. It's a place I associate with lots of love. My mother was working two jobs, so she asked my grandmother to drop me off and pick me up from day care. But my real day care was the nail shop.

"As soon as I would turn the corner to that day care you'd start crying and crying," Grandma told me years later. "So I'd just keep on driving." She secretly kept me out of day care for about a week before she confessed to my mom.

"Ann, I just can't stand to take him there. They're mistreating him."

~~"Mama, they aren't mistreating him. That's a good day care," Mom said.~~

"Then why does he start crying as soon as I get near the place?"

"You want to know why? Because he knows you can't stand to see him cry. He knows he cries, you'll keep him with you. He's making a fool out of you!"

After that, they came to an agreement. My grandmother bought a playpen and set up for me right there in her salon. The customers and workers loved me, and I loved them. Maybe that's why I've always been so comfortable around women. I've been surrounded by them my whole life. I thrive on their energy.

My grandmother loves to tell a story about me at age three. There was a young lad who worked at her nail shop who just couldn't get enough of me. So every day, she would take me out to lunch with her. We'd come back an hour later and I'd be as happy as can be. Well, one of those days, my grandmother and I were driving home from the salon, and I started pointing out the car window at a bar.

"Grandma! Grandma! I had cocktails in there."

"What did you say?"

"I had, I had kiddie cocktails there."

Little did she know that every lunch hour, my new girlfriend and I would head over to the bar and have a drink to go along with our lunch. I think my drink of choice was Shirley Temple. For the next month, my grandmother tells me, every time we'd drive home along Seventy-ninth Street, I'd point to that bar and squeal, "Kiddie cocktails! Kiddie cocktails!"

ALL THE LOVE and happiness of my childhood exist side by side with a certain pain. When I think of my mother and my father together, I think of a pain that I don't know if I actually witnessed. Images flash before my eyes—my mother crying, the two of them fighting—but I don't know if these things actually happened or if they are simply my suppressed emotions made visible.

As long as I can remember, it's just been my mother and me. I can't recall ever living in the same house with my father. In fact, I've only seen my parents around each other a handful of times. But the pain I associate with the two of them together has affected me emotionally in ways that I'm just now beginning to understand. It's certainly affected how I've dealt with women. They say the first lessons you learn about relationships come from your parents. Not all of those lessons are good ones.

"In the bottom of my heart," my father once told me, "I think your mother loves me so much she hates me." Somehow that made perfect sense. For the longest time, I would measure how a woman felt about me not just by the love she showed me but also by how upset she would get at me. Pain was as good as pleasure. They both told me that she cared enough to feel *something*. The worst thing was indifference, a flat line. I never wanted that, so I would do things and say things to provoke a strong emotion, regardless of what that emotion was. "I want to be the one to make you happiest and hurt you the most," I once said in a rhyme. Over time, though, I've come to understand myself well enough to know the difference between a healthy and an unhealthy love.

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