**RAISING**

KANYE

*Life Lessons from the Mother of a Hip-Hop Superstar*

Donda West

*with Karen Hunter*



**P O C K E T B O O K S**

**NE W YOR K LONDON TORONT O SYDNE Y**



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*Dedicated to the memory of my sister, Klaye Jones, whose laughter was a smile set to music.*

*I'll hear her laughter forever.*

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Forewor d

by Kanye West

*I've known my mom since I* wa s zero years old. She is quite dope. Wha t stands out most about her is not only how she taught me but her willingness to learn new things and that she listens to me.

Whe n some people become parents, they are so busy teaching, they sometimes close off to learning. A lot of parents are so stuck in their way s they can't adjust to new things. You have to be in touch wit h wha t your kids are doing. You have to be a part of them.

If parents could be more open-minded to their children, more open to what their children are into—like their music, their clothes, and their interests—maybe they could raise children wh o become open-minded adults. That' s how my mom was . An d I wa s open to what she told me because she always valued what I had to say.

I remember one time we were having a discussion about

proper English. I wa s saying something and asked her if it wa s proper. She told me it depends. Language is situational.

"If you're in a room full of people and everyone is speaking Ebonics and you break out wit h the Queen's English, super proper, then even if you're speaking so-called correct English, you're not correct. To communicate effectively, you have to speak so that people can understand you.''

I remembered that when I wrote my songs. An d she in turn lived it. It wa s nothing for her to break out into perfect Ebonics. "Wha t up, dog?"

Whe n I wrote that song, "Hey...Mama! " about my mom, I worked on it for months. I wanted to make it as great as she is. I wanted to tell the whol e worl d about our friendship and how it came to be. I also wanted to talk about her in the most artistic wa y I could. I wanted her to know how much I ap- preciate her for the wa y she raised me.

You'll see that in these pages and you'll learn things that I didn't even know until I read this book. But what I did know is that because of wh o she is, I am able to be wh o I am.

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I N T R O D U C T I O N

# Raising Kanye

*He was about seven months old* when I first no- ticed it. Actually, I didn't notice it; someone else

pointed it out to me. Kany e wa s sitting in his stroller in a vegetarian restaurant in Atlanta wit h his middle and index fingers in his mouth (he sucked those tw o fingers until he wa s eight). Thi s lady came into the restaurant and stopped in her tracks.

"Look at that face!" she said.

I looked and she wa s staring at Kanye , al- most mesmerized. I thought to myself, "Yes, he is cute, isn't he?" But then he looked up at me and

I saw it, too. I saw what she wa s talking about. He looked at me with eyes that spoke. An d I knew, like the old folks some- times know when they see certain babies, "He wa s an old soul."

Whil e he was still in my womb , I used to pray for my child. Everyone prays for their child to be healthy—to have all their fingers and toes. I prayed that prayer, but I added to it brilliance. I prayed for my child to be healthy *and* brilliant. That day in the restaurant, I knew my prayers had been an- swered—beyond my wildest imagination. I never imagined that I woul d be the mother of someone quite as unique as Kany e West , someone Go d had chosen to do something very special in the world.

Looking back, I've thought many times about what makes Kany e Kanye. Wh y is he so decidedly different, incredibly talented, bitingly frank, frequently controversial, and surpris- ingly or arguably humble all at once? Undoubtedly, wh o Kany e is today has a great deal to do wit h the wa y he wa s brought up, his exposure to the world , his relationship wit h his parents, the impact of his grandparents, the "you go, boy" of friends and family, the hard work of his team, the drive w ithin him, and most of all, the goodness of God .

This book is a journey into wh o he is. But it is also my story, my journey as a mother—at times a single mother—just trying to raise a healthy and productive child. An d some- wher e along the way , the journey led to greatness.

It's said that at some point you become your parents. I be- lieve that your parents have a tremendous impact on the kind of parent you become. My father, Portwood William s Sr., and my mother, Lucille Williams , influenced my parenting tremendously. The y loved and supported me. Never did I wan t for anything, materially or otherwise. It wasn' t that we were well off. In fact, mother alway s said we wer e poor. But I never felt poor. In fact, I felt just the opposite. My sisters and brother and I were made to feel rich.

We had material things because my parents wer e very resourceful. But more importantly, our lives were filled wit h love, adoration, and congratulations. Kid s pay attention to what they don't have monetarily only when there is a real lack of everything else. In my home, my parents made us all feel that nothing came before us, except God . I wa s the same with Kanye. He knew how highly I thought of him.

He also knew I had high expectations of him. A lot of people like to coddle their children. They don't want to hurt their feelings, or make them feel bad for not achieving. But if you don't set benchmarks, and if you don't set that bar high, you can't expect your children to excel. My parents required every one of us not just to do our best, but to be *the* best. The y didn't demand it in an overbearing, make-you-want-to-jump- out-of'-the-window-if-you-don't-get-an-A sort of way . It wa s just quietly but assuredly expected.

Once, in seventh grade, I brought home five As and a B. My dad looked at me and said, "That' s good, Big Gir l [I was the baby of four and that wa s my nickname]. But wh y did you make the B?"

It wa s a good question. I had made the B in home econom- ics. I wa s never big on cooking, sewing, knitting, and all the other rather mundane (or so I thought) tasks we were required to perform in Mrs . Ricks' s class. I got a B because I didn't do my best and my father knew it. My father gave me five dollars—he woul d give me a dollar for every A. I didn't really care about the money as much as the praise. But this time I felt shortchanged—I had shortchanged myself because I didn' t do my very best. That simple question—"But wh y did you make a B?"—wa s all I needed to not want to make a B again.

My father alway s had a wa y of making me feel that I was

the most special and the smartest person on earth, and I never wanted to disappoint him. I'm told that when I wa s born he said, "I'll make her a masterpiece." I have absorbed those word s into my being—in my mind, spirit, and actions. I prayed that prayer to make my child brilliant, in the same vein as my father wanting to make me a masterpiece.

I am grateful to have had a road map, a blueprint to par- ent, laid down by my mother and father. There wa s no need for me to reinvent the wheel. Emulating great parents is just common sense. It's a wa y of keeping or returning to some of those old-fashioned values. Now , I didn't follow them to the letter. Sometimes, if paradigm shifts were needed, I chose not to emulate them. But there wa s one constant: I made sure that Kany e alway s knew he wa s loved—not just doted on and in- dulged, but loved. That is the only advice my father ever ver- bally gave me about raising Kanye . An d I never forgot it.

Whe n I watch Kany e today, I see in him the courage of my dad and the strength of my mother, the diligence of his father's dad and the devotedness of his father's mother. I see the creativity of his dad, Ray West , and my sensitivity. Kany e embodies aspects of the entire Wes t and William s families. Sometimes impatient, he is also able to endure wha t many cannot. I see in him the passion of Christ, but not alway s the patience of Job .

Just as I am my parents' child, Kany e is very much his par- ents' child. Lik e his dad, Kany e has little patience for what he thinks is unjust. If he sees a president leave human beings stranded on rooftops for days at a time, his passion and com- passion wil l outweigh his patience. And the media is likely to witness wha t it calls outrageous outbursts. Wha t is actu- ally outrageous is the situation prompting the "outburst." His

fiery statements never anger or embarrass me. I know they come from not only the situation at hand but also his legacy.

As much as I have tried to give to Kanye , I believe in many way s I have gotten so much more from him. Whil e this book is about raising Kanye , in many ways , Kany e has raised me. He has taught me so much. One of the most valuable lessons I learned from him wa s to always tell the truth. I have learned many other lessons from him, as well , which I wil l share within these pages. But telling the truth at all casts is not al- way s easy to do. We live in a society wher e everyone wants to put on a good face, wants to look good no matter what . But the truth sometimes is very ugly and you have to stand strong in those times when the ugly truth has to be told—when you have to come face-to-face wit h your own ugliness or the ugli- ness of those wh o might persecute you for telling the truth. I appreciate Kany e for being truthful.

I really do believe that our children are not *our* children— they are souls that come through us to fulfill their purpose. We are here largely to giv e life to them so that they might give life, figuratively or physically, to others. I believe that we must listen to our children so that we may teach them wel l the lessons that Go d woul d have them learn. In fact, lis- tening is the only wa y we can be effective in our teaching.

Strong and effective parenting requires that we give more than lip service to the phrase "out of the mouths of babes." As we train them, they teach us—if we'r e open to it.

I believe children come here with wisdom. They have gifts that are uniquely theirs. An d because they are still chil- dren, they are not ye t constrained the wa y adults often are. That' s why , for example, they pick up languages easier than adults do. Kany e and I spent a year in China . Whil e I strug-

gled to put together simple phrases, before we left, he was able to speak and understand the language fairly well .

Children don't have all of the barriers we have. They aren't steeped in tradition and bogged down by rules that tell them wha t they cannot do or ho w things must be done. The best thing a parent can do for a child is to not teach them the wrong kinds of traditions, those that foster fear and inse- curities.

Another lesson I got from Kany e wa s tolerance. Actually, that wa s something that we taught each other. Often, we

teach best what we most need to learn and we get the lesson back in the reflection of our children. The y become our mirror to see the things we really need to work on, and Kany e was that mirror for me.

He taught me to reserve judgment by calling me out every time I wa s judgmental. And he did so simply by throwing my own word s right back at me. He also taught me patience and how to put things into a proper or the best perspective.

One time, we wer e rushing to the airport so he could catch a plane to visit his dad, as he did every summer. Kanye insisted that we take a certain route to miss the traffic. We missed the traffic but wer e stopped by a long freight train. I wa s next to furious because I'd purchased one of those bargain-rate tickets for whic h there wa s no refund if you didn't use it. An d I didn't have that kind of money to waste, nor did I really have it to buy another ticket. I grew frustrated as I contemplated all of that and I started ranting and raving about ho w we should have just taken the regular route and ho w he wa s going to miss the plane. Kany e just looked at me. And out of his twelve-year-old mouth came, "Mom, only something that wil l help. Only something that wil l help."

Th e word s hit me as hard as that freight train woul d haveavc had we kept driving not to miss that plane. I wa s actually

stunned. It wasn' t about getting the pressure off him as much as it wa s about making me think. It wa s about me engaging in conversation that would be helpful—not ranting and raving uselessly. No bringing energy to the situation that could only exacerbate it. "Only something that will help.''

To this day, I try to live by those words .

We ended up making it to the airport just in time. Kany e did catch his plane and we didn't have to buy another ticket.

Now , don't get me wrong, it wasn' t all peaches and honey raising my son. There wer e many challenges. But the chal- lenges wer e actually opportunities to learn and grow . They were just part of life.

I became a single mother early in Kanye' s life. His dad and I had been happily married for nearly four years by the time Kany e came along. But we separated when Kany e wa s just eleven months old and divorced when he wa s three. Some se- rious differences of opinion surfaced that were seemingly in- surmountable. I joined the ranks of the majority of black mothers in this country—more than seventy percent of black children are born to single mothers.

My story is very much like theirs in some ways , but in other way s very different. We lived in cities—Atlanta and Chicago—wher e we had no immediate family. Ther e wa s no grandmother or auntie to drop Kany e off with , no built-in babysitter to provide the comfort of knowing my child would be safe. There wa s no one there to pick us up and drop me off at work and Kany e at day care when the car broke down — which happened a lot in those days. There was no dollar or tw o slipped in my pocket for those little extras or even the

necessities. It wa s just Kany e and me. An d I had to make it happen.

One of the biggest challenges for me early on wa s how to discipline Kany e without killing his spirit—how to support wh o he wa s and at the same time give him boundaries that would keep him within the parameters of wha t is appropri- ate. You may laugh and ask, "Kanye, appropriate?" And to that I would reply, "Yes, appropriate." To me, being appro- priate does not always mean conforming. Often it means just the opposite. Sometimes, refusing to conform and even con- fronting is not only appropriate but necessary to change the world for the better. It was not alway s an easy thing to draw the line between what warranted polite behavior and agree- ment and what did not.

I alway s wanted Kany e to be polite. But I wa s not of the mind set that anything any adult did wa s correct and that the child wa s alway s wrong. I believe that adults must alway s be respected, if not for their right actions or thoughts, certainly for their age. But I wa s determined not to send mixed mes- sages to Kanye .

It wa s my jo b as a parent to figure it out. Whe n do I shout (if ever), and when do I calmly explain the situation and wel- come feedback in the same calm tone? I concluded that 9 9 . 9 percent of the time, the latter wa s more effective. I wa s lucky. I had a son wh o I could reason wit h from a very early age. He wa s not a timid and passive child by any means. An d on more than a few occasions I had to struggle just to control *my* tem- per. I had to calm down before I could reason with him.

Another challenge wa s how to provide for him without totally spoiling him. I had to balance the extent to which I would allow him to have things and when I would tell him

no. Rarely did I tell Kany e no. I gav e him most everything he asked for—at least wha t I could afford. I would figure out a way to borrow from Peter to pay Paul so that ultimately, he could have it. Why ? Because Kany e earned it. He had to. I didn't just hand things over without requiring that he do his part—whether it wa s making good grades or doing his chores. And he was a good kid. Had he not been, things would have been diflerent. Had he talked back to me and refused to do wha t I asked of him, I would not have rewarded him. To do so would have been to enable a brat, not raise a child. And that, more than anything, woul d have been a disservice to *him.*

There wa s an occasion or tw o when I had to put Kany e in his place. I don't believe in children raising their voices to their parents. It simply wa s not acceptable. It wa s not an op- tion, and Kany e alway s knew that. So when he tried it once or twice , I had to shut that down .

I'm grateful thatl wa s able to give Kany e most everything he wanted. But I am thankful that I realized the importance of establishing the groundwork. Givin g kids whatever they wan t without first giving them everything they need—a solid foundation of morals, expectations, and discipline—is not parenting. It's irresponsible and wrong. You're not showing love just because you giv e your child anything he or she wants. That' s letting a kid gro w up like a wee d whil e you're just standing by watching and watering.

I cannot take total credit for the man Kany e turned out to be. It does take a village. I couldn't have done it alone. There- are many women wh o are single parents—but being a single mom doesn't mean you have to raise your children alone. That' s my belief. Single mothers wit h sons are obliged to find

strong, positive male figures wh o can be a model to their sons.

Kany e had a father and I made sure he spent his summers with him. He had tw o grandfathers, wh o he saw as often as possible. He had uncles wh o he got to know and learn from. And there were my male friends wh o were there to lend a hand. I wa s very fortunate. There were several men in my life Kany e could learn from, exchange ideas, and share his thoughts with , and from whom he could learn ho w to be a man.

Now , there is a flip side to this. As a single mother, you have to be very careful about not exposing your children to too many men. Having a revolving door of "uncles" and your love interests sends the wrong message. I am a red-blooded woman with needs that I didn't sacrifice just because I had a child. But I just picked my spots. I didn't have a parade of men coming through. I had to be sure about the relationship (and it had to be a relationship, not just some fling) before I had a man meet my son. I used his summers wit h his father to see what wa s what—that' s when I did most of my dating and feeling out.

One of the men wh o stuck around wa s Scotty. He taught auto mechanics at wha t is no w Simeon Career Academy in Chicago. I met him when Kany e wa s ten. A year later we were engaged and living together. Although we never mar- ried, Kany e has told me more than once that Scotty is one of the reasons he is a responsible man today. Scotty wa s a stern man wh o had high standards and wouldn' t let Kany e get away wit h anything. Wit h me, Kany e would moan and groan about putting out the trash or doing other chores. Whe n Scotty said do it, he did it without a word.

Scotty wasn' t a big man in size. He wa s short and stocky with a deep voice; but he wa s a strong man wit h good charac- ter. There is a certain language, spoken or unspoken between males. There is an understanding, a toughness, a demeanor that signals to boys that they cannot crass the lines wit h a

man that they may cross wit h their mothers.

I wa s demanding, but in some way s still typical of many mothers. If Kany e forgot to take out the garbage, I would run to take it out, fussing all the while with a "what am I going to do wit h that boy" attitude. Kany e knew that Scotty wasn' t having it. If Scotty said put out the garbage, there wa s no forgetting.

There are many men wh o have grow n up to be strong, successful, and wis e without the influence of a strong man in their lives—my father being a prime example. But those men are anomalies, the exception, not the rule.

I've heard some women say they don't need a man. And perhaps for them that is true. But if they have children, I beg to differ.

Children, whether boys or girls, need men in their lives. This is particularly true of boys. If you don't believe it, ask all of the men w, ho are currently in our prison system. More than ninety percent of them grew up without a father or father fig- ure. It's not just a male that is needed, however. It's a man— one wh o wil l take the time to talk wit h your child, wh o has something useful to add to the equation.

I believe that men are equally important in the raising of a girl, too. I can't imagine what my life woul d have been like and wh o I would have become had I not had my dad with me. Sometimes people do gro w up and become okay people, even great people. But I'd bet ninety-five percent of the people

raised without a man in their lives have some issues that they wish they didn't. Maybe they have issues they can't even identify, largely due to the absence of that father figure.

From his dad (the creative intellectual), to my brother (the music virtuoso), to my father (the thinker and provider), to Scotty (the no-nonsense general), to a small host of good men, both family and friends, Kany e wa s exposed to real men, which wa s key in his becoming a man. He wa s able to flex his manhood in way s he never would have without their input.

Whe n I wa s approached to do a book about my experi- ences raising Kany e West , I had never imagined actually writing a book about that. But now it makes perfect sense.

I had fancied writing a book one day. But I thought it might be about my different dating experiences. I had lots of little clever titles, like "Th e Jaded Janitor" and "The Crazy Cop. " I wa s going to share those life experiences and hope- fully come full circle to finding my ultimate soul mate.

But the man I ended up writing about is the man who , to date, has had perhaps the most profound impact on my life: my son. An d wha t makes this project extra special to me is that I get to share what he has meant not only to me but also to music and to a generation.

A lot of people think Kany e turned out really well . He's such a departure from wha t people see as a typical rapper. Wit h his life being so exposed to the world—a t least the part that is exposed—there is still so much to share, so many questions to answer.

Whe n I wa s little, I used to travel and compete in oratori- cal contests wit h my church. We would compete against other churches from across the country. I would have to act out Bible passages or giv e speeches about a particular scrip-

ture. My dad alway s encouraged me. Before we' d leave for one of those many competitions, Daddy would turn to me and say, "Big Girl , you have to have a story for the people. You got your story?"

I have my story: *Raising Kanye.*

**I**

# Back to the Future

How many folks do you know Who can boast about their dad? And say that he's the best there is The best they could have had?

How many folks can tell you That their dad is really hip? Our kind of conversation Might cause some folks to trip.

Well here is one who'll talk of you Until this life is through

And when I get to someplace else I'll still be talking about you.

—DON DA WEST, "A Man Called Portwood"

*The last time my daddy saw* his ow n father, he wa s nine years old. He and his tw o sisters walked their father to the train station in Oklahoma City , wher e he boarded a train to a destination they would never know. My dad didn't remember

any of the conversation. But he did remember his father reach- ing into his pocket and giving his older sister a dime, his younger sister a dime, and him—the only boy— a quarter. His father then turned and walked onto that train and never came back.

My father talks about how he and his sisters were very happy about the money, but inside they wer e sad to see their dad leave. My father's mother had not gone to the train sta- tion. Whe n she learned about the little excursion, her eyes filled wit h tears. Mayb e she knew that day would be the last time any of them woul d see him. All he left them wit h wa s a total of forty-five cents. Forty five cents for the kids and tears for his wife.

But still, my dad loved his father dearly. Later, my father asked his mother if she'd loved him, too.

"I worshipped the ground he walked on," Grandmother William s told him.

There were tw o lessons my father took awa y that day that he in turn passed along to his children. The first was that no matter what , you never abandon your family. Th e second wa s that no matter what , you must love unconditionally. Tha t his mother still loved his father—in fact, worshipped the ground he walked on—even after he walked out on the family showed a kind of love that you just don't find every day. They say you must hate the sin but love the sinner. You can hate what someone does and still love the person.

It is that kind of love that made my father the kind of fa- ther, and the kind of man, he is. My daddy vowe d that he would never leave—he woul d never walk awa y from his fam- ily. An d he never did. It's been seventy-two years of mar- riage... and counting—four kids, grandkids, great-grandkids,

great-great-grandkids later—and he's still here. He and my mother laid the foundation for the rest of us to build upon and gro w on.

You took me with you everyplace From church to corner joints

I learned when I was 5 or less About life's finer points.

And when I wouldn't talk up The wasy you knew I should

You gave me words of warning And then I knew I could.

"I won't take you with me, Big Girl, If you don't speak out loud."

And ever since I've talked right out To a few or in a crowd.

When anything was needed You told me what to do

"You have not, 'cause you ask not." Those words stuck with me too.

I remember everything my father ever told me. He never un- derstood wha t woul d make a man leave his family. I know times were tough when my daddy wa s a child, so tough that he picked cotton. Whe n he got older he worked for years on jobs where he was called "nigger'" on a daily basis. An d when he wasn't being called "nigger," the wor d of choice wa s "boy." Long before he rose to the honor of being one of Oklahoma

City' s Outstanding Black Businessmen, my dad shined shoes and grinned for tips.

"Yes, sir," he'd say to the whit e men, wh o on occasion would even spit on him. Then he'd put that dime in his pocket and bring it home to my mom. My dad knew how to take the insults and keep his dignity. It must have eaten him alive in' side but no one would ever know. Sometimes he had to flee for his very life. That' s the wa y it wa s in those days. An d if you wanted to provide the best you could for your family, you took it because you had to.

In Capitol Hill, a southern section of Oklahoma Cit y where my dad worked as a laborer, there was a sign that read: NO NIGGERS AND DOGS AFTER SUNDOWN. My dad had to pass that sign every day going to and coming from his meager job . But he did whatever it took to keep a roof over our heads and, with my mother's help, give us what we needed and wanted.

Some would say i t wa s blasphemous the wa y Grand - mother William s worshipped her husband, the wa y my dad worshipped me, and the way I worship Kanye. But I just call it plain-old-heartfelt, couldn't-help-it-if-you-tried-to-love. In my family there is a legacy of that kind of love. An d there was no shortage of that in our household. It has persisted through generations. And I am certain that Kany e wil l feel the same wa y about his children.

My dad wa s just nine years old when his father left home. But instead of doing the same, Daddy became the kind of fa- ther his dad wa s not. I heard him say on more than one occa- sion, "I wanted to play football, but I wasn' t big enough. I wanted to box, but I wasn' t fast enough. I wanted to sing, but II wasn' t talented enough. I wanted to be the best dad there ever was , and I am."

And he is—unequivocally.

According to Kanye, my dad is where he gets his confi- dence. My dad is in his nineties and he's still setting the stan- dard in our family of wha t a real man, a daddy, not just a biological father, should be. I writ e about this because I look forward to Kany e becoming a father. He is blessed to have Buddy as a model.

A million days have come and come Since I was first in school

But never did the teachers teach What I have learned from you.

I got those books for you had said That they could bring me glory

But more than that you taught me that I'd have to have a story.

A story for the people You'd say and show concern

That's been the greatest lesson That I have ever learned.

You taught me how to hustle And when to dummy up

Whatever the occasion You had the proper touch.

The time that tops them all off, though Was not so long ago

When we rapped and rode for hours Down the streets there in Chicago.

That night the conversation Seemed to linger in the air

And we both know without a doubt We were a special pair.

So, I couldn't be more lucky Than to have a dad like you

'Cause you're a priceless present That I've had my whole life through.

You're a man that some call Portwood And they say it with a smile

But I'm more blessed by far than they 'Cause I was born your child.

Love, Big Girl

Behind every great man...yo u know the rest. Wit h all that my father is, he is magnified by my mother. Unconditional love? Mother personified this. Not a single day passed in my childhood when anything came before her children. No t even her ow n needs. She wa s alway s wherever we needed her to be despite working full time. She didn't miss one PT A meet- ing, not one talent show or beauty pageant, not a church pro- gram or graduation. Mother didn't even miss a single graduation of her ten grandchildren. Sometimes she'd travel

as far as El Paso, Texas, or Chicago, Illinois, to be there. She and my dad would be on a plane to that graduation.

Mine wa s the mother wh o took off work to go on field trips and the mother wh o made all the other kids glad she had come. As the youngest of the four children, I confess that I wa s in an enviable pttsition. I got the fewest spankings and the best perks. We spent a lot of time together, mother and I. Whe n she wasn' t working at the Tinker Ai r Force Base or when I wasn't with my dad on a call to one of his customers (those demeaning jobs had now been replaced wit h my dad's own furniture upholstery and refinishing business), I hung out wit h Mother.

Every Monday night she would take me shopping down- town. Both of my sisters were grown and out of the house by then and my brother, Porty, woul d be in the shop mostly with my dad. Mother and I would hit John A. Brown's first and then Rothschild's. It wa s our routine. I didn't mind that we' d alway s go to the bargain basement first (and sometimes last). I loved it. I loved the time we spent together even more than the bargains she'd manage to alway s find for me. Mother is probably the one wh o came up with the concept "buy one, get one free." You could say that she could stretch a penny. A penny went far, but not nearly as far as her love.

Mother had not always worked as a keypunch operator at Tinker Ai r Force Base. I heard tell of stories wher e she'd done hair and been a domestic. My dad wanted her to stop doing hair, though, because she wa s on her feet too long. The do- mestic job? That bit the dust the day my mother went to work and rang the doorbell, as she had done so many mornings be- fore to start her work, only to be met by the lady of the house, wh o I'll call Mis s Ann. Mis s Ann had come into some money

and had a maid's outfit, complete with a little hat, ready for my mother.

"Use the back door from no w on," she told my mother.

Well , you'd have to know my mother to know wha t this triggered inside of her. After giving the woman a few choice words, she left that house never to return. She wa s never to do domestic work again, either. She wa s not forced to take the same level of mistreatment my dad had to take. In fact, he would not stand for her being mistreated on a job . I don't re- member hearing wha t my mother's next jo b was. But neither she nor my dad wer e okay wit h her being told to put on a little maid's hat and only use the back door. Whil e my mother's mom wa s herself a domestic, Grandmother Eckles had never been treated like that. She worked for the Robinsons for forty eight years and never suffered an unkind wor d from that family. In later years, they even sent for my grandmother by cab daily just to be a companion to Mrs . Robinson. The y had hired another maid and cook by then and Grandmother's jo b wa s to keep Mrs . Robinson company. Th e Robinsons even paid off Grandmother Eckles's mortgage. I learned later that it wa s only a few thousand dollars, but paying the balance of the mortgage, no matter how small an amount, wa s a far cry from being told to put on a maid's hat and come in through the back door.

My mother couldn't and didn't take insults very well . Whe n we went on our shopping sprees at John A. Brown , mother insisted that we use the "Whit e Women" restroom and that we drink from the "White s Only" water fountain. She must have had a presence that said to people, "Don't mess with me!" because rarely did anyone say anything to us. They just looked as if we ought to know better. Wha t Mother

knew is that my dad, as he'd often say, had picked enough cotton for us all. He'd picked cotton until his fingers bled. And he did it so that ultimately, his wife and his children would not have to, literally or figuratively.

Mother was always assertive, I'm told, even before she met my dad. Whethe r Kany e realizes it or not, he gets a lot of his fighting spirit and confidence from my mother, too.

Much of Kanye' s confidence can also be traced from the Wes t side. Mom-Mom wa s his paternal grandmother, Fannie B. Hooks West . Born in Arkansas, she met her husband, James Frederick West , in Tucson, Arizona, where Kanye' s dad wa s born. After several months of courting, Mo m Mo m demanded that James put up or shut up. She wa s not going to be the girlfriend, she wa s going to be the wife. After a relatively short courtship, Fannie and James married. James wa s a mili- tary man and remained so for twenty three years. He, like my dad, wa s a protector and a provider. Unlike my dad, how- ever, he lived in many places. Th e family traveled from Tuc- son, Arizona, to Salina, Kansas, to Delmar, Delaware , to Roswell , Ne w Mexico , to Seville, Spain, to Altus, Okla- homa, back to Roswell , then to Marysville/Yuba City , Cali - fornia, and finally back to Delmar, wher e James, wh o Kany e called Pop-Pop, wa s born. Mom-Mom and Pop-Pop would raise six children—James Jr. , Ray, Juanette, Wanda , Sheila, and Wayne . Ra y is Kanye' s dad.

James and Fannie Wes t were very spiritual people. Like my family, they attended church every Sunday that the good Lord sent unless they wer e traveling on the road, moving to yet another city wher e Pop-Pop had been stationed. Ra y tells

the story of how they were frequently faced wit h not being able to stop and rest for the night at motels, not because of money but because of the color of their skin. Pop-Pop wa s a sergeant in the United States Army, but this did not afford him the right to lodge at the white, racist motels along the way. Not even the restaurants or stores would open their doors to a black family, military or not. Sometimes to keep the family safe, Pop-Pop would drive the car a little distance from the store and walk back to see if he could purchase some- bologna and bread and something to drink for his wif e and children.

Pop-Pop wa s a quiet and reserved man wh o loved his fam- ily and his God . Mom-Mo m wa s equally as God-fearing. I never met tw o finer people than James and Fannie West . They had been married for sixty years. On December 28 , 2006 , James departed this earth. He had a long illness and it wa s expected. Wha t wasn' t expected wa s that the very next day, quite suddenly, Fannie joined him. I suppose upon seeing her husband pass, Mom-Mom decided she'd rather leave, too. She'd not been ill and wa s her same jovial, loving self when I spoke wit h her the day after Christmas.

"Donda, James is not doing well, " she said. "You can see him slipping away. " Little did I know that she'd go right be- hind him. I wonder if she knew. Something in me says she may have. She had lived with this man for sixty years. Had been wit h him every day, taking care of the home and the kids, except for the rare occasion when she would work out- side of the house. Her work wa s taking care of her six chil- dren, all grown now, and her husband. Whe n Pop-Pop left, perhaps she felt her work wa s done.

That kind of love races through the Wes t family and right through Kanye. Like his parents and grandparents, he is de- termined, steadfast, persistent, and caring.

This life is about lessons and learning them and sharing them. Kany e had some pretty incredible teachers. He ab- sorbed enough knowledge to be able to take wha t I thought would be a real negative—dropping out of college—and make it work for him. But again, he had models. Neither my mother nor father wa s educated beyond the twelfth grade (my dad only went through the sixth—h e had to drop out to help his mother provide for their family).

Kany e learned that learning, true education, is in living every day to the fullest. Most of our life lessons cannot be taught in a classroom. Those lessons come from watching and learning from the best—our families. Those lessons don't have to be preached; sometimes they just flow through the blood, in the DNA .

I learned my most important lessons not from school— kindergarten through a doctoral program—but from my dad and my mom, wh o learned from their mom and dad, wh o learned from theirs. We are the sum total of the lives our families lived and the lessons they instilled in us—both good and bad.

So before there could be a Kanye , there had to first be his teachers—Chick and Buddy, Mom-Mo m and Pop-Pop, mom and dad.



I

***2***

# Ray West

*Our first date was at Greenbnar* Mall . Ra y Wes t picked me up in his old car. It wa s pretty beat down . I don't remem- ber the make or model but I do remember that part of the c windshield wa s covered wit h duct tape and the passenger- side door didn't open, so I had to get in on the driver's side and slide over. But I didn't mind.

I really liked Ray . He wa s ambitious and had his own pho - tography business. That wa s part of the attraction.

believe a lot of girls look for guys wh o are like their dads, especially if they look up to and admire their dads as I did mine. My dad always preached self' sufficiency and being self-employed. Well , Ra y worked for himself and he wa s very smart, cre ative, and focused. He wa s not typical, not at all.

We met at Spelman College, where I wa s working full-time. During those days, I worked

three jobs. I taught business writing part-time at Atlanta College of Business. I also filled in for the secretary at a law firm each day whil e she went to lunch. But my main job, in addition to completing a masters degree at Atlanta Univer- sity, wa s working at Spelman as assistant to the head of public relations. I wa s in charge of recruiting for the school's up-and- coming premed program. Spelman had a huge waiting list, but the vast majority of students came from outside of the At- lanta area. Some people in town viewe d the school as snob- bish and felt that it overlooked talent in its ow n backyard. I wa s sent out to change that perspective. I helped to bring into the school some of the best and brightest in all of Atlanta.

Ra y wa s an independent contractor hired by the PR di- rector to shoot photographs for the new brochures and other promotional items. Sometimes we went out together on re- cruiting trips. He'd shoot striking black-and-white photo- graphs and I'd tell the counselors and sometimes the students all about the program. He wa s a master photographer. Every- one loved his work, especially Judy Gebrehewit, my supervi- sor and the head of public relations. She had fallen in love with the photos he'd taken in South Sea Island. He had won awards for some of those shots. An d to look at them made you feel as though you wer e right there experiencing the culture. Judy raved about his work. Clearly she loved it, almost as much as I would come to love Ra y West .

The first time we actually spoke wa s over the telephone. Judy had set up the introduction and wa s excited because she thought Ra y and I woul d hit it off. She had told me about this photographer and ho w great she thought he was . After we spoke, I went into her office.

"Judy, I thought you said Ray Wes t wa s *black*," I said.

"He is."

"No, he isn't," I said. "Not the man I just talked to!"

Ra y sounded *absolutely* white . He didn't just sound like a black man changing his tone and inflections so that his ethnic- ity woul d not be readily detected. I could usually tell if that wa s the case. No , this wa s the true speaking pattern of Ray West , and he sounded one hundred percent white . As I got to know him, I understood why. He'd been a military kid and had grown up in whit e neighborhoods. He wa s born in Tuc- son, Arizona, but moved from there when he wa s two . He lived a different experience than most black kids. He even lived overseas for a while. He never even had a black teacher until he went to college. An d he never really lived what one might call a black experience.

Suddenly, when he enrolled at the mostly white Univer- sity of Delaware, the tide turned. Fo r someone wh o didn't act, speak, dance, dress, or do much of anything else black, how ironic that Ray Wes t wa s so active, so vocal in the Black Student Government that he wa s elected its president. I loved to hear him talk about how he snatched the microphone from the president of the university one day at an assembly. I loved that he wa s militant, fiery, passionate, and above all, very, very smart.

I had never been out wit h a man like Ray . I wa s completely captivated. Despite how different we were, there wa s an in- stant connection.

Before Ray, I hadn't dated a whol e lot. I wa s very picky about wh o I decided to spend my time with . Whe n I wa s in high school I pretended to be cooler than I was . A lot of girls were giving it up, but not me. I didn't have sex until I was entering my second year of college.

Most of the men I had dated wer e guys wh o were kind of popular and had smooth pickup lines and a little game. Ra y had none of that and I liked that he didn't. He wa s a bit of a nerd and I liked that, too. He had very little fashion sense, with his JCPenney baggy pants, and I didn't like that—but I felt that woul d be easy enough to fix. He was honest and sin- cere and didn't play games, whic h wa s perfect for me.

Yes, our first date wa s at Greenbriar Mall . We had a nice, romantic dinner at Piccadilly Cafeteria. We had both chosen the place. It wa s quick, clean, and had great food and enough atmosphere for tw o people wh o only wanted to look at each other. Afterward, we held hands as we walked about the mall. There wa s a fountain in the mall where people would make wishes. On that very first real date—we' d been together professionally several times— I threw three pennies in the fountain and wished that Ray Wes t woul d be my husband.

Three months later we were married.

Looking back, I think Go d wanted Ra y to be the father of my child, whic h wa s strange since neither one of us had ever wanted children. I watched both of my older sisters get mar- ned and have children when they were very young. I watched their lives go in a direction that wa s not that appealing to me. My oldest sister finished high school at sixteen and went off to college, but returned home after a couple of years and got married. My other sister married a military man as soon as she finished high school. Sh e finished college after all her kids were grown . I grew up watching them rip and run behind kids and I thought, "Oh no, that will not be my life." I loved children, but I also wanted so much more for myself and I be- lieved at the time that children woul d prevent me from hav - ing it all.

Ray wanted to have it all, too. He and I discussed travel-

ing around the country and around the world . We wer e going to have a very nice home, tw o very nice cars, eat out all the time, and have fun. We wer e going to live the good life we thought all smart, industrious black people like us deserved. And that's just wha t we did.

There were so many things about us that weren' t as com- patible as we thought initially. But I didn't process all of that until much later. Whe n we met, there wa s an instant attrac- tion. We wer e best friends. Even when we broke up, we re- mained friends. No t alway s friendly, but always friends. Even when we didn't see eye to eye, we alway s had chemistry. Lots and lots of chemistry! Friendship and chemistry are great bedfellows and led us quickly to the altar.

On January 1, 1 9 7 3 , Ray and I wer e married in Oklahoma City. We had a sunrise wedding. Ou r invitations wen t out wit h a picture of Ra y and me on the front wit h our big Afros. Behind our silhouette wa s a sunrise. My mother's sister, Aunt Ruth, made my dress. It wa s eggshell white , actually cream. And it wa s beautiful—some of Aunt Ruth's best work. She wa s known for being one of the best seamstresses in town. We were married in the church in front of family and friends. We had a small reception in the church basement, wher e we served apple cider and cake, and then we went back to my parents' house for a big country breakfast—fried chicken, grits, rice, and biscuits and gravy.

Everything about our wedding was unconventional. *We* were unconventional. We didn't have a honeymoon. Ra y booked us a room at the Ramada Inn on Twenty-third Street in Oklahoma City . We wer e supposed to have the honeymoon suite. That's what the man who gave us the room said. But

there wa s nothing sweet about it. The beds wer e lumpy and the room wa s not even clean. Worn and tattered bedspreads, yellowed sheets that were supposed to be white, dirty floors, dark and dingy walls . I actually cried when I saw the room, so Ray said, "Let' s go. " An d we were out of there. We packed up the few things we had unpacked and went to my parents' house, and without even considering spending the night there, we grabbed up as many wedding gifts as we could fit in our rented car and headed back to Atlanta that night to start our lives together.

We settled into my town house. Shortly after starting at Spelman, I had bought my first home. It wa s a small two - bedroom town house that I'd put $60 0 down on, and my mortgage payment was $125 a month. I was living there when I met Ray . He had a gorgeous loft apartment in Green- briar Village . It wa s huge, wit h a fireplace. His bedroom overlooked the living room, which had no furniture. In fact, the only room he furnished wa s his bedroom, whic h wa s the only room he really cared about. So he didn't have much to move.

I hated him giving up that apartment, but there was no point in paying rent when I owned a place. We fixed up my town house and made it a home. I wa s alway s creative wit h decorating. An d back then, the checkerboard pattern wal l I designed using mirrors and twelve-b y twelv e corkboard wa s a real hit. His parents stayed wit h us once and his mother loved wha t I had done so much that she went back home and covered one of the walls wit h cork and mirrors. I wa s thrilled when I visited their family home in Delawar e the first time and sa w it. I felt validated. As an artist, Ra y wa s also eclectic and creative. Together we really were quite adept at turning

a house into a home. In fact, that's what we did the entire time we were married.

We woul d drive around suburban Atlanta and dream about where we would live next. If I saw a house I liked, we would buy it. We weren' t rich—not on teachers' salaries. He taught photography and media production at Clark College . And I taught English and Speech at Morris Brown College . But we somehow managed to do a lot wit h the money we did have.

Not long after being in the town home, we moved. A deal came along we didn't want to refuse. It wa s a four-bedroom, two story frame house right in the middle of the Cascade area. We loved it even though it needed a little sprucing up. Wit h our skills, we didn't feel that would be hard at all. It wasn't. We bought that big green house on Sandtown Road and put a lot into it We refinished the kitchen cabinets, re- placed the kitchen floor, installed new windows , and carpet, and so on. My mother even came from Oklahoma to help us.

Once she had gone, I remember I had this grand idea to paint one of the four bedrooms red. I thought that would be really hip. Ra y didn't think so, but he agreed to let me have my wa y and we went ahead and hired the painter to get started. Fortunately, the painter knew something I didn't and painted just one wal l to show me before continuing. Whe n he showe d it to me, though, I turned into Mis s Ann in- stantly.

"Oh no!" I said, almost shouting. "I don't like it! Take it off! Tak e it off! I don't care wha t it costs, just take it off!"

I wa s a real drama queen that day, but Ra y humored me. He wa s a trouper. Less than tw o years later, we wer e moving again. Just eight blocks from Sandtown Road , we' d stumbled

upon a beautiful house on a quiet, tree-lined street. It was

brick and definitely better than our home, or so we thought. Withi n a week we put our house on the market. It sold almost immediately for a good profit. We had enough money to buy the brick house on the tree-lined street.

Th e days flew by. No Kany e in sight. No t even a thought of him in either of our minds. Country drives and long talks, no children, wer e a part of our weekly routine. We loved it.

And it loved us. Whil e driving around an unincorporated part of Atlanta one day, we saw another house and fell in love with it. It was perfect for us. Ray was a nature enthusiast— into natural foods and juicing, before it became popular. He wa s into eating raw foods and respecting nature. He taught me a lot about that. It sounds funny, but he even taught me to love trees.

Anyway , it wa s a brick home with a huge basement. It sat on four acres, had a creek, and had plenty of room for a garden. Neither of us wa s into gardening, but still, the room for one- sounded good. Actually, the backyard wa s practically a for- est. It wa s like living in the wilderness. We had a dog, JT (short for Jiv e Turkey). We' d found him in a shelter, already trained. An d it seemed such a shame not to bring home the little kitten I'd found abandoned in the parking lot at work. For some reason, wh y I don't know, we called the kitten Mr . Smith. But Mr . Smith ran awa y for a few weeks and came back pregnant. No more Mr . I t wa s just Ray, Donda, JT , and Mrs. Smith. We were the perfect family.

After one year of teaching English at Morris Brown Col - lege, I got the opportunity to study for my doctorate at Au- burn University. Ray wa s alway s encouraging and didn' t ever seem to have a problem wit h my going awa y without him to

study. Auburn wa s just a couple of hours awa y as I remember and we d planned to see each other every weekend. He would stay home and work as a photographer. He loved his work at the time, but later began to feel that it may not have been wise to turn his hobby into a profession. He wa s good, I mean brilliant at shooting pictures and at developing them. He even built and equipped a state-of-the art darkroom in the base - ment of our home. Alway s wanting to create images from start to finish, Ray preferred doing his own development work rather than sending out the film to be developed. I learned a lot from him about photography. He lived and breathed it in those days. He alway s talked about composition and about shooting wit h available light. I wa s impressed by his knowl- edge and his talent and very proud to be married to the best photographer, bar none. Everyone thought his work wa s su- perior, not just me. I remember objecting vehemently, though, when he wanted to buy a camera lens that cost a thousand dollars. We had a big argument about it, because that wa s a lot of money back then (heck, it's a lot of money today for a camera lens). I thought the money could have been put to bet- ter use. But I didn't win that one. I should have known better than to try and come between Ra y Wes t and his camera equipment.

Soon he began shooting photo essays of families. Jenny and Jim Trotter, our neighbors on Sandtown Road , wh o ulti- mately became Kanye' s first godparents, still had the photo essay he shot of their family displayed proudly on the wal l the last time I visited them four or five years ago.

Ra y and I were faithful to each other and I believe we trusted each other totally. My faith in him remained even after a little conversation I accidentally heard one day. Th e

phone rang and Ray answered it. Whil e he wa s still on the phone I casually said, "Wh o is it?" I wasn' t being nosy, nei- ther did I think anything wa s up. I just wondered wh o might be calling. One of our friends, I thought. Well , when he told me wh o it wa s (some man, he'd said, whos e name I don't re- member now), for some reason I didn't believe it. So whil e he wa s upstairs talking rather low on the phone, I went down- stairs and picked up the extension line. It wa s not a man at all. It wa s a woman' s voice and I heard her clearly. Instantly, I hungup the phone. I don't know wh y but I wasn't even inter- ested in hearing the conversation. Stranger than that, I wasn' t even mad or upset. It crossed my mind then that maybe some- thing wa s up. Wh y would he tell me the person wa s male?

After he got off the phone I calmly confronted him.

"You said that wa s John [or whatever name he had used]," I said. "But that wa s the voice of a woman."

Without even hesitating, he confessed. He told me it wa s some woman named Cynthia . Ho w funny that I remember that name even today, and that wa s more than thirty years ago. He told me that he couldn't explain why , but he did like her. Nothing had happened between them, he said, and I be- lieved him. Actually, I still do. Mayb e I wa s being foolish or just typically naive, but he'd never lied to me and I didn't think he wa s lying then.

Ra y wa s visibly disturbed by the whole situation. He had a little conflict going on and I guess he didn't know quite ho w to feel or what to do. I had no feelings of jealousy or anger, as I'm sure I'd have today if I were married or in a committed re- lationship wit h someone and that happened. I just calmly told him that if he liked Cynthia, that sounded like a personal problem to me. He would have to work it out. It wasn' t on

me. I never felt that our relationship wa s threatened by her**I C T .** and really, I'm pretty sure it wa s not. I loved Ra y dearly and I knew he loved me. Mayb e that's wh y I wasn' t more affected by the whol e situation. I never heard or asked any more about Cynthia. I wasn' t even curious. Ra y and I spent all our time off work together, so there wa s never any moment when I wa s wondering where he wa s or what he may have been doing. Mayb e it wa s just a passing thing that happened in a short space of our being together. I never met Cynthia, nor did I wan t to. Mayb e it wa s just a one-call stand.

Some months later I wen t off to Auburn to study for my degree and left Ra y working in Atlanta. As planned, we' d see each other every weekend and we were alway s elated to be together. After my first year at Auburn, Ray decided to join me. There he would study in the media department and teach medical illustration at Tuskegee Institute, just thirty minutes away from Auburn. He earned a master's in audiovisual stud- ies and media. Like Kanye would come to be, he wa s a highly visual person and really adept at any kind of work that in- volved visual representation.

Ray and I had many good times together in Auburn. We lived in married-student housing just tw o blocks awa y from the sprawling campus. We enjoyed the friendship of one of my favorite professors, Michael Littleford, and made really good friends wit h Bart McSwin e and his wife , Donna. Bart and Donna wer e the only black professionals we knew in Au- burn. Al l the other black people we saw wer e laborers, tak- ing toilet paper out of trees whenever the Tigers would win a football game. Th e Auburn Tigers were good, though. So a lot of black people stayed employed. Donna and Bart both taught at Tuskegee but lived in Auburn. Ra y had met Bart at .I

health food store and instantly they became friendly. Soon we visited them and Donna and I hit it off, too. The y had a baby girl, Myisha. She wa s beautiful and I wa s impressed wit h their vegetarian lifestyle and the way they wer e raising her.

Life wa s good in Auburn, but it wa s not without its down moments. Twic e whil e we wer e there Ray and I sepa- rated. We had begun not to get along very wel l at all. So funny, however, that every time we' d separate, we' d become best friends again. Once we even found an apartment for Ray in Tuskegee, but he never even stayed in it. In the course of buying sheets, towels, dishes, and everything else he'd need—imagine us doing that together when we' d decided to split up—w e began liking each other again and didn't want to spend a night apart. It wa s crazy. But I'm glad it happened that way. That wa s before Kany e wa s born, so had we stayed apart there would never have been a Kany e West .

I completed all my requirements for my degree, except for the dissertation. Ray had already received his master's and it wa s time to return to Atlanta. We bid good-bye to our friends and professors and headed back home. Th e plan wa s for me to finish my writing from Atlanta.

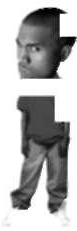
Times were good. To my knowledge, few if any in our circle had it better. I guess those were what some would call the good old days. Ra y Wes t wa s my sweetie, and despite our not getting along at times, we were still crazy about each other. We'd weathered the storm, weathered some things I won' t even share here.

We' d come a long wa y since that fated day we met just three years earlier. Those three coins had paid off a million- fold. '

3

# And Baby Makes...

I never wanted to have kids. No one ever heard me say growing up that I wanted to have children. Marriage, yes. Children, no. I imagined me and my guy—my husband— traveling around the world and doing things that were abso- lutely incongruent wit h the wor d "babysitter." One of the reasons wh y Ra y and I clicked so wel l is that he felt the exact same way .

But after a while, the thought of having and raising a baby wa s for me all-consuming. I wa s overwhelmed with a feeling that to this day I can't explain. I had made a decision wit h my head never to have children. But my body and my spirit had other plans. I think it was Go d selecting Ra y and me right then to have the child wh o would become Kanye West. And despite any of our

thoughts to the contrary, nothing was to keep this

pregnancy and birth from happening, not even our initial re- luctance, or better put, our initial insistence that a kid wa s just not in the cards for us. But the script flipped.

My maternal instinct kicked in and went into overdrive. Still, Ra y wa s not convinced that being a father wa s wha t he wanted to do. He wa s happy wit h just the tw o of us doing our thing. After all, we had all but vowe d not to have kids. But three years and counting into our marriage, this over- whelming desire in me to get pregnant just would not go away. So Ra y at least began to give some thought to the idea—partly, I'm sure, because he wanted me to be happy and partly because I wouldn' t and couldn't let it rest.

I had been on birth control pills since Ray and I got to- gether. But this new desire overtook. I have no idea where it came from. I really don't. I wa s only twenty-seven when I be- came pregant with Kanye, so I know :m biological clock wasn' t going haywire. Or maybe i t wa s Mother Nature just having her way . We are put here to procreate. Wh o the hell are we to mess wit h nature? Well , nature wa s messing wit h me. It wa s a powe r greater than I.

One night, I wa s more emphatic than ever about wanting to become pregnant and spun into a combination of pleading and insisting. I told Ra y I knew instinctively it was time for us to have a child despite anything we may have planned or not planned.

He looked at me, puzzled, and reminded me of wha t we' d said.

He said in a voice that wa s firm but still loving, "I don't want to have kids."

He wasn' t angry. He wa s just trying to reason wit h me. And in that moment, I understood something that had not

been clear to me before. I understood wh y his paternal in- stinct had not yet kicked in.

"Donda," he said. "I don't know if I can be a good father. I don't know if it's in me. That's wh y I don't wan t to do it."

I totally understood. I didn't know if I would make a good mother, either. I talked wit h one of my best friends, Jenny Trotter. She and her husband, Jim, had a little girl, Saun Toy, at the time, and all the wisdom in the world, it seemed to me. I told Jenny about my secret fears. I told her that for me, be- coming a mother wa s like being asked to perform surgery without going to medical school. I wasn' t prepared. No t only that, I, too, wa s afraid.

Jenny helped that fear dissipate. She had and still has a calming effect on people. Thank God , I wa s and still am one of them.

"Look at all of these people out here raising kids," she said to me. "It doesn't take a genius. You just have to be a willing, loving person.'"

She wa s right. There were a bunch of people having ba- bies wh o wer e seemingly less qualified than I was . An d most of their children wer e turning out okay. At least I wa s start- ing from a right place— I *wanted* a child and I knew I would love that child. But I didn't want to do it alone.

Ra y and I talked more, and soon he became more comfort- able wit h the whole idea. I told him what Jenny had said to me.

"If you want a child, we can have one," he said.

Almost before he could get the word s out of his mouth, I got off the pill. Tw o months later, I was pregnant.

The first weeks after the news wer e bliss. Ra y wa s very attentive. We still went everywhere together and enjoyed

planning and shopping for our unborn child. We even bought an antique rocking chair that I would rock the baby in. I still have it today. Everything wa s going fine. But as the reality set in, Ray' s fears came back wit h a vengeance.

My closest understanding of that kind of fear wa s when I wa s graduating from college. I remember sitting in McVicto r dorm on the campus of Virginia Union University a week before graduation, paralyzed wit h fear. The thought that I would have to be totally grown and fully responsible for my own life brought utter consternation. I woul d have to pay my own bills, function wel l in the world , and do so inde- pendently. I would have to be the big girl my father alway s called me.

My parents wer e very supportive of all of us. But they had a rule: once you wer e out of college, you were on your own . Of course, emotional and loving support woul d alway s be there. But you wer e expected to make it financially and in every other way once you graduated with that four-year de- gree. They had worked and saved to educate us. I remember my mother pulling out a big stack of savings bonds she'd been putting awa y for my college education since I wa s five or six years old. But no w it wa s graduation time and time for me to make it on my own .

I figured their rule wa s very fair, until my independence day hit. Wit h graduation fast approaching, I had only a very vague idea of wha t I woul d do, wher e I woul d go after leav- ing the environment I had found so nurturing. I wa s scared as hell when that reality first stared at me. Thinking back, if I'd wanted to go home to Oklahoma City , I knew my daddy would have welcomed it—despite the rule. Both of my par- ents would have let me come home, especially since I wouldn' t

have been bringing a baby home for them to raise. The y didn't play that.

But I never considered it an option, returning home to my parents' house or to the city I wa s raised in. I wa s raised just as I ultimately raised Kanye, to go out in the world, live my life, and tell my truths the way I see them.

I had so many questions. Woul d I be successful? Could I make my parents proud? Could I make myself proud? I had al- way s been an overachiever. But I wa s afraid of the unknown. So I knew the place where Ra y wa s and I also knew it wa s a very real place.

I wanted my husband to be pleased. I felt I couldn't be happy if he wasn't. But I also knew that I couldn't be totally happy if I didn't have a child. I somehow knew that as wel l as I knew my own name. And even though Ra y wa s off-and-on consumed wit h unanswered questions about his ability to be an excellent father (he always pursued excellence in ever y thing he did), his questions and fears about fathering last out to the best decision we ever made.

I thank Co d that I changed my mind about having a child. I can't imagine wha t my life would have been without him. Not because he happens to be Kany e West , but because being a mother is for me by far the most rewarding experience I've ever had. Besides life itself, raising Kany e wa s my greatest blessing. He has brought so much to my life and taught me so much about myself.

As the months wound down and the arrival of our child wa s imminent, Ra y turned into superhusband. He woul d go to Lamaze classes wit h me. He had me exercising and eating ra w and organic foods. He had me drinking fresh carrot and apple juice. And , from the moment we decided we' d go for it,

I stopped smoking weed . I wanted to provide the healthiest environment I could in which to carry this child. I had fallen in love with him before he wa s ever conceived. Righ t before and during my pregnancy, I wa s probably the healthiest I had ever been. Th e only thing that got big on me wa s my stomach.

Ra y wa s totally into it. He photographed every stage of the pregnancy, even me at eight and a half months, riding my bicycle. Once again, we did our unconventional thing. I wouldn' t wea r maternity clothes because back then you couldn't find anything stylish. I wanted to be fashionable and cute. No baggy, untailored, matronly-looking ensembles for me. So I would wear my jeans and put a hole on the other side and tie a string from the buttonhole to the hole I created, loosening the string as my stomach grew. I wore loose, stylish shirts to cover my stomach as the months progressed.

I knew I wa s having a boy. Ra y said he wanted a girl. I think he just said that so he wouldn' t be disappointed in case we had a girl . Or maybe it's that thing that daddies have with their little girls. But I *knew* we were having a boy. We never had an ultrasound, I just felt it. I felt Kanye , too, as he twisted and turned inside me. Boy, did I feel him. He would sometimes poke his elbow into my stomach so hard that I thought he must have been doing gymnastics inside. Many nights he woke me up on the parallel bars or something. But it wa s alway s a good feeling no matter how uncomfortable. Ra y would get a kick out of feeling my stomach and even con- ceded after a point that maybe we did have a boy on the way , after all.

The time came when the baby wa s ready to be born. Ra y was pretty cool and collected, as I remember it. He grabbed

my already-packed overnight bag and his camera equipment. We got to the hospital and were all ready for the big event, or so we thought. Th e contractions wer e ten minutes apart. I wa s ready. But as it turned out, the baby wasn't. I wa s to be in labor for a total of thirty nine hours! I wa s sweating and pushing and breathing and sweating. An d in pain. After the first twelv e hours, they sent me home.

"You haven't dilated but three centimeters," the doctor told me. "You can go home and come back when the contrac- tions are five minutes apart."

We went home with no baby. Just labor pains and antici- pation. I don't recall having one of those "I curse the day I ever met you, Ray West " moments. Mayb e I did. I had prayed and pleaded for this child, but labor pains wer e no joke. I'm sure I must have looked at this man I loved fiercely as the man wh o wa s responsible for all that pain.

Despite all that, I wa s determined to do this the all- natural way . However , the doctor came to me and said, "Donda, we have to do a C-section."

*A C-section?*

Here I was juicing, exercising, going to Lamaze classes, doing everything right. I'm thinking the baby should have fallen out. But I guess the baby wh o woul d come to be known as Kany e Wes t wa s going to do things his wa y even from the womb .

Thirty nine hours later, I gave in to the drugs that would enable me to bring this child into the world. The doctor said a C'section woul d be performed if I didn't dilate to ten centi- meters. After all of those hours, I managed to dilate only five.

It wa s disappointing. There would be no birthing room, which was so delicately planned for and eargerly anticipated.

No warm pan of wate r to submerge the baby in right after he came out. No low lights or candles, the wa y I wanted to wel- come him into the world . Those best-laid plans wer e de- railed.

I would have to take the drugs to have the C-section. I wa s still conscious, though. I wa s able to see our beautiful baby boy. He wa s healthy. Th e doctor said so without even being asked.

I knew the C-section wa s a last resort. My doctor wa s down to earth and encouraged all the natural things like breast-feeding and good nutrition. He even had a midwife work with him and they wer e both awesome. Ra y liked them, too. He alway s took me to my appointments, so Ray met and talked wit h them both. Ra y wa s so totally involved in my pregnancy right down to our weekly dinner at the Chi - nese restaurant where I always ordered butterfly shrimp. Ho w funny now that Kany e does not like seafood.

We lived in Atlanta at the time, but I had chosen to have our baby in a hospital in Douglasville, Georgia, because it offered a birthing room. There, I'd be able to have my hus- band, my mother (wh o I learned later wa s just as content to not be at the actual birth), and even a very close friend or two . The lights would be low in the birthing room so the baby wouldn' t undergo as much stress and experience the harsh, bright lights and that clinical feeling immediately upon coming out of the womb .

Ray and I had chosen right—the right doctor, the right hospital, the right classes, the right, healthy lifestyle, and we even selected a birthing room. It wa s all conducive to having that optimal experience and that perfect baby. We' d been

enormously blessed., despite all of that choosing being for naught.

Ra y ended up being the only person in the room other than the midwife and the doctor when Kany e was born. We couldn't have the C-section in the birthing room. But the hos- pital wa s small and intimate and the room felt warm to me.

Like everyone does, we had prayed for a healthy baby wit h ten fingers and ten toes and all of that. But I also prayed for him to be brilliant. Brilliant like my dad, wh o only has a sixth-grade education but is one of the most intelligent people I know, a real thinker.

Our prayers wer e answered. Ou r baby wa s healthy *and* brilliant. Ra y wa s there, camera in hand. He tried to capture every one of our baby's first moments. He took pictures of ev- eryone wh o held him in the hospital—the nurses, the doctors. It wa s funny. We had all of that time of not wanting kids or being afraid to have one, and when our son finally came into the world , there was not a more proud father alive.

My mother came from Oklahoma Cit y to help me out around the house. But because of the C-section, she ended up spending more time with me in the hospital. She loved our actual home, but not wher e it wa s situated. My mother didn't like a bunch of wood s where you couldn't see people coming or going. It made her nervous, so she stayed wit h me in the hospital. Only later did she tell me that she wouldn' t have even considered going out there on that four-acre, tree-filled property whil e Ra y and I stayed in the hospital. I had become just a little depressed over not getting to have natural child- birth and not being able to breast-feed for the first week. So Ray stayed wit h me. He coached me through labor by having

me think of lakes and trees. He coached me through postpar- tum depression by reminding me of the tremendous blessing we' d just been given. I remember all of that as though it were yesterday. We were as happy as tw o people could be.

Only one thing wa s missing—the perfect name for the perfect baby. Wit h all of the excitement around the preg- nancy, we' d never picked out names. So my mother and I began thumbing through this book of African names I'd bought. I wa s very Afrocentric and so wa s Ray . We wanted our child to have a name that represented his culture and stood for something. We wanted him to have a strong name.

Mother and I found the name "Kanye " in this book. It wa s

an Ethiopian name that meant "the only one." I knew he

wou ld be our only child, set apart, and special.

My mother found his middle name in the Os. She chose "Oman," whic h means "wis e man." Kany e Omari West . Mother pointed out that his initials would be K.O . She liked that it stood for knockout. We asked Ray about the names and he wa s cool wit h both Kany e for the first name and Oma n as the middle name. So we made it official.

Whe n we got home, Ra y wa s incredible. He did every- thing but breast-feed. And if he could have found a wa y to do that, I believe he woul d have. I couldn't have asked for more support. It wa s the wa y I imagined—the wa y it should have been.

A few months later, we decided to move...again . We found a beautiful home in the newly renovated section of Wes t En d in Atlanta. Those homes had been gutted and brought back like nothing I'd ever seen. None of that paint- ing over and sprucing up. These homes could rival those in magazines, and at the time, we wer e the only ones among our

friends wh o could actually manage to land one of those babies. Wit h the sale of our home on the four acres, we had enough money to purchase it.

We put dow n eight thousand dollars as earnest money, which in those days wa s nothing to sneeze at. The developers invited us to dinner, wher e we met all the progressive people wh o were to be our neighbors. They were mostly, if not all, white. That didn't matter. We' d continue to have all our same friends, and the neighborhood wa s actually in the hood, not far from everyone we knew and loved. No t far from Jenny and Jim Trotter, wh o had consented to be Kanye' s godpar- ents.

But as fate would have it, before we closed on that house, Ray found this commercial building that would be perfect for his studio. After much thought, the home became history. We could not afford both the home and the photography studio. We even lost our $8,00 0 earnest money because we' d quali- fied for the $ 1 2 5 , 0 0 0 mortgage and just didn't want to g o forward with the loan. We needed to put the business first. In doing so, we thought that ultimately, we could have any- thing we wanted. We both believed that when his business took oft, we could have as far as we could see. An d we saw a lot. It's what we didn't see, I suppose, that made a big differ- ence.

We decided on the commercial building over the beauti- ful family home in Wes t End . There, Ra y could have his stu- dio and expand his business. We would have a loft apartment upstairs and his studio would be downstairs.

Ray worked hard to build his business. He named it RaDonda, whic h wa s a combination of both our names. I wa s very proud of him and what he wa s doing. Fo r a whil e he

wa s doing it all whil e being an attentive daddy, taking care of his family, and trying to build his business into a success.

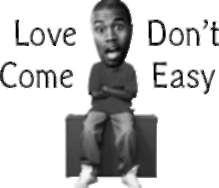
But as the months rolled on, I noticed Ra y spending more and more time wit h RaDonda and less time with us. I could feel the energy pulling awa y from us and I didn't like it, so I confronted him.

During a heated discussion he told me that yes, the studio wa s the most important thing to him. He even confirmed that it came before Kany e and me. Wha t a switch he had made. Long after we' d divorced, though, he told a mutual friend of ours that saying those word s and having that attitude were the biggest mistakes he ever made and that he wished he could take those word s back. But he couldn't. Those word s stung me as much as if he had hauled off and slapped me across my face, because when I looked in his eyes at that moment, I was certain he meant it.

My father alway s told us that you put Go d first, family second, and your work third. I didn't mind coming second to God , of course, but I certainly wasn' t coming second to Ray' s business. Not me and not Kanye.

In that instant, I no longer wanted to stay married to Ra y West . No t just because of his perspective on that matter, but because in many way s I wa s becoming a stranger to myself. It wa s time to go. Eleven months after Kanye had come into the world, Ra y and I separated for the last time. Whe n Kany e wa s three, we divorced. The divorce was final on August 28 , 1980 . The only reason I remember the day wa s because it wa s Rav' s birthday. It wa s also a rebirth for me.

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*Leaving Ray was almost as easy* as being wit h him. I often say that we had a great marriage and a great divorce. Whe n the marriage was working, it was working very well. Whe n it wasn't, it wa s time to go. There wa s no bitterness or nasti- ness, it just wa s time to go . We had such an amiable breakup that Ray drove me around to find an apartment. I guess we had broken up and reconciled so much that when we did it for the last time, we both knew it wa s for good.

I probably wouldn' t have even filed for divorce if I hadn't planned on leaving Atlanta. I figured when I decided to leave, I needed to make it a clean break. So I filed for full custody and Ray didn' t put up much of a fight. He didn't realize what had happened until I wa s actually moving from Atlanta. I was determined to leave, but there wa s no wa y I wa s going to de-

prive him of seeing his son. I just didn't want him filing aban- donment charges against me later, so I had to make it official.

I left Atlanta to start a new life. I moved to Chicag o partly at the encouragement of Larry Lewis . Outside of our romantic involvement, he showed me how many wonderful opportuni- ties I would have in Chicago. I left Atlanta to pursue some of those.

I had dated a couple of people after Ray, but Larry wa s the first guy I wanted to be serious about. I met him in Atlanta at the Koo l Jazz Festival. He wa s staying wit h a friend, Sheridan, wh o wa s also my friend. Larry told Sheridan that he wanted to meet a nice young lady whil e he wa s in Atlanta. I just happened to be over Sheridan's one day. Larry wa s out, but when he walked in, I wa s sitting at the kitchen table- talking wit h Sheridan. Whe n Larry and I looked at each other there wer e sparks everywhere. I won' t say that it wa s love at first sight, but there wa s definitely a connection.

We talked nonstop that night and the whol e week or tw o he wa s in Atlanta. Before he left, we were an item. Larry wa s smooth but honest, laid-back but outgoing. He wa s also very sexy and one of the most fun people I had ever met.

It wa s not hard to leave Atlanta and head to Chicago. I had planned to change jobs, maybe even cities, but I just didn't know where. Whe n all this happened, I knew it wa s supposed to unfold that way.

I told my friends and family my plan to move to Chicag o and no one discouraged me. I even drove a truck wit h our fur- niture and everything to Chicag o by myself. That wa s the only time I heard any opposition. Some of my friends didn't want me to make that trip by myself. But since no one volun- teered to go wit h me, I drove those eleven-plus hours to Chi -

cago. I found a place to stay and got settled and came back for Kanye, wh o wa s staying wit h his dad whil e I wa s there.

Ray wasn' t happy that I wa s taking Kany e and moving to Chicago. But he didn't put up much of a fight—not even for joint custody. Th e divorce wa s final tw o weeks before I left Atlanta and I had full custody of Kanye . I wa s ready to em- bark on the next phase of our life—as a single woman and a single mother.

I had just completed my doctorate in English education. I wa s young, black, and smart. I could writ e my ow n ticket. Before I moved, Larry cut out the yellow pages of the phone book wit h all the colleges and universities listed and sent me the classifieds from tw o local newspapers. He had circled things he thought I'd be interested in. I applied to Chicag o State and Roosevelt University. I landed both positions. I ac- cepted the one at Chicag o State because I wanted to teach in a predominantly black school. I wa s all set.

Larry Lewis wasn't the primary reason for this change. And I didn't move to Chicag o because of any promises we had made each other. I wasn' t delusional about our relationship and, quite frankly, I wasn' t looking to necessarily get into an- other serious relationship so soon after my divorce. But I did love Larry, I enjoyed his company, and I needed a change of scenery. So the Wind y Cit y suited me just fine.

Larry and I didn't stay together very long. I met him in June, moved to Chicag o in late August, wen t back for Kany e in late September, and four or five months later, Larry and I were history. I only remember when we broke up because by that Valentine's Day we were no longer an item. Although we remain friends to this day.

Kany e wa s only three years old, and thank goodness he

and Larry never had the time to really bond. I think one of the worst things you can do to your children is have them get close to people—men—and then have those people disap- pear. It causes a lot of confusion. That' s wh y I wa s alway s careful about the men in my life and wh o I decided to have around my son.

It's not easy being a single woman wit h a child. You have needs and desires. You want to date and enjoy the company of the opposite sex because after all, you're human. But your child must come first. You cannot have a revolving door of "uncles" and friends coming in and out of your child's life.

I alway s considered this before I dated any man. Like with Larry, I had options. Ray kept Kany e until I got settled. And after we moved to Chicago , Kany e woul d spend his summers wit h Ra y and Ray' s parents. I had my summers to explore the dating scene. An d those three months gav e me enough time to know whether a man wa s worth y of sticking around beyond August, worth y of meeting my son.

A couple of men wer e worthy. Ulysses Buckley Blakely Jr. , or Bucky, wa s one. I thought he wa s going to be my last love. He and I had a great relationship. Kany e liked him a lot. He would take Kany e to the park for hours near his apartment building in Evanston. Kany e used to call that park "Bucky's Park." We lived wit h him for a few months after I returned from India. And we were even going to buy a house together on South Shore Drive, but I think Bucky got cold feet.

That house wa s supposed to be *our* house. We were to move in there as a family. But love didn't live there anymore. Things had changed between Bucky and me and I could feel it. He never said anything. We didn't have a big blowout ar- gument or anything. He didn't treat Kany e any differently.

Things wer e just different between us. Th e love didn' t feel the same.

I wa s torn at the time. I really wanted that house and I couldn't afford it by myself. But there was no wa y I could see myself staying wit h a man because I thought I needed him or putting Bucky into a situation that I knew he didn't want . I believe he would have moved into that house with me had I pressed the issue. But I wasn' t going to press the issue.

I had to do something. But I really didn't know what to do. On e day I got on the bus and what should I see in the seat I wa s about to take? A sign that read: **BAN THE BUCK!** Th e Chi - cago Transit Authority wa s requiring all passengers to use correct change. Back then a bus ride wa s only a quarter. There were ads everywhere to "Ban the Buck!'' I thought it wa s a sign for me to kick Bucky to the curb. I had prayed for a sign, but I never imagined Go d would take me so literally.

It wa s time for me to ban the Buck. I don't think Bucky minded at all. Actually, I think he wa s relieved. He wa s not the kind of man wh o woul d have wanted to bail out of the relationship. He wa s a kind, loving, generous, responsible man. But it wa s time to move on.

After Bucky, there wa s Tony. Kany e actually hooked me up wit h him. I wa s taking Kany e voting with me at our local place. I sa w this handsome man—he wa s tall, six foot four (I am all of five four). Before we voted, Kany e tugged on me to check this guy out. I already had. We went in to vote (I al- way s took Kany e in the booth wit h me because I wanted to expose him to the process). Whe n we were finished, the man wa s gone.

I decided to walk up the street a bit. They were building some town houses there and they had a few models open.

Wh o would we bump into there? The man from the voting facility. I wasn' t the kind of woman to ever make a move, so I just went about my business, looking at the models. Whe n I finished, I started to head home. Tony, being a man, wanted to check out the garages. Kany e saw an opportunity. Grab - bing me by the hand, Kany e pulled me in Tony' s direction.

"Mom, he went that way! " Kany e said.

I wa s so amused. Here wa s this little six-year-old trying to hook me up. Kany e wanted me to have somebody. I think he never wanted me to be alone. I don't know what it wa s about Tony that caught Kanye' s eye, but he wa s being rather insistent that we go in Tony' s direction. I kept heading to- war d home, though, not interested in seeing the garages. But Kany e carried on, wanting me to follow this man. Tony ended up catching up to us. And we struck up a conversation. Kany e stood there just as nice as he could be. It wa s as though he wer e saying, "I'm a good boy, see. No trouble at all!"

Any other time, Kanye would have been ready to go , fidg- ety, in fact. But he waited patiently. Tony asked for my num- ber but I told him I'd take his instead. Rarely, if ever, would I give my number to a man. I called Tony a week later and we ended up dating for a couple of years. Kany e liked Tony. He especially liked that Tony rode motorcycles. Kany e wa s so small then, I dared not let him ride on the back wit h Tony. But it wa s a good relationship while it lasted.

Scotty wa s the closest I came to actually marrying again.

Kanye called him "my almost stepdad."

I met Scotty at my going-away party in my backyard. Kany e and I wer e leaving for China for a year and Scotty tagged along wit h my best friend, wh o lived in his building. He had locked himself out of the apartment that evening; she

saw him in the lobby and invited him to come wit h her to my party.

Nothing really got started then. We talked a little but I didn't make much of it. But I heard that he asked about me for the entire year I was in China (I guess I made an impres- sion, huh?).

Whe n we got back, Scotty asked me out. After that first date, it wa s on. We wer e together for six years. Wha t im- pressed me wa s that he wa s an old-fashioned gentleman, meaning he knew how to make a woman feel like a lady. He wa s a sharp dresser, interesting to talk to, and very progressive-minded. And he wa s a whol e lot of fun.

He wa s an auto mechanic teacher at a local high school and wa s involved in lots of activities through the teachers union. But 1 really liked that the students he taught wer e all very fond of him. They loved him dearly. Some of the boys would come up to him during football games or wherever we were just to speak to him. Some wh o had graduated still made it a point to come and pay their respects to Mr . Willi e Scott.

We lived together for a few years. But our relationship ended primarily over a dispute over how I should raise Kanye . Some of his old-fashioned, stern schoolteacher way s just weren't congruent wit h the way I wanted to raise my son. I did respect, however, Scotty' s point of view, and never inter- fered (at least not openly) wit h the wa y he disciplined Kanye . I wanted that strong male influence for Kanye on a daily basis. But Scotty seemed more interested in punishment than disci- pline and exchange.

I alway s believed that children aren't these silent slaves wh o should be seen and not heard, wh o should obey and

nothing more. I believed that you should communicate wit h your child and that if you're a good parent, your child wil l obey you because he respects you, not because he's afraid of you.

Scotty wa s from the fear-and-awe school of parenting. He wa s one to focus more on taking awa y things and privileges— for example, if Kany e hadn't cleaned the tub wel l enough or mopped the kitchen floor to Scotty' s satisfaction.

Whil e that kind of parenting has its place, I wa s more interested in nurturing the creative side of Kanye, making sure that he wa s widely exposed and even heavily indulged. Scotty felt that I wa s too lenient. Scotty woul d say the few times I came to Kanye' s defense about a chore left undone, "You're going to fuck him up!"

Scotty thought I wa s spoiling Kanye , ruining him, by let- ting him get awa y with any one small thing. I learned later that his military stance was , in fact, good for Kanye . But still, enough wa s enough. The breaking point for us came the day there wa s a piece of paper on the lawn.

It wa s Kanye' s jo b to keep the lawn free of debris. And somehow a piece of paper ended up on the lawn. Scotty lost it. I believe he overreacted. It wa s one thing to discipline a child, it wa s quite another to be overbearing. I knew then it wa s time to go .

Kany e and Scotty had their share of run-ins by this time and I felt Kany e wa s growin g unhappy being around him. I had caught Kany e sitting at the dining room table almost in tears. He and Scotty weren't getting along that day. I asked him wha t wa s wrong.

"If you love him, Mom , stay wit h him," Kany e said. "I'll be out of the house one day."

"But wha t wil l you do now?" I asked Kanye .

"I guess I'll just go live with my dad," he said, wipin g the tears from his eyes.

That was it. Kany e never cried and I knew he didn't wan t to go live wit h his dad. He wa s content just staying wit h him for the summers, but for good? That' s not wha t he wanted. If I believed that Kany e truly preferred to live wit h his dad, I would have been devastated, but I would have let him go. But he wa s only asking to leave because he wa s unhappy living wit h Scotty.

There wa s no wa y in hell I wa s going to send Kany e off to stay wit h his dad just so that Scotty and I could be together. Wha t Kany e says in the song is true. I "never put no man over" him and I wasn' t about to start then.

Not long after that day Kany e sat at the table teary-eyed, I took my child and moved out. I still loved Scotty. But love wa s not enough—not enough to make my child unhappy.

I'm glad I went through those loves and exposed Kany e to all of it—the good, the bad, and the ugly. There wer e some lessons there for him, too. One of them wa s that love doesn't come easy. Whe n you know that truth, perhaps you're more apt to treasure it when you find it and you're less likely to jump into a relationship without thought and care.

My greatest love, though, whic h outweighed any love I could have for any man, wa s for my child. Women must real- ize that their first responsibility, their first consideration must be for their children. Too many women put a man before their child and that's wrong. Men come and go , but your children wil l be your children forever.

The one thing your child must know is that he is loved above all else. You give him security and confidence when you

let him know that no matter what , he wil l alway s be loved. That doesn't mean that you stop your life. That doesn't mean that you live like a nun. That doesn't mean that you aren't tough and that you don't discipline your child and even pun- ish him when necessary. Wha t it means is that you love him unconditionally, and you let him know that the love you have wil l never fade. Th e love for your child is not like a love for any man—that may fade at any time. This love is eternal.

And that's what I let Kany e know—tha t my love for him wa s unconditional and eternal.

5

# "Hey Mama!"

My mama told me go to school, get your doctorate But still supported me when I did the opposite

KANYE WEST, "Hey Mama," Late Registration

*The first time I actually saw* the term "mama's boy'' connected to Kany e wa s in a Chicag o news - paper in 2005 . It wa s in the headline of a cover story for the entertainment section. The headline read: "Kanye: A Mama's Boy After All."



I didn't like the reference at first, but the actual story wa s quite glowing. I wa s very proud of

it and so wa s Kanve. Whe n he wa s asked about me in an interview he said, "M y mama's my best friend. I talk to her every day."

It's no secret that Kanye and I are really,

really close and alway s have been. I have accom-

panied him to awards shows, been his general manager, and am no w the C E O of his parent company, Super Good , as wel l as the chair of the Kany e Wes t Foundation.

If asked before the article appeared to define the phrase

"mama's boy," I probably would have said it wa s a pejorative, a description of a male child wh o wa s too tied to his mama and who' d never quite come into his own . But that wa s a con- notative meaning that wa s totally and ultimately inaccurate. No w I think of the phrase in very positive ways . That you're a mama's boy doesn't mean you're not a man. Kany e is very much his own man. I recall him saying in an interview, "I'm not tough, but I am strong." He can love his mother and still be a strong man.

I really don't ever remember that mama's boy moniker being a problem with Kany e when he wa s growin g up. And I wa s always very involved in his life. I worked in one of his day care centers, and later, I wa s alway s volunteering at his school. Whethe r it wa s attending a PT A meeting, chaperon- ing kids on a field trip, or editing the parent-teacher newslet- ter, I wa s alway s there. It never seemed to bother him. I wa s supportive and I believe he appreciated it. It wa s a source of comfort, knowing that I would alway s be there.

I remember one time when he wa s just a toddler, I had to work a long stretch at the school. I wa s teaching at Morris Brown Colleg e in Atlanta, Georgia, then and had to do some advising after a full day of classes. Thi s wa s at a time when we definitely needed extra money. It wa s a necessity, not a luxury, and I just couldn't afford not to make that extra money advising for a couple of weeks.

I'd dropped Kany e off at about seven in the morning and didn't pick him up until ten that evening. Boy, wa s he mad at me. He had his little arms folded and wouldn' t say a word.

"W e can get some ice cream," I said as we wer e driving home. I wa s feeling really badly and trying to bribe him into forgiving me. Kany e wasn' t having it, though. He turned his

head toward the windo w awa y from me and continued to sulk. I tried everything I could to win his favor, but to no avail. Finally, I became a little frustrated and said, "Well , just forget you, then!"

Instantly he unfolded those little arms and burst into laughter. I wa s stunned that a baby—h e wa s scarcely more than a year old—could hold his own like that. I could not believe he was so focused and so determined not to give in. Never had I met a kid wh o could not be snapped out of his mood wit h the offer of an ice cream cone. Not Kanye . He felt that I had abandoned him and he wanted me to know it. I think he wanted to pay me back, and he surely did. I wa s a little taken aback by the whole ordeal. But I wa s more re- lieved than anything that he had finally forgiven me.

I alway s hated the thought of disappointing any child in any way . Tha t time it couldn't be helped, though, and I was as sad as he was . Excep t for punishing him when he needed to be punished, I don't think I ever disappunted him ever again after that.

Like the song says, Kany e wa s just three years old when he and I moved to the Chi . I'd gone to Chicag o a month before I wen t back to Atlanta to get him from his dad. I needed to find a place that would be affordable, safe, and ideal for a single parent raising a young boy in Chicago. That wa s not the easiest task, partly because of my limited budget and my limitless taste. An d partly because in the nicer places, chil- dren wer e not alway s welcome.

I persisted, though, and found a wonderful place near Chicag o State University, where I'd already begun teaching, and also near Professional Playhouse Daycare, where I'd enroll Kany e in school. Th e landlords, a very nice lady and her hus-

band, had at first turned me down. They explained that while they loved children, they felt that having one in their three flat building would attract other children and that the yard would alway s be full of them.

They themselves occupied the first floor and another single lady without any children lived on the second. I loved the place the moment I looked at it and thought it to be just per- fect for Kany e and me. So I insisted that having Kany e there would not attract a single kid. After all, he wa s just three years old and I had no intention of letting him go out to play without me. Still they turned me down . How glad I wa s when they called back to tell me I could have the apartment. The tenant they had chosen had not worked out for some rea- son. So they called Chicag o State to verify my employment and ended up being rather impressed wit h me.

They complimented me on having just earned the doctor- ate degree and on becoming an instructor at the neighborhood university. They said they wanted smart people in their build- ing and that if we still wanted it, the apartment wa s ours. Withi n one week we moved in. Kany e had his ow n room and there wa s a living room, large dining room, full kitchen, and an enclosed back porch. My room wa s right next to his and we both felt very comfortable in our new home. It wa s a godsend—just like the job, just like Larry Lewis , the man who' d been the catalyst for our moving from Atlanta, and just like Chicag o itself, a city I'd vowe d never to live in but came to embrace as my favorite city in the world.

I loved working at Chicag o State and I think Kanye was proud of me even then. It wa s a new start for us and we both were very happy. In one year, I purchased a home for us in South Shore. Mama would rent no more and Kany e would

have his ow n backyard. He wa s a little older and kids could come over if they wanted to. I didn't know it, but South Shore, and especially South Shore Drive, where we lived, wa s considered "the shit," a prestigious area in a coveted part of town. We were within walking distance of Lake Michigan and our backyard backed up to Rainbo w Park. It's in the kitchen of that house that Kany e talks about kneeling on the kitchen floor and saying "Mama, I'm gonna love you til you don't hurt no more." He had seen me fall in love only to be disappointed and had never forgotten, even up to the day he wrote "Hey Mama."

Lots happened in those eight years we lived on South Shore Drive. I enrolled Kany e in preschool at Chicag o State University. Nothing wa s wron g wit h Professional Playhouse, where he started when we first left Atlanta. But since I wa s teaching at C S U and had waited for a year for the preschool there to prove itself worthy (it was brand-new and I preferred to wai t until its second year of operation for them to workou t their kinks), I decided to take Kany e out of Professional Pla y house and enroll him in the school on the campus where I taught. It would be a little more convenient for me and I could check on him throughout the day. It turned out to be an excel- lent school where the director and teachers were caring and nurturing—one where the children learned something new every day and all the parents were required to be actively in- volved.

In no time, Kany e wa s ready to enroll in kindergarten. His teachers told me that academically, he wa s fine, even gifted. But socially, they thought he needed some help. The y told me Kany e did not work wel l wit h others, that he wa s self- centered and needed another year there to adjust to public

school. There wa s a kindergarten at the preschool and for about half a second I considered whether I woul d take their advice. The answer came quickly, though. Whe n I debated leaving him there at nearly three hundred dollars a month or finding a good public school and seeing to it that he worked wel l wit h others, I chose the latter. Th e money wasn' t the major factor (although it wa s a factor). I wa s confident that Kany e would do just fine in regular kindergarten.

I checked out Powell School on South Shore Drive. Al l the kids in the neighborhood wer e going there and it wa s only four blocks dow n the street. Named for Adam Clayton Powell, someone wh o I'd long admired, it did not quite mea- sure up to the standards I had in mind for the school Kany e would attend. Kindergarten would be his entry into real school, and like many of the mothers I had met at his pre- school, I wa s hell-bent on making sure he'd get into one of the best schools in the city.

For a minute, I considered a school in Lincoln Park. It wa s in Near North and quite a distance from the house. There would be no wa y for him to get there except my taking him. That wa s secondary, though, because the school sounded so great. Th e curriculum allowed for applied teaching and hands-on learning. I knew the value of both. I wa s impressed with the activities and the many field excursions the kids wer e afforded. But wha t I did not like, besides the long drive on icy winter mornings, wa s that there wer e no other black kids at the school. Whil e I applauded diversity, I did not wan t Kany e to be the only "diverse" kid there. So I continued my search for another school.

Just in the nick of time, another mother of one of the pre-

schoolers, Beverly, told me about Vanderpoel Magnet School. She told me it wa s excellent and known for teaching the arts. After talking wit h her and visiting the school, I wa s sold. Mr . Olsen, the principal, Ms . Wooten, the vice principal, and Ms . Morgan, the music teacher, all stood out to me as the kinds of educators I wanted to influence Kanye . So did Ms . Murry, the kindergarten teacher, wh o wa s also patient and kind.

Our only problem wa s that we missed the deadline for applying. Here is where I knew Id have to do a little handi- work and call on someone I knew at the board of ed for a favor. One more problem: I wa s fairly new to the city and really didn't know many people, nor wa s I due any favors. But I fig- ured I wa s young, gifted, black, degreed, and a professor of English at Chicago State University. Surely there would be a wa y to get some consideration. We' d only missed the deadline by a couple of days and the school still had a couple of spaces. Mama strikes again! I'd get Kany e in that school or bust.

I asked the provost at my university to help me and I sup- pose he did. I don't really know wha t happened, I just know that within a couple of days of visiting the school, Kany e wa s invited to apply. In those days, kids weren' t selected to at- tend magnet schools by lottery, as they would be in subse- quent years. A battery of tests wer e given, and fortunately Kany e did wel l on them all. I couldn't help but be amused when they asked him to draw a man. k.im c told them he'd draw a football player, but they told him he couldn't do that. They wanted him simply to dra w a man. I learned later that there wa s a scoring system based on the detail included, and I

guess the test did not allow for a picture of a football player.

er.

Kanye said he'd draw a man, but he wa s going to put him in a football suit. They just looked at one another and said okay. Kanye drew his football player and passed the test in flying colors. My baby wa s in Vanderpoel and there he would stay until he graduated from eighth grade.

It wa s during those times that I "work[ed] late nights just to keep on the lights.'' And I got [him] training wheels so [he] could keep on [his] bike." "[I] would give anything in this world/Michael Jackson leather and a glove, but didn't give [him] a curl."

Not everything wa s perfect during those years, and al- though Kanye wa s a good kid, he got into his share of devil- ment. I'll never forget the day he took the X-rated magazine to school. He wa s passing it around for the other boys to see and the teacher caught him. I've never been so embarrassed as the day I had to go to the school and face Ms . Wooten. She wa s so tough that I wa s almost afraid of her.

"Look what Kany e brought to school," she said, showing me the magazine. I wanted to crawl through any hole in the floor. An d if his taking it to school wasn' t bad enough, she told me that when she asked him where he'd gotten the maga- zine, he said, "From my mother's closet."

I could have killed him. I didn't know what to say. And to this day, I don't know what I did say. Everything seems somewhat of a blur after that, until I had Kany e in the car and proceeded to yell at him like I'd never done before. Before I knew it, I'd lost my temper and smacked him across his face. Th e bad thing about that is that I wasn' t even sorry for it. I dared him to ever do such a thing again, and I think it took me hours, if not days, to cool down .

That wasn' t the last time Kany e would get caught wit h his pants down , at least figuratively speaking. He had gradu- ated from Vanderpoel and gone on to Polaris High. I decided to borrow his V C R to look at a movie because the one in our room (Scotty's and mine) wa s on the blink. To my surprise and utter dismay, Kany e had an X-rated tape in it that in my opin- ion wa s too graphic for the most mature adult, much less a fourteen-year-old boy. It wa s triple-X-rated and I wa s mad as hell about it. He'd gotten it from one of the boys at school and it seems they had been taking turns watching it. I wa s so angry that I didn't say a word for tw o days. I couldn't because I didn't know wha t to say or wha t to do.

I did take the tape out so that he'd sweat a little (or hope- fully a lot), wondering wha t had happened to it. Whe n I re- gained my composure, I confronted him. By this time I had already decided what the consequences would be. I knew that ranting and raving would not deter this behavior. I knew that making him promise never to watch such a thing again would only make him lie to me. So what could I do that might have some positive impact? Wha t could I say that might re- sult in something productive? I wanted to be the mama of mamas, and yet, in this situation I found myself speechless.

In that tw o days of not mentioning a wor d to Kanye , it came to me wha t I should do. Calmly, I approached him wit h the tape in my hand and said, "Wha t is this?" It wa s the mo- ment he'd been dreading, I'm sure, and the moment I'd begun to anticipate. To my surprise he said quite openly, 'It's a tape I got from Johnny [not his real name]."

"Wha t were you doing wit h i t in your VCR? " I asked him.

Wit h his head down , he told me he'd been watching it. I don't know what I expected him to say. I'd alway s raised him to tell the truth, and somehow, I wished then that he'd thought of a lie I could believe. Of course, I knew he'd been watching it. Wh y else would it have been there? Thankfully, I had taken a moment to reflect on the whol e matter and to ask for guidance in confronting him. The direction had come and to this day I know it wa s better to have done what I did than to have ranted and raved and forbidden his actions. I asked him if he thought it wa s healthy for young teenaged boys to look at X-rated movies. I continued wit h a series of other related questions. I wa s surprised by the maturity of some of his answers and annoyed by the flipness of others. In the end, however, I required him to do a full-blown research paper complete wit h footnotes and bibliography. I gave him three topics to choose from, but I only remember the topic he chose; "The Impact of Watchin g X-Rate d Movies on a Teen- aged Boy."

Until he finished that paper to my satisfaction, there wa s to be no television, no going to play basketball, no friends over, or any other activity. Needless to say, he worked on the paper consistently and finished a decent paper in a pretty short time. I corrected it as though he wer e in one of my col- lege classes, allowing no misspellings and requiring correct documentation. I don't believe it deterred an affinity for such videos. But I do know he learned quite a bit about how to do a research paper and I thought that in itself to be a very valu- able lesson.

In Kanye' s earlier years, I had friends and quite a few rela- tives wh o thought I wa s too permissive with Kanye. They felt I didn't discipline him enough, that I allowed him to do

and say things that he shouldn't. I never believed you should stifle children and beat them into submission for the sake of your ease and comfort. I alway s wanted my son to feel free to express himself. Of course, there needed to be boundaries and I wa s always pleased to know that if I told Kanye I didn't like something, he would fix it.

I alway s wanted him to be his ow n person—not some cookie cutout of me or his dad. I didn't put many restrictions on Kanye.

He used to call my sister Klay e instead of Aunt Klaye . I didn't have a problem wit h it because that's wha t I called her. I guess being the youngest and having nieces and nephews close to my age, and having them sometimes call me by my first name instead of Aunt Donda, made it cool.

But some family and friends did not seem to like that at all. After all, in a traditional black family, there are these rules. You have to call people Mis s Whatever-their-name-is. You can use either the first name or last name, but if she is an elder, you have to call her Miss Jones or Miss Mae . An d for men, it's Mr . Smith or Mr . Paul. You can't call older people- by their first names. It's a show of disrespect. And I under- stand that. I may not agree wit h it, but that's the wa y it is. So I had to talk to Kany e about that. We live in a world wit h people and you can't alway s do things your wa y just because you feel it's right. You have to be considerate of ho w other people see things, too.

Kany e did things like that, not to be disrespectful but because he couldn't see why it had to be done the wa y ever y one else did it. It wa s part of his wanting to stand out. But sometimes he would get beside himself. He'd be a little more grown than even I, the permissive one, would allow.

We' d moved to Chicag o during the summer. But before our move I'd visited on a couple of occasions to interview for jobs and get acclimated to the city. On one of those visits, I'd made a few friends. One of them wa s Linda Pruitt (whose name is Jahon Rashid today). I met her through Larry Lewis , the guy I met at the Koo l Jazz Festival in Atlanta and wh o wa s responsible for me being in Chicago. His best friend, Frank, wa s either going wit h or married to Linda. I don't re- member which now. Instantly, she and I hit it off and became best friends.

It woul d be a whil e before Linda spent any real time around Kanye. She' d just seen him briefly here and there. He wa s very young then and very likely did not remember her at all. On e summer after Kany e had just come home to Chicag o after spending the summer with his dad, Linda came over for a visit.

Kanye ran to the door, opened it, saw Linda, and said, "Wh o are you?!" Not "Hello." Not "Ma y I help you?" Just "Wh o are you?!"

He couldn't have been more than five years old. Linda wa s not amused.

"Boy, I'm your mother's best friend!" she said. "You better get out of the wa y and let me in this house!"

I didn't know until years later (actually, after Kanye had made it) that she remembered that day well . She confessed, "I'm going to tell you, I thought Kanye wa s a spoiled, snot- nosed kid wh o woul d gro w up to be trouble."

She never told me that then. But had I heard him speak to her in that manner, I would have put him in his place. Look- ing back, I could understand wh y she thought as she did.

But back then, I couldn't see it. I guess I wa s totally blinded. I thought just about everything he did wa s brilliant and wonderful.

I guess he wa s very much my boy—mama' s boy. Wha t wa s wrong to others wa s not always wrong to me.

I appreciated that Kany e saw things differently. He never thought inside of the box. He began to draw when he was three years old, and I bought him a huge box of Crayolas. You know, the one with the sharpener in the back. I think it wa s a box of sixty-four. Even then, his talent stood out. He drew things that kids wh o wer e twic e his age couldn't draw. He drew people—real people, not stick people. I wa s impressed by it.

I remember having a conversation wit h him about colors and how a banana is supposed to be yellow and an orange should be orange. But he rarely made things the "right" color, not unless he wanted to. He would make the banana purple and the orange blue. I didn't tell him it wa s wrong. That wa s the wa y he wanted to see it. He knew that a banana wa s actu- ally yellow, but he wanted to make it purple and I didn't argue wit h him.

Whe n he wa s six, my sister and brother-in-law took him to a lake. There wer e ducks there just quacking away. Kany e took exception to the way the ducks wer e quacking.

'That' s not the wa y that's supposed to sound," he said, and started quacking the wa y he thought it should be. Now , these were real ducks quacking and he felt like they were doing it wrong. In his mind it should have sounded a different way. He wa s adamant that the ducks wer e quacking wrong. Kany e had a distinct perspective. He alway s had his own spin

on things. I never criticized him for it. I figured I would just nurture the creativity.

Wh y does a banana have to be yellow? Mayb e the ducks were quacking wrong. I never thought when he grew up that he would be looking for a purple banana.

It's ironic he'd be considered a mama's boy when he was so independent of me. Al l kids need their mothers and there is a huge amount of dependence that most will never even ac- knowledge. Whethe r or not he depended on me openly, I just wanted Kany e to know that I loved him unconditionally and that it wa s critically important for him to display respect for himself and others.

Respect has always been a big thing in our house—not just being respected but learning how to respect. And because Kany e has a high regard for me, it makes him a better man. He has never denied being a mama's boy. An d even in the tough world of rap, that respect he has for me shines through in the wa y those around Kany e treat me. An d I appreciate that.

Whethe r lt's Jay- Z or Ludacris or Nelly or John Legend or Common—or Don C., Kanye' s road manager; Gee , his man- ager; Ibn, his barber; or any of his many friends—they all walk in wit h so much respect. An d I know it's because of ho w Kany e treats me. I don't know how they act around others. I suspect they display that same level of respect. In fact, I know they do because I know some of their mothers. But Kanye has set the tone for ho w I should be treated. And it's alway s wit h utmost respect.

Whe n he wa s younger and he'd play one of his songs for me, he'd alway s turn dow n the volume on any part wit h pro- fanity. Now , I knew Kany e cursed and not all the word s in his music were from his Sunday school class. But I liked that

he felt it appropriate to spare me from some of the lyrics. It wa s all about respect. No w that I've become a true hip-hop mom and Kany e is wel l beyond his teen years, he know s I don't mind hearing all the lyrics and that, in fact, I prefer to. There is no need to turn the volume down . Th e respect re- mains and I know it.

That children should have respect for themselves and for their parents is a given. It's something that I required of Kany e and that my parents required of me. Ye t frequently, that's not ho w it is. Some may say it's phony to avoid certain behaviors in front of a parent or vice versa. But I've alway s believed it's the right thing to do. Admittedly, some things become age appropriate, like Kanye not needing to edit for me the profan- ity in his music. But other behavior may or may not ever be appropriate. Wha t one does wit h one's peers is not necessar- ily the respectful thing to do in all situations. I know Kany e has intuited this, as I've never spoken on it to him. I never had to. Some things are taught by setting an example.

The whole respect thing is declining. Permissive as I was when Kany e wa s a child, and cool as I fancy myself now that he's an adult, he has never disrespected me. I'm concerned that across the board, however, that may be the exception rather than the rule. Wha t greater evidence is there than the wa y some children treat and act around their parents? It's not nec- essary to watch Jerry Springer or other such show s to know that this is true. We need but to look around us. Disrespect is running rampant and it didn't start yesterday.

I remember when I wa s in graduate school, my roommate, an undergraduate, wa s growin g impatient about something. I heard her say, not even under her breath, "I wis h that bitch would come on!"

"Wh o are you talking about?" I asked her.

And without hesitation she replied, "M y mother!"

Now , I could never imagine thinking about referring to my mother as a bitch, much less actually doing it. It would never enter my mind no matter wha t the situation. But in some households it is commonplace, a phenomenon that to me is as disturbing as it is damaging.

If you can even fix your lips to call your mother a bitch— even if she is one—you're not only disrespecting her, you're also disrespecting yourself.

But many kids don't know any better because parents aren't stepping up and teaching them better.

Not long ago, one of my little twin nephews came to visit his grandmother. They haven't spent much time with our side of the family. But, of course, we love them dearly. At five years old, they are the cutest little boys you'll ever see—Hollywood cute. They are also sweet and wel l behaved. Nevertheless, there wa s music playing that I guess one of the twin s didn't like. He said, "Can you turn that *damn* thing down! It's annoy- ing me!"

Everyone in the room just stopped. We come from one of those families where that just wasn' t allowed. Whe n we were coming up, if an adult wa s in a room and wanted to curse, he or she had to spell it out or use pig Latin. But my little neph- ew s hadn't a clue that to use the wor d "damn" at age five was not going on. Not even I would allow such language raising Kanye—not to my face or anywhere within earshot.

"Justin, we don't talk like that," my niece said to him in a calm voice. Sh e didn't go off on him and scream and yell.

He looked up and said, "Oh, okay." It didn't dawn on him

that it wa s inappropriate for him to say that. He wa s never taught that. But he learned that night.

There are some old-fashioned values I insisted on that could serve us wel l today. People talk about back-to-basics— reading, writing, and arithmetic. But there are some basic val- ues we must return to as well , not the least of which is respect. Honesty, integrity, and a strong work ethic wer e traits I knew had to be instilled in Kanye. He wasn' t going to learn them through osmosis. And if I, his dad, his grandparents, aunts, un- cles, and any adult he was allowed to be around did not teach him, the streets and impolite TV certainly weren' t going to.

It's not rocket science to conclude that we spend too much time and money on things that aren't as important as teaching our kids the basics. We build space stations on the moon— and neglect the fundamentals. As Kany e wa s growin g up (and now, as well , of course), people actually took the lives of other human beings daily and thought nothing of it. Now , decades later, there isn't a night that goes by that someone isn't killed or injured because someone "dissed" them. We have come so far and our ancestors have sacrificed so much. If we fail to keep our children mindful of this, disrespect wil l continue to run rampant.

Whe n Kany e wa s very young, I began teaching him to love himself. It's something I felt I must consciously do. The low self-esteem he wa s bound to take on if he looked to the media for validation would only serve to cripple him and make him question himself into oblivion. As a black man and as a man period, he woul d need to be strong. Thi s would not happen if he learned to hate rather than love himself. An d in a society wher e our legacy is surely the love of our forefathers

but also the hate of slave masters, it is imperative that parents consciously teach the love of self, the courage of Malcolm, the wisdom of Martin, the tenacity of Marcus.

I believe that unless combated, self-hate is easy to develop and nearly impossible to shed. On e of the best way s to teach a child to love himself and others is to love that child wit h all your might. Perhaps it is the only way . If you don't know that you are loved, how can you possibly have a conscience? Ho w can you care about another person? It's so basic. Yet we almost miss it. But if you kno w you are loved and are taught to love by those wh o raise and nurture you, you have what' s funda- mental to a well-adjusted and happy life.

I spent a few days in Spain in 2006 , and I met a guy there wh o grew up with very little. Economically, he wa s deprived as a child and didn't alway s know how he wa s going to sur- vive from day to day. Today he is highly successful financially and otherwise. I asked him wha t made the difference for him.

"Unconditional love,'' he told me. His daddy left when he- wa s five months old, but his mother wa s right there. No mat- ter wha t they lacked or whether they wer e able to eat on a given day, he knew his mother loved him every single moment of his life. For him, her loving him unconditionally made all the difference.

I would say that anyone wh o grow s up to be a reasonably well-adjusted, fulfilled individual has to have had someone there—a mother, a father, a teacher, a pastor, a friend or other family member—who really loved them and made it known. If you don't get that, you can't gro w up feeling good inside even if you defy the odds and become successful. If you get too much love, maybe you'll be called a mama's boy. But that isn't the worst thing in the world , is it?

**6**



# I'll Fly Away:

**From Chi-town to Shanghai**

*I would give Kanye the world* if I could. But I guess I did the next best thing— I exposed him to the world. I knew that more than money, clothes, and things, exposure to new things, exposure to different things, is perhaps the best gift you can give your child. My goal wa s to show Kany e the world so that he could make up his own mind how things were—bu t he would do it from experience.

Kany e had his first plane ride when he wa s just eight weeks old. We flew to Oklahoma Cit y to attend my ten-year high school class reunion. This wa s 197 7 and I was feeling pretty good. I had earned a couple of degrees, had traveled a good bit and met people from all over the country and the world. But what I wa s most proud of wa s Kany e Oma n West .

My mother kept Kany e whil e I attended most of the

events. But I had him strapped in a carrier to my front for a few gatherings. He wa s a great baby. At our class dinner, I got the prize for having the youngest child. I kept that prize—a baby bottle and tw o pacifiers—for years. We didn't have much use for the pacifiers, though, because Kanye had been sucking those tw o fingers since he came out of the wom b and that's all he wanted. I didn't need the bottle much, either, because I breast-fed Kanye. But I appreciated the prize and wa s honored to have won .

The trip to Oklahoma Cit y wa s the first of many. Ove r the next few years, Kany e and I traveled at least a couple of times each year—most frequently to Oklahoma City. But we also wen t to fun places, like Florida. Glenda, one of Kanye' s tw o godmothers, and I took Kany e and her daughter, Alexis , to Orlando and Daytona Beach. Disney Worl d wa s some of the most fun ever. I loved it as much as Kany e did. In fact, I've been there four times—only twic e wit h Kanye. On one of the trips, we found a place where you could record your ow n music video. Thi s wa s before the days of karaoke, but it wa s similar. Kany e performed a Stevie Wonde r tune. Go d only knows where that tape is today.

Glenda and I rented a car and drove to Sea World . On the wa y Glenda and I spotted these really cute guys driving in the car next to ours. Before I could even gear up to say any- thing, Alexi s stuck her little head out of the back windo w and, pointing to her mother, said, "She's married!" Glenda wa s faithful to her then husband, George (they're not together anymore), but Alexi s wa s going to make sure nothing inap- propriate happened that trip, not that it ever would . It's funny how kids are so protective and perceptive.

Whil e in Disney, we went to one of those time-share-pre-

sentations. We had no intentions of purchasing one, but they rolled out the red carpet for us, complete wit h Disney charac- ters to greet us. The y even offered tw o days of free lodging and breakfast wit h the Disney characters just for checking them out. There wa s no obligation and it wa s wort h it all to see the smile on those kids' faces when Mickey and the whole crew came out to greet each kid personally at the breakfast.

I found it very important to expose my child to many things. Glenda and I were alway s finding places to take the kids—either out of town or right in Chicago . I wasn' t rich, or even wel l off. I alway s kept a house because I wa s taught that owning your ow n home is something that you simply must do. Renting wa s not an option. I found that it wa s usu- ally cheaper to own a home than to rent, anyway. An d while I rarely denied Kany e anything, it wasn' t because I had it like that. I wa s very clever in saving my money and finding way s to give him things and expose him to things without breaking our bank. Sometimes I would shuffle the bills to make sure he had something.

I didn't make much as a professor, believe it or not, so I sometimes worked tw o or three jobs. I believe you do what you have to do to have the kind of life you want to have. I don't talk much about my struggles because I don't think about it that way. I just did what I felt I needed to do for me and my child. I had a vision for ho w I wanted things done wit h him, so I proceeded to just push ahead and make it happen—no complaints, no feeling sorry for not having more money or more help. I just did it.

As our kids got older, Glenda and I increased their expe- riences. Every month we woul d take them to a different res- taurant so they could experience different cuisines—Mexican,

Japanese, even French. The trouble was , Kany e alway s wanted a hamburger and French fries no matter where we were. He even asked for a hamburger at Bemhana! He wa s not that impressed wit h the cooking at the table, except for the tricks the chef did wit h the utensils. He just wanted his ham- burger. But at least he wa s exposed to something different. Today, he tries just about everything.

Another thing you do when you don't have much money is find "free" activities. One of my favorite "free" places to take Kany e wa s the Chicag o Academy for the Arts. They offered art lessons for children on Saturdays. Kany e wa s a gifted art- ist and I wa s thrilled that we had someplace where he could get more training for no charge at all. I wa s surprised that he and Alexi s wer e the only black kids in the class. They both took art lessons in Hyde Park, too. There were special classes on cartooning there. Since Kanye had already become inter- ested in computer graphics and talked about going into anima- tion, I thought this to be a golden opportunity to nurture his talent and see if he'd stick to it. He still draws today from time to time. I know that skill wil l be enormously helpful in his clothing designs soon to come. An d it wa s nurtured for free, simply because I wa s active keeping him active.

Our trips within the city and beyond were incredibly educational. A lot of times, the hands-on experiences end up being a much more effective wa y for kids to learn rather than through some of the more traditional approaches. It makes children curious and enthusiastic about learning. Passive learning is often boring, a waste of time, and ultimately unful- filling.

Once Kany e and I took a Greyhound bus once from Chi - cago to Oklahoma City . The bus made several stops along the

way, and one wa s in St . Louis. I wanted Kany e to see the arch, which he had only seen in a photo in his geography book. I promised him we d go there in person one day and see it up close. Our ride up and through the leaning arch in the little cars reminded me of a roller coaster. It wa s an exciting day that included a visit to the St . Louis Zoo . Kany e loved zoos and wa s fascinated by all the animals.

It wa s a good trip, except for the bus ride itself. That wa s grueling. We suffered through the entire trip, spending much of it on the very last seats—the only tw o left on the bus— which would not recline. Kanye was only six and did not seem to mind at all. But I vowe d then that we d never travel by bus again if the trip wa s more than tw o hours.

One of my favorite trips wa s our excursion to Washing- ton, D.C . I wanted Kany e to see the Whit e House and the Smithsonian Institute. We traced the steps of the March on Washington, and even put our feet in the pool. Washington,

D . C , wa s the perfect field trip. We saw so many sites that Kany e wa s learning about in school. He wa s especially fasci- nated by the space museum. We woul d have seen more, but money ran out before the fun did. But we' d seen and done a lot.

Kany e and I traveled a bit when he wa s growin g up. Al l that exposure wa s good, seeing people from different walks of life. But nothing compares to the experience of leaving the good old U-S-of- A and seeing what' s really happening in other parts of the world . I wa s blessed to be able to do that myself and bring my son along wit h me on some of those trips. As a kid, I thought those kinds of excursions wer e for the su- perrich and for those who' d joined the military. Since I be- longed to neither of those groups, I wa s content with the idea

of traveling around the United States. From Ne w York to California. Yes , that sounded about right. I never even imag- ined going places as far awa y as Moscow , Russia. I never dreamed I woul d see Bombay. I never thought it wa s possible for me to live in China—a s Kany e and I did for a year. But seeing those places, and bringing slides and photos home for my son when he couldn't be there, wa s an education that you just couldn't find in a textbook.

My first step outside the United States, except a one-day trip when I wa s twenty-one to Tijuana, Mexico , wa s **CO** India. Kany e didn't go along on that trip. He wa s only three and both his father and I thought it best that he stay home.

Besides, I wa s part of the Fulbright Scholar Program, selected along wit h ten other educators for a nine-week re- search project. We wen t to study life in India, particularly life for women and children. Ou r first stop wa s Madras. I re- member going outside after checking into our hotel, looking up at the moon, and thinking, "Wow , that's the same moon we see from ten thousand miles on the other side of the globe!" It wa s sobering and at the same time exciting.

My colleague and best friend, Brenda Cullen, had put to- gether the trip and a very full itinerary. Workin g wit h tw o other professors wh o were natives of India, the plan wa s that we' d hit all the best spots. We would learn so much and meet so many interesting people and go to so many places. I'd never imagined a trip of this magnitude, much less my first real trip abroad.

The hotel was modest—so modest that I wa s greeted in my room by a lizard wh o obviously thought I wa s invading his home. Thankfully, I wasn' t afraid of a little green lizard. But my roommate almost broke an ankle when she jumped on

the bed to get awa y from it. She wa s carrying on, showing her "Western ways. "

Th e next morning, we left our hotel extra early so that we could visit the Gandhi Museum in Ne w Delhi. For some- reason it had not been on the original itinerary, but I wa s ex- tremely glad it was added. I have alway s admired Mahatma Gandhi and knew that Dr. Martin Luther Kin g Jr . had learned a great deal from him about nonviolent protest.

Since we were educators, on a Fulbright scholarship at that, we were afforded the opportunity of meeting Indira Gandhi . As I shook her hand, I wa s humbled by her great work and reminded of the profound impact that Mahatma Gandhi had had on the world. These are stones I would tell Kany e later. An d I would expose him to as many places and cultures as I possibly could.

In addition to Madras, we visited eight other cities, in- cluding one of my favorites, Bombay. Bombay reminded me so much of Chicago , with the city sprawled right alongside the massive waters. Th e Taj Mahal, a place I'd only seen in pic - tures, wa s mesmerizing both at sunrise and sunset. We' d pur- posely gone at both times of day to witness the rising and setting of the sun. No less impressive wer e the beaches of Mahabalipurum. where I spent my thirty-first birthday. It wa s amazing to wak e up right on the beach. We slept in rooms that wer e outside, covered only wit h mosquito netting. Later that evening, there wa s a party. I had no idea there would be a huge cake for me, and even small gifts that my colleagues had gotten in town. After we' d eaten a meal fit for a queen, they sang "Happy Birthday'' and we danced. Whe n I awoke that morning from my mosquito-netted room, I wa s astonished to see the long stretches of whit e sand almost com-

pletely empty. Only tw o gentlemen were on the beach, and to my amazement, one wa s actually levitating.

We left Mahabalipurum a couple of days later and trav- eled to our next city. I was more interested in seeing the peo- ple, the wa y they lived or existed, at least. As we drove dow n the road it wa s not unusual to see places in the hills that had been carved out and made into dwellings. Th e spaces dug out of the dirt wer e about seven feet long, five feet high, and four feet deep and often housed a family of six . Along the way , we' d stop at little shops or a place to eat. At one of these shops we were approached by a young man carrying a child, wh o he held out to us, and begging for money. The child wa s ashy black and extremely emaciated. He looked like an infant but we wer e told he wa s three years old.

We gave him some money and went into the shop. By the time we came out, he wa s on the ground, hovering over his child, wh o lay dead on the street.

I shouldn't have been shocked, considering how he looked—skin and bones and ashy. I had seen other kids look like that throughout the town. It was a look of death that you just couldn't shake. I wa s deeply saddened. I had a three-year- old back at home, so it wa s a little too close for me. I still think of it today. I can still see that little lifeless body and wan t to cry. I remember thinking how blessed I wa s to not be living under those circumstances. I thanked Go d for giving me a healthy child, forgiving me the means to keep him healthy.

There are children in America wh o are starving and mal- nourished, but nothing compared in America wit h the pov- erty I saw in India. Th e worst projects and the poorest neighborhoods of Chicag o look like Pennsylvania Avenue in

D.C . compared to that. Then there wa s the contrast. No t more than a few miles away wer e temples encrusted with ru- bies and emeralds. I wa s awar e of their customs and religious beliefs. But I still could not understand how temples could be filled wit h so many precious stones whil e just miles awa y children wer e dying of hunger.

The nine weeks in India went quickly and I couldn't wai t to get back to my beautiful, healthy child. I made a detour, though, to Germany to visit my dear friend Ernie Faye and her husband, Kevin , wh o wa s stationed in Wiesbaden. I spent just a few days there, even checked out a win e fest in a nearby town . I still have the little glasses the win e wa s served in. There wa s so much free-flowing win e that if we hadn't been careful, we' d have been crawling home. I bought more souvenirs for family and friends, but most of my purchases wer e for Kanye . By this time I wa s consumed (even in the beautiful hills of Wiesbaden) by the thought of getting back home to my child. I missed him terribly.

I vowe d I would never be awa y from my child that long again. So when I got an opportunity to spend a year in China, teaching English as part of an exchange program that Nanjing University in the People's Republic of China had wit h Chi - cago State University, I wa s going to turn it down .

But the chairperson of the English department, Dr . Jesse Green, made it clear that I could take Kany e wit h me. My main concern, besides all of the expenses being paid—and re- ceiving my regular salary—wa s my son. I couldn't see leaving him for a month, let alone an entire year. And I didn't have to. It wa s an offer I couldn't refuse.

I knew very little about China except what I had read or

seen on television—which wasn't much at all. It wasn' t even on my list of places to visit. But intuitively I knew that living in Chin a for a year woul d be the opportunity of a lifetime.

I began studying the language some and preparing for the journey. Soon Kanye and I were on the plane headed to China. That seemed like the longest plane ride ever—but we finally landed. We disembarked and followed the instructions I'd been given. But the plane wa s early and the university officials wh o wer e to meet us had not arrived. Everything was so for- eign, of course—the people, the language, the signs, the cus- toms. We waited for about forty-five minutes, not knowing what to do. Then tw o professors and a student from Nanjing University showed up to greet us. Our adventure began.

Our first taste of China wa s the traffic. There wer e bicy- cles everywhere. I learned later that only those employed by the government drove private cars. It wa s understandable. Wit h the streets so jam-packed wit h bicycles, there would have been no room for that many cars.

Kanye wa s ten, and one of the only foreign children wh o had come to spend the entire year. He made a few friends quickly. One of them wa s Diego, a Mexican boy about Kanye' s age wh o had already been there for half the year. His parents both taught Spanish. About ten professors, or foreign experts as we were called, had come from across the globe to work in the foreign languages department there: I and several other professors from the United States, Trevor from England, Elli e from France, Larissa from Russia, Diego' s parents from Mexico , and a wonderful lady from Germany wh o lived in the apartment right across the hall from us in the Foreign Ex - perts Bull ding on campus. The only other kid there wa s a little French boy. He wa s quite a bit younger than Kany e and

Diego, and rather spoiled, everyone thought. He wa s happy only when he wa s right under his parents.

Withi n an hour after we arrived, Diego' s parents con- sented to let him accompany us for dinner to the Jinling Hotel, which wa s a very nice Western-style hotel we often wen t to when we wanted American food. It's not that we wanted it that day, but it wa s recommended as an excellent place to have dinner, so we decided to go there. Diego had already been in China for six months and had become pretty fluent in Chinese. He woul d be our interpreter for those first months until Kany e learned the language pretty well. I found Chinese to be very difficult, wit h its four tones and inflections that had to be pronounced just so. Kany e had fun with it. He thought it so amusing that the wor d "ma" pronounced one wa y meant "Mama." But the same wor d pronounced wit h a different inflection meant "horse." He played that to the hilt.

Every day in China brought a new and exciting experi- ence. Withi n that first week I purchased a bike for both Kany e and myself, and we soon learned to navigate through the traffic wit h the best of them. It wa s our primary means of transportation, just like everyone else's. We' d ride for miles.

Kany e rode his bike to school every day, which wa s about six or eight blocks awa y from the campus. He wa s the only foreign kid in his class. Although he wa s ten, he'd been put in first grade because of the language barrier. I thought it would be awkwar d for him but he adjusted quickly. He learned math, some science, and especially the language, and for the most part got along wel l wit h the other kids. The teachers seemed to adore him. He wa s no doubt a novelty and the first black kid they'd seen in person. I wa s pretty annoyed that when the Chinese children would see Kanye , they'd yell,

"Break-dance, break-dance!" They didn't know much English if any at all, but they knew "break-dance." It wa s very stereo- typical to me, but maybe the stereotype wa s based on the American culture as a whole , not just on Kany e being black. Still, I wa s annoyed.

It should not have surprised me to learn one day that Kany e had been putting his break-dancing skills to use. He could spin on his head and everything. Fearing he might break his neck or something, I alway s forbade him to do it. One day, as he approached me, I noticed he wa s eating a skewer of sheep meat. You could purchase it on the streets and we' d long since gotten over our hesitancy about eating the meat, which had not been refrigerated much less approved by the USDA . I had not given Kany e any money, though. I wondered how he'd bought the sheep meat. He'd been charging the kids to see him break-dance. I wa s amused and not altogether happy about it at the same time. I discouraged his little capi- talistic venture, but I never really checked up to see if he con- tinued. As long as he'd leave out the spinning-on-his-head part, I wasn' t upset enough to put the fear of Go d in him about doing it. I never saw him wit h more skewers, though. Mayb e he stopped.

Things were going pretty well . Usually the greatest of our worries wa s having to endure being stared down every time we went out. Not by just a few but by everybody. In China, staring is not rude and of course, neither Kany e nor I were regular scenery. Sometimes we didn't feel like being stared at so we didn' t venture out. On e time, though, we were in a small shop in the middle of Confucius Temple. In walked a group of Chinese, pointing and staring at Kanye . Before I knew it, Kanye had whirled around toward them and

suddenly shouted *"gun hui qu"* whic h in Chinese means "get back." Quicker than lightning, those people made their exit. Kanye, I'm sure, felt vindicated. He'd made them go awa y and stop staring, if only for a moment.

Even the loud command to "get back" paled in comparison to the incident that brought me to the school one day. Kanye had done the unthinkable. It wa s a cold winter day and in China, there was no heat in the classrooms, at least not south of a certain point. It wa s very cold in all the classrooms in grade school and on the college campus where I taught. Ev - eryone wore a coat, hat, and gloves to try to keep warm.

Kany e had on all of that, but his gloves were the regular ones we had brought from the States. All the Chinese kids wore gloves wit h no fingers in them, I suppose so they could writ e better. Upon seeing that Kanye' s gloves wer e not fin- gerless, his teacher approached Kany e to take his gloves. She probably said in Chinese, "You can't wea r those gloves in here." Well , she did try to take the gloves but didn't quite get awa y wit h them. A tug-of-war ensued. Kanye wa s pull- ing on one end of the gloves and the teacher on the other. It wa s on, and the language barrier didn't help. Not being able to get the gloves from the teacher and put them back on his freezing hands, all of a sudden Kany e kicked the teacher and retrieved his gloves. I couldn't believe my ears when I heard what had happened. I wa s furious wit h Kanye. I had raised him never to kick anyone, much less a teacher or any elder. And yet it had happened.

Immediately the university arranged for an interpreter to accompany me to the school, and we all went trekking up the hill so that Kany e could apologize. Whe n we got there, the teacher wa s waiting. She explained what had happened

to the interpreter, wh o of course translated to me. I told Kany e how disappointed I wa s and that he must never do that again. Looking toward the floor, Kany e apologized. Then I explained to the teacher that whil e I would never condone Kanye' s behavior, he would have to wear his gloves in the classroom. We could not risk frostbite in exchange for Chi - nese customs. He'd have to be allowed to wea r regular gloves with the fingers in them on the bitter-cold days or he'd miss school on those days. It wa s settled. Th e teacher understood. Kany e wor e his gloves from then on.

There wa s one last matter to address, however. "Kanye," I said. "You know you're to look at people when you're speak- ing to them. Ey e contact is important. Wh y in the worl d would you look down at the floor?'

He then explained to me that to look at the teacher would have been rude and disrespectful. I had never realized that until that day.

The year in China wa s full of learning opportunities and outright fun. Kany e and I both became friends wit h the Afri- can students there wh o studied at one of three universities in the area, and learned to love the African cuisine. We went to many places in the city as wel l as around China. The Great Wal l of China wa s one of them. Never wa s I so tired as when we climbed Yellow Mountain, though. That took a full day. I'd wanted to ride the cable car up and down , but Kany e in- sisted on the climb and I wa s too chicken to let him go wit h just my colleagues.

The mountain has lots of dangerous places, and if you're not careful, it could be the last mountain you'll climb. But we made it and got ready to take the drive back to Nanjing. It wa s a six-hour drive from Yello w Mountain to Nanjing on

very bumpy roads. My legs wer e so swollen when we arrived back on campus thai I couldn't walk and had to be carried to the apartment. In the end, it wa s worth it, bumpy roads, swollen legs, and all. Nothing wa s any more beautiful than Yellow Mountain.

At Christmastime, Glenda and Alexi s came to visit. Lots of people said they would visit during the course of our being there, but the only ones wh o made it wer e Glenda and Alexis . The Chinese didn't celebrate the birth of Christ nor exchange- gifts, of course, and Kanye and I were quite homesick. But when we picked up Glenda and Alexi s from the airport, our whol e demeanor changed. It wa s the four of us, along wit h my student Chang Don Bing, wh o traveled wit h us. She wa s also Kanye s sitter and language teacher, and wa s a lifesaver— booking tickets, getting cabs, and showing us the sites. It wa s more than an adventure and not easy. But Don Bing made it totally pleasurable and educational as well .

Once, Kanye and I literally took the slo w boat from Can- ton to Hong Kong, where we' d spend tw o weeks before going on to visit Thailand. Around the Chinese Ne w Year every- body went on a six-week holiday from the university; I'd de- cided on Hong Kon g and Thailand, since Japan wa s much too expensive. In Hong Kon g we stayed in what became known as Slum Kin g Mansion. Th e bath wa s dow n the hall and the room wa s definitely no-frills. Th e cast wa s eleven U.S . dol- lars a night, if that tells you anything. But it's what I could afford and besides, wh o stays in the room whil e in Hong Kong?

Whe n we got to Thailand we visited Bangkok first. Kanye went right along to the red-light district wit h me. I wanted to see it and I certainly wa s not going to leave him in

the hotel wit h some sitter I hardly knew. From there it wa s on to Ko i Samui. The beaches there are some of the most beautiful in the world . I wa s totally embarrassed, though, when one of the professors (also a Catholic priest) asked Kanye what wa s the favorite part of his holiday. Kany e an- swered, "The nude beaches in Thailand."

One of the many great things about being in China wa s that we could afford a lot of wha t we would not have been able to afford in the States. Kany e took tai chi lessons and got quite good at it. He also took private art lessons twic e a week. He had private tutors in the evening, mainly Ezra, an African student from Zimbabwe , so that he woul d not be behind in his studies when we returned home. We would not have been able to afford any of this had we not been in China. Heck, I even got acupuncture every other day. Each treatment wa s

$1.50 . I'd lost my thyroid medication and thought acupunc- ture would work just as well , if not better. It did.

Without a doubt, living in China wa s a once-in-a-lifetime experience that neither of us wil l ever forget. I believe Kany e has forgotten all but one or tw o word s of the language now. Languages are not like riding a bicycle: if you don't use it, you'll lose it. But I can envision us there on that campus and all about the city as though it were yesterday. I'm sure Kany e can as well .

We wer e on the go a lot from Chi-tow n to Shanghai and even took a ski trip or tw o in Wisconsin when both Kany e and Alexi s wer e older. Glenda and I drank hot chocolate by the fireplace whil e they stayed on skis all day. It wa s just one more experience that contributed, I think, to well - roundedness.

If I had to point to any one thing that made a world of

difference in Kanye , I would point to his exposure through travel. We didn't have a lot of money and wer e not able to see the world as he does now. But the exposure he did have wa s key in learning firsthand about different cultures and cus- toms. Whe n we didn't have money to do it up close and per- sonal, we did it through books, museums, and eventually the Internet.

My hope is that more kids will have such experiences. I wa s lucky being a professor because there wer e a lot of travel perks. That' s ho w we got from Chi-tow n to Shanghai.

**7**

# L No!

*There weren't many things that* I denied Kanye. But there wa s one thing that I could not compromise on—his safety. He hates for me to tell this story, but I didn't allow him to ride the L train in Chicago. There were L stops all along the South Side of Chicag o wher e we lived. I'd taken that train myself several times and caught it right at Ninety-fifth and State streets. Sometimes I'd catch it at Seventy-Ninth Street. But no matter wher e it stopped, I just wasn' t comfort-

able wit h Kanv c being on it when he was young. The neighborhoods weren' t that bad to me, at least not on the surface. But dangerous things happened at those L stations and even right on the train.

Whe n I first got to Chicago , Larry Lewis

gave me a crash course in riding the L.. He ac- tually took me to the station at Ninety-fifth

and gave me full instructions on boarding the train and getting from place to place. He knew it wasn' t rocket science and thought of me as pretty clever. But he knew also that even wit h the few travels I had under my belt at that time, I might need a little assistance to feel comfortable on the L. Lots of peo- ple rode it: unskilled laborers, highly paid professionals, and everybody in between. Almost everybody seemed nice enough, but still there could be trouble, and frequently there was .

Larry wa s a native Chicagoan wh o had grown up on the west side of the city. He knew the city backward and forward and said I'd need to know how to get around on the L, just in case I couldn't or didn't wan t to take my car some days.

I appreciated that crash course. An d it came in handy a couple of times. But recurring headlines in the Chicag o news- papers about what had happened on the L wa s all I needed to decide that Kany e riding it, at least as a rule, wa s not hap- pening.

Kany e wasn' t particularly happy about that decision, but he didn't really object. As long as he could get from place to place by bus, wit h a friend, or by some means other than the L train, he wa s cool. But still, he wa s a teenager working on being a rapper. His music and image wer e very important. It wa s hard enough trying to break into rap being kind of preppy and from the suburbs. He didn' t wan t to be perceived as being so spoiled that he couldn't ride the trains. That just wa s not cool. Wheneve r I'd begin to tell that story, Kany e would al- way s stop me.

But I wouldn' t let him ride them. People wer e getting killed over Starter jackets and gym shoes. The murder rate and gang activity in Chicag o wa s no joke. We'r e not talking an isolated incident here. No t by a long shot. An d I wasn' t

going to risk anyone taking Kanye' s Ai r Jordans or his Starter jacket or worse yet, his life. Life itself wa s not sacred on the

L. I preferred to drop him off and pick him up if need be. Otherwise, he didn't need to be there.

I hesitate to tell the story even now. I'm all too familiar with the press and the context they build around things. That was fifteen years ago and the next thing you know, we'l l see a headline that says "Kanye' s mama says L no." Wha t I wa s really saying is "Safety above all else."

I wa s really blessed, though, because Kany e wasn' t inter- ested in hanging out and getting into trouble. He wa s too consumed with his music. Ther e weren' t any keyboards on the street corners, so he preferred to be in the house making music. He wa s comfortable there and I alway s allowed him not only to make music at home, but to have any and all of his friends over, too. At times it wa s nerve-wracking wit h all the noise. But I preferred a little discomfort to him being in the streets. At least I knew where he was . Besides, I couldn't overhear some important conversation I needed to hear if he and his friends were out on the streets.

Kany e didn't have a strict curfew once he got to high school. There wasn' t really a need for one because he wasn' t allowed to just hang out. It wa s fine if he wa s going to the park to play some basketball, to the mall, or to the movies wit h friends. But he needed to have a specific destination whenever he left the house.

I didn't like the idea of kids just chilling on the corners. I knew not all of them wer e selling drugs, probably not even most. But still it's easy for a group of boys to find trouble if they're just on the streets wit h nothing constructive to do. So we went a lot of places together, bowling, to the museum,

shopping. An d when he went out wit h his friends, I had to know where they were going.

Whe n Kany e wa s growin g up a television commercial aired for years that asked, "D o you know where your children are?" My answer wa s alway s yes. I felt i t wa s important to know exactly where Kany e wa s or at least where he wa s sup- posed to be. I never understood wh y all parents didn't insist on knowing.

Wa s I being overprotective? I wouldn' t say so. I wa s just being the best parent I knew how to be. I needed to know not only Kanye' s friends, but the parents of his friends. That way , we could stay on top of things better. Besides carpooling to take the kids to school or a movie, we' d talk sometimes when they didn' t even know it. We' d do a little collective parent- ing by comparing notes, and it helped keep our kids on the straight and narrow.

Most of that happened after we moved from South Shore Drive. After the bike incident.

One day while Kany e wa s out riding his bike in the park behind our house, some pretty tough kids, all older than he was, demanded that he give it to them. Kanye wasn't about to do that. Instead of handing it over, he jumped on it and rode off. As he took off though, one kid slashed the tire wit h a knife. I was through when Kany e told me about it. That could have been him they slashed. If it wasn' t safe for him to ride his bike in a park that backed right up to our backyard, then it wa s time to move. I began looking for someplace else to live.

Cal l it black flight or whatever, I was ready to go. Wha t if the next step wa s to recruit him for some gang or something? I wasn' t having it.

It didn't take long to find the house in Blue Island. Scotty

agreed to purchase the house and he, Kanye, and I moved in. I wa s still teaching at Chicag o State and wa s able to arrange my schedule so that Id usually be home when Kany e came from school. Whe n I couldn't, Kany e came straight from school to my jo b at Chicag o State until he wa s twelve . There he'd work on his homework until it wa s time for us to go home. It wa s a good arrangement. Kany e wa s usually able to complete most if not all of his homework in my office. That wa y he'd be able to watch some TV when he got in unless he'd used up his entire major network TV watching hours for the week. I restricted those and monitored the shows he did watch as best I could. I knew how damaging watching too much TV and watching the wron g kind of shows could be.

Public television wa s open season. As long as he'd finished his homework and chores, he could watch all of that he wanted. He knew what wa s expected of him, whether he'd sneak and break the TV watching rules whil e I wa s at work or not. No w twelv e or thirteen, I'd be surprised if he did not...bu t Kany e knew what wa s expected of him and I'm certain that just having the rules in place, and being expected to follow them, made a difference.

I wasn' t a drill sergeant, but Kany e knew if I expected something of him, he'd better comply. It wasn't the least he

could do. I worked very hard to make sure he had everything he needed and most of what he wanted. But he would be re- quired to do his part. He would have to do his chores and follow all the rules. I didn't have that many but the ones I did have were important. No riding the L. No hanging out on corners. No watching too much TV .

Not talking back wa s another rule. I felt that wa s disre- spectful and I still do. This didn't mean he couldn't disagree,

raise questions, or express his feelings freely. I encouraged that. He just couldn't raise his voice at me or at any adult, that's all. An d he never did (or almost never) because it wasn' t allowed. I don't know what had gotten into him this one day though. I don't remember wha t the issue was . I just remember being startled that he flared up like he did. It caught me off guard but not so off guard that I didn't shut him down imme- diately. It didn't take hitting him. In fact my tone wa s quiet, deliberate, and very serious. Kanye was smart. He knew when I wa s serious. Just my telling him one time that I'd literally break his neck if he ever talked to me like that again stopped that behavior immediately.

I wa s indulgent, permissive, and maybe what some would consider overprotective. But I did not allow for one moment my son talking to me in a disrespectful tone.

Kany e knew also wha t I expected of him in school. He had to make good grades or else. That wa s his jo b just like mine wa s teaching. Since he wa s highly capable, there wa s just no excuse for him not to do wel l in school. I required that. From kindergarten through ninth grade he wa s an honor student. But in the tenth grade, things changed. Except for art and music, he didn't seem to care much about school.

I talked with him about it, like I talked wit h him about everything. There was no topic that was off limits, not even sex. Whe n he wa s twelve , that conversation came up. It wa s my time to car pool and Kany e wa s in the car along wit h tw o of his friends. Jocelyn Elders came on the radio and as I remember it, she wa s talking about the rise of teenage pregnancy. That' s when I told Kany e and his friends that mas- turbation wa s a far better alternative to having sex at such a young age. I told them it wa s perfectly healthy, normal, and

gratifying and that they did not have to participate in sex with another partner and risk some young lady getting preg- nant or contracting a venereal disease, not the least of whic h wa s AIDS . They said nothing. They just sat there anxious for us to get to school I'm sure so they could get out of that car.

I found out later my word s had sunk in because Kany e told me so. But my words about the grades weren' t so pene- trating. Kanye' s As wer e falling to Bs and the Bs to Cs . By the time he reached twelfth grade, I found myself telling Kanye , "Jus t graduate and don't bring home any grade lower than a

C. " But even that happened. He brought home a D in calculus and an F in French. I thought I would literally pass out. I was glad then, however, that I'd insisted on him attending public school—not that he would have had it any other way . But that allowed money for a tutor whereas private school would have taken every dime. We got a tutor soon after that report card came out and both grades came up: a C in calculus and a B in French.

No w if he could manage not to get suspended again or not to get Saturday detention again, we' d be home free. Thank- fully, I didn't regard the infractions as too, too serious. Kanye' s school had almost a zero tolerance policy, and he got sus- pended for going to sleep in Study Hall.

I stayed on Kany e though and he snapped back into what wa s acceptable. I wa s glad he did so I could resume indulging him. A few Cs remained, but I praised him for his accomplish- ments much more than I chastised him for his Cs . I was proud that he wa s winning every art competition that came along. He wa s also making million-dollar beats and I told him so. It wasn' t just talk. They wer e really dope beats.

I tried to give Kany e the worl d as long as I thought he had earned it. Some parents do just the opposite. They are so strict that their children never get to find out wh o they are. They are so demanding that their children feel the weight of the worl d on their shoulders. I've never considered that ef- fective parenting. Effective parenting requires being close to your children, whic h in turn requires mutual respect and bal- ance.

I bought Kanye the things he wanted and he did what I asked of him, for the most part anyway. Admittedly, I was demanding, but now and then, I wa s not. Scotty on the other hand wa s a stern man wh o like me had high expectations of Kanye, at least in some ways . But unlike me, Scotty never let Kany e get awa y wit h anything. Sometimes it angered me. Kany e had to wash the dishes, mop the kitchen floor, make his bed, clean his room, clean the bathtub, take out the trash, and cut the lawn. And he had better do a good jo b at all of it.

Even though I had my "no's," I thought Scotty wa s being .I little too strict. But he wa s used to dealing wit h boys in his

auto mechanics class and he'd had three sons of his own, all grown by then. I wanted Kany e to have the strong male input on a day-to-day basis, so sometimes I just swallowe d it since Scotty wa s never physically or verbally abusive. Still, some- times when Kanye wasn't around and couldn't hear me. I'd tell Scotty I wasn' t raising Kany e to do manual labor. Never- theless, I'm glad I didn't stop Scotty from enforcing the rules.

Children need the support and discipline of tw o loving parents, today more than ever. But we do not live in Utopia and it's not realistic to think that all children wil l have that. But we must do the best we can to provide experiences and

set parameters that are most conducive to our children becom- ing happy, healthy, productive adults. Every child deserves that.

Some parents choose not to be as attentive as I was . Some might say it wa s a bit overbearing. But I disagree. You've got to set the no's, the boundaries early in a child's life. It may not be riding on the L that you object to. Your no's may be differ- ent depending on your own perspective. But parents have to "show up" as my friend Keith Cunningham alway s says. Showing up and being there is a prerequisite for accomplish- ing anything, especially raising a productive human being.

I'm glad I wa s both liberal and strict all at once. I'm glad Kanye wa s a good kid wh o understood and respected the no's. He wa s most times obedient and alway s respectful. That kept someone from having to get me out of jail for killing him. As I think about it, there were quite a few no's. But I am certain there wer e far more yeses. Parenting alway s has its challenges, and at times it is a struggle. But Kanye made raising him easy.

8

# College Dropout

Kanye, can I talk to you for a minute?

Think you could probably do somethin' for the kids for graduation to sing?

— "Intro," *College Dropout*

*He bought his first keyboard when* he wa s fourteen. H e had saved nearly five hundred dollars toward it. Wit h the thousand dollars I gave him at Christmas, he had enough to purchase it. Mayb e he knew then that it wa s music, not nec- essarily a college degree, that he wa s mast interested in. I certainly didn't know that the keyboard would be his ticket out of college before graduation. I hadn't thought of a ke y board, or music period, as his path to success.

Abov e all else, I certainly thought he'd get at least one degree.

Dropping out of college like he did wa s not my choice. I alway s emphasized education from the time Kanye was tw o years old. I thought edu- cation wa s the best wa y to succeed. I knew Bill Gates and others hadn't finished college if they wen t at all. But they were the exceptions. Besides,

I had that black, middle-class ethic that said you must go to school, do very well , and get at least one degree and probably more. I never heard anyone say, "Oh, I sure am mad I got this degree!"—even if they weren' t using it.

Perhaps I wouldn't have been so eager to contribute to him buying that keyboard if I had known that it would ulti- mately lead to Kany e dropping out of college. But that would have also been the biggest mistake of my life. I had no idea at the time that he wa s so incredibly gifted, that he'd be able to cultivate and use that gift to acquire not only fame and for- tune, but also true fulfillment. I knew he wa s good at art and music, but I never imagined him turning that into the career he has today. That wa s my limited thinking. If I had been thinking as big as he was , it would have been a no-brainer.

Four years in college or the opportunity to change the course of a whol e genre of music and influence millions for the better in the process? Wh o knew that Kanye Wes t would become Kanye West ? Apparently he did. After years of my pounding the education mantra into his head, Kanye proved me wrong. I still believe in education. School is great and I still encourage it. The more degrees the merrier. But only if you're going to use them. "Use school, don't let school use you," is one of Kanye' s favorite sayings.

Kanye has shown me the meaning of the phrase, "There's more than one way to skin a cat."

He purchased that keyboard and soon he was able to ac- quire turntables and a mixer. Later, he added a drum machine with money he made working odd jobs. He had an entire stu- dio in his room (at least the basics), along wit h a bed, a televi- sion, and a pile of clothes on the floor.

Kanye dreamed of doing music from the time he wa s very young. I first noticed it when he wa s in third grade. That and drawing wer e his passions. But somewhere along the way , music took over. Kany e spent hours and hours mixing, rap- ping, and writing . It wa s nonstop. He became so involved that his socializing revolved around that studio in his room. Whe n his grandparents Chick and Buddy would visit, Kanye would come out of his room only to eat and go to the bath- room. He wa s amazingly focused. If anyone, including my dad, wanted to spend time with Kanye, they'd have to go to his room and get in a few word s whil e Kany e made music. Daddy did that a number of times. He wa s fond of being wit h his grandchildren, mainly to learn from them and teach them what they'd probably not learn from books. But if he was to teach Kanye anything besides what he taught him when we' d visit Oklahoma Cit y at Christmas and for family reunions in the summers, he'd have to do so tight in that bedroom studio where Kanye wa s preparing to be ready to drop out of college—if that's what it took to do his music.

There seemed to be a sound track playing perpetually in our home. It wasn't always pleasant for me. In fact, a lot of the time it wa s nerve-wracking. That thumping bass line seemed to shake the very foundation of our house. *Boom-boom-boom* day and night. Al l I have to do is close my eyes and think about it for a moment, and I can still hear that bass ringing in my ears.

By the time Kanye graduated from high school and had been out for a couple of years, I had had as much of the per- petual hip-hop right next to my bedroom as I could stand. I had listened to it for nearly ten years and even offered my sometimes solicited opinion on the tracks he made. It wa s

time for either his music or for him and his music to be some- where else. Not that I wa s going to stop supporting his dream. We' d just have to find another place for him to follow it.

I had considered turning my garage into a studio. I had even looked into the cast of soundproofing it. But it wasn't feasible. So the studio stayed in his room. There wer e all sorts of people coming in and out of the house. An d since my room wa s before Kanye's, his music friends had to pass my room to get to his. Mas t of the kids looked pretty wholesome— hip-hop wholesome, that is. Mainly it wa s the thundering bass that wa s no longer welcome—not all day and all night, anyway.

I finally had to say to Kanye , "You're moving.''

He wa s twenty years old and had announced that he wanted to drop out of college. He'd use flattery to convince me that his decision wa s a sound one. "After all," he said, 'I'v e had the professor in the house my entire life."

I'm now wondering if he came up wit h that line himself or if Rhymefest, Mali , John-John, or one of his other very clever friends had suggested he use that to wi n me over. Any- way, it worked—whoeve r came up wit h it. Yes, he did have the professor in the house all his life. No w I supposed it wa s time for me to see wha t he had learned that would bring him success without a college degree. I had preached marching to your own drummer and often didn't conform in my own life if I thought there was a better way. But I'd come from a family like so many other African-American families, where getting your education wa s right next to believing in God . I'd even put a little money aside so he could go awa y to college if he- wanted to—Florida A & M , Morehouse, I woul d have made

it work. But here he wa s dropping out of school to do beats. I wa s not happy. My plan for him included his getting at least one degree. But that wa s my plan, not his. I believed in him and I believed he would be successful wit h his music. But I never imagined my child not completing college.

Nevertheless, I wa s convinced that it wouldn' t be the worst thing in the world—maybe next to the worst, but not the worst. I didn't really try hard to convince him to stay or say to him that he should have something to fall back on. From the time I wa s making my own decisions about wha t I'd major in and wha t profession I'd enter, I never thought of falling back. I wa s so convinced that the only option wa s to achieve whatever it wa s that I set out to do; it would be only natural if Kany e felt the same way . Never woul d I argue against hav- ing plan B. But once you're truly sure of wha t you want in life, if you're passionate about it as wel l as talented and persistent enough to go after it, perhaps it's better to spend that falling- back energy concentrating solely on getting wha t you want.

All the same, I wa s right next to devastated when Kany e first put out his feelers about dropping out of school. If he had said directly, "Mom, I'm dropping out,'' that would not have been the best approach and he knew it. It wa s much better to discuss it wit h me and bring me around to accepting the idea, although he probably knew for certain that he wa s going to do it when he first brought it up to me. Ultimately, I'm sure- he knew I would support him whatever path he chose as long as it wa s positive. It just took a little time for me to really grab hold of the concept that college is not for everybody. Not for the Bill Gateses, the August Wilsons, or the Kanye

Wests .

At least he'd tried college for a couple of years. He had gone to the American Academy of Art in downtow n Chicag o on a partial scholarship the first semester after he finished high school. It wa s very competitive to get scholarships and that he got even the partial scholarship for one semester made me very proud. The total cost per month without books, room and board, art supplies, or any of the other essentials wa s

$1,100 . I'd worked my wa y up from the $17,00 0 annual sal- ary when I started at Chicag o State when he wa s four, to somewhere in the $70,00 0 range. But the $55 0 I needed to pay each month for tuition along wit h the other expenses had me reaching back into that little nest egg I'd put away. Soon it would be depleted if he lived in downtow n Chicago, stayed beyond the scholarship semester, and paid for everything else that wa s needed.

I didn't mind. If being an artist wa s wha t he wanted to do, I would gladly have doubled that $55 0 a month I had paid whil e he wa s on scholarship and sprung for the whol e

$1 ,10 0 a month the next semester. He stayed at home and the train fare from Tinley Park, where we lived at the time, wa s much less than the $1,40 0 a month they wanted for the tiny little space in the dorms. He went for one semester, then told me, "I don't wan t to be an artist." I knew then that although he went to his classes daily, had a portfolio that raised eye - brows, and really still loved the medium, he wa s much more interested in music.

"Fine," I said to myself, and then to him. "You can go to Chicag o State University."

He'd still be in college, the tuition wa s already much cheaper, and I got a fifty percent discount as an employee. Chicag o State it was. Kany e enrolled the very next semester.

He finished that semester and didn't do too badly. He'd be- come an English major partly because he liked word s (or at least he liked writing raps wit h them), and partly because he didn't have to stand in the long lines to get registered. I was chair of the English department. It wa s nothing for me to se- lect the required courses, fill out his registration form, and sign it. No big deal. As long as he showed up for the classes and did his work, I didn't really mind saving him the drudg- ery of a system that wa s a little less than efficient.

Th e second semester he wa s at Chicag o State, his sopho- more year, a couple of friends and colleagues reluctantly re- ported to me that Kanye wa s alway s either in the music rooms or the student union—not in the classroom. Walter , my good friend Dr. Joyc e Joyce' s husband, worked in student affairs and wa s the first to pull my coat. Then Kanye' s English teacher confessed that she wished he'd not been in her class. He wa s very smart and a good writer. But he didn't alway s do his work, nor always come to class. Thinking it might help, I ran to the office of the English advisor, Al Brown , and asked him to talk wit h Kanye. Al wa s young and with it. Al l the students liked him. Th e girls loved him because he wa s so tall and good-looking. He'd actually been my student at Chicag o State before graduating and going for a master's. I taught both Al and his twin sister, Alfreda.

He'd be perfect to speak to Kanye . Al would make him see the light. He tried all right, but Kany e wasn't really going for it. An d Al , seeing Kanye' s passion and his drive to do something other than get a degree in English, was wise enough to not really press the issue.

Desperate by this time to find way s to encourage Kany e to go to class and take advantage of this opportunity to earn at

least one degree, I talked to several people. On e of them was Robin Benny, the director of our composition program. I think

she had a conversation or tw o wit h Kanye and saw that his alternative just might be a good one. I wa s surprised when she spoke to me on Kanye' s behalf. Here she was , an educator just like me, encouraging me to realize that Kany e didn't nec- essarily have to complete college—at least not right then—to do something big in the world. She saw what I did not see at the time—a young man wh o had other ideas and expressed them very well , an artist wit h a passion wh o felt another path would serve him better.

I appreciated Robin' s pun t of view , and technically, I even agreed with her. But it's one thing to agree with some- one philosophically and quite another to feel good about the inevitable—your one and only child dropping out of school.

Well , it happened that semester, his third semester of college life. Kany e dropped out and never looked back. We made a deal. He'd have one year to make it happen. He would continue to live at home, but because he wasn' t in college and pursuing wha t in my mind wa s the wisest plan, I would charge him tw o hundred dollars a month for rent. It wasn' t that I needed the money. An d it wasn' t punishment for not going to school. I simply wanted to instill in Kany e the re- sponsibilities that come wit h manhood. To me, if you'd fin- ished high school and chosen not to go to college, then you'd chosen a path that brought with it financial responsibility. Kany e would need to earn enough money to pay that rent on time every month. That wa s part of showing me he could make it work .

He got a jo b working as a busboy in a Bob Evans restau-

rant. But when he reported, for work, he decided immediately that bussing tables wa s not something that woul d work for him. He quit on his first day before he even started. It would have to be another kind of jo b for him. He'd never worked at McDonald's, Burger King , or any other food places. A restau- rant wa s not going to work.

Kany e did have the gift of gab. So , he landed several jobs in telemarketing and did quite wel l at all of them. His first such jo b wasn' t long-lived. On e reason wa s that he wa s not allowed to doodle whil e he talked on the phone. But the main reason is that the supervisor insisted on pronouncing his name wrong. Kany e told her several times it wa s pronounced Kon - yay, wit h a long *a.* But she seemed to screw it up on purpose and would say, "Kanyee, Kanyah, whatever yo name is!" This angered him to no end. So one day, without even giving it a second thought, he decided to quit. I couldn't believe it.

His dad had bought him a new car. It wa s small and inex- pensive, but new and sporty-looking just the same. He had to maintain it and put gas in it. My contribution wa s paying the insurance, and that wa s considerable for a male under the age of twenty five wh o didn't have the best driving record in the world .

"Kanye," I said, halfway between calm and irate. "You'll have to go back in there and get that jo b back until you can find another." He didn't like that but he didn't really argue. And he even went back in and got his jo b back. Mayb e he hadn't told them he wa s quitting, now that I think about it. But after another paycheck or two , he landed another telemar- keting position. Thi s one he liked much better. He could draw while he was on the phone and nobody cared as long as he

wa s productive. He made a lot of sales, enough to even get a few bonus checks. He wa s so good that one day he called me and I swea r I didn't even know it wa s Kanye . I just thought it wa s a telemarketer. I knew I had no interest in buying what - ever wa s being sold. Actually, I hated those telemarketing calls. It wa s nothing to hang up on them. But since Kany e had become one of those telemarketers, I had started listening pa- tiently and kindly declining whatever the offer was . Just as I wa s about to interrupt politely and tell the young man thanks but no thanks, Kany e told me it wa s him.

Kany e wa s making enough money to pay his rent and buy gas, fast food, and an outfit or two . But the problem wa s that Leonard, Warren, and a whol e host of other kids (as I called them and still do) wer e trotting by my door nightly on their way to Kanye' s room. If my door wa s open, they'd stick their heads in just as polite as could be and say wit h a smile, "Hello, Ms . West. " They were all charmers, especially that Leonard. And I loved all the ones I knew. But that didn't make it any better. Th e bass wa s still booming and as I mentioned before, I had had enough—more than enough. Tha t music and traffic wer e too much. They woul d all have to go .

'It's either you or your music," I told him. "You'll need to move out or find a studio awa y from the house. You can stay. But all of this music and these people have got to go. "

"Mom, are you kicking me out?" He couldn't believe it.

But he knew I meant business. I rarely had to raise my voice or get the least bit ugly for Kany e to know when I was dead serious. And he also understood my point, totally. Well , wouldn' t you know it, Kany e had been working wit h this young man called Gravit y and Gravit y landed a record deal.

He bought beats from Kany e to the tune of eight thousand dollars. I knew then that Kany e wa s going to make it. It's not that I had doubted it, but now I wouldn' t just need to go on faith. Surely eight thousand dollars wasn' t all the money in the world, or even enough to support him very long. It wa s the principle. I saw him making it work. It reminded me of when he'd had all his cousins in the mall in Oklahoma Cit y one summer selling his first mixed tape. Wit h their help, he'd made it work. An d when he got that deal for eight thousand, I knew that millions weren't far behind.

Shortly after that, we found him an apartment in the Bev- erly section of Chicago. It wa s a spacious two-bedroom apart- ment over a dress shop. It had a huge living room and dining room and there wa s even a small room that he used for a stu- dio. It wa s a perfect space for him.

The rent wa s a thousand dollars a month. The landlord wa s a little reluctant at first because Kany e wa s such a young man. I told the man that my son wa s very responsible and if there wa s any problem, I woul d be there to take care of it. I always pulled for Kanye. I woul d help him get anything he- wanted. I certainly wa s going to pull for him if it meant get ting that music out of my house.

He got the place. But the guy didn't like the traffic the music wa s attracting. It wa s in a commercial area and there wa s one other tenant, wh o wa s hardly there. Sh e never really complained. The landlord just wanted Kany e out. Tha t wa s his right, I suppose. It wa s his building. Besides, the lease- would have- ended sooner or later. And it probably worked out to be a blessing in disguise. It wa s perfect timing for Kanye to leave the city he had grow n to love so much.

And I got evicted

packed all my shit up in a U-Haul.

—Kany e West ,

"Last Call, " *College Dropout*

Kanye, proud college dropout, decided he wa s going off to the Big Apple , where it wa s all happening. Before deciding on Ne w York, though, he'd considered another hip-hop hot spot—Atlanta. Jermaine Dupri wa s there and Kanye thought perhaps he could find success there, too. He felt he had out- grown Chicago. There was just nothing big enough popping off for him there. It wa s his home, though. And I believe he would have stayed if he could have made it big. So we went to Atlanta, even found an apartment and put a down payment on it. But Ne w York wa s calling.

I had a friend, Richard Johnson, wh o lived in Ne w Jersey. We' d heard lots of people lived there and worked in Ne w York. It wa s settled. Ne w Jersey would be a better (and more affordable) place for Kanye to settle whil e he wa s trying to take off in the music business. Richard found him this beauti- ful one bedroom apartment in Newark, right across from Penn Station. We rented it, sight unseen. It wa s $85 0 a month, with a living room and a step-up great room wit h a glass ceil- ing. You could actually look up and see the sky. It wa s won - derful. And Kany e wa s inspired. He said he knew he could make good music there and I wa s pleased just as long as Kanye was happy. The only thing that wa s not happening wa s the carpet. A couple of cats had occupied the place before Kanye got there and had not alway s made it to the litter pan. We snatched that up and had Home Depot come and lay some new carpet tight away.

Kanye loved that place. He called up his friends and said, "Man, you should see this place. It's like something off of TV**."**

Kanye wa s exactly where he wanted to be. He wa s on his way to fulfilling his dream.

9

# Rap or Bust!

*Madison Square Garden. The biggest stage* you can imag- ine, in the heart of Ne w York City . Kany e could taste being on that stage. He could hear the crowd s cheering, feel the adrenaline rush through his veins. He wanted to perform this night. He wanted to be on stage wit h the other rappers. He wanted to take this first step toward stardom.

But the answer wa s no.

Kany e had produced songs for the headliners of the evening—hit songs, multi-platinum songs. And all he wanted to do wa s be a part of it.

But the answer wa s no.

Instead, he wa s told he could have tw o tickets and watc h the concert— a concert that some of his beats and songs wer e a hit in—from the crowd, just like everybody else. Two comp tickets, not even a backstage pass. He wa s very disappointed. Wha t hurt the most, I'm sure, wa s that he knew in his heart

that he could be a star—if only given the chance. But it didn't seem like anyone wanted to give him a chance.

Sure, they wanted him to make music, produce songs, and make beats. But they didn't want to let him rap. Fortunately, it wasn' t up to "them.'' No one could stop him. Kany e had been planning this trek to stardom for far too long.

Whe n he wa s just twelv e or thirteen I caught him primp- ing in the mirror one day. He turned and said, "Mom, look at me! I could be a teenage sex symbol!"

He was serious. It used to tickle me, him looking at him- self in the mirror. It reminded me of my own brother, Porty, wh o used to look in the mirror all the time, talking about ho w fine he was. It wa s all in good fun. An d very effective. Porty couldn't keep the girls away. And Kany e did become that sex symbol.

You have to be able to see yourself; you have to be able to see it when no one else can see it. You have to visualize where you want to be and claim it. Kany e claimed it a long time ago. But it didn't just come because he said so. Those countless hours in his room, the years of preparation and grooming for that moment, the work he put in, and the perseverance through all of the rejection, prepared him for when his vision finally came to fruition.

Sure enough, Kany e wa s going to be a star and a sex sym- bol. But that road leading there wa s a little more than rocky. I here were a lot of closed doors and a lot of no's and a few dashed hopes before Kany e actually realized his dream.

The summer shortly after his nineteenth birthday, Kany e thought he had his big break. He wa s still in college and had no clue that he wa s even considering dropping out at this point to pursue music. Whe n he told me he had a meeting in

Ne w York with Sony I thought, "That's nice." But I still never put tw o and tw o together. I didn' t realize that his "big break" would mean he wouldn' t be finishing school.

Sony flew him out to Ne w York and paid for all of the expenses. We didn't know that this wa s a customary practice- when a record company had some interest in an artist. Kany e thought this meant he had it in the bag—especially when he saw the limo pick him up at the airport. He just knew he wa s in the big leagues. I could just see the driver standing outside of LaGuardia Airport wit h a sign that read: Kany e West . I just knew this would be it for him and I think Kany e felt the same way .

He met wit h several Sony executives, including Donnie Ienner, the president, and Michael Mauldin, wh o wa s head of Sony urban music at the time. During the meeting Kany e wa s asked, "Wha t is your niche?" They wanted to know what Kany e planned to bring to the game that would be different. They wanted to know what woul d set him apart from the other rappers? Unfortunately, Kany e had no answer. He had never even thought about any of that. He just knew that he wa s good and wa s going to be the next teenage sex symbol. And that wa s good enough.

Well , it wasn't. An d to add insult to injury, Kany e boldly predicted that he would be bigger than Jermaine Dupri. Ho w wa s Kany e supposed to know that Michael Mauldin, the Sony executive sitting across from him, wa s Jermaine Dupri's father?! Needless to say, Kany e left there with no deal—and they didn't even supply him with a limo back to the airport.

Whe n he got back home, Kany e did what he alway s did—wen t to work making more music. He wa s producing music and writing raps like the world wa s coming to an end.

But no matter how great his music was , no one wanted to give him a deal. He would soon learn that it would take more than talent, good looks, and desire to land a deal. He would have to add "resilience" to the mix.

If you're going to crumble when you hear the word "no," you can forget making it in the entertainment business—or any other business, for that matter. You have to develop tough skin. If they kick you down and bruise that ego, you have to brush yourself off and get right back up. And that's just what Kany e did.

He is like his grandfather (and his mother, too) in that re- gard. We wil l find a wa y or make one. That' s just ho w i t is. That's the difference, perhaps, in being a winner or a loser in life. Winners find a way . Losers don't. Losers wim p out. Los- ers have excuses.

There is no room in rap for losers. An d Kany e certainly wa s not a loser. He's a winner and a worker. In fact, in his own wa y he's a hustler if there ever wa s one. He had to hustle just to get in and stay in the game. But his kind of hustling wa s different. He didn't sell or use drugs. He- didn't join a gang, although he had friends in them. He didn't curse out the cops. But he did hustle. An d he still does.

It wa s that hustle mentality and never-quit spirit that finally landed him his big break. It wa s the thing that Damon Dash, head of Roc-A-Fella Records, saw in Kany e and liked. It wa s wha t finally landed him that deal. Here wa s this young man being told no by everybody—Sony, Def Jam, Arista, Capital. An d he- kept coming. Somebody had to reward that kind of persistence.

We thought that reward would come much earlier than it did. Capital Records said they would be signing Kanye .

Jo e 3H wa s unrelenting trying to get Kany e a deal and he called us and said that Kany e finally got one (or so we thought) with Capital . But before the ink could even get on the con- tract, there wa s another disappointment and another "no."

Kany e had been looking forward to finally signing wit h a label that believed in his talent not only as a producer, but also as a rapper. It went right down to the wire with Capital and I'm not sure what really happened but they pulled out of it at the last minute. Once again, Kany e had no choice but to bounce right back.

He took the rejection and kept working, and kept writ - ing. Capital wouldn' t sign him, but they did buy some of his beats for their artists. He played "Jesus Walks " for one of the labels. They wouldn' t sign him, either, but they wanted to buy that beat for another artist. This time Kany e got to say no.

More disappointment would come before he finally made it, however. There wa s a Ro c the Mi c tour coming through Chicago. It wa s in his hometown, his backyard, and Kany e wanted so badly to perform in that show. In fact, he fully ex- pected to go out onstage and do his thing, sing his verse on "W e Ar e the Champions." After all, it wa s his verse. But once again, he wa s passed over. Tha t wa s perhaps the biggest slap in his face.

He came to my house that night and I don't think I have ever seen him that disappointed. I don't remember seeing Kany e cry after the age of thirteen, but that night he looked like he wanted to. I wa s hurt for him. He wa s trying his best to take his music career to the next level but it seemed like there wa s alway s a block.

He thought this would be his chance to show what he could do, before his crowd—thousands of do or die, Chicag o rap fans—on an open-air stage. Thi s would be his chance to prove that Kany e Wes t wa s not only a dope beat maker, but that he wa s a dope rapper, too.

He wa s backstage ready to walk out on the part of the song that he had rapped on for the C D , but the music shifted to something else right when his part wa s about to come on. It wa s no coincidence. It wa s just a blunt wa y of saying, "Not this time, dude."

Kany e wa s pretty dow n about it. But feeling dow n and letting people get you dow n are tw o different things. Kany e wa s on a mission and nothing or no one could stop him. Had he been another type of person, one who' d march to the beat of someone else's drum or one who' d listen to the naysayers, he might have left the rap game.

It wa s tough, as a mother, watching him experience rejec- tion. I know he shielded me from most of it. I never knew about many of those doors closing on Kany e until much after the fact. As close as we were, he always wanted to bring home good news. I'm also sure that Kany e didn't want to tell me because it would give me more ammunition to get him to finish school.

But the rejection that I did get to see him go through actu- ally made me support him even more. Seeing him work so hard and keep at it made me want it for him just as much. I saw his vision and I wanted it all for him—even if it meant him drop- ping out. It wa s important—for the industry and for me. Fi - nally, there wa s a rapper whose words I actually could understand. Kanyc' s rhymes were meaningful and potentially

life altering. He had to be heard. I would have done anything to support him. I wa s ready to wav e a "Sign Kanye West , or Else!"flag, if I needed to.

Thank God , those rejections didn't stop Kanye or even slow him down . The y seemed to make him even more deter- mined. He never missed a beat (pun intended). He kept on making music in our home until he moved into his own apart- ment. He kept on making music there until it became apparent to him that he would have to leave Chicago to take his music to the next level. Kanye had met a lot of good people in Chicago—he even had the chance to be mentored by No I.D . and to work wit h Common. He wa s always at some venue in Chicag o trying to be seen and heard, trying to break into the hip-hop game. But he outgrew Chicago. Like he said, "It just wasn' t poppin' off like it should have been."

So he moved from Chicago. He chased his dream and caught it.

Kanye didn't get to do the Roc the Mi c tour in Chicago. And he didn't get to perform at Madison Square Garden in Ne w York Cit y that night. He ended up turning dow n those tw o comp tickets that woul d have put him in the stands with the crowd. Instead, he went to the studio and worked on his music.

"Fuck that show!" he said. "Next year, I'll have my own show at Madison Square Garden!"

You have to speak things into creation. That very next year, Kanye Wes t opened for Usher at Madison Square Gar - den. He performed a full forty-five minute set—on the same stage from whic h he wa s shunned. That next year, Kanye Wes t had a record deal. Roc-A-Fella signed him, giving Kany e a $1 **50,00 0** advance. He needed every penny. He used

a hundred thousand to get out of the management deal he had and then had to pay the attorney, Londell McMillan , wh o got him out of it (he's the same attorney wh o got Prince out of his deal wit h Warner). Wit h what wa s left over, I think he bought himself a watc h from Jakob the Jewele r in Manhattan and bought a Mercedes SUV . He also bought me a Rolex for Christmas.

But it wasn' t all about the money for Kanye . He wanted his chance to shine. And he got it. He wa s an artist. On e year after all of that rejection, he wa s a rapper wit h a hit C D , *College Dropout*.

One year after being rejected, dissed and blocked, Kanye Wes t wa s a major voice in hip-hop.

1 o

# Through the Wire:



**The Accident**



I must gotta angel 'cause look how death missed his ass Unbreakable, would you thought they called me Mr. Glass

KANYE WEST, "Through the Wire," *College Dropout*

*It was five in the morning* when the phone rang, October 23 , 2002 . I picked it up and immediately recognized the voice. It wa s Sumeke, Kanye' s girlfriend at the time. She was talking through tears, saying she hated to wak e me so early in the morning, but Kanye had been in an accident. I sat straight up in the bed, fully awak e at that moment. Before she could continue, I began firing questions. "Wher e wa s the accident? Wh o wa s driving? Wa s he hurt?" I asked her all in one sen- tence and in one breath.

"He's in Los Angeles still," she said, no calmer than when

she'd started. "I think he wa s driving. He says he's all right. But the car is totaled and they can't get him out of it."

I wa s stunned. Still, I managed to remain composed. "Okay, okay," I said. "Calm down . It's going to be all

right."

I asked her wh o had notified her and when she told me Kanye had dialed her from his cell phone and told her to call me, I wa s relieved. I knew that he woul d be all right, partly because I couldn't stand the thought of it being any other wa y and partly because he'd at least made the call him- self.

"Sumeke, stay right by the phone," I said. "I'm going to try to reach him and I'll call you right back." Sh e agreed and seemed just a little calmer. I hung up the phone and as fast as I could, I dialed his cell number.

"Hello," he answered on the first ring in a low, muffled voice I could hardly understand.

"Kanye, is that you, baby?"

"Uh'huh," he mumbled. "I wa s in an accident, Mom . I'm hurt."

My heart sank at the sound of his weakened, helpless voice.

"Kanye, where exactly are you? Do you know?"

"I'm not sure," he said. "M a .. . Ma , I'm sorry. I'm sorry, I hurt myself."

*Sorry? Hurt himself?*

I had no idea what he was talking about and all I wanted to do wa s tell him that it woul d be all right. Before I got the cchance, however, another voice came on the phone. It must have been the police or the paramedics.

"Ma'am, I'm sorry, but we'll call you when we get more

information," the man said abruptly. "I'm trying to cut your son out of his car!"

"But where is he?" I asked. "Where' s my son? Wher e ex- actly is he right now?"

Hurriedly he told me where they were and that they didn't know yet wha t hospital they'd be taking Kany e to. He said he had to hang up. Kany e wa s still pinned in the car.

*What?!*

It wa s crazy. I wa s crazy inside. I had to get to my child immediately. He'd been in an accident and it wa s horrible and they wer e cutting him out of a car. I wa s also very calm. I have always been steady during a crisis. I somehow find strength and am able to gather my wit s about me and handle the situation—no matter wha t it is.

I called Sumeke back and let her know I'd just spoken with Kanye and she'd better get packed immediately so we could get to him. I made reservations for the tw o of us to leave on the next flight out of Chicag o to Los Angeles. My then eighty-seven-year-old parents were visiting me from Okla- homa Cit y and wer e asleep in the next room. Mother had be- come very ill and had just come home from the hospital the day before. She, too, wa s very weak. Wha t woul d I do about her? Withou t even thinking about it I called Helen, a very dear friend. I told her wha t had happened and she wa s at my house in wha t seemed like minutes. Sh e told me not to worry about Mother and Daddy. Sh e would be sure they wer e okay.

I called Glenda , wh o lived in Los Angeles. I told her that Kanye had been in a serious accident on Wilshir e Boulevard and Santa Monica. Immediately she knew whic h hospital they'd probably take him to. She said she'd find out as much as

she could and keep me posted. I finished throwing a fewc w things in my suitcase, wok e up Mother and Daddy and ex-

plained the situation to them, and headed out wit h Helen to pick up Sumeke and get to the airport.

By the time I got to the airport in Chicago , Glenda called with the news of what hospital Kany e had been taken to She wa s on her wa y there.

I arrived in Lo s Angeles and for some crazy reason rented a car rather than taking a cab straight to the hospital. I guess I wa s just used to doing that and had not thought about the delay there might be in getting a car. It didn't take very long, though. I cut in front of the second person in line, explaining that my son had been injured and I needed to get to the hospi- tal quickly. No one objected. I guess they could see in my face ho w serious I was .

Once I got the car, Sumeke and I jumped in and were on our way . I called Glenda and she guided me straight to Cedars-Sinai. I wa s on automatic. I had to get there and find out if Kany e wa s okay. In my spirit I knew he would be fine. After all, he had called right after the accident. If he had that much strength right after it happened, he had enough to pull through. No w was not the time for me to let go of my unshak- able faith in God . I just kept praying. I'd been praying con- stantly since I got the call.

Oh God, let my baby be all right.

I probably made a string of promises, too, about what I would or woul d not do if he'd just let Kany e be all right.

I got to the hospital and Glenda was there to greet me. She gave me a big hug but didn't say much. She just told me where Kany e wa s and pointed the way. She seemed upset, but I wa s so focused on seeing Kany e that I didn't process it.

He was still in the emergency room. It had been more than eight hours since the accident and he had just gotten a treat- ment room minutes before I arrived. I guess he wa s just a regu- lar black guy. He wasn' t "Kany e West " at this point. He had just signed his deal wit h Roc-A-Fclla . He had done "H to the Izzo" wit h J a y Z , which was his first hit single. But his wa s not a household name—not that it should have mattered, be cause everyone should receive star treatment in the hospital.

I pulled back the curtain and there he was. Glenda had not prepared me for what I was seeing. I don't think anyone could have prepared me. Kanye wa s unrecognizable. Glenda had tried to wip e off mast of the blood from his face and chest before I got there, but his head wa s three times its normal size. It wa s as big as the pillow they had it on. If I had not known I wa s looking at my ow n child, I would not have rec- ognized him. His face wa s so swollen, so deformed. In fact, I thought perhaps it *wasn't* really Kanye I was looking at.

"Hi, Mom, " he managed to say when he saw me come in. That wa s the only thing that confirmed for me that he was indeed my Kanye .

I couldn't believe he could even speak. But I refused to react. I knew he hadn't seen himself and I didn't wan t to alarm him. So I kept a poker face.

"Hey, baby," I said. "Oh, you're going to be just fine." Right then, Glenda went out to the waiting room to get

Sumeke. Only tw o visitors at a time could be in the little emergency room cubicle. I eased out for a minute wit h Glenda and told her to warn Sumeke that Kany e hardly looked like himself, so that she would not react. Then I came back in to see if I could do anything for my child other than just be there and try to share his pain somehow. I wished that I could have

taken it for him. I thought about his career and about all of his plans and I wished it had been me in that accident instead. We' d not yet seen the doctor and I had no idea of whether Kanye' s face would ever be the same as it had been.

I guess Glenda did a good job preparing Sumeke because when she walked in, she was pretty calm and collected.

"Hi, baby," she said. An d then she hugged him. Whe n she looked at his face and his swollen body, she told him, "It's not so bad."

It wa s horrible. But like me, she did not want to worry or upset him. Both of us could have gotten an Academy Awar d for our performance that day. In fact, we deserved a star on the sidewalk of Hollywood Boulevard. We knew, like ever y one wh o know s Kanye , that he wa s very conscientious about his looks. He has alway s been that way. Whe n he got braces, I remember his cousin Stephan asking him why .

"Because I'm going to be on TV, " Kany e said. None of us thought he really needed braces. But Kanye wanted his teeth to be perfect.

Knowin g him as I did, I didn't want him worried about ho w he looked, so I wa s going to keep up the front and keep the issue of his face out of the equation. Kanye would not be able to look in my eyes and see a hint of concern. That, I hoped, woul d be enough to comfort him.

His face wa s broken in three places. He had on his safety belt, thank God . But the airbag didn't deploy and his face hit the steering wheel wit h such force that it wa s crushed. Kanye, high off the excitement of his recording deal, had rented a Lexus, whic h is funny now that I think about it. His godsister's name is Alexi s and so is his fiance's. Referring to neither of them, of course, in "All Falls Down. " he wrote:

She's so precious with the peer pressure

Couldn't afford a car so she named her daughter Alexus (a Lexus)

Kany e wa s driving that Lexus at four in the morning and he fell asleep at the wheel . That' s how it happened. Whe n we were filling out the insurance claim, Kany e admitted to falling asleep. But one of the insurance brokers told him, "Don't say you fell asleep; say you wer e cut off or a car wa s coming and you swerved to get out of the way . If you say you fell asleep, you wil l be taking the next five years of your career paying off a negligence claim."

For several months we wer e riding wit h this lie. But Kany e called me one day and said, "You know what , Mom? I'm not lying anymore. I don't care if I have to pay millions and I'm down to my last dime, I'm telling the truth. I'll just make more money. Whateve r it is, I'm just going to pay it."

I thought about trying to talk him out of it, but I knew that wasn' t going to happen. I told him that I would handle it and he shouldn't worry about it. I told him to let me deal wit h the lawyers. But he was determined to make it right.

Kany e didn't just hurt himself in the accident. Whe n he fell asleep, he veered into another lane and hit another car. The man in the other car ended up wit h tw o broken legs and wa s off work , unable to take care of his family.

"Tha t man wa s lying in the hospital because of me," he said. "I have to tell the truth!"

Now , I consider myself honest, but I felt like a good lie could come in handy every now and then—especially against the system. Kany e wa s more highly evolved than I wa s in that way. He had been that wa y since he wa s little. He has alway s had a keen sense of right and righteousness.

There was this little Mexican boy in the neighborhood whos e name wa s Tony. An d people used to call him Tony Taco. So I said something about Tony Taco one day and Kany e got so mad at me.

"Ma , how could you say that?!" he said. "How woul d you like it if somebody called you Donda Chit'lin?"

He couldn't have been more than eleven or twelve , but that's the way he was. An d that's the wa y he is to this day.

He didn't get that from me. If somebody broke into my house and stole a TV , I wa s the type of person wh o woul d say they stole two . I woul d justify it by saying to myself that they woul d depreciate that television and wouldn' t pay me what it wa s worth. But it's still wrong. Kany e just wa s never that way . We had a flood one time and there wa s a receiver on the floor that got immersed in water. I told Kany e that we wer e putting that on the claim.

"Oh, no!" he said. "W e can't put that on there. It didn't even work!"

Now, I'm not saying he was an angel. It's just that as a rule, lying wa s not his thing. Most times, even if he knew he wa s likely to get in trouble, ultimately he would tell the truth. So I wasn' t surprised when his conscience got the best of him. Just one honest friend saying "Kanye, you should just tell the truth and be done wit h it" carried far more weight than any lawyer, insurance broker, or me justifying a lie that wa s weighing him down .

There wa s much to get through before he'd speak on the actual cause of the accident again. The pain, the swelling, the exams, the surgery, and ultimately the recovery wer e all- consuming. After the initial ordeal of being literally dropped on the ground when he first arrived at the hospital and was

taken from the ambulance (he said that hurt worse than the accident), and waiting hours in emergency without treat- ment, there would be consultations and decisions that had to be made. Wha t could be done about that face headed for Hollywood—o r at least for a career in entertainment? Woul d the doctors be able to put him back together again? Thi s was no fairy tale and he wa s not Humpty Dumpty.

Whe n he whirled himself out of the bed all of a sudden and went to look in the mirror for the first time, he said, "I look like the Klumps!"

I wa s relieved to hear him joke about it. By that time, we' d seen the doctor, a world-class plastic surgeon, wh o as- sured us that through reconstructive plastic surgery, Kanye could be made to look almost exactly as he did before the ac-

cident. Wha t a relief. I'll admit the doctor wa s also a pleasant distraction; he wa s very fine!

"M y God, " I thought. "Is he married?"

That wa s one good-looking man. So much so that it was the first thing I noticed. Of course, my first concern wa s his credentials, his qualifications to not only do a good jo b but the best job . But that did not stop me from thinking about how I could pull an Ivana Trump and go for someone wh o was much more than a decade my junior. Oh , if it had only been possible. Neither Billy Dee nor Denzel Washington had any- thing on this brother. Anyway...w e were glad to hear the news and I came back to reality.

The day of the surgery, the whol e L.A.-area family had gathered at the hospital. There must have been at least a dozen of us in the room. Sumeke and I wer e first joined by my sister Shirlie. She wa s visiting from Detroit and immediately sum- moned my nephew Little John to bring her to the hospital.

Big John, Deviett Jr. , Jean, Yolanda, Lynn, Ricky, Corey, Sheila, Terrell, and Devielta all chipped in for the Thai food that would be somewhat of a comfort until the surgery wa s over. I didn't eat a bite. I couldn't. And after a while , several of us wen t to a waiting room closer to where the surgery wa s being performed and just waited. It's a wonder we weren't thrown out when we refused to leave the surgical area before we joined hands and prayed. My sister Shirlie led us in asking for God' s mercy.

The doctor said the surgery would take only about tw o and a half hours, hearing that fourth hour, I began to get pretty anxious. My cousin Jean wa s my rock. She held my hand and kept saying, 'It's gonna be okay.'' I believed her but still I wa s nervous. Finally, the doctor came down the hall and we all jumped up when we saw him. Somehow, word s would not come out of my mouth and it wa s Jean wh o asked the doctor ho w it had gone. He told us everything had gone okay, but because of some X-rays they needed but didn't have, it had taken a little longer than expected and further surgery might be needed. Then he quickly assured us that Kanye would be fine—he'd just be in a lot of pain for a whil e and his face would still be really swollen. We thanked him and God . I wanted some of that Thai food. But it wa s all gone.

The days went by fast and in another week or so Kanye wa s released from the hospital. We packed his things and headed straight for the W Hotel, where he wa s staying. Since he had to have medicine around the clock, I called my jo b and told them I woul d not be back until later. When ? I didn't know.

Th e staff at the W wa s great. We moved into a two - bedroom suite and brought in everything we needed—a small

refrigerator and a microwave. Kany e could eat almost nothing wit h his mouth wire d shut. I spent a lot of time shopping in Ralph's, trying to find just the right juice, soup, broth, straws, smoothies—anything I thought he might be able to get through those wires. And we had to make sure he took that medicine like clockwork—every four hours night and day. I still have the medicine bottles and the little extra that he did not consume.

It wasn' t long before Kany e wa s back at work—right in the W Hotel. That' s where "Through the Wire " wa s writ - ten. He'd started it even before he left the hospital, thinking of the lyrics and rapping them through jaw s wired shut. Kany e never writes his lyrics on paper. He just creates and remembers them, all of them, like a true genius. Sometimes I'd hear him on the phone talking as best he could about this dope song he wa s making and the beat he had in mind for it. Before I left, he convinced Roc-A-Fella to let him go back to the studio, supposedly, I believe, to make more beats for their "proven rappers." But in reality, he wa s making beats for him- self.

Since third grade he'd written raps. By the time he got to seventh, he realized he'd need beats to rap over. That' s ho w he came to be a producer. No w he wa s one. Painful as it must have been, he wa s determined to finish and record "Through the Wire. "

Th e rest is history.

I I

# Jesus Walks

That means guns, sex, lies, video tapes

But if I talk about God, my record won't get played, huh?

—KANYE WEST, "Jesus Walks," *College Dropout*

*I sat in the parking lot* of Best Buy, popped in one of the ten copies of the College Dropout CD I had just purchased, and listened to all of it. I had heard snippets of the C D , even a few songs. But I had not heard the finished project. I had counted the days until February 10 , 2004—th e day the CD wa s to come out. I wanted to buy my son's very first CD—jus t like everybody else.



Whe n I'd gotten to the checkout, at Best Buy, the cashier said, "Wow , you bought ten!'"

"Yeah, this is my son's," I told him.

"No, it's not!" he said. "If Kanye Wes t wa s your son, you wouldn' t have to buy it."

I didn't have to buy it. I *wanted* to buy it. In fact, I came back a couple of days later and bought more. I wanted his first CD to hit the charts. I wanted the Sound Scan numbers to go

through the roof. I thought my meager purchase of just ten would make a difference. No wa y would I not be a part of the count.

I sat in that parking lot and listened to the whol e C D . I couldn't pull off. I wanted to be still and take it all in. It had all of the skits on it. An d De e Ra y wa s hilarious doing them. I sat there, listening—halfway holding back tears, halfway jamming. I had the music turned up real loud. I wanted to open my windo w and scream to everybody walking by, "Hey, this is my kid!"

I liked every song on the CD but one, "Home." That one- just did not appeal to me. But all the rest of them wer e slam- ming. I wa s more than proud. I wa s beside myself. My five- foot-three-and-a-half-inch body stood ten feet tall that day.

It's hard to say whic h song I liked best, but one of my very favorites wa s "Jesus Walks. " It had been almost a year in the making and I loved it long before it wa s actually finished. Tw o months before the C D dropped, the whol e family wa s at home in Oklahoma Cit y for Christmas. Th e cousins wer e all going to the mall as they always did just to kick it. But before they could leave, Kany e delayed everybody waiting on him in the car and asked my sister Shirlie to listen to "Jesus Walks. " Shirlie has directed many church choirs and has been the director of music in lots of churches. She spent a lot of her life finding or developing talent, like Alfre Woodar d and the Ga p Band. She knew how to make people sound good whether they were acting, singing, or playing in a band, and Kany e knew it. He ran back into the house wit h the cut and popped it into the little CD player in my parents' house.

He started playing it. Shirlie wa s listening intently. No-

body dared say a word whil e she wa s listening. Whe n i t wa s over, all Kany e wanted to know was , "Wha t do you think?"

She wa s visibly moved. She wasn' t surprised that Kany e would writ e such an incredible song. But she wa s so proud that he had.

"Kanye, this is good," she said. "Reeeeal good!"

Whe n Shirlie says something is real good, especially wit h such emphasis, it's like anybody else saying it's outstanding. She didn't have any suggestions that I can remember. Kany e thanked her for her feedback, and he and his cousins took off for the mall.

Whe n I first heard the finished version of "Jesus Walks " on the C D , I wa s speechless. I wa s moved as much by the concept as I wa s by the lyrics and beat. Here wa s my child, right in the middle of a hip-hop album, talking about Jesus. I'm not a deeply religious person, but I am highly spiritual. I know people say that all the time. It's almost become a fad to be that way . But loving Jesus is no fad for me. It's a wa y of life. Being grateful is a wa y of life, too. If there is one wor d that describes how I felt at the moment I heard "Jesus Walks " in that car that day, it's "grateful."

I wa s grateful because Kany e wa s alive. His life had been spared in that terrible accident and so had everything else that enabled him, along wit h his friend Rhymefest, to writ e the song. I wa s also grateful because the song wa s so good in every way . You don't kno w if you wan t to dance or shout or do both when you listen to it. I wa s grateful because of the message many would hear just listening to the C D . I thought of the far-reaching impact it would surely have and became grateful all over again.

God show me the way because the Devil trying to break me down

Here Kany e wa s not only open to it, but asking Go d to show him the way . Any doubts I had about hip-hop and Kanye' s departure from college would now be gone forever. Thi s dropout had dropped in to tell the whole world that Jesus walks . I knew that in thirty-one years of teaching, I had not impacted young people the wa y this single record would. It would also touch the old and everyone in between. To me, it wa s hip-hop and gospel, pop and blues all at the same time.

I didn't think about it in the car that day, but "Jesus Walks " would also bring many to Christ. Although there are many paths to right living, not just Christianity, following the teaching of Jesus is one of them. If people could be touched by "Jesus Walks " to the pun t of committing to a life of service, a life of helping others, what could be better?

Once when Kany e wa s on the road opening for Usher, he missed one of the concerts. I wa s not on the road wit h our team at the time and came all but undone when I heard the news. The crew had gone ahead, but Kany e had stayed back to visit wit h his dad and perform at a youth revival service his dad was involved in. He wa s to fly out the next morning, but the weather wa s too bad. Kanye hopped in a taxi without enough cash, but convinced the cab driver to take him nearly tw o hundred miles so that he could try to make the concert.

By the time he got there, Usher wa s onstage. Kany e wa s tw o hours late. He had missed his set and there were plenty of disappointed fans. But Usher, being the wonderful guy that he is, allowed Kany e to perform a couple of numbers anywa y and I heard the crowd went wild . I wa s unhappy that Kany e

wa s not on time for the concert. It wa s his ethical and con- tractual obligation. But I learned later that three hundred young people gav e their lives to Christ the night Kany e did "Jesus Walks " at the youth revival. He wa s at the right place at the right time.

From the time Kany e was a small child, he believed in Jesus. He wa s raised that way . His father wa s much more reli- gious than I and insisted that Kany e go to church every Sun- day when he'd visit him in the summers. His grandparents on both sides wer e church going people and, more important, people wh o followed the teachings of Christ. I wa s also pretty adamant about Kany e attending Sunday school and church because I knew what a difference that had made in my life.

We' d go every Sunday to Chris t Universal Temple in Chicago. I liked the church because the minister, Johnnie Coleman, preached prosperity. I had belonged to Hillside Church, which was very similar, before moving from Atlanta, and would take Kany e there. Barbara King , the minister there, wa s also a very spiritual and progressive thinker. I wanted Kany e to be steeped in that kind of exposure to God . I never bought into the fire and brimstone type of religion or one that wa s repressive. Certainly, I woul d not expose Kany e to that. But I felt compelled to see to it that a spiritual compo- nent wa s a key part of Kany e s upbringing.

I don't ever remember a Sunday that I did not go to church as a kid, except for the times I had the chicken pox and the measles. We didn't just go to church, we actively partici- pated. It wa s fun, so I didn't mind it. My parents didn't just send us to church, they alway s took us. My parents wer e a part of our church—whether it wa s as Sunday school teacher,

mission president, choir president, Baptist Training Union director, or trustee board member. I wa s not nearly so active in church once I was out on my own. But like my parents, I took Kany e to church. I didn't just send him. I wanted to teach through example and to do more than just send him off to Sunday school like he wa s sent off to kindergarten.

To me, a strong spiritual foundation is critical, and it wa s up to me to be certain that Kany e got that consistently. Wit h a spiritual foundation, he woul d be able to do anything—even write songs that woul d wi n him Grammy Awards . It would be up to him how he wanted to feed that knowledge and de- velop his spiritual side.

Kanye, being so steeped in hip-hop, once said that hip- hop wa s his religion. Perhaps it still is. But he believes in a powe r that is greater than hip-hop. Kany e has alway s prayed. I'd hear him on the phone with his dad sometimes and they'd be praying. I'm sure that in many of Kanye' s prayers he asked Go d to help him get on. He wanted a deal as badly as anyone could want anything. It wa s necessary to take the next step in his chosen career. He prayed to ask God' s favor and he prayed to thank Go d forgiving it to him. I know he still does.

Some may think it wa s the accident alone that inspired "Jesus Walks. " I'm sure the accident, his upbringing, and every experience Kany e ever had factored into it. He wa s no stranger to spirituality. And I have thought since he wa s three years old that he had a special connection to God . We all do, but for some of us, it is perhaps more apparent.

He probably doesn't even remember this, but one day Kany e wa s playing in the dining room of our first home in Chicago, a third-floor apartment on the South Side. All of a sudden, he looked toward the door and the staircase leading

down . He pointed and said, "Look, there goes Jesus!" My heart raced. I saw energy. To this day, I believe it wa s Christ giving us just a little extra protection that day. Neither Kany e nor I have spoken of it since. But it wa s very real to me and just one of the reasons I think Kany e is connected in a special wa y or for a special purpose. God has chosen him to not only reach but also touch millions.

Sitting in the parking lot that day, I didn't think about the Grammy potential of "Jesus Walks. " So many other things were on my mind. I definitely didn't think about him perform- ing the song at the Grammys. I definitely didn't expect to be a part of that performance. Late one evening, though, I got a call from Don C., Kanye' s road manager. He told me that Kany e wanted me to play the part of myself in the production he'd be doing at the Grammys. There is a line in the song that says, "M y mama used to say only Jesus can save us."

No w that I think about it, I wa s alway s saying something like that. I'd look at the devastation in the world and remark to Kanye , or even under my breath that Go d woul d be our only salvation. I never knew he wa s really listening. I didn't ever preach to Kany e that he must believe in Go d like I preached to him that he must wear condoms. I just lived my life thanking Go d for ho w he had provided. Kany e sa w my unshakable faith and I guess he knew that it worked. To tell someone they must believe in Go d is not nearly as effective as believing in Go d yourself and having them see what results from your faith.

I told Don that I'd be at the rehearsal and do whatever it wa s that Kanye had in mind. Whe n I got there, the choir wa s in the rehearsal room. Th e "Jesus Walks " treatment had been settled and it was hot. I wa s to be one of the choir members,

doing all of the strategically choreographed moves. We were dressed in vintage church clothing—hats and all. We rocked that place. At the "mama" line, the camera zoomed in on me and I played my part like a true pro. I wa s no stranger to sing- ing, dancing, acting, or the stage. But to be a part of this was more than I could have dreamed.

Here wa s my son getting a Grammy and he'd asked that I be a part of it. Like many things since Kany e broke out as a star, this wa s surreal. Whe n someone asked if I could get the part dow n in just one rehearsal, Kany e replied, "What?! You think my mama can't do what those church folks are doing? My mama can bust some Usher moves!"

I had no idea all that would come of that song when I first heard it. But as I sat there in that Best Buy parking lot hearing it for the first time, I knew it wa s very special—not just that song, but the entire C D . As I wa s listening to it, so much more wa s going through my mind. Thi s wa s everything Kany e had worked for finally coming together. All of those years making beats and songs in his room. That thumping bass line that shook the house, all of those kids coming and going at all hours. It had paid off.

I knew it would . Whe n I woul d pass by his room some- times, I would stop and tell him, "Kanye, that's a million dol- lars right there."

Listening to that CD took me back to those days; i t took me back to the first time I knew Kany e wa s going to be big. It took me back to "Green Eggs and Ham," the first song I re- member of Kanye's. He wa s about twelve when he wrote it. We wer e living in Blue Island, Illinois, on Longwood Drive. He had a little group then and they'd practice faithfully at the

house. Kany e woul d not be satisfied until we could get som e place to record that song.

Most of the studios charged by the hour and wer e pretty pricey. He had no connections and no reason for anyone to give him a break. Th e $125 an hour I wa s quoted wa s just not in the budget, not for "Green Eggs " at least. But Kanye would find a way . He wa s alway s finding a wa y or making one. He learned about some studio in the basement of somebody's house where you could record for $2 5 an hour. Twent y five dollars an hour? It wa s a done deal. We wer e soon on our wa y to that studio.

The neighborhood wa s nice enough and the house wa s inviting. But when we walked into the basement so that Kany e could record, I sa w wh y the price wa s so affordable. The arrangement wa s pretty makeshift, basic to say the least. But wha t I remember most wa s that the mic Kany e wa s to rap into wa s hanging from a wir e clothes hanger, just sort of dan- gling there.

"Wha t kind of studio is this?' I remember thinking to myself. But Kany e didn't mind. He wa s in producer's heaven. Th e recording session began and "Green Eggs and Ham" be came a reality. It wa s the best twenty-five dollars ever spent, a precursor, no doubt, to "Jesus Walks " and so many other songs.

"Green Egg s and Ham" wa s clever and had a catchy beat. Most of all, it wa s Kanye' s work and rarely did he produce anything that I didn't at least like, if not love. You know ho w mothers are. We put drawings on the refrigerator and leave them until they've turned yellow . They're more valuable to us than a Picasso.

But Kanye' s work wa s akin to Picasso for me. I had been watching him do incredible things since he wa s old enough to talk. He wa s destined for greatness. Holding that CD wit h "Jesus Walks " on it, and everything else that makes it a clas- sic, wa s a culmination of all of those years. My expectations and his had come to fruition.

1 2

# The Roses

Coz with my family we know where home is So instead of sending flowers we the roses...

—KANYE WEST, "Roses," Late Registration

*None of the success Kanye has* experienced would have been possible if not for the support of family. That support and love, as I mentioned in the first chapter, is just part of the fabric of wh o we are. We wra p our arms around one another during good times to celebrate and also in a crisis.

In 2004 , we all got the call saying we should come to Oklahoma. Mother wa s deathly ill and doctors said that it could go either way. I'm sure they d felt like saying "Ge t all affairs in order" and everything else doctors say to you when they don't think your loved one wil l make it. But they dared not say that to the William s family, not about Lucille Wil- liams.

She had been there before—close to leaving us. She' d had surgery nearly twenty years before after being diagnosed wit h cancer of the bladder. It looked bleak—bleak to the doctors, but not to us. We couldn't let it. Fo r as long as Mother

wanted to keep fighting, wanted to be here wit h us, loving and earing for us as only a mother like her could, we would light right along wit h her.

She had been in and out of the hospital since the surgery in 1986 , when she had undergone a twelve-hour procedure that, to this day, I don't know how she endured. We wer e there. We gathered together for prayer, as is customary when a family member is experiencing medical challenges. Shirlie, the oldest, would be the one to lead it. We bowe d our heads and prayed wit h unshakable faith that mother would pull through. We did not believe in giving up, giving in to what the doctors said wa s probable. An d sure enough, twelv e hours later we wer e told she had made it. It would be touch and go, but she'd survived.

We all cheered like we were at a football game or some- thing. We wer e screaming like we did when my brother, Port Jr. , had stolen the ball and made the winning shot at Central High School's championship game. Teddy, his best friend, wa s much taller and wa s actually the star of the team. But it wa s Porty wh o had won the game.

But this wa s no game. Thi s wa s mother's life. An d we shouted, and cheered, and gave thanks. We knew that only by God' s grace had she not succumbed to the cancer.

This time—twenty years later—it would be no different. Th e Roses had come from everywhere: Illinois, Florida, Cali - fornia, Alabama, even Canada. Of course, those wh o lived right there in Oklahoma wer e there, too. Some from Okla- homa City , some from Tulsa. Ho w ironic that Mother wa s lighting for her life in the same hospital where she'd given birth to me.

I don't remember wh o showed up first. It wa s probably my dad, wh o knew all too wel l what those hallways looked like in St . Anthony's Hospital. But by the time that surgery wa s over, all of us had arrived, gathering in the waiting room on the eighth floor. It wa s filled to capacity, full of family, full of Roses wh o had come to make sure Chick woul d be okay.

Kanye wa s next to her bed when Mother opened her eyes.

"Hey, Chick," he said to her. "How're you feeling?"

Mother wa s weak but she mumbled something to him in a very low voice. We wer e all so glad that she could even say a word . Deviett Jr. , my favorite cousin, wa s there from Los Angeles, too. He had flown in like most of us. But unlike us, it wa s his first plane trip. He'd been afraid to fly. Deviett is gone now. He passed in 2005 , just seven months before my sister Klay e joined him in death, or in life. Fo r me, it is only the physical body that dies, not the soul, not the spirit. An d our Roses on the other side are still alive.

On that day we gathered to join forces in prayer, to sup- port the matriarch of the Williams family. We didn't actually think of ourselves as Roses at the time. It wa s later that Kanye would describe the whol e experience in a song and explain to the world that "instead of sending flowers/We the roses."

We didn' t send flowers to his grandmother, wh o lay weak and was , some thought, near her last breath. Rather we made it by railway, bus, airplane, car, or any wa y we could. We ourselves came. As Kanye put it, we were the roses.

I don't know how the word spread that Chick wa s in the hospital and the doctors had actually told us not to be too hopeful. But I do know that in that hospital waiting room

there wa s such a special connection among us that it inspired Kanye. He started right there in the waiting room. That' s where the Auntie Team wa s formed:

Aunt Shirlie, Aunt Beverly, Aunt Klaye, and Aunt Jean So many Aunties we could have an Auntie team.

The word s are fitting. And all the players wer e champions.

Kanye' s aunt Shirlie has alway s been very special to me and to our whol e family. She was the first child born to my mother and father, and I'm sure there had never been tw o prouder parents. From the time I wa s little, I can remember seeing tons of pictures of her. They were everywhere. My fa- ther doted on her just as he did me when I came along. But she wa s the first.

More than a few times I've heard the story of how Daddy would make sure he'd sell more tickets by far than all the other parents so that Shirlie could wi n the title of Princess. Back then, there woul d be these fund-raisers at the school and the child bringing in the most money woul d win . Shirlie alway s won. Sh e and my sister Klaye , wh o came along three years after Shirlie, wer e the first black children to appear on televi- sion in Oklahoma City. Klay e sang and Shirlie played the piano. Ove r the years, they sang and played all over the coun- try. Shirlie still does.

Since Shirlie is fifteen years older than I, I really don't re- member her living at home. Sh e wa s brilliant and graduated tw o years early from high school. I do remember visiting her frequently, though. Shirlie had moved to Tulsa and wa s very politically involved. A militant Republican is ho w I'd de- scribe her. Back then, many blacks wer e Republican, espe-

cially the progressive ones. I attribute some of Kanye' s fire to his aunt Shirlie. He knows of her fire firsthand. She came to Chicag o and lived wit h us briefly when Kanye wa s very young. Once, when she (and I, too, for that matter) had had enough of Kany e being late for the bus every single morning, she sent him out of the house half dressed, wit h his clothes, shoes, and socks in a brown paper bag, including his pants. She closed the door and told him he had better make that bus. Kany e went running across the street wit h his attire for the day in hand. He had to actually dress on the bus.

Fortunately, there wer e only a couple of kids on that bus because it wa s one of the first pickup stops. But Kany e got the message. I don't think he has ever forgotten that day. He was never late for the bus again.

Kany e wa s alway s fond of his aunt Klaye , too. Sh e lived in Oklahoma Cit y and went by to see to Mother and Daddy' s needs even single day. He finally got around to calling her aunt Klay e after I'd said she wa s his aunt and he should refer to her accordingly. Before that, he'd just called her Klaye . She never minded. To her, Kany e could do no wrong. Sh e wa s the one member of the family wh o didn't mind at all if he "peed on the white carpet." In the William s family there are lots of sayings like that. Whe n one can pee on the white carpet and nobody says a word , that means that person can do no wrong.

Klay e wa s around Kany e a lot during those early years. She had come to stay wit h us in Atlanta when Ra y and I were still together. She wa s leaving a bad marriage, fleeing for her very life, she told me. I wa s so glad to have her stay wit h us, no matter the reason.

I adored my sister Klaye . She wa s petite and beautiful, a

jazz singer for much of her life. Whe n I wa s young, she sang in all the local clubs in Oklahoma City . They called her "Lit- tle Mis s Klaye , the steam heat girl." Of course, that wa s wa y before Kanye' s time. But certainly he has that legacy. She was the first in our family to really make a living with her music. That she left that legacy is hugely important. But more impor- tant tom e is wha t she told me one night when I wa s pregnant and feeling trepidation about whether I would be a good mother.

"Donda," she said. "I am here for you. Don' t worry about anything when it comes to that baby. And if at any time you lose Ray' s support, I wil l help you raise him."

Whe n I think about her words, I still get emotional. Partly because they were so heartfelt when she said them, and partly because she is no longer here on this earth wit h me. Not physically, anyway. But I still feel her presence. I wonder if Kanye does, too. It is his aunt Klay e wh o told him there would be people wh o woul d try to bring him down .

"Don't let them!" she told him. I don't think he ever will .

Whe n my brother, Porty, wa s just twelv e years old, he met the girl wh o would eventually be Kanye' s aunt Beverly. We loved her from the very beginning. I certainly did. I thought she wa s much prettier, smarter, and nicer than Chris - tine, another one of my brother's girlfriends wh o he wa s seri- ous about. Beverly and Porty had met through my sister Shirlie at True Vin e Baptist Church in Spencer, Oklahoma. Tha t wa s a small, rural, mostly black town right outside Oklahoma City. Shirlie had taken both my brother and me to church with her. It might have been choir rehearsal. Shirlie played the piano there and Beverly sang in the junior choir.

According to Beverly, she spotted Porty when we first walked in and said to herself immediately, "I'm going to marry that hoy! He's going to he my husband." I don't know how she could have been so certain that it would happen. But I'm sure that Kanye , for one, is glad. Every Christmas when we go home, Kany e stays wit h his aunt Beverly and uncle Port. She even makes an extra dish of her awesome banana pudding— a whol e banana pudding just for him. You know the lyric where he says, "And that makes me wan t to get my advance out and move to Oklahoma and just live at my aunt's house'? It's his aunt Beverly he's speaking of. She's a godsend to us and to the entire family.

She wa s the one wh o promised my mother's sister, Aunt Ruth, wh o suffered from Alzheimer' s disease, that she would never have to leave her home. Beverly went there every single day to see that she wa s wel l cared for. In those final days, Renee, Beverly's niece, took care of Aunt Ruth wit h tender- ness like you've never seen, as did BeBe, Beverly's sister, Loretta, another niece, and her brother, Butch. Aunt Ruth died peacefully in 200 5 in her bed at home. Beverly kept her promise.

Asked to retire early from Millwoo d Academy in Okla- homa City , where she'd put in thirty-plus years first as teacher, then counselor, and finally assistant principal, she did it. We needed her to come aboard as program director and executive secretary of the Kany e Wes t Foundation, and if she hesitated, we never knew. She wa s never one to disappoint—only one to bring joy.

Whe n I wa s just twelv e years old and she wa s a freshman at Central State College in Edmond, Oklahoma, she invited me to spend homecoming weekend with her. I could scarcely

believe the treat in store for me. A typical college student would have wanted to party and go to all of the places I cer- tainly couldn't go . But not Beverly. Sh e had invited me, her boyfriend's pesky little sister, on that very special occasion. We had so much fun that weekend. She showed me oft to ev- eryone and I felt as loved as I'm sure Kany e does each time he gets that whole banana pudding she makes just for him. She may be his aunt by marriage, but she is also his aunt from the heart and one of his very favorite Rases.

I believe that Kanye' s aunt Jean, wh o is actually my first cousin and godsister, is the lifeblood of our family. She is per- haps the mast fragrant of all of the Roses. My daddy' s sister's only child, she gre w up wit h us (mostly with my tw o older sisters, since I didn't come along until much later). If you could see ho w she loves family, ho w she showers each one of us with a love that we feel to the core, you would know wh y I call her our lifeblood. Of course Jean wa s there on that day "Roses" wa s inspired. If anyone wa s going to be there, she would be—all the wa y from California. My earliest recollec- tions of Jean are some of my fondest memories. My cousin Deviett Jr. and I wer e about five years old, hardly old enough to tie our shoes. He always stuck his foot out for me to tie his shoe. I loved doing it. And I did it willingly until my aunt Ruby, Deviett s mother, insisted that I stop and let him tic his own.

Jean wa s crazy about both of us. She never minded having us around, although I'm sure that together we wer e a handful. We all lived in Oklahoma City , very close to my grandmother Williams , wh o we would visit almost every day. Jean would be there, too. It seems that daily she woul d send Deviett and me to the store around the corner, just about a block away, to

get her a dill pickle and an RC Cola. She' d give us enough money to get her a whol e pickle and a full bottle of pop, and one more pickle and pop that Deviett and I would share. I loved our daily excursions and I loved my cousin/sister Jean. I could feel even then, the special kind of love she had for fam- ily. There's something definitely special about the wa y she loves each one of us and how she shows that love. There's no way you can feel anything but uplifted when you're around her. She's going to see to that. Kany e knows she would do anything in the worl d for him. We all do. She's the most lov- ing Rose of us all.

On that day when my mother, according to the doctors, wasn' t supposed to make it but did, the hospital room got fuller as the day went on—not just wit h the Auntie Team but wit h all of us. At one point, we wer e pretty loud. That wa s right before the nurse come in and asked Kanye if he would sign some T-shirts.

Wor d had gotten around that the grandson of Mrs. Wil - liams, the lady in room 805 , wa s Kany e Wes t and he wa s in the building. None of us would have been surprised if it had been Daddy who' d spread the word. There's not a prouder grandfather on the planet than Portwoo d Williams . He'd just as soon ask someone in the cafeteria, the gift shop, or even the restroom, "D o you know Kany e West? " Then say to them, "That's my grandson! You know his mother is a professor at Chicag o University.'' He wa s alway s leaving out the "State" in Chicag o State University. Not for any reason other than he just did. From the basement to the eighth floor and above, people knew that the Roses were in the house, and of course Kany e Wes t wa s one of them.

There were many others. Port Jr . wa s there, my mother's

only son and the big brother I've alway s adored. You could never tell me as a kid that I didn't have the smartest, most talented, and definitely finest big brother of anyone. I even sold his senior picture for twenty-five cents a pop. It wasn' t hard to do. Al l the girls loved him. Of course, my nieces, Yvette and Pamela, from Tulsa wer e there. They were alway s going to Oklahoma Cit y to check on their grandparents. And they still do. Their older brother, Kevin , had made the trip from Tulsa wit h them, along wit h his daughter, Sharon—the oldest of my mother's great-grandchildren. Teandra, wh o now at ten stands taller than me and Antonio, the youngest Rose, wa s there, too.

Jalil , the actor/musician/gymnast/model and all-around everything grandkid, was there, as was his younger sister, Je- hireh, remarkably poised for a girl of ten and equally as beau- tiful. My nephew Don wa s there from Texas, as wa s my nephew Tony. Tracie, Tony s wif e and Jalil and Jehireh's mother, also made the trip. No doubt she would make it. She always docs. And we love her for it. Mike came, of course. He lives in the city, and wit h Sandy he'd alway s make his rounds. My nephews Stephan and Damien were definitely there. Wil d horses couldn't have kept them in Canada. They never needed a special or serious occasion to show up to see Mother or Daddy. They' d come all the wa y from Windso r just to change a lightbulb if they were needed. Kim , or Cousin Ki m ("Cousin Ki m took off for work," Kanye shouted her out in "Roses"), came from Florida in a heartbeat. Eloise, Rosie B, and Joe Louis rounded out the clan. There on that eighth floor we stood, all twenty-six of us. Th e Roses wer e there in full bloom. And mother blossomed.

Whe n I think about it, I fully believe it wa s the gathering

of the Roses that pulled Mother through. I believe it wa s our prayers and our presence that made the difference. We were her flowers while she lived. And even those wh o wer e not there physically gave fragrant and healing flowers through their prayers and through their spiritual presence.

From California to Ne w York, Texa s to Illinois, Mary- land to Delaware, Alabama to Arizona, Michigan to Ne w Jersey, the flowers came. An d we formed one big bouquet.

There is nothing more important or more powerful. In that oneness, we can nurture and heal. Family members, bio- logical or not, provide a foundation and a lifeline that is nec- essary for us to gro w and thrive. It is important, critically important, to remain rooted. For what happens to a tree that is severed from its roots? Wha t happens to a rose that is no longer watered, no longer nourished? It dries up like a raisin in the sun. Then shrivels and dies.

It wa s not only Chick wh o blossomed and came alive the day the Roses gathered, it wa s each of us.

1 3

# Arrogance or Confidence?

*If a hundred people who didn't* know him personally were asked to describe Kanye, ninety of them might say that he is arrogant. In fact, that's the very first term that may come to their minds. Like the word association game: Kany e West? Arrogant! No t confident, not brave, not sure or certain. Not talented, witty , clever, or just willin g to call it like he sees it. Just plain old arrogant. Some would say so wit h great adora- tion, others wit h outright disdain.

But for those wh o really know him, Kany e is anything but arrogant. He is mild-mannered, kind, gentle, sensitive, and alway s looking to improve himself and help others. That' s ho w I'd describe him.

So wha t is the most fitting description? Whe n Kany e wa s just in kindergarten,

his teacher said to me. "My , he doesn't have

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any problem wit h self-esteem, does he?" Readily I replied, "He does not."

But I wondered if there wa s a hidden meaning under her statement. I don't remember what prompted it. I just remem- ber that I couldn't tell for certain whether she was compli- menting him or indirectly describing a behavior to which she took exception.

Kany e wa s alway s a very self-assured kid. He knew what he wanted and how he wanted it. An d he set out wit h great determination to get it. I never noticed him being willful in a wa y that wa s a negative or being insistently selfish to the detriment of others. But I did notice him, at a very young age, having what I thought wa s a pretty keen sense of self. And that's something that I always nurtured.

From the time Mrs. Murray, his kindergarten teacher, made her remark, and even before, I have known that what I view as high self-esteem, or at least the striving for it— a competitive spirit, a desire to win , and a lack of self-hate— might be viewe d by others as arrogance, depending on who' s doing the viewing.

Although we are constantly taught that it is a good thing to display strong self-worth and to stand and walk tall, we're often criticized when we really do that. We live in a world where we're taught to feel badly and get used to it. In some instances, the more we look dow n at our shoes and say "Yes, ma'am," or "Yes, sir," the more we are thought to be behaving appropriately. Ther e is a contradiction in that somewhere. Ho w are we to look up and look dow n all at once? Wher e do we draw the line between appropriately humble and sicken- ingly meek?

I'm familiar wit h the scripture that tells us the meek shall

inherit the earth. But I'm convinced there is more than one wa y to interpret that scripture and more than one definition of meek. As I raise these questions and express my sentiments, it's probably clear that I am not one to encourage kids to wither awa y into the background, to be seen and not heard because it signals politeness. That' s not how I woul d approach teaching any kid.

Of course, not everyone shares the same perspective on this. Not even couples married for years, like my mom and dad, have the same point of view . lean remember my mother and dad disagreeing about the then heavyweight champion of the world . Muhammad Ah wa s as bad as they came and my dad and I loved him. "Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee," he would say, or "Ain't I pretty? I'm so pretty! We cheered him on, Dadd y and I. But Mother couldn't stand it. She didn't like Al l and didn't really like the wa y my dad and I were al- way s right there in his comer. She wanted Al i to wi n the fight, all right. But she could do without all that bragging. She felt Ali wa s arrogant and so full of himself that she scarcely wanted to hear a word he had to say.

Of course, Al i wa s not her grandson and she is totally dif- ferent when it comes to Kanye. She adores him. An d *if* she ever thought Kany e wa s arrogant—and she does not—she would probably just laugh and say, "Oh, that boy, listen to him!"

Arrogance to one person is simply not arrogance to another. If you say that you are the best and you really are, is that arrogance? If you say you are the best and you suck, is that arrogance? I suppose it depends on the tone and manner in whic h a statement like that is expressed. If you walk and talk cocky, putting dow n all others around, and display a nasty attitude in your pronouncement of greatness, then I'd

call you arrogant. But that wasn' t Muhammad Ali , nor is it Kanye.

All day long people run up to Kany e asking for autographs and wanting to take pictures of or wit h him. He can't even get a bite to eat in a public place without somebody, and often a lot of somebodies, coming over to get his signature. Celebri- ties are treated like gods and if they act like they've got the slightest sense of self-worth, they're arrogant. I believe if Kany e wer e truly arrogant, he'd have eaten a lot of baked po- tatoes by now while they were still hot instead of taking the time to graciously say hello and make some little kid, teen- ager, young adult, or even grandmother happy. Kany e is al- way s so kind and accomodating. I'm not defending Kanye , because I don't feel he needs to be defended. I just wan t to set the record straight, to tell the truth about the issue.

It's not surprising to me that Kanye' s persona makes people feel he is arrogant. Actually, as kind and considerate as Kany e is, even when he wa s a child, friends told me that I would need to put him in Boy Scouts. They' d say that there he'd learn to get along better wit h others. Frankly, I don't remember his not getting along wit h others, but maybe that wa s an issue. I do remember him wanting to have it in *his* way. As long as he understood he could not alway s have his way , I didn't have a problem wit h him wanting to. He wa s taught to share and to be considerate. Granted, as an only child he had to share less frequently than kids in large families. But this is just the na- ture of being an only child. And being an only child in and of itself does not make one arrogant.

Ho w can you say Kany e Wes t doesn't work wel l wit h others? The nature of his business is collaboration. He couldn't have done what he did wit h Jay- Z if he didn't work well

with others. Nor could he have had successes wit h everyone from Jon Brum and Alicia Key s to Jamie Fox x and John Leg- end to Chri s Martin and John Mayer—and the list can go on. You wouldn' t want to work wit h someone wh o is arrogant and difficult, would you? An d Kany e keeps working.

I know his tirades and so-called tantrums can definitely be considered a bit much. But whenever he has an outburst, I believe it's wit h good cause. It's about making the best music, the dopest movies and videos, the freshest clothes possible. He's simply about being the best. Some regard that as arro- gant.

Has Kany e ever behaved arrogantly? Absolutely! Not only at a few awards shows, but at home as a kid. He went through a phase at twelv e years old where he seemed to care about no one but himself. He'd think nothing of drinking the last Pepsi in the refrigerator or eating the last of the cereal without so much as a wor d to see if Scotty or I wanted any. Kanye would drink that last pop or eat the last of whatever it wa s wit h such indignance that I had to pull his coattail pretty force- fully. I finally sat him down and said, "Kanye, I love you, but I don't like you. I don't like the wa y you're acting. I don't like the wa y you have regard for no one in this house but yourself, and you must stop it, now."

I went on telling him about himself until he wa s at the pun t of tears. I had had it wit h Kanye. I did not like what I wa s seeing. An d I wa s intent on doing all I could to ensure his growin g up wit h a healthy regard for others. Kany e under- stood what I wa s saying and began changing immediately. I had come dow n on him with the wrath of Khan and I'm sure he thought twice each time he opened the refrigerator.

I wil l not deny that even today, Kany e acts arrogantly on

occasion. Bui to me, this occasional behavior is not character- istic. I recognize those occasions, but I don't think of him as an arrogant person because of them. At awards shows where he has voiced his strong opinion about not winning, he has sometimes expressed himself in way s that, to me, wer e ques- tionable at best. I think this, as wel l as his on e liners and sometimes stinging sound bites, are what has caused many to think of Kany e as an all-around arrogant person. So much so that many times when people meet Kany e they are surprised, even amazed.

"You're not arrogant at all," they've often said.

Wha t Kany e is is passionate—passionate about ever y thing he cares about. An d it is that passion that has brought fame, fortune, better, and best. Admittedly, his passion can lead to wha t some may see as trouble. But that passion is his lifeblood. Therefore, I encourage it, applaud it, and learn from it. Whateve r mistakes he makes, I am certain that he learns from them. An d learning from mistakes means growth .

Like me, Kanye wa s raised to speak the truth as he sees it, the raw truth. And it's that raw truth that allows him to pro- duce Grammy Award-winnin g hits and sell millions of CD s around the world . He shares his passion wit h other artists and helps to catapult their songs to the top of the charts. Kany e pours that same passion, truth, and vision into ever y thing he does. I would no more suppress his passion, whic h sometimes leads to the so-called outbursts, than I would sup- press his ability to make music. To stifle the former is to threaten the latter.

Do I wish , however, that he woul d be a little less vocal on occasion? Yes , sometimes much less. But not usually— especially when he's speaking about injustice in this country.

Because he is alway s expressing the truth as he sees it and as he understands it at that moment. He has been raised to look through his own eyes, his own lens, considering the world and others in it but not mirroring their realities, not even mir- roring mine or his dad's.

Whe n I think about it, it is evident to me that Kanye was born to make a difference. An d that requires stepping out of the little circles that the world might draw for him. That means coloring outside of the lines. Ultimately, if you yourself speak truthfully, rather than politically correctly, you may on occasion find yourself agreeing wit h Kanye . You may even spew out some of the same feelings wit h as much passion.

I'm the wron g person to ask for comments whe n it comes to Kanye' s so-called outbursts. It's been said that I may even be partially to blame. Mayb e there's some truth to that. I'm not certain. But I have always been a rebel. An d right or wrong, I have always spoken my mind. I have alway s preached standing up for wha t you believe to be the truth. An d that's what Kany e does. That' s what his father did when he felt the need to express his truths.

Do I believe that every word out of Kanye' s mouth is a universal truth or that he is correct each time he speaks? Ab - solutely not. It would be absurd to think so. In fact, we have differences of opinion more often than some might think. But that does not impact my supporting him fully. I don't sit around supporting Kany e because I think he is alway s correct. I support him because he is my son, doing positive things in the world. That he makes mistakes and says things with which I disagree is a given. Sometimes I strongly disagree. And when Kany e says or does something I think is wrong, I tell him so—usually immediately. I may not tell the world so .

but Kany e knows when I am not pleased wit h something he has said or done. I think he still listens mast of the time. I know, like all of us, he is still growing .

It's been said that Kany e is a creative genius. Wit h that, I agree. It's evidenced in his music, designing, and directing. Of course, the world knows him best thus far for his music. But he pours his heart into everything he does. An d with that passion I spoke of, he expresses himself in multiple ways . The same passion he has when he creates his music or draws a pic - ture is the passion he has when he makes such statements as "George Bush doesn't care about black people" or "I should have wo n that award." It's passion. An d I woul d never stymie that.

As for awards shows, I can totally understand Kanye' s anger and frustration. There have been times when he was led to believe he'd won a particular awar d only to get there and not take it home. It would stand to reason that in such in- stances he may think of the show as a spectacle put on for ratings. I suspect that his disdain for whatever he thinks is not real or fair leads him on the spot to a mind-set of "I'm going to give them a show." Th e awar d is not based on record sales or excellence. It's all very political. In the case of the M T V European Music Awards , I firmly believe that Kany e had the video of the year. So when he went up on that stage and said what he said, I understood. That wa s not my proud- est moment—not by far. But I understood.

Wh y sit there, smile, and applaud when you really feel like you wer e robbed. I hate false humility. I don't go for it. There's a lot to be said for being a gracious loser, but my phi- losophy has alway s been "Sho w me a good loser and I'll show you a loser." Whil e it's prudent and appropriate to be silent

sometimes—some things are indeed better left unsaid—being honest and open about ho w you feel is not all bad. I didn't like Kany e making the comments he did, I didn't applaud it, I didn't find it amusing. But I understood.

I can remember being so outraged at one of Kanye' s losses that I could hardly contain myself. He wa s up for Best Ne w Artist at the American Music Awards . He lost to Gretchen Wilson , wh o is an exceptional country singer. But there is no wa y she had had the impact on the music industry and on her genre that Kany e had on his. It's of no consequence, of course, but I had never even heard of her before she received that award.

Whe n they made the announcement, I could hardly be- lieve it. Kany e had just performed. After the show, when he went to do press, I went along wit h him and wa s as disap- pointed as he was . Admittedly, I wasn' t quiet about it ei- ther.

I suppose if Kanye won and someone came up onstage and went off, I would have a problem wit h it. But if they re- ally felt they were better than Kanye, I would honor their feelings. We'r e dealing wit h human emotions. Real, raw, honest human emotions.

The first time Kany e displayed his feelings over losing, he wa s seven years old. He wa s alway s participating in talent shows and contests and he performed in this one talent show as Stevie Wonder . He wor e braids, sunglasses, and even walked like Stevie. Lip-synching to " I Just Called to Sa y I Love You, " he felt he was the star of the show. He had prac- ticed that song for weeks, getting it just right.

On the day of the performance, the person handling the music cut off the record before Kanve wa s finished. He hadn't

gotten to his favorite part in the song, "No Ne w Year's day... "

He stood there for a minute, dumbfounded. He wanted to finish his song. Finally, when it wa s apparent the music wa s not coming back on, he walked off the stage. He didn't win. Backstage, he wa s one upset young man. He couldn't believe that someone had the audacity to cut off his record before he wa s finished wit h his act.

' I wasn' t done!" he kept saying over and over again on our drive home.

"I know, Kanye. It wa s a mistake. There wil l be another talent show next year," I told him.

"The y didn't finish my song," he said. "I could have won!"

"You wil l wi n the next one," I said.

He eventually got over it. He came back the next year and won. In fact, he won every year after that until the talent competition became just a talent show, so no one would have to lose. I liked his spirit after he'd lost, though. He didn't let a little adversity get him down . He used it as fuel to come back even better.

Everyone knows Kany e is pretty unhappy when he feels he's lost unjustly. An d despite my disappointment in his not winning sometimes, I'll admit it may serve him better in the long run to be a more gracious loser—even when he feels he's been robbed. However , he wil l use that experience to do something even greater. Kanye hates to lose. He hates coming in second. It's just the wa y he's wired .

As his mother, I support him without exception because he will learn from the experience. It will help him gro w as a person, and in the end he wil l find a wa y to overcome it.

That' s wha t separates success from failure—the ability to overcome adversity and use that adversity to become even stronger

All of this I say in the context of asking the question "Is it arrogance or confidence we see in a determined, strong-willed, expressive Kanye? "

Despite the opinions of others, I say that it is confidence. It's the confidence you develop when you're challenged or challenge yourself to be the best.

I alway s set high expectations for Kanye . It wasn' t some- thing I had to talk to him about. It wa s just understood. And it wasn' t the kind of pressure that some parents put on their children, wher e the kids want to jump off a building for get- ting a B. I think that's unhealthy.

I never put any expectation on Kany e that I didn't believe he could meet and exceed. It wa s alway s clear that he could be anything he wanted to, so I wanted to make sure that he never had any excuses for wh y he didn't accomplish some- thing. Exposure, support, encouragement, feedback, praise, and spending lots of quality time wit h Kany e have resulted, I believe, not in an arrogant person but a confident one—one wh o believes in himself enormously.

To believe in himself, however, meant he had to know wh o he was . Otherwise he might believe in some pseudo self, some figment of his imagination. So I made it a point to ad- dress the issue consciously. As an educator, I alway s posed this question to my students: Wh o are you? Naturally, I posed it to my own son. I wa s first confronted wit h the question myself in the essay "Wh o Am I" by Marya Marines. I taught it for nearly thirty years in all my freshman writing classes and used it in parenting Kany e too. It raised one of the most im-

portant questions we can ever ask, the question of wh o we are. I don't remember the opening paragraph precisely, but it went something like this;

"Wh o are you? Not you together, but you singularly? Whe n did it begin—that long day's journey into self? Whe n did you begin to know that you are unique, separate, alone? We came from somewhere. Not from just the seeds of our fa- thers and the womb s of our mothers—but from a long line of forefathers before us. Th e time of self-discovery is different for everybody. Some, very few, find themselves early in life. For others the discovery comes later. But for most, and those are the tragic one's, self-discovery never comes. "

This poignant message, though not offered here verbatim, is nonetheless one of the most important we can ponder. The essay continues to challenge us to think on the question of wh o we are. I believe all parents should ask their children this question at some point. I asked this question of Kany e when he wa s twelve . I did not want him to be one of the tragic ones. He answered loud and clear, not in word s but through his actions.

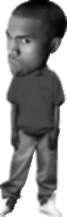
I didn't sit down and tell him, "You have to be the best." I just alway s thought he was. This, I believe, bolstered his confidence and his enthusiasm in all that he did. An d given ho w competitive he wa s by nature and how determined, it all worked out. I saw it in him when at seven months old, he was determined to get out of his crib and be free, even if he split his head in the process—which he did. That never stopped him. An d he has been fighting to do exactly what he wants to do ever since. I suspect he alway s will .

Is Kany e the arrogant artist some think him to be? Well , arrogance is in the eye of the beholder.

1 4

# Pink Polos and Backpacks

*I don't know how many times* I said it. "Kanye, pull up chose pants!" It must have been a thousand. I finally gave up. He would say, "But, mom, it's the style."

I don't know how the pants didn't end up around the an- kles. It wa s a physics marvel how they woul d hang just low enough to still stay on. All the kids wer e dressing like that. I wondered wha t woul d happen if they were chased and had to break out into a run. But if you wer e cool, that's

the wa y you wor e your pants. And Kany e wa s no exception. At least not at first.

He wa s around fifteen years old when he started wearing them that way . That' s when Scotty and I separated and Kanye and I moved to Tinley Park. Scotty wouldn' t have allowed him to wea r his pants like that, not for one minute. I

didn't want to allow it either. But after a while .

you learn to pick your battles. As long as his pants didn't ac- tually fall dow n around his ankles, and as long as the other rules I'd set wer e followed, I wouldn' t complain. We com- promised. He could wea r them low, but not as low as I'd seen some of his friends wea r theirs. They could hardly walk with - out their pants falling completely down .

I just couldn't understand this latest trend. It seemed ri- diculous. An d Kanye had all kinds of excuses for why the low pants wer e necessary.

"I have a big butt, Mom," he'd say. "I have to wea r my pants low like this so it won' t look so big."

But the day did come, thank goodness, that Kanye decided to have his ow n style. He stopped wearing his pants low and he stopped wearing those X X X L shirts that swallowe d him. I bought all of Kanye' s clothes until he got into the fourth grade. And he didn't seem to mind. Whe n I look back at some of the pictures of him in those early days, it's apparent that both of us were thinking about something other than fashion.

Still, I thought he looked pretty cute in the clothes I bought for him. I especially liked the little Miami Dolphins letter- man jacket I'd gotten him when he wa s two . He looked good in pastel colors even then. The y wer e pastel, but still rich and didn't look feminine at all. That Dolphin turquoise blue and orange really popped on Kanye. I'd have him in that jacket all the time. It looked good wit h his blue jeans and Hush Pup- pies.

But some of the pictures tell a different story. Th e blue and red sweater that I put with brown corduroys when Tony, my then boyfriend, took us to the auto show at McCormic k Place could hardly be considered fashionable. That outfit wa s sinful and I have pictures to prove it. It looked like something

I'd gotten from Goodwill . Mayb e we wer e just in a hurry that day. Then again, it's quite possible that I had gotten it from some used clothing store. Quiet as it s kept, I loved a bargain. I didn't frequent the Goodwil l stores, but I did hit the Uniques more than a few times. I used to go on Monday nights when everything wa s half price. I loved shopping where everything in the store wa s affordable. I'd gather up a whol e basket of stuff that might only get worn once after I

got it home. Regardless, my bill would usually come to no more than forty bucks. I thought that wa s far better than going to the local Kmart and buying half the stuff for twic e

the price, not to mention the quality issue.

I dragged Kany e wit h me a couple of times and he hated it. It didn't matter, though—not when he wa s a little kid. I wa s the one forking over the dough on a teacher's salary. And at five, six, and seven years old, wh o cared if the clothes came from Macy' s or Second Time Around? After he got bigger and headed into those preteen years, any shopping I did at thrift stores wa s for me only. Being a typical kid, Kany e wanted his clothes to be new, and he wanted name brands. I'll never for- get the day he wa s ducking around the aisles in Payless be- cause he thought someone might see him.

I guess I wa s partly to blame for his name-brand jones. I bought him his first pair of Air Jordans when he wa s ten. Wha t boy didn't love Michael Jordan then? An d to have a pair of those sixty-five-dollar Jordans wa s something special. I'd gotten them in Hyde Park at a shoe store that specialized in shoes for kids. They had all the latest styles and brands— PF Flyers, Keds, Converse, you name it. But nothing could compare to the Ai r Jordans. Nothing.

Back then, sixty-five dollars wa s quite a bit to pay for a

pair of kid's sneakers. Even today, that's a pretty penny for a pair of sneakers that a kid wil l outgrow in a couple of months. But I didn't think twic e about it. I woul d save in other ways , on other things, so that when there wa s something special to be purchased, I could once again borrow from Peter to pay Paul and purchase it. I didn't sacrifice getting Kany e books, or a computer, or anything else I thought more important than gym shoes. But he wa s a good boy. (Mischievous, but good). As long as he did wha t he wa s supposed to and earned his way, I wa s into getting him what he wanted, and he wanted those Jordans. I'd just have to find a way , that's all.

Kany e had wanted to be a fashion designer in fourth grade. But he still focused on drawing and writing raps. By the time Kanye was eleven or twelve , however, he'd become totally conscientious about how he dressed. That wa s when he first started doing his ow n laundry. One day he wanted to wear this particular outfit and it hadn't been washed. He was unhappy and I was not feeling it. I had a lot to do on a daily basis. I couldn't squeeze into my busy schedule making sure Kany e had a particular outfit clean on a particular day. He had clean clothes—even if it wasn' t exactly what he wanted to wear. No w that he had become Mr . Style Guru, everything had to go his way ? I didn't think so.

I remember clearly the day I told Kanye that if he wanted to have it like that, he needed to do his ow n laundry. That day, he started doing it, and he did it from then on. He became pretty good at washing and ironing his clothes. His grandfa- ther, Buddy, even taught him how to iron his shirt collars and how to tie a tie.

I had given Kanye tw o hundred dollars for back-to-school clothes one summer and he came back wit h one pair of jeans

and tw o shirts. I wa s outdone! He wa s in the eighth grade. Wit h tw o hundred dollars I could have bought at least four pair of pants and four shirts, some matching socks, and maybe even a pair of shoes. But he came back wit h one pair of jeans and tw o shirts and thought that wa s okay. We typically shopped at Marshall's where you could get designer brands at discount prices. Kany e surely didn't shop at Marshall's that day.

I wa s so mad, I refused to give him any more money, not that there wa s any more to give . He wa s content, though, with those few pieces he bought. He wa s happier with those jeans and tw o shirts than he would have been wit h four times as much. That' s when I knew he valued quality over quantity. And while I wasn' t happy wit h him not getting more for the money I had given him, I begrudgingly respected his choice.

Initially, Kany e spent more time and had more interest in his art and music than he had in clothes. But once he discov- ered clothes, it wa s like a light went on inside of him and he poured the same kind of energy that he put into his art and music into putting outfits together and dressing well . It came without effort. Whe n Kanye and his friends were preparing for a talent show or for some other event and they wanted "a look," Kany e would be the ringleader, in charge of deciding what that look would be.

At first, his style wa s to match. Everything had to match—black pants, black shirt, black jacket. That's what his group, Quadro Posse, wor e when they won first place in the talent show at their school. The four of them did a dance routine and were all dressed alike—not identical—but alike in their black digs, right dow n to black shoes. Th e shoes had

to be on point, too. That' s one of Kanye' s things. To this day, he is always telling me that the shoes complete an outfit.

"You can mess up a dope outfit with the shoes," he'll say. Kany e became my stylist when he wa s fifteen. He'd cri-

tique whatever I wa s wearing whenever I had someplace to go. Sometimes he'd be kind. Other times, cruel. Once he even told me he'd give up his allowance if I'd go to Jenny Craig . I guess I wa s looking pretty fat in the dress I'd put on. I didn't get offended, though. I didn't even take it personally. An d I did *not* go to Jenny Craig—no t then, anyway.

Kany e alway s had some advice on how something or someone could look better. He's a visual person and alway s has been. He may be a little too frank on occasion, but he al- way s want s to see people look their best, especially those he's close to.

Today, Kany e likes to be surrounded by people wit h style, people wh o know how to dress. I think Don C., Ibn, Leonard, John-John and all the rest of the crew would all have been fired by now if they didn't dress "fresh to death." If not, they would have certainly been teased to death. Poor Really Doe really hears it for wearing gym shoes that Kany e and most of the other guys think are weak.

Whe n we'r e all together shopping, whether it's in Los Angeles or Ne w York or even Japan, and someone sees a pair of gym shoes that don't quite cut it, we wil l say that they're Really Doe's.

"Really Doe left his shoes here!" someone wil l yell out.

I don't know wher e Really Doe (Warren) got his lack of taste in gym shoes, but he doesn't seem to be bothered by the teasing. He has thick skin. I catch it a lot, too sometimes. Just

when I think I've picked out something that is really fresh, Kany e or Don C. or Ibn (John-John usually doesn't join in with them when it' s about me) will bust out with the Really Doe crack. Or they may just shake their heads no.

Since Kany e is so into fashion, shopping is one of his fa- vorite things to do. I'd say he's a shopaholic. It's habit now. Unless he's working day and night in the studio trying to meet a deadline for an album, he is going to get in some shopping. Whe n he doesn't have the time to go himself, he'll send some- one to pick up wha t he wants. Running around wit h Kanye and all the fellas in recent years, I'd begun to think that you need to have a lot of money to look good. But Kanye is the one wh o straightened me out on that.

Although he has money that is out of most leagues, he shows me examples of people wh o don't have a lot of money, but wh o look good all the time. The y just know what they're doing when it comes to dressing. The y know what looks good on them and how to wea r it. I wa s glad he pointed that out to me so I can share it here with others.

You don't have to break the bank to look good! You can study fashion and go straight to Marshall's, or to the outlets and buy it for a lot less. Thi s is not news to most, but it was to me. I'd shopped in Marshall' s or some store like it since Kany e wa s a teenager and still wasn' t getting it right. It's not the store you shop in. You can shop in Gucci and Louis Vuit- ton and still not have any style. It's not where you shop, it's what you buy and how you put your outfit together.

Th e trick, too, is not to buy just because somethings on sale. If you don't love it or if it's weak, leave it on the shelf. That' s common sense, I guess. But a lot of times I picked it up

anyway because the sale wa s so good. That's one wa y to have a closet full of clothes you never wea r or a style that defi- nitely leaves something to be desired. I learned these tips from Kanye. And I must admit I get a lot of compliments on my outfits these days.

Fashion remains a big thing for Kanye. He loves it. He even brought his love of style to hip-hop. He wasn' t going to look like every other rapper and he took a radical departure from typical hip-hop dress.

Whe n Kanye first walked into Roc-A-Fella, everyone looked at him crazy because he wasn' t wearing an oversized sports jersey. Even before *College Dropout*, Kanye wa s onto something entirely different when it came to clothes. Th e big jerseys wit h numbers gave wa y to sport jackets, and the baggy pants to a dope pair of YS L pants. Whe n *College Dropout* dropped, people started copying, biting his preppy style—his pink Polo shirts, his proper-fitting khakis and jeans, his Louis Vuitton backpack. No rapper had stepped out of the box like that. Wh o would ever have thought it would work?

The sport jackets, the Pol o shirts, and then the sunglasses made a statement. And the fans were loving it. Benae, the woman wh o braided my hair before I left Chicago , had a ten- year-old son, Akayade wh o wa s totally enamored by sport jackets because Kany e Wes t wor e them. One day, she ran across a Ralph Lauren jacket that wa s eighty percent off, wit h another discount at the counter. She grabbed that jacket as fast as she could. It wa s the perfect size, too. You have never seen a kid so thrilled as when he got that jacket. Imagine, a ten-year-old being thrilled about a sport jacket. He called it his Kany e Wes t jacket. Ever y time he put it on it made him

feel that much closer to Kanye West. If Benae had let him, Akayade would have worn that jacket every day—tight over his Kany e Wes t T-shirt.

Clothes that fit and that were by all standards considered preppy wer e not all that Kany e would bring to the rap fash- ion game. He brought the backpack, too. He became the Louis Vuitton don for the Louis backpack and other Louis apparel he wore. Some others may have done it before, but I guess that backpack, along wit h everything else—the preppy clothes, not being a former drug dealer, or gangbanger, or rap- ping about guns and killing—made it all stick. He wa s the definitive backpack rapper. He traded in green khaki canvas backpacks for the Gucci or Louis Vuitton ones and instead of filling them wit h college textbooks, he wa s filling them wit h his music.

Lots of mothers have told me about the impact Kanye has had on their children when it comes to fashion. The y say the baggy pants worn low are starting to be worn closer to the waist. Th e huge, oversized jerseys are taking a backseat to the Pol o and the polo-style shirts. Ralp h Lauren (and others wit h a similar style) have sold more Pol o shirts in the 'hood than he ever woul d have had Kany e not made Polo a house - hold word . It's a new day in hip-hop—not just wit h beats that are more musical and lyrics that are more conscious, but wit h fresh-to-death clothes, too.

No w all eyes are on Kany e for his soon-to-be-launched clothing line: Pastelle. It's an upscale line for the highly dis- criminating and somewhat elite. It wil l sport nice colors (pastel shades, in fact), simple designs, and high quality. They are the kinds of clothes Kany e would wear and buy himself.

Remember the days when men couldn't wea r pink? No w nothing's more fashionable even for some rappers than a styl- ish, pink Polo.

One of the hardest things for me now is what to buy Kanye. He's very particular and knows wha t he wants. Christmas 2005 , I wa s beside myself trying to think of what to buy him. Wha t do you get your kid when he either has ev- erything he wants or could certainly get it? It's not about the money. Kany e alway s tells me to buy him something small.

Small or not, I wanted it to be special, something he would really like. Just as I wa s about to give up thinking about it and run into Best Buy to get the old faithful gift card (Kanye's a music and movie junkie so I couldn't go wrong wit h the gift card), Don C. and I just happened to talk. I wa s stand- ing in the Louis Vuitton store waiting on my purchase when Don told me that Kanye had been talking about the million- aire sunglasses that Louis made. Hardly anyone had them yet.

"I can get them!" said Donna, the very cool lady wh o usu- ally helps us when we shop at Louis Vuitton in Beverly Hills. And help me she did. She had them flown in from France and I surprised Kany e that year wit h those glasses. I almost broke the bank to do it but his reaction when I handed him those millionaire glasses wa s wort h it. I can definitely see Kany e wit h a sunglasses line. I don't know of anything Kany e is as passionate about as he is his music and visuals, unless it's his clothes.

Wa s he raised that way ? Well , it's certainly in his genes. My father is quite a fashion plate. He loves to look sharp. He's now in his nineties and he's still a sharp dresser. My dad likes to wear a nice suit and has tons of them. His wardrobe is full

of stingy-brimmed, hats and two-tone shoes—that's the wa y he alway s got down . Most of us in my family put a high value

of dressing. An d Kany e is no exception.

I'm glad that Kany e has a passion for clothes. Whe n he looks good in what he's wearing, he feels good. But it's about much more than clothes. It's about balance. If you look great and have nothing else going on, what' s the point? I wa s never bothered by wha t Kany e put on his body, as long as it came second to wha t he put in his mind.



**1 5**

# Gay Bashing: "Yo, Stop It!"

"I think in the daily life of a black male, we gay-bash way more than we disrespect women. We would call a gay guy a fag to his face. But if we walked up to a woman and said Ai'ight, bitch! we would know that was disrespectful.

I remember five years ago I was in this clothing store in Greenwich Village with my old girlfriend. I said the word fag kind of loud and there were some gay dudes in the store. My girlfriend was like, "Yo, c'mon, step into the new millennium." Well, my level of consciousness has since been raised. And I actually think that stand- ing up for gays was even more courageous than bad- mouthing the president.

In the black community someone could label you gay and bring your career down. But that was me showing what black people are really about today, or at least what we need to be about."

—KANYE WEST

*I was always in the arts* at church or at school, and it wa s not uncommon to encounter people wh o some felt were homo- sexual. In some cases, it wa s a known fact. But nobody said anything. It seemed that all the homosexuals were in the closet back then, except to one another, probably. Man y of the male musicians wer e thought to be gay, and looking back now, a lot of them probably were. I also had a gym teacher in school wh o some said wa s a lesbian. She just looked athletic to me. Anyway , everyone commented behind their backs— but never maliciously. I never heard one person being out- wardly persecuted for being gay. Perhaps that wa s because no one wa s out.

I could count at least ten people right now, probably more, wh o wer e known to be gay when I wa s growin g up. Some were teachers at my high school. Some of them were choir directors, musicians, or ministers of music at my church or at other churches we' d visit. It wa s no big deal, and then again maybe it wa s and I just didn't know it. Mayb e it wa s a big deal to those wh o were gay. They wer e the ones wh o had to tolerate the gay jokes and smile when inside they may have been bleeding. I'm sure that it must have been difficult at times not being able to be wh o they really were .

Many years later, I had a student tell me as much in an essay she had written on homosexuality. Sh e wa s still in the closet and not happy about it. But she thought her family would disown her if she came out. She wa s glad to have a platform to speak. The experience had given her the courage to be wh o she was . To hell wit h anybody wh o didn't like it. But that wa s after I had grown up myself on the issue and opened my own closed mind.

Because of the silence on the issue around my house grow -

ing up, I learned to like the gay friends of the family a lot, and to fear the gay s I did not know. Ignorance is not bliss; it's dangerous. So dangerous that I went off to college being afraid of any gay person wh o I'd not gotten to know in some other capacity before learning he or she wa s gay. Ho w absurd.

My freshman year at college there wa s a girl on campus wh o wa s rumored to be a lesbian. I had seen her around cam- pus but hadn't paid her much attention. I lived in a dormitory with about twenty on a floor, wit h a bathroom at the end of the hall that we all shared. I wa s hanging out one evening, heading back to my dorm room, and I really had to go to the bathroom. I ran down the hall and into the bathroom and there she was, washing her face or something. I didn' t stick around to find out. I shot out of there and didn't even use the bathroom.

Looking back, I realize ho w silly I had been. Even if the rumor wa s true, what wa s she going to do to me? It's some- how assumed that all gays have on their minds is sex. Many never look at a gay person as an individual wh o has many di- mensions other than sexuality It's ludicrous, but that's ho w it is.

In the black community when I wa s coming up, being gay wa s something to be ashamed of. Labels helped to ensure that shame: queer, punk, funny. That' s how people were described. I don't remember anyone coming out and saying, "I'm gay. Fuck off!" An d I don't blame them. People had to go through so much just to be wh o they were—and some still do.

Growin g up, I didn't understand the whol e notion of ho- mosexuality. Whe n you come up in the church, you think it's some sort of disease that you can catch or cure wit h enough prayer. But as I began to broaden my horizons and really get

to know people, I figured it out. Just as some people are het- erosexual, some are homosexual. It's as simple as that.

One of the things that helped me see this wa s having people in my life wh o I loved dearly wh o happened to be gay. At first, I wa s like a whit e racist wh o has that one black friend but is unable to see that their black friend is not "spe- cial" or some sort of exception.

One friend of our family's, a brilliant artist and musician, is so close to us that he's considered family. It didn't matter to us that he was gay. He was always welcome in our home. You made exceptions to the rule. The rule being it's not good to be homosexual. But the reality wa s that there were so many good and wonderful human beings wh o were homosexual. And this family friend wa s one of them. He helped crush the myth for me.

I could list other examples. I won't, though, because the world is still cruel and I don't know how they'd feel about me discussing them in this book. Mayb e they woul d say, "It's not nice to *out* Mother Nature."

I thank Go d that before Kany e wa s born I realized how absurd it is to be homophobic—how narrow it is to judge- people on the basis of their sexuality. I wouldn' t want to pass that narrowness on to him. But the anti-gay paradigm wa s deeply rooted in the minds of most Americans. Kany e wa s not able to escape it. It is so prevalent in the black community and is in most communities. Even as someone wh o alway s marched to the beat of his own drummer, he dissed gays big-time.

In hip-hop, defending someone's right to be gay was defi- nitely frowned upon. You wouldn' t think of expressing an opinion that wa s pro-gay. You'd better not even have such an

opinion. It made much more sense to be antigay. An d Kany e was . He wasn' t just pretending to be. Lik e so many others— black, white , male, female, rich, poor—he thought homosex- uality wa s totally inappropriate, maybe even repulsive. I'm not sure, but I believe he held these values not just for himself, a straight male, but for anybody else. Homosexuality was something to be hated, not defended, something to be scorned, not understood.

Besides genuinely feeling as he did, he wa s not going to put himself in a position to be further castigated. He wasn' t hard. He came from a nice home and people considered him a mama's boy—the wron g ingredients for becoming a successful rapper.

I wa s never around when Kanye and his friends wer e gay bashing. But I can imagine the jokes, the attitudes, even the disdain they probably displayed. I don't know that any of them actually hated any gay person in particular. I think per- haps they just hated the whole idea. I believe a lot of young people are pasturing when they gay bash. They are pretend- ing to hate gays but really don't. Besides, how do you prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that you yourself aren't gay? By showing that you hate gays. Th e last thing you want to be associated with as a rapper is anything gay.

But Kany e came full circle the day he stepped up and called for his peers to stop the gay bashing. He distinguished himself once again not just as a talented rapper and incredible producer, but also as a courageous individual wh o thinks critically and is not afraid to speak his mind. Even if he is afraid, he does it anyway, whic h is what ultimately matters. Kany e made his comments in 2005 . Looking back, he feels

that that wa s "even crazier than bad-mouthing the presi- dent."

I'm glad Kanye realized there is no value in gay bashing. Nothing good wil l result from it. Even those wh o have a problem wit h homosexuality because they consider it to be immoral shouldn't cast stones. Isn't that just as immoral? Peo- ple have lost their lives just because they were gay. They be- came "strange fruit hanging from a tree."

Until I heard Kanye speaking on it in interviews, I never knew he had disliked or ridiculed gays. My nephew, his first cousin and one of his favorites at that, would come over fre- quently. The whol e family is crazy about him, alway s has been. He's a dynamic person wh o leads a very productive and successful life. What' s not to love about him, his sexual pref- erence? Giv e me a fucking break! There's stupid, more stupid, and most stupid. An d to not love my nephew because of his sexuality woul d be the latter.

Kanye is none of those. In fact, he is the exact opposite. Ingenious. So I wasn' t surprised when it dawned on him that despite the heat he might take by speaking out against the gay bashing—if indeed he even thought about that—he'd speak his mind.

Kanye' s word s wer e welcomed and applauded by many. Phone calls and mail came in to prove it. Heterosexuals, gay activists, closet gays, all voiced their approval via internet or some other medium. I wa s proud that Kanye had spoken up, that he had taken a stand. He's made a name for himself in hip-hop, wo n awards, and made millions of dollars. He could have just kept quiet and kept it moving. He could have played it safe. But he didn't.

This is my cousin. I love him and I've been discrimi- nating against gays. It's not just hip-hop, but America just discriminates against gay people. I want to just come on TV , and just tell my rappers, just tell my friends, "Yo, stop it!"

— KANYE WEST, in an August 2005, "All Eyes on Kanye West" MTV special

I hope everybody will stop it. Like comedian Wanda Sykes said about people protesting gay marriage, "If you don't like it, don't marry a gay person!''

Kanye' s cousin has been out of the closet for more than fifteen years. He brings his partner home to Oklahoma Cit y for Christmas and has for the last ten years. We love his part- ner. He, too, is an outstanding human being. It's cool that no one raises an eyebrow when I introduce them as my nephews, especially since my nephew' s partner is white . Even my mother, wh o is ninety-plus years young, has a totally open mind about the relationship.

"W e have people in our family wh o are gay," she once said. "It's not what you do, it's how you do it."

Everybody doesn't have the opportunity to explore their true selves in a family that won' t judge them. That' s a shame. It is a very weak person wh o downs others for being them selves. But in another context, I understand this. Sometimes you judge others when you're least happy wit h yourself. You look outward to find some deficit in someone else. It's not even conscious. I've done the same thing, although all my life I have prided myself on not being judgmental.

Whe n Kany e spoke out against gay bashing, he didn't

show up to create a stir or to be controversial. He just felt like it wa s time to say something that needed to be said. It's doubt- ful that he thought very long about the risks involved, if he thought about that at all. He wa s too busy concentrating on what needed to be said—he thought more about the message than the messenger. He spoke eloquently and truthfully about something that wa s and still is critically important. Whe n you have a platform and millions of people listening to you — not just hearing some word s you utter because you happen to be on TV or in front of an interviewer for a widel y circulated magazine—it's important to speak the truth as you see it. Crazy or not, it makes a lot of sense.

Thank God , we'v e seen a lot of breakthroughs over the past decade on the whol e gay rights issue. In some places it has almost become popular, a fad, to be gay. Ang Lee won an Oscar for *Brokeback Mountain*. Television shows like *The L Word, Six Feet Under, Queer Eye for the Straight Guy,* and *Will and Grace* feature gay characters and affirm the gay lifestyle. Even soap operas like *All My Children* have had story lines that in some wa y embrace gay life. Sometimes those way s are as "out there'' as it gets.

Well-respected people like Ellen DeGeneres, Rosie O'Donnell, and many others have had the courage to step up and say, "This is wh o I am." I admire and applaud them for being open and honest, but most of all for loving themselves.

If I could count the word s Kanye has spoken that some people have found inappropriate, controversial, in poor taste, or just downright crazy, I would still be counting. But I'd bet

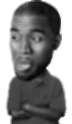
you a year's salary that most of those word s would be right on on the money. "Yo , stop it!" are three of them.

# Nigga vs. Nigger

That's that crack music, nigga that real black music, nigga

KANYE WEST,

"Crack Music," *Late Registration*



*I grew up in the 1950s* —th e heart of the struggle

for equality and humanity for blacks in America. My parents wer e activists in the movement. My whol e family wa s involved— I wa s even arrested at the age of six for participating in a sit-in. Needless to say the wor d "nigger" wasn't welcome in my home.

In fact, we couldn't say it anywhere unless we wanted to be in serious trouble. My siblings and I never even thought about saying the word. It wa s just understood that this word, "nigger,"

wa s offensive. It wa s right up there wit h "shit"

and "damn," which we were off limits to us, too. But I think "nigger" wa s probably worse in my parents' eyes.

"Nigger" wa s associated wit h slavery and Jim Crow , lynchings and disrespect. It wa s the word that wa s used to

downgrade and destroy blacks. It wa s the tool to humiliate and separate.

But even back then, when the there wa s so much tension around race, when that wor d nigger had so much power , there were still places in the black community where it was used. On occasion, I heard the grown-ups use it affection- ately.

"You my nigga if you don't get no bigga, and if you get any bigga you'll be my bigga nigga," they'd say.

So I guess from the beginning there wa s some conflict over its use.

I do remember when it wa s used by blacks, that it had a different intonation. The word wa s pronounced differently. It wa s "nigga," not "nigger." It took on different meanings de- pending on wh o wa s saying it and the intent behind it. You could say it affectionately, vehemently, or indifferently.

"Tha t nigga's crazy," might be said quite jovially. While , "I hate that nigga," took on a different tone altogether.

Nevertheless, because of the wa y I wa s brought up, and because of its use historically, I came to abhor the term. I reached a point where I never used it and never wanted to hear it used. I thought it played right into the whit e man's hands.

I felt obliged to hate the word "nigger." It wa s a strong feeling. I had heard the word nigger personally from the mouths of the most southern of whites. I thought of the Ku Klu x Klan when I heard it and the treacherous acts they com- mitted. An d then there wer e Emmett Till and so many others wh o took their dying breaths wit h that wor d floating over them. As the years went on, I gre w to hate the wor d even more than I had as a teenager and young adult. It wa s per- sonal.

In the 1990s, there wa s a push to remove the wor d "nig- ger" from the dictionary. I wa s the chair of the English de- partment at Chicago State University at the time and was asked to speak before the Illinois State Legislature, whic h wa s holding hearings on the matter. I wa s adamant as I spoke about the damaging effects of the wor d and its association wit h everything bad and foul. I spoke about ho w that wor d wa s only applied to blacks and wa s detrimental to our psy- chological health. That word , I believed, should have been taken out of the language, period—end of story.

Ironically, having held that perspective about the wor d "nigger" almost all my life, today I am not bothered when black people use it, especially in the contexts in whic h I usu- ally hear black people using it. I know how it wa s used his- torically and how white racists and some blacks still use it today. But being aware of our history and conscious that rac- ism is still a huge problem in the world doesn't make me hate the wor d like I once did.

Although I'm still not always comfortable personally using the word , when I do hear it used in an endearing way , I don't question the motive or the consciousness of the person using it. An d when I hear it used in any negative context, it doesn't sting the wa y it once did. No w don't get me wrong, I wil l *neve****r*** sanction whit e people or anybody other than blacks using the word . But when they do, it doesn't make me react the wa y it once did.

It's like somebody calling my mother a bitch. I wouldn' t like it. But I know that my mother's not a bitch, so it wouldn' t bother me. They can say it all day and it will not make it true. So I don't give it any energy. I won't give the caller any powe r or credibility whatsoever. I know wh o my mother is

and I know wh o I am. Calling me a nigger will never make me one.

Whe n Michael Richards, the comic, used the wor d at the Laugh Factory back in 2006, I didn't like it, but it rolled off me like water off a duck's back. I understood and even ap- plauded all of the controversy and outrage over wha t hap- pened. But I believe that you choose your battles. And this wouldn' t be one of mine. I am more concerned about wha t I think about me than what some comic thinks.

Whe n I step into the recording studio during one of Kanye' s sets and hear "nigga" used repeatedly, when I hear my ninety-year-old aunt say it, when I hear it in song lyrics or in the vernacular of so many black people, or when I hear ignorant racists using it supposedly to insult a black person, it garners from me no energy—no willingness to repel the word . I prefer to repel the actual injustice in the world , and I leave the so-called N-wor d battle to those wh o still feel like I used to.

Wha t bothers me is not the wor d "nigger" but the job- lessness, the poor housing, the inferior schooling, and the low salaries for all wh o whit e racists might label "nigger." Fo r me, hating the word and insisting that it not be used in any context does little if we don't address the underlying issues.

I have come to feel that what is damaging to our psycho- logical health is not being called a nigger, but being treated wit h disrespect and disdain and being denied privileges and inalienable rights. Take away the word "nigger" and leave all the other atrocities in place and everything remains the same. No w I know that word s are important and that they shape the way people think. But I also know that a wor d has no powe r except the powe r we give it. Blacks don't have to

forever hold on to denotations or connotations of the word "nigga" given to us by whit e people. We have the powe r to define that word for ourselves and many of our young people have exercised that power.

At this point in my life, it's not so much about racist whit e people as it is about conscious black people. An d for our young people to not only tolerate the word, but also use and embrace "nigga" does not in and of itself indicate a lack of conscious- ness. To me, to be conscious means knowing your power , your strength—even as it has to do wit h overthrowing the racist notions associated with the so-called N word . Some blacks (and whites, too) don't think that is possible, feasible, or ad- visable. I respect that position. It's just not mine anymore. Holding steadfast to that position (although it may be fine for others to), woul d signal a lack of consciousness on my part. Why ? Because I believe that we can evolve from the defini- tions assigned to word s to ourselves.

I may never say anything like, "What' s up, my nig?" or even "Nigga, please!" But I don't believe that it's true that those wh o do say it are necessarily unconscious and unaware of the historical use of the word . In fact, I have known peo- ple wh o are fully conscious, warriors even, wh o use "nigga" freely. Whethe r those in my generation ever embrace the word or not, ever stop pretending that they never use it, ever stop giving the powe r to it that I used to give to it, is their choice—just like not being mad at the wor d or the blacks wh o use it, is my choice.

Another reason I am no longer bothered by the word "nigga" is that I don't feel the use of it is wha t robs black people of self-esteem. The little black children wh o indicated

a strong preference for white dolls in Dr. Clark' s 1950s doll

test and again when the test wa s repeated in 2007 surely did not suffer from self-hate because they were all called nigger on a regular basis. Mayb e they had never been called nigger to their faces at all. It wa s the attitude behind the meaning of the wor d that wa s the culprit. Not the wor d itself. So admit- tedly, I am not offended any longer when I hear the word in the context of hip-hop culture and I sometimes even sing along when I hear songs like "Gol d Digger."

I ain't saying she's a gold digger. But she ain't messing with no broke nigga.

No doubt my emersion in hip-hop culture is to some de- gree responsible for my change in attitude when it comes to the word "nigga." But I hold my belief primarily because I strongly feel as I said before that the word , in and of itself, is not the root cause of racism in this country. It is simply a bi-product. Th e wor d is not the problem. People using the word with a certain intent, a certain disdain are the problem.

As I head now into my late fifties, I have come full circle regarding a wor d I could scarcely bring myself to say just a couple of years ago. Wher e I questioned whether or not a word like "nigger" could ever evolve to a term of endearment, and even felt strongly that it could not, I have witnessed that happening.

"Can a generation actually change the meaning or change the context to create a whol e other experience?" I wondered. For me the answer is yes because I have seen it happen.

And in seeing it, I have shifted from a paradigm I thought I would hold steadfast to until death to one that has opened up a whol e new wa y of me thinking about the word. Perhaps

some of my colleagues and dearest friends would be all but outraged that I could possibly be questioning whether or not there is a context for the wor d that makes it palatable. After all, my own father wa s called "nigger" daily as he worked to make a living to support us. Ho w in the world could I ever have anything but disdain for the word in any context? And yet, if I am honest, I must admit this shift in my thinking. I don't invite anyone to share in it unless they want to. An d I have no interest in debating the issue. But for me, it's liberat- ing to no longer be bound by a word . It frees me further to fight the real racism behind the word.

I know firsthand that some of today's rappers, Ch e Smith aka Rhymefest or Lonnie Rashid Lynn, Jr . aka Common, for example, are fully conscious of wh o they are and are fully aware emotionally and academically of our history. Rhymefest and I have had deep conversations about black people, our heritage, and our struggles since he and Kanye wer e teens. He, like Kanye , Common, Ma s Def, and some others wh o use the wor d "nigga" in their music, are clearly conscious and in- formed and in no wa y taking anything away from the culture by using the word in his lyrics.

Semantically and rhetorically no other wor d woul d have quite the same bite. Not by far, in fact.

That I don't feel the urge to lecture all of the young people in the studio on the wor d being offensive and inappropriate lets me know that I have evolved, not regressed. Wer e I to go back to the slave dungeons in Ghana that I visited in 2002 , I would feel no less connected, no less pain than I did before my position on the wor d "nigger" shifted. It wa s not wha t the slaves wer e called, but how they were treated that continues to upset me. I remain racially and politically conscious, and

even feel that perhaps the word "nigger" may ultimately un- dergo the same metamorphosis as did the word "black." Ad- mittedly, the analogy breaks dow n after a point.

But when I wa s growin g up in the '50s and wa s not al- lowed to use the wor d "nigger," I wa s not allowed to use the word "black" either. That wa s just as bad as saying "nigger."

"You old black thing!" wa s a phrase that I just might get a whipping for if I dared to say it. To be black back then wa s a bad thing. It wa s associated wit h evil, destruction, the worst of the worst. There wa s no wa y that you could be considered beautiful, no matter how "keen" your features, how "good" your hair, how shapely your body, if your skin wa s black.

But James Brown proclaimed, "Say it loud! I'm black and I'm proud!" and the Black Powe r Movement came into full bloom and suddenly the wor d had another kind of power . We proudly referred to ourselves as Black and regard those using terms like "colored" or "Negro" to be all but barbaric. "Black" or "blackie" wer e word s whit e people used to degrade people of African descent just as they used the wor d "nigger."

Th e wor d "black" evolved. No w we'v e gone from fighting if we were called black, to fighting if we aren't. Despite the negative associations linked to the wor d or color, it is still our description of choice. We rarely think about or take ex- ception to the language being racist and the color black being associated wit h something bad today, even though it still has a negative connotation in many ways . Th e good guys still wear the white hats, the evil ones wea r black. Th e good horse is the white horse, the bad one is black. The lie that's okay to tell is a little whit e lie. Black hole, blackmail, blackball are all negative. Th e angel food cake is whit e or light, while the devil's food cake is dark. There are other examples of how

over the years the wor d "black" or anything dark has taken on a negative connotation. That , in itself, impacts a nation of people, consciously and subconsciously.

There wa s a point in our history that many wer e not only offended by the wor d "black" but wer e offended to be black. More than a few cents wer e made from bleaching creams. Th e affluent underwent cosmetic surgery to alter not just flat noses and thick lips, but dark skin as well . We didn't wan t to be black. Pure and simple.

But the wor d evolved, and so did we—t o another under- standing and another wa y of perceiving it. Is it possible that any part of this is analogous to the word "nigga ?

My exposure to hip-hop culture and to those in it wh o I know are racially conscious, has lead me to raise questions I never imagined I would . It wa s difficult at first for me to even hear the word "nigga" in Kanye' s music. Now , it's no big deal. No w I even sing along.

However black people may ultimately come to feel about the wor d "nigga," for me one thing is certain: It wil l never be appropriate for a white person to use the word because of what it has meant historically. I realize that it is a double standard, but it is a necessary and an earned double standard, as far as I'm concerned. It's not one that I seek to justify. Some things are just family business. And for the collective black family, I believe that using the word "nigga" is our preroga- tive alone.

Should racism everywhere in the world and especially in America disappear so completely that not one trace of the im- pact of slavery and injustice against blacks can be seen or felt at all, perhaps my stance on this would change. Of course, I, nor any other black person can stop any nonblack person from

saying "nigga." I'm not the word police. But in expressing the shift in my position on the wor d "nigga," I hasten to say that for me, it's a wor d reserved for blacks only. Sometimes at his concerts when Kanye is singing "Gold Digger," he extends special privilege to the whites in the audience.

"Whit e people, this is your only chance to say the word 'nigga' and get awa y with it," he says. "Take advantage of it." It's Kanye' s wa y of saying he too feels that the wor d "nigga" should only be used by blacks. Some whites do take advantage and sing the song right along wit h everybody else. Inwardly, I become slightly pissed off. There are many whites, however, wh o are silent on that word , and I respect and ap-

preciate them for that.

That hip-hop has tried to reclaim the word "nigga" and bring new meaning to it doesn't mean that the wor d has changed completely and that there are no overtones when the word is used in certain contexts. Nevertheless, it is and al- way s has been part of black culture and not only in negative- ways . Just as we now look at ourselves as a people wh o were enslaved rather than a people wh o wer e slaves, there is a dis- tinction to be made between the niggers we were called by whites and the niggas we call ourselves. I'm not arguing for this change. But I see it coming. It's a word . Granted, in some- contexts, still a volatile word . But again, word s have no mean- ing in and of themselves. It is people wh o assign meaning.

Kanye understands the historical context of the wor d "nigger" and I'm certain that his peers do, too. Perhaps to them the idea is to transcend the feeling that created that word and not the word itself.

# Heard 'Em Say: "George Bush Doesn't

**Care About Black People"**

I hate the way they portray us in the media. You see a black family, it says, "They're looting." You see a white family, it says, "They're looking for food." And, you know, it's been five days [waiting for federal help] be- cause most of the people are black. And even for me to complain about it, I would be a hypocrite because I've tried to turn away from the TV because it's too hard to

watch. I've even been shopping before I've even given a donation, so now I'm calling my business manager right now to see what is the biggest amount I can give and just to imagine if I was down there, and those are my people down there So anybody out there that wants to do anything that we can to help—with the way America is set up to help the poor, the black people, the less well-off, as slow as possible. I mean, the Red Cross

is doing everything they can. We already realize a lot of people that could help are at war right now, fighting another way—and they've given them permission to go down and shoot us! George Bush doesn't care about black people.

—KANYE WEST, NBC hurricane-relief telethon,

September 2, 2005

*The last line was all that* people focused on. It wa s the shot heard round the world . I wa s in Ne w York Cit y at the Dream

Hotel, relaxing. I had been doing some Kany e Wes t business in New York and I didn't actually watch the telethon. I didn't hear the statement Kany e made live. But later that day, all week in fact, I heard it over and over and over again as the news media had a field day.

My phone rang minutes after Kanye said what he said. It rang off the hook. The first phone call came from one of my dearest friends, Bill Johnson. It wa s ironic that he would be the first to call because he wa s my Negr o History teacher in high school. I'd been taught from birth, it seems, to be proud of wh o I am, proud to be black. Bill Johnson wa s one wh o confirmed and continued those lessons. His class gave me a strong sense of myself, my culture, and my history and helped me shape my view s on race and ethnicity.

Where justice is denied, where poverty is enforced, where ignorance prevails, and where any one class is made to feel that society is in an organized conspiracy to oppress, rob, and degrade them, neither persons nor property will be safe.

—FREDERICK DOUGLASS, 1866

Wha t a filling passage. Ho w ironic also that Bill had taught it in our Negro History class. No w here he was , the first one to dial my number, minutes after Kany e announced to the na- tion his feelings about George Bush.

"Did you hear what Kany e just said?" wa s the first thing out of Bill' s mouth.

I told him I had not heard. "Turn on the TV,' ' he said.

I grabbed the remote control and turned on the television.

The news was starting to flood in.

"You better beware," he said. "Ge t ready for a slew of phone calls."

After he told me exactly wha t Kany e said, my mind started turning.

Kany e wa s right, I thought. Georg e Bush doesn't care about black people. Hurricane Katrina exposed that truth. And Kany e simply stated it.

As Bill and I talked, everything started sinking in. I began to realize wha t an enormous impact those seven word s were having on the entire country and I wondered what impact Kanye' s saying them might have on him personally and profes- sionally. I didn't let fear set in, though. I couldn't afford to. But it wa s not just an ordinary morning for me. Not at all. "Had he really said it?" I thought to myself. An d then I thought, "Wha t next?" Bill and I hung up the phone and he said he'd be available if I needed him. I guess he knew things would start to sink in and perhaps be a little unsettling.

He wa s right. Concern deepend. Jahon, my best friend in Chicago, called and began talking about what had happened to the great diva Eartha Kit t for speaking her mind. Ms . Kit t had been a huge star, selling many records, topping the charts,

selling out shows . In 1968, President Lyndon Johnson and his wife, Lady Bird, invited her to a celebrity women's luncheon at the Whit e House. The president asked Eartha Kitt to give her view s on inner-city youth. I guess he thought that as the only black invited, she would have some insight. Instead of talking about inner city youth, though, she took the opportu- nity to talk about the Vietnam Wa r and ho w devastating it wa s to poor minorities.

She told the truth. But that truth embarrassed Lyndon Johnson and made him so angry that allegedly, he had Eartha Kit t blacklisted. Apparently, people refused to hire her to perform, afraid of a negative backlash. Sh e wa s put under a secret federal investigation. Her house wa s bugged and Secret Service agents followed her. Some say when the FBI failed to find any evidence that Eartha Kit t wa s a threat to na- tional security, they sicced the CI A on her and put together a dossier defaming her character, saying she wa s a nympho- maniac.

It seems that Eartha Kitt , someone wh o I admire and re- spect, wa s basically run out of America for speaking her mind and telling the truth. That' s the history of this government— defaming and destroying those wh o have the audacity to chal- lenge it. Fortunately, she came back bigger than ever and is considered an icon today. But some people never come back.

Jahon wasn' t afraid for Kanye . Like me, she wa s just somewhat concerned. Sh e had seen him land on his feet before and felt that at the end of the day, it would be no different this time. He had told the truth and, like we say in my family, "it needed to be said."

The calls continued to come in. They came from people I knew wel l and from people I hardly knew at all. Al l of them

were positive and supportive, however. Not one person was disappointed that Kany e had made the statement. I did think, however, that some may have likened those seven word s to another seven—the last seven uttered by Christ.

My former dean, Rachel Lindsay, called. Sh e knew of Kanye' s affinity for speaking his mind from his days at Chi - cago State. My trusted friend and fellow professor Haki Mad - hubuti called. He'd known Kanye since he wa s five years old, studying Swahil i at the African-centered school Haki and his wife, Safisha, owned . Both Rachel and Haki wer e alway s supportive. Haki and I even talked about getting ready and being prepared for a backlash. By this time, I had started to think more realistically about the possibilities. I became a lit- tle more anxious. I think the Eartha Kit t story and the Dixi e Chicks experience another friend had reminded me of started to weig h a little more heavily on my mind than they should have. Not because they weren't real live examples of what speaking out can bring. But because my faith is unshakable and I knew Kanye had been used as a vessel for those word s to come through. My father alway s taught us, "If God is for you, wh o can be against you?" I think about his word s a lot, espe- cially when I know Kanye has said something Co d would have him say.

Haki and I began to talk about the whol e situation. He told me not to worry, that what Kanye said was true and a lot of people knew it but wer e too afraid to say so. He ap- plauded Kanye for stepping out of a comfort zone in a wa y that none of the other entertainers had. He talked about ho w conscious Kany e wa s and how he woul d be protected. As we spoke he wa s mentally putting in place the army of supporters we would call on if we needed to. If I knew anything, I knew

that neither Kany e nor I woul d be alone. Haki has alway s been that kind of friend to me. And I have always loved him for his consciousness and his commitment to the liberation of black people. Even if he had not called, I would still know I could count on his support.

I have many friends like Haki: Bart McSwine , Leroy Bryant, and Saleem Muwakkell . An d that doesn't begin to exhaust the list. I know they'd have Kanye' s back not because he is my son, but because they are warriors wh o understand that we must stand up and speak out and act on wha t we feel is important, or we wil l perish.

After a number of such calls, I finally got one from Kanye . "What' s up, Mom?'' he said.

Of course, only one thing wa s on my mind.

"Kanye, I heard you said that the president doesn't care about black people," I said.

"Yeah. "

"You told the truth," I told him. "I'm proud of you."

We kept talking and he sounded emotional. It wa s clear to me that he had not planned to say what he said, but he was not sorry he had said it. Whe n I think about it, it woul d have surprised me if Kany e had not said whatever he wa s feeling at that telethon. He is not someone you can just hand a script to and expect him to follow it verbatim, unless it expresses ho w he truly feels. Th e more important the issue, the more pas- sionate he will be about it. Wha t wa s more important than what went on that ill-fated day in New Orleans?

Kany e is a thinker and a doer. That' s how he's wired. How could he be expected to think any differently than he did that day? And being wh o he is, it's natural that his thoughts would be followed by the statement he made. I can't

imagine him *not* calling it like he sees it. Isn't that what we should all do?

It comes natural to him. His father wa s that way . Ra y wa s very active in the movement, as wa s I. So we raised Kany e with a certain sensibility. That sensibility runs through the entire family—that consciousness that comes from knowing wh o you are and believing you have rights that should not and must not be violated.

I've fought for justice all my life, or at least since almost as far back as I can remember. Whe n I wa s just six years old, I wa s arrested for a sit-in at a segregated restaurant in Okla- homa City . I remember crying, my little legs dangling over the seat of that big chair at the police station. I wasn' t crying because I'd been arrested, though. I wa s crying because I wanted to ride to jail in the paddy wagon just like my older brother, Porty, and the other big kids. But I wa s only six and too young for the paddy wagon. I guess I wa s also too young to be fingerprinted and put in a cell like my brother and the older kids. But that didn't stop me from wanting to be. We were all members of the N A A C P Youth Council. Mrs . Clara Luper, wh o presided over the youth council, had organized us. We knew we were fighting (nonviolently) with a purpose and we knew what that purpose was . I sat in that big chair and waited for my parents to come for my brother and me. And I wasn' t scared, not at all. I wa s mad.

That wa s in the mid-1950s. Th e movement hadn't made- national headlines yet. There had not been the Montgomery bus boycott or the March on Washington. Emmett Till' s bru- talized and deformed remains had not yet appeared in Jet magazine. Dr . Martin Luther Kin g Jr. wasn' t yet a household name. And the image of fire hoses and dogs had not yet gripped

the American psyche. But in my hometown and places like it throughout America, coloreds, as we were called then, were ted up. The movement had begun. And I wa s part of it. It just had not been televised vet.

I wa s arrested that day along wit h more than twenty oth- ers. We sat in at a hamburger place called the Split- T Restau- rant and violated an injunction forbidding us to do so. So they took us to jail . That place is still standing today. I drove by i t recently and wondered, "Wh y did we ever wan t to cat there?" It's shabby-looking now. But it wasn' t then. It wa s just off-limits to anyone black as wer e almost all establish- ments in Oklahoma Cit y and throughout America at that time.

We kept sitting-in, however. We wer e not deterred by a trip to jail and within tw o years, almost every restaurant in that city wa s integrated because of our efforts.

Integrating restaurants would not be Kanye' s struggle. But the racism would be just as apparent in Louisiana in **200 5** as it wa s in 1955 . It woul d manifest itself in people left to die on rooftops. We know. We went to the Astrodome and talked wit h some of the people wh o were on the roofs. They told us how they'd been thrown body bags and told to put the bodies of their loved ones in the bags if they did not make it. We saw hundreds of them stretched out on cots, wonder- ing where they'd go once the FEM A money ran out and the cot filled dome had closed. The y listened as the president's mother said that some of them wer e better off than they had been before Hurricane Katrina hit. And we saw their an- guished faces.

Kany e had wanted to go to Ne w Orleans to see the dev- astation firsthand. He wa s advised to go to Houston instead

because by that time dead bodies wer e floating around in con- taminated waters in Ne w Orleans and supposedly all of the people who' d survived had been evacuated to other areas. He went to Houston. We wer e a delegation of eight. Ray and I joined Kanye. Senator Rodney Elli s and his assistant Karen Domino had worked it out so that Kany e could learn just wha t he wanted to know.

"Wha t do the people need most?' Kany e asked. " I can't do as much as I woul d like to, but I can do something. I want to talk to the victims myself and ask them what they need."

I wa s touched by Kanye' s sincerity and determination to help as much as he could. I wa s also impressed that he would not allow a single camera to follow us.

"I'm doing this as a regular citizen, not a celebrity," he said.

He didn't want any credit or any publicity for any contri- bution he might make. He wanted to help quietly.

We checked into our hotel and prepared for the next morning. We' d brought some toiletries and other personal items we' d been told woul d be useful to those we visited at tw o different churches in the area. Some of the gifts were not altogether practical — like lipstick and fingernail polish for the ladies, and cologne for the men. But I thought that wit h all the other gift boxes containing only the basics, perhaps to beautify a little or put on a fragrance might not be all bad. The people loved those gifts as wel l as the monetary contri- butions we made. Fo r the children, we brought candy and Halloween masks. Wearin g them seemed to be the most fun they'd had since the hurricane hit. Those wer e "I love you" gifts. We returned tw o weeks later wit h more substantive contributions.

Our first full day in Houston, we started at the Astro- dome. Before entering, we all joined hands and prayed. We wanted to be guided to say things and do things that would be must comforting, most meaningful. Ou r prayers were an- swered. And when many of the people saw Kanye, they wer e thrilled. The y were glad that he had said what he had about the president and they thanked him for it.

Kany e wa s prepared to speak to the tw o thousand people there over the PA system. W e d been told that he'd be able to and we looked forward to it. Tha t way , he could say some- thing that would be inspiring, hopefully, to all there. As Kany e started toward the mic to greet the people, however, he wa s told that he could not. Th e Re d Cros s wa s in charge and I guess they'd heard enough of Kany e for a while . It wa s too bad. I know it woul d have lifted the spirits of so many to know that Kanye was there and that he really cared.

We visited the tw o churches on the itinerary that day and Kanye was able to really talk to the people and ask indi- viduals wha t they needed. Must responded that they needed jobs and a place to stay. Partnering wit h the Urban League to interview families who' d been displaced, Kanye , through his foundation, wa s able to help. Thanks to his generosity, fifteen families wer e given a furnished place to stay for one year. It wa s to be a transition year, a year to rebuild as much as pus- sible.

Whe n Kany e said those words about the president, he spoke from his heart that day, and a nation of people heard him. He wa s talking about what wa s happening in Ne w Or- leans, but his word s transcended that city and the president. The devastation, as tremendous as it was , is not nearly so tre- mendous as the poverty, ignorance, and hopelessness that

characterize so many in this country. Th e attack, if you'd call it that, wa s not on the man George Bush, but on the govern- ment that he heads.

T have never met George Bush," Kany e told me. "Maybe one-on-one, he's a cool dude."

But what' s not cool is the overwhelming despair still ram- pant in this country. Wer e that not the case, there would have been far fewer people to side wit h Kanye . People were even printing T-shirts wit h Kanye' s word s on them. Th e shirts sold out fast. Why ? Because people wanted to echo the sentiments of Kanye West . The y felt if George Bush cared about black people, the dropout rate among black males in this country would not be fifty-eight percent. Thirty-three percent of black males between the ages of twenty and twenty-nine would not be incarcerated or under some correc- tional supervision. Unemployment for blacks would not be double that of white s in this country. Seventy-plus percent of black babies woul d not be born out of wedlock or in orphan- ages. Almost thirty percent of all blacks would not be living at or under the poverty level. And the list goes on and on and on. Does this seem to you like a country whose leader cares about black people?

George Bush himself said that perhaps he needed to do a better job showing that he cares about black people. Ho w can you claim that you care about something if you don't show it? You can say you care about your children, but if you don't provide for them, do you really care about them? You can say you care about your neighbor, but if you never even speak ex- cept in passing or when you want something, do you really care about them? You can say you care about your spouse, but if you beat him or her day and night, do you really care? The

proof is in the doing. All the rest is just windo w dressing, just tinsel on a tree.

In the midst of the craziness around Kanye making that statement, a strange calm came over me, the calm that comes after the storm, the calm that comes in knowing that truth is liberating.

Kany e told a simple truth—one that Stevie Wonde r could see. And it wa s news for week s around the nation and the world . If the statement wer e not true, why all the fervor? It's like somebody calling your mama a ho. If she's not a ho, you know she's not and you don't even play into it. But if she is one, you want to fight.

Fight I will . But one thing I don't want to do is fear. We do too much of that as black mothers. We'r e afraid for our children, especially our male children. That has been part of our legacy. We'v e taught our children to look down for so long, I'm not sure we know how to teach them to look up. We don't want them to expect too much because we fear they'll be disappointed if they don't get it. I couldn't do that to my child and expect him to gro w from a boy to a man. Whe n fear would dare raise its ugly head, I'd just push it back down , or shake it off and keep moving. There wa s no time for looking dow n or for tiptoeing around the truth. Not then and not now. We must teach our children to speak their minds and speak the truth wit h confidence and strength.

Kany e stood strong when those words came through him. And today, he has not been the worse off for it. It actually expanded his popularity enormously. And my respect for him, already as high as I thought it could get, shot through the roof.

So many people came to rally behind him, whic h wa s un-

doubtedly confirming and comforting. Even an ex-boyfriend of mine called to tell me he wa s not going to drink Pepsi. Pepsi wa s one of Kanyc' s endorsements at the time and the rumor wa s that Pepsi wa s going to pull their endorsement deal. People everywhere started boycotting Pepsi. We got emai l and letters in support of Kany e over wha t they heard. We returned those emai l messages and phone calls when we could. Thankfully, Pepsi never pulled out of the deal or even thought about it. We wanted all our caring supporters to know that. Instead of ending the relationship, Pepsi actually beefed up play of Kanye' s commercial on stations throughout the country, particularly on M T V and BET . Any wonder why they chose those stations?

People wh o didn't know wh o he wa s suddenly wanted to shake Kanye' s hand and say thank you. Letters and calls came from people saying, "W e got your back!'' From Al Branch, who' s on Kanye' s marketing team, to Al Gore , the former vice- president of the United States, Kany e wa s approached and supported for his so-called brave statement. I don't deny that it wa s a brave thing to do. But it wa s also the only thing to do. Like Gitlo w says in Ossie Davis' s Purlie Victorious, one of my favorite plays, "Somebody's got to take a stand for the ev- erlasting glory of our people. Mak e civil rights from civil wrongs and bring this old nation to a fair and just conclu- sion ."

Kanye took that stand at the telethon by simply telling the truth.

Whil e the truth can set you free, apparently it can also make you act crazy. Woul d you believe that on the flip side of the coin, some people wh o had donated to the Re d Cross re- portedly called and said they wanted their money back? If, in

fact, that wa s the case, it saddens and disappoints me greatly. That people would withdra w their support for human beings and pull back contributions made to lessen human suffering based on something someone said off script at a live telethon, something neither sanctioned nor supported by the Red Cross, is mind-boggling to me. Wha t else can one think but that they, too, didn' t care about black people, about poor people, about people in utter despair?

After the fact, Kany e went on a couple of talk shows and wa s asked about his now infamous comment. On *The Ellen DeGencres Show*, Kanye shared his feelings about the possibility of losing existing or potential endorsements. He stated forth- rightly, "I might lose my endorsements for wha t I said, but what about the people wh o lost their families? Wha t about the people wh o lost their lives?"

That' s wh o he wa s speaking for that day—the people. They were the source of his pain. Seeing those bodies floating in the water; seeing the abandonment; seeing the lack of food, lack of water, and all too little help; reading about people being shot; seeing ho w blacks were portrayed as criminals—it wa s too much.

Heard em say; "George Bush doesn't care about black people." Heard him tell the truth.

1 8

# Touch the Sky

Y'all might as well get the music ready 'cause this is going to take a while. When I had my accident, I found out at that moment, nothing in life is promised except death. If you have the opportunity to play this game called life, you have to appreciate every moment. A lot of people don't appreciate their moment until it's passed.

And then you got to tell those Al Bundy stories: "You remember when I... " Right now, it's my time, and my moment. Thanks to the fans, thanks to the accident, thanks to God, thanks to Roc-A-Fella, Jay-Z, Dame Dash, G, my mother, Rhymefest, everyone that's helped me.

And I plan to celebrate, and scream and pop cham- pagne every chance I get, 'cause I'm at the Grammys, baby! I know everybody asked me the question, they wanted to know, "What, Kan, I know he's going to wild out. I know he's going to do something crazy."

Everybody wanted to know what I would do if I didn't win .. . I guess we'll never know!

—KANYE WEST, Grammy acceptance speech, 2006

*That speech was about the whole* idea of seizing the mo- ment. To live in the now. To not look back and say, "I shoulda coulda woulda." This is something that I am learning from Kanye. I haven't mastered this yet. But I certainly see the need for carpe diem, to seize the day and really live.

Kanye wa s saying, "It's my time right now and I'm going to live it right now!"

Whe n he wa s on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, he said that if we are living life in living color, then he wanted to live it in bright red—bold, loud, and alive. And I get that. Why be here on this earth if nobody notices? Wh y be here if you're not going to make a difference? Wh y be alive if you're not going to live?

We teach best what we most need to learn. We often- times know something, but we don't live it.

I see things in him that I may have given lip service to, but he applies them. Relaxing, going into my living room every day and looking at either the sunrise or the sunset. That's what I'm doing.

I wil l not let a day go by that I don't take fifteen to thirty minutes minutes to smell the roses.

I never did that before. We lived on Lake Michigan for eignt years. Kanye and I and the dog would go out and play fetch. I would look at the lake, but I never looked all the wa y across. You could see the skyline of Chicago , but I would stop my vision. Kanye never stopped his vision—he took in the whol e picture.

My parents taught me to think about Hying, but Kanye is teaching me to actually fly. I'm a copycat when it comes to Kanye. I see my whol e style changing. I've gone from being a collector to being a minimalist. I used to want every spot on

the wal l covered and I would have so much furniture that I would almost break my leg trying to get through a room. Now , my house is sparsely furnished and the art is sparingly and strategically placed.

I realized that I like it that way . It makes me feel less clut- tered, freer. I've alway s lived in homes that wer e Victorian or Colonial. No w I have an open floor plan wit h a view of the ocean (Thank you, Kanye , for this birthday present!). An d I notice that my demeanor changes in this environment. I have even started doing a little yoga.

The older you get, the more you realize how short life is. Everyone should make a commitment to enjoy every day on this earth, to stop and smell the roses and to make a real at- tempt to touch the sky!

1 9

# Giving Back: Loop Dreams

*Won't You Please Join Us Jn Making A Difference...*

*A message from Kanye:*

*For as long as lean remember, I have dreamed of making a substantial impel on the music world. Hard work and other values such as commit ment, respect, discipline, integrity, and responsibility conspired to drive me toward my dream.*

*Over the past few years, I have had the opportunity to meet hundreds of young people across this land, and contrary to popular belief, they also have goals and dreams.*

*Consequently, I have concluded that prospering in the world of music is only a piece of what I really want to accomplish. So I was encouraged—in fact, driven—to found and develop Loop Dreams, the first initiative of*



*the Kanye West Foundation. This rap writing and music production program is designed to involve students in learning through a hands-on curriculum we believe will motivate and compel them to stay in school and graduate.*

*Loop Dreams is an unprecedented approach to engaging students in not only the study of hip-hop and the way it can be used to better our world, but in the development of habits of mind that are critical to student success no matter what path they ultimately choose to follow.*

*I fervently believe that, as someone has said before, "When you change the way you look at things, the things you look at change." I want to help change the way young people look at school and, hence, the way they look at their futures.*

*Not long after Kanye signed his* record deal wit h Roc-A -

Fella, and before the release of College Dropout, he asked me one of the most important questions he has ever asked: "Mom, when am I going to start giving back?"

It blew me away. We had talked about a number of things that day, including whether he'd stay in Ne w Jersey and rent for a little longer, or whether he would buy something in Manhattan. I wa s never big on renting. I'm into ownership and I wa s focused on how Kany e would make the break from the Hudson Tea Building in Hoboken, Ne w Jersey to at least a one-bed room condo in the city. But Kany e wasn't very inter- ested in searching for property. His mind wa s on giving back.

Kany e never got high marks in the "plays wel l wit h oth- ers" section on his report card. He wa s an only child and he never really had to share his toys. Everything he had wa s his. I never put him in the Boys Scouts, as my friends had recom- mended, thinking it woul d give him a more communal sense. And he never wanted a little brother or sister growin g up, and told me as much. He wa s pretty single-mindedly focused his entire childhood.

So whil e I wasn' t surprised when he asked me that ques-

tion about giving back, it wa s not expected at that time. In the first throes of success instead of thinking only about all of the things he would do for himself, he was also thinking about wha t he must do for others. Tha t wa s a proud moment for me.

"Well , Kanye, " I said. "You can start giving back at any time."

But since there was still not a whol e lot of money coming in at the time, I wondered wha t Kany e had in mind. Paying the rent, whic h was now substantial, and all of the bills, and buying those extras that he wanted—like the huge pool table and the flat screen TV , the Mercedes-Benz and the designer clothes—wouldn' t leave much for charity.

But Kany e had a plan. He decided that he'd give ten per- cent of whatever he netted to someone less fortunate. He'd just pick somebody, give them the cash, and that would be that. Immediately, I thought that he'd probably had a conver- sation with his dad about tithing. It made me feel good that Kany e wa s so intent on giving that he would sacrifice some- thing he could have purchased for himself. But there had to be a better wa y than just giving cash to someone at random.

"Kanye, it's great that you wan t to give back," I told him. "Let's look into the best way s to do that very soon."

Kany e is the kind of person that if he has something on his mind, there's no waiting; there's no "very soon." There's only right now. There would be no "looking into it" as far as Kany e wa s concerned. There would just be doing it. I knew that I had better come up wit h my own plan if I didn't want Kany e just handing out money.

I'd alway s thought that Kany e would one day have a foundation. I wa s confident that he would be rich and famous.

S o I came up wit h an idea to for a 501(C)(3), through whic h we could raise money to help others. Not only would Kany e be helping others, he'd get a tax break for doing it. Al l the money he put into the foundation woul d be tax deductible. It made much more sense than unstructured giving. I shared the idea wit h Kany e and he got right on board. "Okay, let's do it!" he said.

It wa s time to go to work. I didn't know much about foundations. I'd never been a part of one. I just knew that lots of people had them and they were doing wonderful things through them. Th e first person wh o came to mind wa s Oprah. Everyone wh o knows me know s I'm an Oprah fanatic. I've admired her for many years and love everything about her. No wa y could anyone ever say anything negative about her around me. I wasn' t having it. Al l of my friends know I won' t stand for any Oprah bashing. Anyone who' d ever try it would hear it from me. I just can't understand how people wh o do noth- ing for anyone but themselves and maybe their families, could say anything negative about someone wh o does so much for so many.

Whe n I thought about this foundation, Oprah wa s the first person that I thought of. I went online to read about her foundation to see if there wa s anything I could garner that might be helpful to us. I thought of the things she'd do to make a difference on her show—littl e things that were actu- ally huge, like focusing on gratitude and random acts of kind- ness. The wheels started turning, but I still didn't know what to suggest to Kanye , at least not programmatically.

We decided to launch the foundation without a signature program. It woul d just be a foundation through whic h Kany e could give to other foundations or worthy causes. Soon how-

ever, Kany e came up wit h another plan. He decided he wanted to have his ow n program. Rather than raise money for other worthy causes, he would raise money for a specific pur- pose and a specific program of his own . He wanted a music production program where he could put music studios in the schools and help motivate students to stay in school and graduate.

He told me that when he wa s in high school, all he liked wa s art, music, recess, and lunch. He had grown tired or bored wit h all the other subjects. Of course, there was no threat of him ever dropping out of high school because he knew I would have killed him first. But still, he struggled through the "academic" courses wit h no motivation like what he wanted to provide.

"In school, I could never make music I heard on the radio," he said. "If kids have opportunities to do that, maybe they wil l stay in school."

We talked about the tremendous dropout problem in schools across the nation. An d when he learned that more than 50 percent of African American and Latino students drop out of school before graduation, that wa s it. He knew how he wanted to giv e back. His woul d be a drop-out prevention program involving music production and rap. He felt that would definitely motivate kids to stay in school.

Just as kids have "hoop dreams" and want to stay in school to play basketball, Kany e felt that many kids today want to rap and produce music.

"They have loop dreams," he said. And we had our name: Loop Dreams.

It wa s confirmed when we met Mik i Woodard , the then

director of programs at Creative Artist Agency. Mik i wa s very familiar wit h foundations. In her capacity at C A A , she worked with them all the time. Whe n she heard about the idea, she wa s instantly on board. Beverly William s retired early from a thirty year career in education to come aboard as program director. Sh e knew kids inside out. We were ready to plan and then implement.

Loop Dreams launched at the Accelerated School in South Central, Los Angeles as a one-semester pilot program in the fall of **2006 .** Seventy five eighth graders went to their Loop Dreams class everyday where they studied, in an academic setting, the whol e of hip-hop culture. They studied the his- tory of rap, famous rappers, the impact of positive vs. negative lyrics, how to create a loop, how to create a track, and careers in the music industry. Each day, students ran to class, excited about making music of their own. They also learned the habits of mind that characterize the program: commitment, respect, discipline, integrity, and responsibility.

Loop Dreams wa s a big hit.

But it's not alway s easy to make decisions about such an important project. One night, as I lay thinking about some critical decisions that had to be made, my phone rang. It wa s Chuck Ortner, the president of the foundation.

He wanted to talk about expanding the Loop Dreams pro- gram and suggested that we consider Y's , boys' and girls' clubs and other such venues for program expansion.

Since the foundation wa s launched in the fall of 2003,

Kany e has contributed over four-hundred-and-fifty-thousand dollars to the Kany e Wes t Foundation in support of programs and initiatives designed to help others. An d he is seeing his

idea come to fruition—and believes that student performance is linked to student passion. Whe n students are passionate about wha t they are doing, learning becomes fun and they are more likely to achieve the program goals as well as personal goals they set for themselves. Loop Dreams is a rigorous pro- gram wher e students not only learn to writ e and produce music, they must also demonstrate increased literacy skills, heightened self-worth, and hopefully start the road to self- actualization through the arts.

To Kanye, superstar status carries wit h it responsi- bility. It mandates giving back to the worl d community in proportion to what he has received. His vision, and therefore the vision of the Kanye Wes t Foundation, is not without challenges, but understanding the critical role of educa- tion, literacy, and preparedness in the success or failure of young people reaffirms the importance of programs like Loop Dreams.

Kanye and the foundation board members envision the

day when the high school dropout rate in cities across the na- tion wil l be virtually nonexistent.

It is a well-known fact that kids wh o drop out of high school often end up in dead-end jobs, unemployed, on the streets, on welfare, in jail, or even dead. The meaningful con- tributions they could potentially make to themselves, their families, and to the world are lost. Kany e is driven, wit h the help of the foundation, to put a huge dent in the dropout rate and eventually help eliminate the dropout problem alto-

gether.

Kanye's giving did not begin with Loop Dreams and it doesn't end there. He has made substantial contributions to victims of the Katrina Disaster, and through the foundation,

donated money to support Tiffany Person's "Shine On Sierra Leone'' project.

Fully committed to alleviating the awful suffering of chil- dren in the Sierra Leone mining schools, Tiffany called one day to talk about the grave problems there and inquire about the possibility of Kany e making a contribution. I had never spoken to Tiffany prior to that day, but it wa s apparent in her voice that not only wa s the problem dire (a fact wel l known by all wh o dare to delve beyond news reports, in whic h the full story is never told), but that she personally felt driven to help, to do whatever she could to make a difference. After speaking wit h her, I knew Kany e would not hesitate to make a contribution. Immediately, I hung up the phone and called Kany e to relate to him the discussion I'd just had wit h Tif- fany. He wa s actually across the world on tour. We spoke for just a couple of minutes. It would not take long for Kany e to be fully onboard. We had not yet established the formal board for the foundation so it would be up to a handful of us to make the decision. It wa s a no-brainer and I wa s happy to get back to Tiffany with our affirmative reply.

According to Tiffany, "Through a generous donation from the Kany e Wes t Foundation, 'Shine On Sierra Leone' wa s able to rehabilitate the first school in the impoverished dia- mond mining community of Bongema. After ten days of labor- ing from dawn to dusk, the school wa s reborn with a brand ne w roof, cemented floor, painted interior and exterior walls , repaired toilets, and a new iron door wit h locks."

Tiffany told us she'd be forever grateful for the initial sup- port from the Kany e Wes t Foundation. But we are more- grateful to her for her vision, commitment, and hard work. Through her efforts, the Sierra Leone Foundation wa s

launched and wil l "be the face for improving the lives of thou- sands of children devastated by poverty, yet living on rich soil."

Thankfully, Kanye has found many way s to give back. Way s as small as talking to a distraught teenager who' d just lost her best friend in a car accident to as large as doing a full concert in Ne w York Cit y to benefit colon cancer research.

"Wak e up, Mr . West . Wak e up, Mr . West, " says the teacher on Kanye' s *Late Registration* album. Thi s teacher is in- sistent that Kanye, asleep in class, must wak e up and pay attention. I'm here to inform that teacher and everyone else that Mr . Wes t is awake. He's not only awake, but he's also aware—awar e that giving back is not only an obligation, but a privilege.

E P I L O G U E

*I've heard it said more than* once that Kanyc' s success came overnight. People felt that because he rose from virtual obscu-

rity to superstardom in wha t they believe to be a relatively short period of time, he must have snapped his fingers and all of a sudden became the Kany e Wes t we kno w today. Well , that just isn't so. Kany e has worked long and hard for what he has achieved and he still docs. There is nothing magical about his success. It took and still takes persistence, disci- pline, commitment, and resilience. Thos e are a few of the Qualities I tried to instill in Kany e from the very beginning. I would talk to him even before he wa s born. Yes, whil e he wa s still in my womb . I believe there is value in that. I believe that the stage must be set before the play ever begins.

I am fortunate to have a son like Kanye. And from all indi- cations, he feels fortunate to have a mother like me. I remem-

ber like it wa s yesterday feeling down sometimes about one thing or another. It may have been because I had more bills than money at the time. It may have been because of some ro- mantic breakup. It may have been that biorhythms wer e just not in sync that day. But all I needed to do wa s look down at those smiling eyes Kany e alway s had, and the sadness would just roll away. It worked every time.

I have talked to other mothers wh o have experienced the same thing. Even now, when my friend and colleague, Jeanella Blair and I speak about her five-year-old son, Julian, or when I watch video clips on her BlackBerry of him singing "You Are My Sunshine," or making up lyrics about how much he loves his mom, I know all over again wh y it wa s imperative that I give birth to and raise at least one child. Nothing is more ful- filling, at least not to me.

Whe n Susan Linns, my confidant and many times my right hand, and I speak about her very heart and soul, six-year-old Dareious, I am reminded of how I felt when Kanye wa s an infant, a toddler, and a preschooler. An d I am gratified all over again. Sometimes I play the voice-mail messages Dareious has left, thanking me for the least little gift I have sent to him, and I can't help but think of Kany e at age six. I reflect on how I knew then he wa s quite special. Somehow, I knew that he'd have a gift to share wit h the world . An d I knew I had to cul- tivate that and nurture him so that he could do the work he wa s sent here to do.

I am grateful that even with all the mistakes I surely made in raising Kanye , I wa s able to impart some wisdom, some knowledge that has apparently stuck wit h him all these years.

I've heard Kany e say that the one thing he appreciates

about how he wa s raised wa s being able to question anything without being shut down. It is important that kids are not only seen, but heard. I have never believed it should be any other way . Of course, kids have their place, and they should understand and respect that. But that place must be broad and safe. It must be a place where there is room to make mistakes and to learn from them.

I had to learn that children have to have room to roam and at the same time have boundaries so that that roaming does not become detrimental. I had to learn that unconditional lov- ing does not mean unconditional giving. Instead, it means never ever turning your back on your child no matter what. You must alway s be there and put their needs in front of your own. Tha t wa s not difficult for me because much of my life centered around making sure Kany e got the best care I could possibly conceive of giving him. I never felt put out in the least because, quite frankly, his happiness wa s mine.

Now I had a life and activities that did not alway s include Kanye. But I never had a day pass that he wa s not central to—even if I wa s miles and miles away. The psychological connection can sometimes be stronger than the physical one. And when that is the case, love transcends the miles and cre- ates a feeling of security in a child that makes him know he can do anything if he is encouraged and adequately prepared. Love is fundamental but it is not enough. That love must translate into knowing where your child is at all times, seeing to it that the homework and other chores are completed, going places together and communicating honestly and regu- larly. Any parent can say, "I love you," but you must show up with that love, not just express it verbally.

I have always been a romantic, not just in the sense of a

significant other, but about life and all it encompasses. So I romanticized wha t wa s possible in raising Kanye . Fo r me, everything was . We didn't have a lot of money, but we sa w places in the far most corners of the world . We didn't have twenty-four hours a day to spend together, but we established a bond that could not and cannot be broken. We didn't and don't always agree, but we respected and respect each other's right to an opinion.

Sometimes when people see me on the street and recog- nize that I'm Kany e West' s mother, they ask me what I did to raise such a brilliant and respectful child. It surprises me sometimes that what they remember is wh o he is inside as re- flected in his lyrics, not his persona, whic h may sometimes seem a little too blunt and forward for some. I smile and say thank you when they compliment me, knowing that much of my success as a parent came from being blessed wit h a bright, inquisitive, mischievous, and creative son. It seems to me that he came straight from the wom b like that and my jo b would be to focus almost single-mindedly on providing a nurturing and intellectually challenging childhood for him. Sometimes I had to say no, when I really wanted to say yes . Sometimes I had to sacrifice wha t I may have preferred doing at the mo- ment to see to it that he did what he wa s supposed to do.

The aim of parenting is the overall development of the child. Anything that might impact that in any negative wa y should be avoided at all costs. From an early age, children must be taught integrity and the best wa y to teach it is to demonstrate it. They must be taught success and the best wa y to teach success is to be successful by your ow n standards.

I wa s lucky. Even before Kany e wa s born I had achieved

some things that would contribute to my success as a person first, and then as a parent. I knew wh o I was fundamentally and this is critical. I had a couple of degrees by the time Kany e wa s born but my father, wh o valued education as much, if not more, than anyone I have ever known, taught me that all the degrees in the world would be worthless if you can't get along wit h people. I wa s also taught to put Go d first and that has never failed me. I believe, above all else, that my unshak- able faith in Go d brought about all I needed to provide for my child monetarily, emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually.

I am convinced you cannot be a good parent if you are not a good person. An d to be the best parent, you must strive to do your best every day. Whe n you do your best every day, then you can insist that your child do the same. Having high expectations is also critical. If you don't expect your child to go far and wide—an d no teacher, preacher, or some responsi- ble adult steps in wit h those expectations—it is unlikely that your child wil l reach for the moon or the stars. An d you may rob them of their greatness.

It's been said that there are no manuals that come wit h children when they arrive on this earth. You're not sent home from the hospital wit h a list of definitive actions that wil l result without fail in your child becoming a wel l adjusted, fulfilled, actualized, happy adult. Not even Dr . Spock could offer the magic formula. But having raised Kanye , I'm not so sure those formulas don't exist. Th e problem is they are so all encompassing and so specific to each child they defy being put on paper. But for certain, every child needs parents wh o are absolutely devoted to their well being at every turn. Caring docs not necessarily mean coddling any more than teaching

means merely telling. Th e responsibility of the parent is to figure out just wha t is appropriate and effective, and supply whatever that is consistently.

The greatest joy I have ever experienced is the joy of rais- ing Kanye . If anything at all tops that, it's how the investment turned out and the love I receive from him for putting in the time when he was coming up. I was nearly twenty eight years old when Kany e wa s born, and that worked wel l for me. It gave me time to complete most of my formal education and to learn some valuable lessons that I had not learned at eighteen. Lots of people become parents much younger than that and they do just fine. They raise fabulous children wh o turn out wel l and make invaluable contributions to the world . But whether a child is conceived at sixteen or forty-six, his best shot at success is growin g up in a loving and nurturing house- hold with parents or a parent or guardian who insists on ex- cellence and rewards it as well .

I never thought when Kayne wa s born I woul d ever writ e a book about raising him. Wha t I thought about wa s trying to be the best mother there ever was . Since Kany e is an only child, I had no prior experience at being a parent. But I knew full wel l that love, faith, patience, exposure, high expecta- tions, good communication, and trust wer e a few of the things I valued most and that they would be fundamental in raising a boy to manhood. I'm as grateful for having had Kany e as I am for life itself.

And I'm grateful, too, for this opportunity to share my story.